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FROM THE EDITOR

In our cover article, Matthew Levitt examines Hezbollah's procurement channels, documenting how the group has been leveraging an international network of companies and brokers, including Hezbollah operatives and criminal facilitators, to procure weapons, dual-use items, and other equipment for the group and sometimes Iran. Levitt details how in the context of the war in Syria, "some of Hezbollah's most significant procurement agents—such as Muhammad Qasir—have teamed up with Iran's Quds Force to develop integrated and efficient weapons procurement and logistics pipelines through Syria and into Lebanon that can be leveraged to greatly expand Hezbollah's international weapons procurement capabilities." Levitt reveals Qasir appeared in footage of meetings last month between Syria's President Assad and Iran's President Hassan Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, underscoring the importance Damascus and Tehran attach to Qasir's efforts.

Our interview is with Vayl S. Oxford, the director of the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA). The Islamic State threat to Europe has grown less acute since the Islamic State lost much of its territory in Syria and Iraq, but a significant threat remains. Petter Nesser identifies three factors that explain why the most recent wave of terrorism in Europe rose so high: the participation of European countries in the anti-Islamic State coalition, the strong reach of jihadi-terror networks into Europe, and the efforts of "terrorist entrepreneurs." He warns anger among European Islamist extremists caused by the military intervention against the Islamic State, networks created in the jihadi battlegrounds of Syria and Iraq, and veteran European foreign fighters intent on orchestrating terror back home could combine to inflict new waves of terrorism in Europe. Lachlan Wilson and Jason Pack outline how the Islamic State in Libya has rebounded since its loss of Sirte in 2016 by fighting a twin-track war of attrition involving attacks on state institutions along the coast and a guerrilla insurgency in Libya's interior deserts. Geoff Porter outlines how counterterrorism efforts in Algeria and low support for jihadism among Algerians has significantly weakened the Algerian chapter of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Lastly, we're very pleased to announce that Don Rassler, the Director of Strategic Initiatives at the Combating Terrorism Center, has joined the *CTC Sentinel* editorial board.

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

Hezbollah's Procurement Channels: Leveraging Criminal Networks and Partnering with Iran

By Matthew Levitt

Iran provides Lebanese Hezbollah with some $700 million a year, according to U.S. government officials. Beyond that cash infusion, Tehran has helped Hezbollah build an arsenal of some 150,000 rockets and missiles in Lebanon. And yet, Hezbollah also leverages an international network of companies and brokers—some Hezbollah operatives themselves, others well-placed criminal facilitators willing to partner with Hezbollah—to procure weapons, dual-use items, and other equipment for the benefit of the group's operatives and, sometimes, Iran. In the context of the war in Syria, Hezbollah's procurement agents have teamed up with Iran's Quds Force to develop integrated and efficient weapons procurement and logistics pipelines that can be leveraged to greatly expand Hezbollah's weapons procurement capabilities.

Hezbollah has long prioritized its weapons and technical procurement efforts, but with the group's heavy deployment in the war in Syria, its procurement officers have taken on even greater prominence within the organization. Today, in the context of the war in Syria, some of Hezbollah's most significant procurement agents have teamed up with Iran's Quds Force to develop integrated and efficient weapons procurement and logistics pipelines that can be leveraged to greatly expand Hezbollah's weapons procurement capabilities.

The latest sign of how closely Quds Force and Hezbollah procurement officers now work together came to light when Syrian President Bashar al-Assad visited Tehran for surprise meetings with President Hassan Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on February 25, 2019. For the purpose of operational security, Assad's visit reportedly dispensed with traditional protocols. The Iranian President was only informed of Assad's visit shortly before he arrived, and Iran's Foreign Minister was neither informed nor included in the meetings.[1] Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani reportedly oversaw the security protocols for the visit himself and flew with Assad on the plane to Tehran.[2] And the person Soleimani chose to accompany him to these meetings and serve as a notetaker was Mohammad Qasir,[3] the head of Hezbol-

lah's Unit 108—the unit "responsible for facilitating the transfer of weapons, technology and other support from Syria to Lebanon," according to the U.S. Treasury Department.[4]

Based in Damascus, Qasir and other senior Hezbollah officials work closely with officers from Quds Force's Unit 190—which specializes in smuggling weapons to Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Gaza—under the supervision of Qassem Soleimani.[5] This smuggling operation is significant in its own right, but it could also be used to assist Hezbollah's own longstanding procurement efforts around the world, which are often intimately intertwined with the group's transnational organized criminal networks raising funds through criminal enterprises.

Recent events underscored the scope and scale of these efforts. In November 2018, a Paris court found Mohammad Noureddine and several of his associates guilty of drug trafficking, money laundering, and engaging in a criminal conspiracy to finance Hezbollah.[6] The result of an international joint investigation involving seven countries, the conviction marked the first time a European court specifically found defendants guilty of conspiracy to support Hezbollah.[7] But it was telling for another reason, too: authorities revealed that at least some of the proceeds of these Hezbollah drug and money laundering schemes were "used to purchase weapons for Hizballah for its activities in Syria."[8]

The weapons connection likely raised some eyebrows among analysts and investigators, given the very high levels of state sponsorship and support Iran provides to Hezbollah. But despite that support, Hezbollah, as also detailed in this article, has an established track record of procuring and smuggling weapons through its own channels, parallel to the weapons regularly funneled to the group by Iran. Hezbollah weapons procurement agents oversee this program, though they often rely on criminal facilitators—weapons dealers, smugglers, money launderers, and more—who are uniquely situated to provide the kinds of services necessary to purchase weapons on the black market and deliver them to Hezbollah in Lebanon. These relationships often first develop through criminal financial and money-laundering schemes that broaden out over time to include weapons deals. And then there are other types of procurement activities focused not on weapons themselves but on dual-use items with military applications like computer programs, laser range finders, night-vision goggles, and more.

This article details how now, in the context of the war in Syria, some of Hezbollah's most significant procurement agents—such as Muhammad Qasir—have teamed up with Iran's Quds Force to develop integrated and efficient weapons procurement and logistics pipelines through Syria and into Lebanon that can be leveraged to greatly expand Hezbollah's international weapons procurement capabilities. The Syrian war elevated the importance of such efforts, which quickly increased in scale and scope. As Assad gains control over more of Syria, Hezbollah and the Quds Force will be well placed to leverage their position in Syria along with their new-

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ly refined procurement and smuggling pipelines through various channels to secure and send weapons and sensitive technologies back to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Hezbollah's Early Procurement Efforts

Hezbollah has a long history of independently procuring weapons and dual-use technology through its own networks abroad. A 1994 FBI report stated that Iran, as Hezbollah's primary sponsor, "provides most of the group's funding and weaponry." And yet, the report added, Hezbollah still engaged in what it described as "domestic weapons procurement" activities in the United States, such as an unnamed New York Hezbollah member who was reportedly involved in acquiring night-vision goggles and laser-sighting equipment and sending them to Hezbollah in Lebanon.[9]

An early example is Fawzi Mustapha Assi, a naturalized U.S. citizen from Lebanon who was caught trying to smuggle night-vision goggles, a thermal-imaging camera, and global-positioning modules to Hezbollah in July 1998. Described by U.S. authorities as a Hezbollah procurement agent, Assi successfully smuggled goods to Hezbollah from 1996 until his arrest.[10] Assi pled guilty to material support charges and acknowledged in his post-hearing sentencing memorandum that "the material he provided was meant to support the resistance in south Lebanon in their armed conflict with the Israeli Defense Force."[11]

At the same time, according to U.S. authorities Hezbollah operative Mohammad Hassan Dbouk and his brother-in-law, Ali Adham Amhaz, ran a Hezbollah procurement network in Canada under the command of Hezbollah's chief military procurement officer in Lebanon, Haj Hassan Hilu Laqis. Dbouk allegedly described Assi as "'the guy' for getting equipment on behalf of Hezbollah." According to court documents, Dbouk added that he himself "personally met this individual [Assi] at the airport in Beirut to ensure Hezbollah got the equipment he obtained," including night-vision goggles and GPS systems.[12] According to court filings, Hezbollah procurement officials in Lebanon would later stress to Dbouk that such equipment was desperately needed because "the guys were getting lost, you know, in the woods, or whatever, and they need compasses."[13]

According to the FBI, Dbouk turned out to be "an intelligence specialist and propagandist, [who] was dispatched to Canada by Hizballah for the express purpose of obtaining surveillance equipment (video cameras and handheld radios and receivers) and military equipment (night-vision devices, laser range finders, mine and metal detectors, and advanced aircraft analysis tools)."[14] According to Canadian authorities, Dbouk's, Amhaz's, and Laqis' efforts bore fruit. For example, after hearing that Hezbollah roadsides bombs in south Lebanon killed an Israeli general, Ali Amhaz allegedly congratulated Dbouk for his part in improving Hezbollah military capabilities.[15]

Allegedly, Dbouk recognized that his procurement efforts for Hezbollah came under the ultimate authority of Imad Mughniyeh, who served as the head of Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO)—the organization's external operations group—until U.S. and Israeli intelligence agents reportedly teamed up to kill him in Damascus in 2008.[16] In April 1999, Dbouk allegedly sent a fax to Laqis, informing him that payment was needed for several items Dbouk had purchased. Dbouk allegedly boasted that he had sent Laqis "a little gift" in the form of a PalmPilot and a pair of binoculars and added, "I'm ready to do any thing you or the Father want me to do and I mean anything … !!"[17] "The Father," according to U.S. Attorney

Robert Conrad, is a reference to Mughniyeh.[18]

These cases are typical of the type of small-scale weapons procurement and somewhat larger scale dual-use technology procurement Hezbollah engaged in directly in the run-up to the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000. But Hezbollah's procurement efforts only increased in the wake of that withdrawal. According to a 2003 Israeli assessment, "Hezbollah uses its apparatuses throughout the world not only to strengthen its operational capabilities for launching terrorist attacks, but also as a means of purchasing the advanced arms and equipment needed for the organization's operational activities. To transact these purchases, Hezbollah uses its operatives who reside outside Lebanon (either permanently or temporarily), 'innocent' businesspeople (including Lebanese), and companies founded by the organization (some of which are front companies)."[19]

Consider the case of Riad Skaff, who worked as a ground services coordinator at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport from 1999 until his arrest in 2007. For a fee, Skaff smuggled bulk cash and dual-use items like night-vision goggles and cellular jammers onto airplanes. Prosecutors argued that Skaff's conduct "in essence was that of a mercenary facilitating the smuggling of large amounts of cash and dangerous defense items for a fee," which he knew were destined for Lebanon, "a war-torn country besieged by the militant organization, Hezbollah."[20]

In other cases, Hezbollah operatives in the United States raised funds for the purchase of weapons elsewhere, including in Lebanon. Mahmoud Kourani, a convicted Hezbollah fighter trained in Iran, was a one-time resident of Dearborn, Michigan. Bragging to a government informant about his ties to Hezbollah, Kourani once let slip that before he came to the United States, another alleged Hezbollah supporter, Mohammed Krayem, had allegedly sent money to Kourani's brother, a Hezbollah military commander in Lebanon, to fund the purchase of military equipment from members of the United Nations Protection Forces in Lebanon.[21]

Operation Phone Flash Exposes Hezbollah's Procurement, Inc.

In the years following the July 2006 war with Israel, Hezbollah's procurement kicked into high gear in an effort to replenish its weapons stocks. For big-ticket items, like missiles, Hezbollah relied on Iran, and sometimes Syria.[22] But Hezbollah proactively complemented the shipments of other items it received from Iran—from small arms and ammunition to shoulder-fired rockets and dual use items—with material it procured through its own global networks. In December 2011, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah underscored the group's procurement efforts: "We will never let go of our arms," he said. "And if someone is betting that our weapons are rusting, we tell them that every weapon that rusts is replaced."[23]

Replacing spent ammunition and rusted weapons at the scale needed after the 2006 war demanded an organized procurement channel run by Hezbollah weapons procurement agents around the world. Hezbollah procurement agent Dani Tarraf is a case in point. In 2006, agents with the Philadelphia Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) opened several parallel investigations into Hezbollah criminal activities in suburban Philadelphia, which together became known as Operation Phone Flash.

In the context of Operation Phone Flash, investigators came across Tarraf, a German-Lebanese procurement agent for Hezbollah with homes in Lebanon and Slovakia and business interests

in China and Lebanon.[24] At first, Tarraf was just underwriting the purchase of stolen merchandise that Hezbollah operatives then shipped and sold around the world. Tarraf was introduced to an undercover FBI agent posing as a member of a crime family, and wasted little time before asking if the criminal enterprise could expand to include the sale of guided missiles and 10,000 "commando" machine guns for Hezbollah.[25]

In his meeting with the undercover agent, Tarraf expressed interest in a wide array of weapons, including M4 rifles, Glock pistols, and antiaircraft and antitank missiles. Tarraf sought to impress the undercover agent, showing him around his Slovakian company, Power Express, and introducing him to his storage and shipping network and explaining that the weapons would be mislabeled as "spare parts" before being shipped to Syria for Hezbollah. U.S. investigators ultimately determined that Power Express "operated as a subsidiary of Hezbollah's technical procurement wing."[26]

Tarraf was very clear that he wanted weapons that could "take down an F-16." Tarraf went online and pulled up the precise specifications for the weapons he wanted the undercover agent to procure on his behalf as the FBI taped the conversations and captured his computer search records. Tarraf and the undercover agent soon met in Philadelphia, where Tarraf put down a $20,000 deposit toward the purchase of Stinger missiles and 10,000 Colt M4 machine guns. Tarraf noted that the weapons should be exported to Latakia, Syria, where Hezbollah controlled the entire port. Secrecy would be guaranteed there because Hezbollah could shut down all the cameras when the shipment arrived. Once the items arrived in Syria, Tarraf assured, no shipping paperwork would be required.[27] After his arrest in November 2009, Tarraf confessed to being a Hezbollah member and "working with others to acquire massive quantities of weapons for the benefit of Hezbollah."[28]

In a parallel case in Philadelphia, an FBI source met in Beirut with Hassan Hodroj, who allegedly served on Hezbollah's political council. Publicly described as a Hezbollah spokesman and the head of its Palestinian issues portfolio, Hodroj was also deeply involved in Hezbollah's procurement arm, according to U.S. authorities.[29] The details on Hodroj that follow are the facts as presented by the U.S. Department of Justice. Hodroj told the FBI source exactly what he wanted—1,200 Colt M4 assault rifles—and explained that Hezbollah would pay in cash to make it harder for authorities to track the payments back to Hezbollah. Hodroj stressed that Hezbollah primarily needed "heavy machinery" for the "fight against the Jews and to protect Lebanon." Like Dani Tarraf, Hodroj allegedly wanted the weapons shipped to the port of Latakia, Syria, which he described as "ours."[30] Before the meeting ended, Hodroj broached one more subject: he was also in the market for sensitive technology from the United States, specifically communication and "spy" systems that could help Hezbollah secure its own communications and spy on its adversaries' communications.[31]

Throughout this period Hezbollah continued to receive not only considerable funding but also direct weapons shipments from Iran, as documented by the U.S. Defense Department in its 2010 annual report on Iranian military power:

> "With Iranian support, Lebanese Hizballah has successfully exceeded 2006 Lebanon conflict armament levels. On 4 November [2009], Israel interdicted the merchant vessel FRANCOP, which had 36 containers, 60 tons, of weapons for Hizballah to include 122mm katyushas, 107mm rockets, 106mm antitank shells, hand grenades, light-weapon ammunition."[32]

And yet, a series of U.S.-led international investigations would soon reveal that Hezbollah's independent weapons procurement

A screen capture from a video by Iran's Press TV showing Mohammad Qasir (seated behind President Assad) attending February 25, 2019, meeting between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (left) and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani (right) in Tehran, Iran.

program continued unabated.

Hezbollah Procurement as Sanctions Hit Iran and the Syria War Began

Whereas Iran pumped funds and weapons into Hezbollah after the 2006 war, by 2009 declining oil prices and sanctions combined to force Tehran to slash its annual budget for Hezbollah by 40 percent.[33] As a result, Hezbollah enacted severe austerity measures to reduce spending and diversified its income portfolio by significantly expanding its international criminal activities.[34] In one case, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents caught a weapons trafficker affiliated with Hezbollah, Alwar Pouryan, seeking to sell weapons to the Taliban for desperately needed cash instead of trying to procure weapons for Hezbollah.[35] Hard financial times also forced Hezbollah to rely in part on deceptive means to secure funding for development projects in the wake of the 2006 war, such as hiding its own and Iran's ties to Hezbollah's construction arm, Jihad al-Bina, when approaching international development organizations for development funding.[36]

Several investigations only later made public would reveal that Hezbollah created multiple illicit financing and weapons procurement networks in and around this time. For example, according to U.S. prosecutors, from 2009 through 2013, a Hezbollah procurement network including Usama Hamade, Issam Hamade, and Samir Ahmed Berro illegally exported UAV parts and technology to Hezbollah, which they shipped to the group in Lebanon via third countries such as the UAE and South Africa.[37] Also in 2009, prosecutors allege that Hezbollah dispatched Samer el Debek, an alleged U.S.-based Hezbollah operative, to Thailand to dispose of explosive precursor chemicals the group was stockpiling there because the group believed its Bangkok safe house was under surveillance.[38] That same year, prosecutors allege, Ali Kourani, another alleged U.S.-based Hezbollah operative, traveled to Guangzhou, China, the location of a company that manufactured "the ammonium nitrate-based First Aid ice packs that were [later] "seized in connection with thwarted [Hezbollah Islamic Jihad Organization] IJO attacks in Thailand and Cyprus."[39] According to prosecutors, Ali Kourani and Samer el Debek were primarily tasked with carrying out preoperational surveillance for potential Hezbollah attacks in the United States and Panama. As previously mentioned, they alleged Debek was sent to Thailand to shut down a Hezbollah explosives lab, and that Ali Kourani was directed "to cultivate contacts in the New York City area who could provide firearms for use in potential future IJO operations in the United States." Kourani was also reportedly tasked with obtaining surveillance equipment in the United States, such as drones, night-vision goggles, among other items.[40]

Unlike the case of Kourani and Debek, who are accused of being members of Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization, most cases involved Hezbollah leveraging criminal fundraising enterprises to procure weapons for the group rather than assigning such tasks to more operational networks. Consider the July 2014 designation of brothers Kamel and Issam Amhaz and Ali Zeiter, who functioned as "a key Hezbollah procurement network," according to the U.S. Treasury Department. Using a Lebanon-based consumer electronics business, Stars Group Holding, as a front for a variety of illicit activities, the network allegedly purchased technology around the world—in North America, Europe, Dubai, and China—to develop drones for Hezbollah.[41] The U.S. Treasury Department press state-

ment announcing this action noted that "Hezbollah's extensive procurement networks exploit the international financial system to enhance its military capabilities in Syria and its terrorist activities worldwide" and underscored that this global terrorist and criminal activity was expanding.[42] Indeed, an investigative report on sanctions evasion through the luxury real estate market revealed the Amhaz brothers' extensive unsanctioned business empire, stretching from Lebanon to Hong Kong and from West Africa to North America.[43]

A particularly important arrest came in April 2014, when Czech authorities arrested alleged weapons dealer Ali Fayad acting on a U.S. arrest warrant. An alleged Lebanese-Ukrainian arms dealer with reportedly close ties to Hezbollah and Russia President Vladimir Putin, as well as Syria, Iran, and Latin American drug cartels, Fayad was the target of an elaborate sting operation.[44] Hezbollah kidnapped several Czech citizens in Lebanon to secure Fayad's release, and Putin put significant pressure on the Czech government as well, leading to his release and return to Lebanon in January 2016.[45] The lengths to which Hezbollah went to secure his release indicated the importance it attached to him and his alleged procurement activities.

By early 2015, DEA investigations into Hezbollah narco-trafficking and money-laundering operations revealed some of the group's weapons procurement efforts as well. The DEA dubbed the entity involved in these activities as the "Business Affairs Component" (BAC) of Hezbollah's External Security Organization (its terrorist wing, also known as Islamic Jihad), which it said was founded by the late Hezbollah terrorist mastermind Imad Mughniyeh himself.[46] The BAC is run by two key Mughniyeh deputies, DEA reported: Abdallah Safieddine and Adham Tabaja. Safieddine reportedly served as the group's representative to Tehran, and is a cousin of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah.[47] Tabaja was designated by the U.S. Treasury in June 2015. According to Treasury, Tabaja is a Hezbollah member who "maintains direct ties to senior Hizballah organizational elements, including the terrorist group's operational component, Islamic Jihad." Also according to Treasury, he provided financial support to Hezbollah through his businesses in Lebanon and Iraq.[48] The reason Hezbollah was so deeply involved in the drug trafficking and money laundering schemes utilized by the BAC, according to then-DEA Acting Deputy Administrator Jack Riley, was to "provide a revenue and weapons stream for an international terrorist organization responsible for devastating terror attacks around the world."[49] In one case, the U.S. Treasury designated Hezbollah-linked Lebanese businessman Kassem Hejejj for working with Tabaja, providing credit to Hezbollah procurement companies, and opening bank accounts for Hezbollah in Lebanon.[50]

In a coordinated action on October 2015, U.S. and French law enforcement agencies arrested Joseph Asmar in Paris and Iman Kobeissi in Atlanta. U.S. authorities lured Kobeissi to the United States, where she allegedly informed an undercover DEA agent posing as a narcotics trafficker that her Hezbollah associates sought to purchase cocaine, weapons, and ammunition. Most telling, however, was their alleged desire to procure weapons and other materiel not only for Hezbollah but for Iran as well, as detailed by the U.S. Department of Justice:[51]

> "Kobeissi also allegedly arranged to obtain firearms and heavy weapons for her associates in Hezbollah and other independent criminal groups in Iran. During recorded conversations between Kobeissi and the undercover DEA agent,
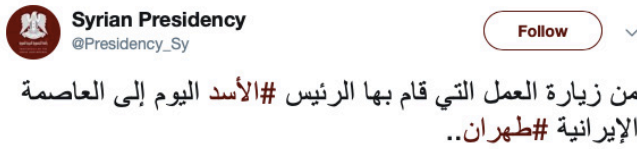
Screen captures from a video posted via Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's official Twitter account showing Mohammad Qasir attending February 25, 2019, meetings between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (left image) and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani (right image) in Tehran, Iran. In first image, Qasir is seated in the far left foreground; in second image, he is seated behind President Assad with Qassem Soleimani also pictured (far left).

Kobeissi stated that she had customers in Iran who would like to purchase a variety of firearms and blue prints for "heavy weaponry." In one list Kobeissi provided to the undercover agent containing a request for firearms for her Iran-based customer, Kobeissi included an order for more than 1,000 military-style assault rifles, including M200 sniper rifles, M4 carbine rifles, and Objective Individual Combat Weapons, as well as 1,000 Glock handguns. In another communication, Kobeissi attempted to obtain thousands of handguns for her Hezbollah associates. In recorded conversations between Kobeissi and the undercover DEA agent, Kobeissi also discussed the potential for obtaining aircraft parts for her customers in Iran in violation of U.S. sanctions. In those recordings, Kobeissi can be heard stating that they had to hurry and obtain the aircraft parts while there were still sanctions against Iran so they could earn additional money for smuggling in the sanctioned parts."[52]

In other words, Hezbollah procurement networks had matured to the point that Iran was seeking to leverage its ability to gain access to weapons and sanctioned goods for Iran's own direct needs. In turn, Iran also took the opportunity to use Hezbollah networks to benefit some of its other proxies as well, including Houthi rebels in Yemen.

For example, in December 2015, the U.S. Treasury Department targeted more branches of Hezbollah's procurement network, including alleged procurement agents Fadi Hussein Serhan and Adel Mohamad Cherri and their companies, as well as additional companies owned by the aforementioned Ali Zeiter, an alleged Hezbollah procurement agent who had been designated by Treasury in July 2014.[53] Much of the procurement activities these individuals and companies were involved in related to obtaining sensitive technologies and equipment for Hezbollah's UAV program—including using their companies as fronts through which they purchased electronic equipment from companies in the United States, Europe, Asia, and
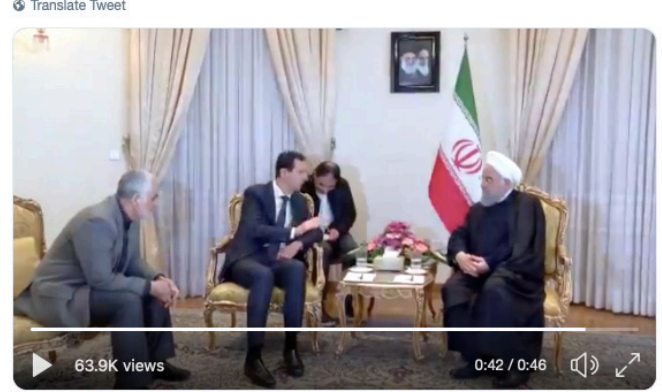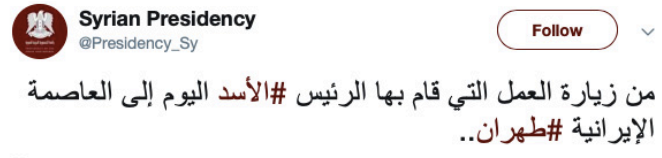
the Middle East. In one case, Cherri allegedly specifically procured dual-use items in China to be sent to Yemen for use in Houthi improvised explosive devices (IEDs).[54]

Meanwhile, as Hezbollah's role in the war in Syria deepened, the group increasingly leaned on its BAC to raise funds and procure weapons and ammunition for Hezbollah operatives deployed to Syria. In 2016, U.S. federal agents in Miami issued arrest warrants for three alleged Hezbollah BAC operatives: Mohammad Ahmad Ammar, Ghassan Diab, and Hassan Mohsen Mansour. According to an affidavit filed in this case, "intelligence gathered by DEA and its foreign counterparts shows that a significant form of Hezbollah funding for the purchase of weapons in the Syrian conflict comes from laundering drug money for Latin American cartels, most notably Colombia's Oficina de Envigado ..."[55]

Further evidence of the drug-weapons connection came in November 2018, when a Paris court convicted one of Diab's Hezbollah money-laundering associates, Mohammad Noureddine, on charges of drug trafficking, money laundering, and engaging in criminal conspiracy to finance Hezbollah.[56] The conviction of Noureddine—a "Hezbollah-affiliated money launderer"[57]— along with several others was the product of a joint operation carried out by the DEA in coordination with partners from seven foreign countries, which led to the arrest of Noureddine and 14 other individuals in France, Italy, Belgium, and Germany. Code-named Operation Cedar, the raids targeted Hezbollah operatives and criminal facilitators involved in a massive drug and money-laundering scheme.[58] U.S. authorities would later reveal that proceeds from the Hezbollah drug and money laundering schemes of which Noureddine was a part were "used to purchase weapons for Hizballah for its activities in Syria."[59]

In fact, when it came to Syria, Hezbollah combined its independent procurement efforts with those of Iran to build integrated and efficient weapons procurement and logistics pipelines to vastly expand Hezbollah's international weapons procurement capabilities. The U.S. Treasury Department designated and exposed one

of the most important alleged lynchpins in this network, Abd Al Nur Shalan, in July 2015. Shalan, a Lebanese businessman with alleged close ties to Hezbollah leadership, had "been Hezbollah's point person for the procurement and transshipment of weapons and materiel for the group and its Syrian patrons for at least 15 years," according to the Treasury Department.[60] With his many years of alleged experience procuring weapons for both Hezbollah and the Assad regime, Shalan was well placed to play a critical role procuring weapons for Hezbollah in the context of the Syrian war. Even before Secretary General Nasrallah's official acknowledgment that Hezbollah had entered the war in defense of the Assad regime, Shalan was at the center of efforts to make sure Hezbollah operatives in Syria were well armed. By 2014, once Hezbollah's deployment to Syria was made official, authorities noticed that Shalan was using "his business cover to hide weapons-related material in Syria for Hezbollah."[61]

According to the U.S. Treasury Department:

"Shalan has been critical in keeping Hezbollah supplied with weapons, including small arms, since the start of the Syrian conflict. Shalan ensures items purchased for Hezbollah personnel in Syria make it through customs. In 2014, Shalan used his business cover to hide weapons-related materiel in Syria for Hezbollah. In 2012, Shalan was involved in helping Hezbollah obtain weapons and equipment and in shipping the material to Syria. In 2010, Shalan was at the center of brokering a business deal involving Hezbollah, Syrian officials, and companies in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine regarding the purchase of weapons. Further in 2010, he acquired a number of tons of anhydride, used in the production of explosives and narcotics, for use by Hezbollah. In November 2009, Shalan coordinated with Hezbollah and Syrian officials on the purchase and delivery of thousands of rifles to Syria."[62]

Given Shalan's alleged background, it should not surprise that he is reported to be a close associate of Mohammad Qasir,[63] the head of Hezbollah's Unit 108 who served as a notetaker during President Assad's meeting with Iran's President and Supreme Leader.

Hezbollah's Unit 108

Iran provides Lebanese Hezbollah with some $700 million a year, according to U.S. government officials.[64] Above and beyond that cash infusion, Tehran has helped Hezbollah build an arsenal of some 150,000 rockets and missiles in Lebanon, far larger than the stockpiles of most sovereign states.[65] Against the backdrop of the Syrian war, Iran has continued to smuggle weapons into Syria for transshipment to Hezbollah in Lebanon, leading Israel to carry out airstrikes targeting these weapons shipments.[66] In response, Iran has now embarked on a "missile accuracy project" centered on providing Hezbollah GPS guidance kits that can increase the accuracy of the group's missile arsenal.[67] According to Israeli authorities, Hezbollah has already built underground missile production sites in Beirut and elsewhere, though these are reportedly still non-operational.[68]

Under the leadership of Bashar al-Assad, Damascus also began to provide weapons directly to Hezbollah, a shift in behavior from the more reserved relationship Syria maintained with Hezbollah under Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad. By 2010, for example, Syria was not just allowing the transshipment of Iranian arms to Hezbollah through Syria, but it was providing Hezbollah long-range Scud rockets from its own arsenal, according to U.S. and Israeli officials.[69]

Iran has used civilian airlines such as Mahan Air to transport weapons and personnel for Hezbollah, the Syrian regime, and other armed groups,[70] and has helped Hezbollah build a sophisticated smuggling network to move these weapons from Syria to the Lebanese border and then to Hezbollah strongholds in Lebanon.[71] These networks are also available to move weapons procured by Hezbollah's own procurement efforts, such as those allegedly overseen by Abd al Nur Shalan and others.

The first link in the weapons transportation chain is Qasir's Unit 108, which is responsible for moving weapons across Syria to the Lebanese border and then, together with Unit 112, transporting weapons across the border into Lebanon. (Another Hezbollah unit, Unit 100, runs a ratline in the reverse direction, from Lebanon to Syria to Iran, ferrying Hezbollah trainees to and from advanced training in the handling and use of the rockets delivered from Iran, like the Fateh-110.[72])

Mohammad Qasir, also known as Hajj Fadi, is uniquely qualified to head a unit as sensitive and important as Unit 108. One of Qasir's brothers, Hassan, is reportedly the son-in-law of Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah.[73] Another brother, Ahmed Qasir, was the suicide bomber who carried out the November 1982 attack on an Israeli military headquarters in Tyre.[74] Nasrallah referred to Ahmed as the "prince of martyrs" at a Martyrs Foundation event marking the anniversary of the attack.[75]

With his family legacy, Mohammad Qasir rose high and fast within Hezbollah, and remains a trusted confidant of Nasrallah, Shalan, Soleimani, and others despite charges of enriching himself, failing to protect weapons shipments from Israeli airstrikes, and infidelity.[76] In May 2018, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Qasir as "a critical conduit" for Quds Force payouts to Hezbollah.[77] Seven months later, the U.S. Treasury Department exposed another Iranian illicit financing scheme, using the Central Bank of Syria and benefitting both Hezbollah and Hamas, and revealed Qasir's central procurement role as the head of "the Hezbollah unit responsible for facilitating the transfer of weapons, technology, and other support from Syria to Lebanon."[78] Also designated was Mohammad Qasim al-Bazzal, described by the U.S. Treasury as an associate of Qasir and a Hezbollah member.[79] In a letter to a senior official at the Central Bank of Iran, Qasir and a Syrian associate confirmed receipt of $63 million as part of a scheme to benefit Hezbollah.[80] Then, in February 2019, Qasir appeared as a notetaker in photographs and video clips of Assad's secret visit to Tehran.[81]

Conclusion

The fact that Hezbollah benefits from both Iranian largesse and its own procurement efforts is well documented. Canada's Terrorist Financing Assessment for 2018 noted that "Hezbollah operates within a logistical and support structure that is both global in scope and highly diversified in nature."[82] Europol's 2018 terrorism report highlights a major criminal money-laundering case in Europe in which "a share of the profits [were used] to finance terrorism-related activities of the Lebanese Hezbollah's military wing."[83] The U.S. National Strategy for Combatting Terrorist and other Illicit Financing 2018 noted: "Hizbollah receives support from Iran and uses a far-flung network of companies and brokers to procure weapons and equipment, and clandestinely move funds on behalf of operatives."[84]

As documented here, these include alleged formal Hezbollah procurement agents (Laqis, Dbouk, Amhaz, Cherri, Zeaiter, Serhan, Shalan) as well as alleged criminal and alleged illicit financial networks that are well positioned to expand into procurement activi-

ties due to their criminal contacts (Kobeissi, Asmar, Hejejj). They leverage alleged front companies (Stars Holdings, Vatech SARL[85]) and provide transshipment and smuggling services as well, whether for materiel Hezbollah procured on its own or received from Iran.

Analysts in and out of government debate why Hezbollah exposes itself to additional law enforcement scrutiny by carrying out procurement efforts of its own when it receives such general support—funds and weapons both—from Iran. Some alleged procurement efforts clearly grew out of alleged illicit financial schemes and were allegedly pursued simply because the opportunity presented itself (Operation Phone Flash, Kobeissi, Asmar), but allegedly others were pursued by Hezbollah proactively (Dbouk, Amhaz, Shalan). One reason for the latter appears to be Hezbollah's search for sensitive technologies even more than small arms—according to the U.S. Treasury Department, Hezbollah-affiliated networks specifically "seek to procure sensitive or controlled goods from the United States."[86] Another reason Hezbollah carries out its own procurement efforts may be a demand among Hezbollah's fighters for original Western-manufactured weapons rather than the Chinese or other knock-offs often provided by Iran. And then there are special circumstances, like the Syrian war, when the demand for weapons and ammunition is so immediate that efforts to procure materiel—both independently and through Iran—are dramatically increased.

By all accounts, Hezbollah continues to prioritize its need to replenish and build its weapons arsenals in the wake of the Syrian war, but faces severe difficulties doing so. As sanctions targeting Hezbollah and Iran take increasing effect, Hezbollah is feeling the pinch.[87] Nasrallah himself recently lamented the impact of sanctions and publicly called upon Hezbollah's members and sympathizers to donate funds to the group's Islamic Resistance Support Organization (IRSO).[88] The IRSO specifically raises funds for Hezbollah's military activities, including its "Equip a Mujahid" fundraising campaign. The U.S. Treasury designated the IRSO in 2006 for its weapons procurement fundraising,[89] but in the wake of sanctions targeting both Iran and Hezbollah, the group has renewed its IRSO procurement fundraising campaigns.[90] Sanctions are also affecting Iran's ability to smuggle weapons to its terrorist proxies, including Hezbollah. In February 2019, Panama expelled over 60 Iranian ships from its merchant marine registry, denying them the ability to sail under the Panamanian flag because authorities linked these ships to support for terrorist groups.[91]

As a result, the channels Hezbollah and the Quds Force have now created to move weapons through Syria to Hezbollah stockpiles in Lebanon are all the more critical to the group's ability to procure and smuggle weapons into Lebanon. Mohammad Qasir's appearance at Assad's meetings in Tehran underscores not only the importance Hezbollah and the Quds Force attribute to Qasir and Unit 108, but the central role Assad's Syria will continue to play in supporting Iran and Hezbollah's militant agenda in the region so long as he remains in power. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Vayl S. Oxford, Director, Defense Threat Reduction Agency

By Kristina Hummel

Vayl S. Oxford is the Director of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency. Before being named DTRA Director, he was the National Security Executive Policy Advisor at the Department of Energy's Pacific Northwest National Laboratory (PNNL). Before joining PNNL, Mr. Oxford spent a short time in private industry after 35 years of public service that combined time in the military and as a government civilian employee, almost all of it focused on countering weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

He served in multiple positions in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) from 2003 to 2009. Appointed by President George W. Bush and reporting to the DHS Secretary, he led the development of the National Strategy to Combat Nuclear Terrorism. Prior to his appointment to DHS, Mr. Oxford served as the Director for Counterproliferation at the National Security Council (NSC), where he supported the development of the President's National Strategy to Combat WMD, the policy and strategy for WMD interdiction, and represented the NSC in the development of the National Biodefense Strategy. He chaired the interagency working group for Operation Iraqi Freedom to develop policies for combating WMD in Iraq, to include developing the initial concept for WMD exploitation and elimination and the plan for foreign consequence management to protect civilian populations from potential Iraqi use of WMD. From 1987 to 2002, he held several positions with DTRA and its legacy organizations (Defense Special Weapons Agency and Defense Nuclear Agency).

Mr. Oxford received his Bachelor of Science in General Engineering from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and his Master of Science in Aeronautical Engineering from the Air Force Institute of Technology at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio.

CTC: DTRA's mission is quite expansive, covering a lot of ground in the WMD and CT realms. Can you summarize the organization's evolution and objectives?

Oxford: The Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) was established as a Combat Support Agency (CSA) in 1996 but our legacy traces back to over 70 years ago with the Manhattan Project. Early on in [our] history, DTRA was involved in the original development of nuclear weapons. We were responsible for underground and above-ground testing of those weapons. Though DTRA no longer does nuclear testing, we are the core organization that understands nuclear-weapons effects.

Over the course of time, and as the geopolitical environment changed, our institution evolved through mergers of our legacy organizations, adding those missions and losing efforts that were no longer required. The most recent change to our organizational structure is the addition of the Joint Improvised Threat Defeat

Organization (JIDO), an organization that worked for 13 years on countering the improvised explosive device threat. With the addition of JIDO, we have expanded our mission beyond just WMD to countering improvised threats.

All of these missions are directly correlated to working with the Combatant Commanders in the field and with the Services to make sure our products can transition to the warfighter. We have around 2,300 federal and military staff along with about the same number of support contractors that work with us every day. We have roughly 400 people forward deployed with the Combatant Commands, operational task forces, and embassies. In 2018, we conducted around 3,200 international engagements across 111 countries. Our global footprint continues to grow with the change in the National Defense Strategy and the emergence of great power competition that we now face.

CTC: The recent move of the CWMD mission from U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) to U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM)—was that a seamless transition for DTRA?

Oxford: The Unified Command Plan transitioned from U.S. Strategic Command to U.S. Special Operations Command to act as the coordinating authority to [globally] CWMD was fairly straightforward for DTRA. When the CWMD mission was with USSTRATCOM, they stood up the USSTRATCOM Center for CWMD (SCC). That organization itself was eliminated along with the HQ Joint Force Elimination that fell under USSTRATCOM when they had the mission. The DTRA Director at the time was dual-hatted as the DTRA Director and the SCC. Those were the biggest changes for DTRA during the transition.

This Agency has been doing business with USSOCOM in great depth since the mid-1990s. One of the first things I did, as Director, was sit down with the USSOCOM Commander to talk about what the relationship would look like and how we would work together since we have about 120 USSOCOM staff embedded with us here in the National Capital Region. With USSOCOM picking up the coordination authority, taking on a new mission, and figuring out how to work with us—in the end, the transition was very seamless.

CTC: Some tend to think of DTRA as purely a science and technology agency, focused on big projects, on research and development. But in fact, DTRA does a tremendous amount to directly support the warfighter. Can you talk a little bit about this aspect of the Agency's work?

Oxford: I have never viewed DTRA as a science and technology agency, and I had the fortune of being here when it was the Defense Nuclear Agency and then the Defense Special Weapons Agency before it transitioned to DTRA. Then I left and went to the White

House and then to the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Energy prior to coming back to DTRA. The entire time there has been a strong linkage between what the DTRA Research and Development (R&D)-element does to support the warfighter. This is a unique organization; when you look at a lot of other CSAs, they have the operational piece but they do not have the linkage back to R&D. And then you have an Agency like DARPA who has a huge R&D portfolio but no operations.

We go across the spectrum from R&D to full-fledged deployment of capability in direct support of the warfighter. When I returned to DTRA, one of the first things I did was sit down with the Combatant Commanders. Now we have Combatant Commander Requirement letters that identify their operational needs in the CWMD and improvised threat space. We have documents that tell us what they need and that informs the R&D process as well as our operational support process. Again, it is a continuum—from requirements back to our research and operational support.

CTC: When you look across the landscape at the threats facing the nation, how do you go about prioritizing DTRA's efforts?

Oxford: With the National Defense Strategy, Secretary of Defense James Mattis made it clear how we would prioritize the Agency's efforts. When I returned to DTRA I said, "This is the most complex geopolitical threat environment we have ever faced as a nation." We brief people on the fact that during the Cold War we spent 90 percent of our effort in the Department focused on the Soviet Union. When the Berlin Wall came down, we had the emergence of some of the rogue states—Iran, Iraq, North Korea—as well as India and Pakistan having become nuclear weapon states. We dealt with that for a period of time. When the Soviet Era was winding down, we had about 20,000 intelligence analysts focused on the Soviet Union that did not know the rest of the world. Ramping up intelligence support for some of these other nations was difficult. I would say it took almost 20 years to get there.

Then 9/11 happened. We still focused some on the rogue states, but we had to figure out how to fight in the counterterrorism domain at a scale we had not faced before. This is something we, as a Department, had not contended with, except in very small scale. We have been engaged with this fight for 18 years, and we finally have the system down. With the emergence of great power competition, we now have all three of these threat vectors at the same time, and this is the first time we have ever faced that combination simultaneously. It is a challenge. However, the National Defense Strategy gives us some left and right boundaries to help prioritize our efforts. We have not had a National Defense Strategy for 15 years. When [then] Secretary Mattis issued the National Defense Strategy, it gave us the direction that we should follow, which helps us with how we should shift resources and re-prioritize our efforts to counter WMD and improvised threats.

The distinction now is recognizing that this is a globally connected world. It is not just Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran; it is all their surrogates, their proxies, and their connections around the world. We cannot look at this problem as geographically bounded areas of responsibility; these threats are more interconnected now than ever and at a global scale. Our mission has even changed from when I first arrived at DTRA and it was along the lines of "we do counter-WMD, counter-improvised threats, and nuclear deterrence." Our mission now reflects how "we enable the DoD, the

*Defense Threat Reduction Agency
Director Vayl S. Oxford (DTRA)*

U.S. government, and international partners to counter and deter WMD and improvised threat networks." It is a mission focused on the entire network—finding ways to counter them and deterring their effectiveness. My number-two priority I outlined to my workforce was to ensure we strengthen and expand our international and interagency partnerships via a whole-of-government approach. We have increased our relationships overseas and most importantly, with some of the interagency partners (DHS, Commerce, Treasury, etc.), and they have authorities we can leverage to enable them through some of our analytical capabilities.

CTC: Has it been challenging to get interagency cooperation?

Oxford: It is interesting how easy building and maintaining those relationships has been, and I have noticed there is an appetite for these relationships to continue to grow and expand. We have found natural partners with Treasury, FBI, Commerce, and DHS. Our partners appreciate the fact that in many cases, they are protecting the homeland through activities that we can help identify.

CTC: You mentioned partners overseas. Are you able to talk about which countries have proven to be strong partners with DTRA's mission? Governments where you wish there were greater cooperation?

Oxford: I have found over time, some of our international programs had drifted into what I consider 'opportunity space' as opposed to 'mission space.' For instance, we would go somewhere because we *could* rather than where we *needed* to operate. In my discussions with the Combatant Commanders, specifically USCENTCOM Commander General Votel and USEUCOM Commander General Scaparrotti (who know their areas of responsibilities better than we do), I noticed an increase in their demand signal for our support

and expertise in their mission space(s). We have now reached out to all of the combatant commands, and we have helped them refine their CWMD and improvised threat requirements.

One of the key things we worry about in the terrorist fight is the proliferation of materials out of places like Syria. Due to this threat, we have worked very closely over the last five to seven years in Jordan and Lebanon to secure those borders. By working with our allies, we have secured roughly 85 percent of the border between Lebanon and Syria, which will help prevent and deter the proliferation of materials. The Chiefs of Defense in those countries have stated that their number-one priority is what we contributed to their national security projects.

Another example is Kazakhstan. After 25 years of cooperation, and even with the Russian influence in the area, Kazakhstan agreed to re-sign our agreement to work non-proliferation initiatives. There are also the Philippines and Vietnam who have been very proactive in the Pacific Region. We are now engaging the Australians to develop a strategic plan to determine how we can work together in that region to counter their national defense priority—China. We have also been actively engaged with U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) and U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) to identify the most appropriate countries to work with in that region to give us the leverage we need to counter China's influence. I look at some of our international initiatives not as programs but as strategic lever(s) where we can build a strong personal relationship with some of those countries and the authorities therein. These relationships are a longer-term benefit for both the Department and our allies.

CTC: In most of those partner countries, is there a DTRA equivalent?

Oxford: Almost never. For example, we had the Australian Embassy visit recently, and they offered to host us in Australia within the next few months to develop an Asian Regional Partnership Strategy that we believe will help identify mutual points of interest for both the U.S. and Australia. The Australians noted during their visit that if we want to work regional initiatives within the Asian Region, they will need to identify which parts of the Australian government we will need to work with to be successful.

CTC: You mentioned Jordan and the Border Operation Center that DTRA has there. How is DTRA specifically supporting Jordan in securing its border? Are you able to talk about any interdictions that have happened?

Oxford: We do not do interdiction, but we do enable the Jordanians to take such actions through a combination of fencing and sensors tied into command centers where they have Jordanian military manning the post. We secured 400-plus kilometers of the border, and though it is an expansive region, it all ties back to those command centers where they have a layered defense to react to any kind of incursion. Through this process, we have been able to help them manage and monitor the ISIS strongholds that are close to the Jordanian border and the humanitarian aid camps that hold Syrian refugees.

CTC: How long has that specific work being going on?

Oxford: It has been over five years working with the Jordanians

and allies to build this border.

CTC: When people think about groups like the Islamic State, they think perhaps chemical weapons, biological even, but there seems to be a sense that even at its zenith and despite its large financial reserves, it would have been difficult for the group to get its hands on nuclear material or develop a nuclear weapon. Would you tend to agree?

Oxford: I spent six years at DHS constantly worrying about your question. No one can ever predict what is going to happen—even if safety and security precautions are adequate and proliferated material has been interdicted. However, a lot of this is awareness and ensuring we continue to monitor these networks and rely on our intelligence community and their sources of information. For instance, the chemical/biological threats were slightly more prevalent due to the type of materials, such as chlorine, that are more readily available and they could be used as a terrorist weapon. Though the nuclear threat was always a concern if lost or stolen, but not as an indigenous nuclear weapons program.

For example, seeing what happened in Syria with the chlorine use,[a] we worry now that the norms for chemical use are lower. It will be more 'acceptable' because if we are going to use casualties as a recourse [and those casualty numbers are not high], sometimes we may not act. But if you saw what happened with the airstrikes in Syria, it was the result of the chemical use. In support of US-CENTCOM, we provided the expertise and helped determine how to target the chemical facilities.

This targeting expertise goes back to our history when we were targeting Soviet facilities. This provided us with the knowledge to develop nuclear weapons effects. When the Berlin Wall fell, we essentially transitioned that to conventional weapons targeting. This illuminated how to do target interaction on the conventional side to better understand how to damage the right facilities while minimizing any collateral damage to the populations.

CTC: We live in a world of fast technological change, and there is always worry that in the wrong hands, this advancing knowledge could be used for nefarious purposes. What concerns you about this?

Oxford: The use of new technology like additive manufacturing and synthetic biology is worrisome, both legitimately and illegitimately. The questions I pose—what do we want to tackle in synthetic biology and how do we find the nefarious actions versus the legitimate actions? We do have a chemical/biological office that is investing in synthetic biology research so we can monitor where that could become more of a threat vector than just the chemical/biological legitimate use.

Another threat that we are facing is fentanyl. This is a purely legal substance but used in the wrong way, they can be very dangerous. We have seen on the news that based on improper handling

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a   Editor's note: Both the Assad government and the Islamic State have been accused of using chlorine in attacks inside Syria. See Courtney Kube and Ken Dilanian, "U.S. officials: Blood samples show nerve agent, chlorine in Syria gas attack," NBC News, April 12, 2018, and Columb Strack, "The Evolution of the Islamic State's Chemical Weapons Efforts," *CTC Sentinel* 10:9 (2017), respectively.

they can be extremely dangerous. However, fentanyl is not classified as WMD because it is not considered a weapon. It is important for us to focus more analytics effort on fentanyl, but until it is declared as a weapon or an improvised threat, we will be waiting on the Department for guidance. Congress is adamant about what we define as an improvised threat, so it is important we spend our resources and time on specific threats that are within our mission space.

CTC: Another technology that could be misappropriated is drones, which of course the Islamic State deployed in Syria and Iraq, taking commercially available units and weaponizing them.[1] What were the lessons learned that DTRA is now thinking about when it looks at those activities?

Oxford: We have JIDO, which is now our Joint Improvised-Threat Defeat Directorate (JD), that has been instrumental in taking drones off the battlefield. We have forward-embedded people in the Middle East with the USCENTCOM and USSOCOM forces, as well as our reach-back support within our operations center in Reston, Virginia. This enables us to identify threat actors employing tools, tactics, and procedures for nefarious purposes. We have also watched the evolution of their tactics of small drones—at a very fast pace—and we are able to find ways to disrupt the system. The reason there has not been recent reporting of small drone attacks is mostly due to the efforts that we took to support the USCENTCOM and USSOCOM forces on the battlefield. What we are seeing now is an evolution of that threat in the UAE and Saudi Arabia with different tactics employed. This threat is evolving every three to six months—it is just that adaptive. We have had some recent successes overseas in that regard as well. This is going to be a continuing challenge due to the adaptive nature of the problem of being able to use small drones in so many different ways and you cannot rely on one technique to respond to them.

CTC: With sarin gas use in Syria;[2] Novichok deployed by suspected Russian operatives in Salisbury, England;[3] and the thwarted Islamic State-linked ricin attack in Germany,[4] are you concerned that non-state actors or terrorist groups are learning from these attacks and also from government responses to the attacks or lack thereof?

Oxford: This gets back to my comment about the chlorine in Syria. Are we lowering the bar for adversaries to use chemical weapons? This is really a risk calculus issue: if an adversary takes an action, do they assess the risk correctly that nobody is going to respond, because it had two people in the Novichok case or they were using sarin to clear areas in Syria tactically? Was it worth our response or not? Ultimately, the Syrians found out that it was worth our response—and we did respond. It is a give-and-take in terms of what actions people are willing to take and what did they think the consequences would be. One of the hardest things to do in any of these cases is to figure out attribution. Who actually gave the order? Was it an individual, or was it tied to a government source? This is always difficult.

CTC: Is there any one particular scenario that keeps you up at night?

Oxford: I think we have a pretty good handle on things. However,

with this expansion of the geopolitical environment, I am worried about tactical, strategic, and technological surprise. If we do not continue to be vigilant and look at where technology is going and stay out in front of that, then we are likely to have a technological and strategic surprise that we cannot anticipate. My discussion with the staff here is, "come to work every day and when you go home at night, ask yourself, 'have I done everything I could to make this country safer?'" As long as we do that, we should all sleep better at night. We cannot rest on our laurels; we have to earn our reputation every day. That is what I tell everybody—we have been designated a Combat Support Agency, but you earn it every day.

As we adjust to this new environment that puts a lot more emphasis on analytics, understanding the networks, identifying the nodes in the networks, determining how to scale those analytics and methodologies to nation-states, I understand the difficulty and pressure it puts on our Agency and the Department. We continue to hear 'buzz words' like artificial intelligence and machine learning that also need to be put into application. Some of our analytic cells that we have in the Agency will allow us to scale to larger datasets because there is a lot of information we are not digesting because we, unfortunately, do not have necessary analytics at this time.

There are some in this country, and the Department, that are unsure of artificial intelligence and machine learning because they think we are going to replace people. However, that is not the case, and what we are trying to do is better supply those people with the right information to make decisions. Machines are not going to make the decisions. Instead, artificial intelligence and machine learning are going to enable better analytics so we can make decisions faster, but it will still require the human to be a part of that process.

CTC: Conversely then, what keeps you hopeful in the midst of the array of threats facing the nation?

Oxford: The collection of the community that we have now become part of and the Combatant Commanders and the interagency understands this. As we continue to branch out with our international partners, they are starting to understand the influence within their regions of the threats that are outlined in the National Defense Strategy. Oftentimes, there are people focused solely on their niche problem-set, but now, we understand that there is a set of problems that we need to work collectively. I am excited to see that type of forward momentum.

CTC: What's remarkable about an organization like DTRA is you have to be simultaneously creative in thinking about future threats and yet still meet the immediate. And then add to that the layer you talked about—the reemergence of the great powers and the challenges therein. It's not just non-state actors to consider.

Oxford: That is right. In many cases, they are all connected. Nation-states using proxies and surrogates and influences that you have to figure out. That is why the network analysis that we are doing, along with others, is really important to determine how everything is connected and where you put pressure on that system. That is why we have the people sitting in the staffs at the Combatant Commands—so they understand what they are going through every day. And we get that feedback through our operation center

here every day as well. Do not get me wrong, this is not easy and we have an impending budget battle this year. We would all love to see another year where appropriations come out on time, but Congress always gets a vote. So far, we have been well received on the Hill because of the jobs we have, and there are not a lot of people that do what we do.   CTC

Citations

1   See Don Rassler, *The Islamic State and Drones: Supply, Scale, and Future Threats* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018).

2   Craig Whitlock and Ed O'Keefe, "Sarin gas used in Syria attack, Kerry says," *Washington Post*, September 1, 2013; "Syria chemical attack: What we know," BBC, September 24, 2013.

3   "Statement from the United States, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom on the Attack in Salisbury," White House, March 15, 2018.

4   "Suspect in German ricin case was in touch with radical Islamists: prosecutor," Reuters, June 20, 2018; Florian Flade, "The June 2018 Cologne Ricin Plot: A New Threshold in Jihadi Bio Terror," *CTC Sentinel* 11:7 (2018).

Military Interventions, Jihadi Networks, and Terrorist Entrepreneurs: How the Islamic State Terror Wave Rose So High in Europe

By Petter Nesser

Even though there were half as many attacks by Islamic State terrorists in Europe in 2018 compared to 2017, the threat remains high. In 2018, Europe saw more jihadi attack plots than any given year before 2015, and several foiled plots last year could have caused mass casualties. The Islamic State became such a potent threat in Europe partly because of special circumstances surrounding the war in Syria and rise of the Islamic State, and partly because the Islamic State built upon networks already established by al-Qa`ida. Because Europe's jihadi networks have grown considerably since the outbreak of the Syrian war and strengthened their ties to the global jihad movement through foreign fighting, it is possible there will be future big waves of attacks. There are three main determinants of the emergence of future jihadi cells in Europe in increasing order of importance: military interventions in Muslim countries, jihadi networks, and terrorist entrepreneurs.

On December 11, 2018, just as Europeans were beginning to think the jihadi threat in the region was shrinking, a terror attack struck the Strasbourg Christmas market. A French-Algerian Islamic State supporter, Cherif Chekatt, killed five and injured 12 in an attack with a revolver and knives. After a major manhunt, Chekatt was killed in an exchange of fire with police officers two days later. Investigations turned up a video in which the attacker pledged fealty to the Islamic State, and Chekatt was already known to the security services for having extremist leanings.[1] The Strasbourg attack was in tune with how Islamic State-affiliated jihadis have operated in Europe[a] in recent years and a reminder that although the Islamic State is weakened, Europeans are not in the clear from jihadi terror. On the contrary, although there were approximately half as many attacks by Islamic State terrorists in Europe in 2018 compared to 2017,[b] there is a high potential for future waves of attacks as Europe's jihadi networks have grown and strengthened their ties to the global jihadi movement since the outbreak of the war in Syria.

What is the actual scope of the Islamic State threat in Europe, and how did we get here? Based upon the author's previous works on jihadi terrorism in Europe, this article examines what has shaped this threat in the past, and may continue to do so in the future.[c] The author argues the threat from the Islamic State became so big in Europe because the Syrian war breathed new life into European jihadism and because the Islamic State took over al-Qa`ida's networks in Europe, making them effective tools for its violent campaign. This article further argues that the variation in the threat to different European countries can be traced to three main factors: 1) military interventions in Muslim countries; 2) jihadi networks; and 3) terrorist entrepreneurs. The author will come back to what each factor entails, but first how much of a threat does the Islamic State pose in Europe?

How Big is the Islamic State Threat to Europe?

Europe has lived with jihadi terror since the mid-1990s when the al-Qa`ida-affiliated Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) carried out a series of bombings in France. In the 2000s, the threat matrix was dominated by al-Qa`ida. Europe saw large-scale attacks such as the train bombings in Madrid in 2004 and the bombings in London in 2005. Al-Qa`ida also plotted a number of large attacks that were foiled in the 2000s. The al-Qa`ida threat continued into the 2010s, before the Islamic State emerged as an international terrorist threat in 2014.

From 2014 onward, nearly all plots in Europe have been linked to the Islamic State, whereas very few have been traced to al-Qa`ida. The level of plotting has reached new heights.[2] Never before have there been so many jihadi terrorist plots in Europe as in the period between 2014 and 2018. Never before have so many plots gone undetected and resulted in attacks. Never before have so many Europeans been killed in jihadi terrorist attacks. More people have died from jihadi terrorism in Europe between 2014 and 2018 (at least 345) than in the previous 20 years (at least 267).[d]

As noted above, in 2018 the number of attacks dropped some 50 percent compared to 2017, and there were no mass-casualty attacks killing more than 10 people. This led many to think that the worst was over and that the military defeat of the Islamic State had decimated the group's capacity to project terror attacks onto

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a   Europe is here defined as Western Europe, not including former Eastern Bloc states.

b   According to FFI's dataset on jihadi attack plots in Western Europe maintained by the author and Anne Stenersen (last updated December 2018), there were 16 attacks in 2017 and seven in 2018. FFI registered six attacks in 2015 and 11 in 2016.

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c   The analysis presented here draws from and expands on the epilogue to the second edition of the author's book *Islamist Terrorism in Europe* (London: Hurst/OUP, 2018) and his article "Europe hasn't won the war on terror," Politico, December 5, 2018.

d   Numbers of deaths taken from FFI's dataset on jihadi attack plots in Western Europe.

Europe. This view was reflected in a U.N. report in the summer of 2018, which identified a possible causal connection between the drop in attacks and the damaging of the Islamic State's command and control, especially the death of the group's most active planners of terror plots.[3]

It must be stressed, however, that this drop in attack activity followed the unprecedented numbers of attacks seen in 2016 and 2017, and that executed attacks only represent part of the picture. It is a common mistake to gauge terrorist threats by the number of launched attacks only and to not include the plots that were foiled by counterterrorism agencies. When both executed and foiled attacks are looked at, there were actually more jihadi plots in Europe in 2018 than in any given year before 2015. (See Figure 1.[e])
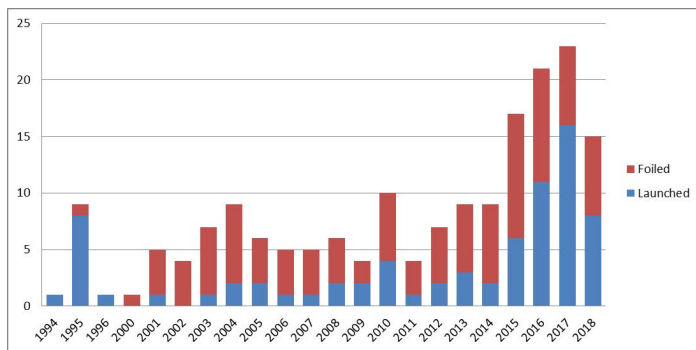

Figure 1: Well-documented attack plots by jihadis in Western Europe, 1994-2018

The plots in 2018 (both attacks and foiled attacks) demonstrate that the Islamic State remains the main protagonist of jihadi terrorism in Europe. Perpetrators were either inspired by the group or linked to Islamic State networks in Europe, internationally, or online. The plots also show that the Islamic State threat is not merely one of small attacks, but also includes plans for large-scale ones.

In 2018, there were three attacks by single gunmen including Chekatt's attack in Strasbourg. In March 2018, for example, a Moroccan Islamic State supporter shot policemen and took hostages inside a shopping mall in southern France.[4] He killed five, injured 16, and said he was doing it for Syria.[5] The year 2018 saw multiple smaller attacks with knives. In May, for example, a French-Chechen Islamic State supporter stabbed a man to death and injured others near the Opéra national de Paris.[6] There were also plots in 2018 to use vehicles as weapons; some had the potential to kill dozens as in Nice in 2016. In February, for example, British police arrested a convert who supported the Islamic State and had planned to ram a vehicle into crowds, probably in Oxford Street. He was in contact with Islamic State members in the Philippines.[7]

The security services also detected plots to employ a toxin in a terror attack. In June 2018, a Tunisian linked to the Islamic State was apprehended in Cologne for allegedly producing ricin to be used in a possible attack.[8] He had been in contact with individuals linked to the Islamic State and suspected to be based in North Africa or Syria.[9] There was also at least one plan by the Islamic State's networks in Europe to carry out complex armed assaults like those

in Paris in November 2015. In September 2018, for example, seven alleged Islamic State supporters were arrested in the Netherlands for allegedly plotting to attack a public event with assault rifles and hand grenades. The investigation also indicated that they planned to set off a car bomb at another location.[10] So even though the number of attacks decreased in Europe in 2018, there was higher plot activity by jihadis in Europe last year than any given year before 2015, and several foiled plots were potentially very lethal. How did Europe get here?

How Did the Threat Get So Big?

In seeking to explain how the Islamic State threat became so big in Europe, it is necessary to distinguish between immediate reasons linked to Syria and the Islamic State, and more general drivers that have shaped the jihadi threat in Europe since the phenomenon emerged in the 1990s. The immediate reasons include the massive mobilization of European foreign fighters, some new tactical moves by the Islamic State, and the refugee crisis.

Immediate Reasons

The civil war in Syria and the rise of the Islamic State breathed new life into European jihadi networks and became major recruitment tools for them. Many European Muslims became enraged by the Assad regime's abuses of the civilian population. The rise of what to some seemed to be a powerful Sunni 'state' implementing sharia and standing up to Assad became a major pull factor for foreign fighting. Over a very short span of time, the recruitment of foreign fighters gave European security services more potential jihadi terror threats to monitor than they had ever dealt with before. A large number of Europeans (estimates vary between 4,000 and 7,000) traveled to Syria as foreign fighters, most of them eventually joining the Islamic State.[11]

Before the Islamic State's rise to notoriety and the realization that the group would pose a threat to Europe, it was easy for young European Muslims to travel to Syria via Turkey. Moreover, European states had no clear position vis-a-vis their exodus. Assad's atrocities in Syria made it hard to condemn those who traveled on moral grounds, and in several countries, legislation was not in place or adapted to ban people from going to Syria.[f] The early travelers had many and often altruistic motives for going,[12] but as soon as jihadis started to dominate the insurgency, most of the Europeans ended up in groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State.

Historical data shows that a minority (some 11 percent) of foreign fighters who have traveled from Western countries to join conflicts in the Muslim world (for example, Bosnia in the 1990s, or Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen in the 2000s) ended up becoming international terrorists.[13] Yet those who did become such terrorists contributed to making the threat higher. Many of them played roles as terrorist entrepreneurs: recruiting, organizing, training, and directing attack cells. The author will come back to this dynamic later in this article. Islamic State-linked foreign fighters have had a hand in many, if not most of the high-profile attacks

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e   The graph is based on FFI's dataset on jihadi attack plots in Western Europe.

f   E.U. efforts to adapt laws to stem the foreign fighter flow to Syria gained traction with the rise of the Islamic State in 2014 and intensified with the attacks on the Bataclan and other targets in Paris in 2015. See, for example, "The challenge of foreign fighters and the EU's response," Council of the European Union, October 9, 2014, and "The return of foreign fighters to EU soil," European Parliament, May 2018.

and plots in Europe since 2014, either by participating themselves as in the attacks on the Bataclan and other targets in Paris in November 2015, or by directing plotters via an encrypted messaging app, as in the truck attack by Rakhmat Akilov in Stockholm in April 2017.[14][g] The strength and nature of links between plotters and Islamic State networks have varied significantly it seems, but as the author will return to, plots absent network contacts are very rare in European jihadism.[15][h]

The second immediate reason for the many plots and attacks attributed to the Islamic State is that the terrorists linked to the group modified their tactics to avoid detection. In 2014-2017, jihadi plots in Europe involved higher proportions of attacks with simple weapons such as cars and knives compared to bombs (which has historically been the preferred weapon of jihadis in Europe), and nearly half of the terrorist plots involved single actors, rather than a group.[i] Single actors with simple weapons are notoriously difficult to stop. Adding to this, the terrorists increasingly communicated via encrypted apps, which are challenging for security services to monitor. As a result, more plots than ever before went under the radar and resulted in attacks after Islamic State launched its campaign in Europe from 2014.

Lastly, the Islamic State exploited the circumstances of the refugee crisis in 2015 to smuggle operatives among migrants. The most often cited example of this tactic is the Abaaoud network behind the attacks in Paris in November 2015 and in Brussels in March 2016.[16] However, there have been multiple other cases in which the Islamic State either sent plotters to Europe posing as refugees or recruited among refugees for attack cells.[j] The monitoring of growing numbers of foreign fighters and terrorists operating in ways increasingly difficult to detect stretched the capacities of European security services to the limit. So, on one level the threat from the Islamic

State became so high in Europe because of a swift increase in the capacities of the terrorists that was not immediately matched by European states. But how did the Islamic State gain such capacities, and what drove its campaign of terrorism in Europe?

General Drivers

Many debates about the drivers of Islamic State terrorism in Europe have revolved around immigration and failed integration. There are certainly links between the immigration of some individuals and jihadism in Europe. Many of those who established jihadi networks in the region in the early 1990s were, for instance, political refugees. And, as noted, refugees (fake or real) have been implicated in plots.

However, at the same time such factors reveal little about when and where the Islamic State strikes in Europe. If levels of immigration from Muslim-majority countries were the main predictor, there would have been more attack activity in countries such as Italy and Sweden, which face high levels of such immigration (but relatively few attack plots).[k] And if, for example, integration policy was a main predictor, one might see different threat levels in countries with opposing integration policies, such as Britain and France. Britain practices multi-culturalism whereas France practices assimilation, and yet the countries face similar threat levels—the highest in Europe. The main reasons why these two countries face such high threats have to do with 1) their policies of intervening in armed conflicts in the Muslim world; 2) the dynamics of their domestic jihadis networks, including the presence of extremist clusters linked to radical preachers; and 3) the presence in these countries of terrorist entrepreneurs, who build international attack cells on behalf of groups such as al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State.

Revenge for Military Interventions Matter

One main reason that the Islamic State threat became so big in Europe is that the group set out to strike back at European countries that joined the coalition against them.

Historically, jihadis have justified attacks in Europe with reference to two main grievances: military interventions in Muslim countries and perceived insults against Islam (such as drawings of the Prophet Muhammad). The interventions seem, however, to be the main trigger. Statistics on jihadi attack plots in Europe since the 1990s (see Figure 1) show that numbers have increased with Western interventions in Muslim conflicts.

The first increase occurred in the mid-1990s when Algerian Islamists accused France of supporting the military regime during the civil war in Algeria. The al-Qa`ida-linked Algerian terrorist group GIA declared war on France and executed a string of attacks in the country. The next increase came in the mid-2000s following the U.S.- and U.K.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Jihadis targeted European countries that were part of the coalition that went into Iraq and major attacks occurred, such as the bombings of commuter trains by an al-Qa`ida-linked terrorist cell in Spain in 2004 and the al-Qa`ida-directed 2005 London bombings. Multiple attack plots were also thwarted in this period, such as an ambitious plan to

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g   In "Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10:6 (2016), the author and his co-authors (Anne Stenersen and Emilie Oftedal) did a preliminary analysis of 38 Islamic State-linked plots and attacks in Europe between 2014 and October 2016, and they found that 19 plots were reported to have involved contacts with and guidance from members of Islamic State networks via social media. See p. 8. Of the 38 plots, the study further found 12 cases that could be linked to Islamic State's section for international operations with a high degree of certainty.

h   The idea that terrorists can operate in complete isolation as 'lone wolves' has increasingly come under critique. For a recent contribution to debunking the lone-wolf myth, see Bart Schuurman, Francis O'Connor, Lasse Lindekilde, Noemie Bouhana, Paul Gill, and Stefan Malthaner, "End of the Lone Wolf: The Typology That Should Not Have Been," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2017): pp. 1-8.

i   For example, in the period 2008-2013, 65 percent of plots involved some kind of bomb dimension, whereas in 2014-2016, the proportion fell to 33 percent. Only 13 percent of plots in 2008-2013 involved knives, whereas the proportion increased to 33 percent in 2014-2016. For more on changes in weapons and tactics, see Petter Nesser, Anne Stenersen, and Emilie Oftedal, "Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10:6 (2016), p. 11-13. See also Nesser and Stenersen, "The Modus Operandi of Jihadi Terrorists in Europe," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8:6 (2014) for more on the historical trends in the modus operandi of jihadis in Western Europe.

j   For example, Anis Amri was a failed asylum seeker to Italy and Germany. He mixed with an Islamic State recruitment network in Germany and communicated with Islamic State handlers abroad both before and during the attack on the Berlin Christmas market. See, for example, "Berlin Christmas Market Attacker Got Order Directly from Islamic State," Reuters, April 15, 2017.

k   FFI's database on jihadi attack plots in Western Europe distinguishes between well-documented and vague plots, according to the extent to which plots fulfill the following criteria: 1) identified jihadi actor; 2) identified target(s); and 3) evidence of attack plan (e.g., confiscated weapons and scouting of targets). In 2014-2017, FFI registered no *well-documented* plots in Italy and four in Sweden.

bring down transatlantic passenger jets departing from the United Kingdom in 2006. The third increase came with the establishment of the Islamic State and the launch of the anti-Islamic State coalition in September 2014. Islamic State-leaders pledged to punish countries attacking the group, and Islamic State terrorists shouted "this is for Syria" when they struck in Europe.[l]

The geographical distribution of terrorist plots in Europe further shows that those countries with the heaviest military involvement in the Muslim world—France and the United Kingdom—are most targeted.[17] Conversely, countries with less military involvement such as Italy or Sweden are less targeted. Another sign that military interventions matter is that many plots target military personnel and installations. Both al-Qa`ida and Islamic State-linked or-inspired terrorists have gone after military targets. The shooting of soldiers in southern France by the al-Qa`ida-linked French-Algerian Mohammed Merah in 2012 is one example. The murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby in Woolwich in 2013 is another. In 2014, a U.K. medical student Tarik Hassane and fellow student Suhaid Majeed made plans for an attack on the Parachute Regiment Territorial Army Barracks at White City in London. Hassane and Majeed were reportedly instructed by the Islamic State via social media.[18]

Some have asserted that European military interventions did not influence the Islamic State threat to Europe all that much, pointing to the fact that the organization's forerunner—the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIL)—was plotting against European countries well before the anti-Islamic State coalition was announced.[19] While plots linked to ISIL started appearing in Europe from at least February 2014 when a returned French foreign fighter, Ibrahim Boudina, was arrested in Nice with explosives and a handgun and believed to be preparing an attack on the Nice carnival,[20] the rate of plotting increased dramatically after the anti-Islamic State coalition was formed and Islamic State spokesman al-Adnani in September 2014 called for attacks in Europe.[21] In addition, it should come as no surprise that there was plotting before 2014. Many among the Europeans who joined the Islamic State as foreign fighters were already part of networks supporting al-Qa`ida that never stopped plotting attacks in Europe. The aforementioned Ibrahim Boudina was part of the Cannes-Torcy network, which recruited for al-Qa`ida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra before members joined ISIL. A central member of the network, Jeremie Louis-Sidney, was suspected to have carried out an attack with a hand grenade on a Jewish grocery store in a Paris suburb in 2012 and was later killed by police.[22] There are, however, many cases illustrating how the distinction between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida has not been perfectly clear-cut among jihadis in Europe. In the attacks on Charlie Hebdo and a Jewish supermarket in Paris in January 2015, for example, two jihadis linked to al-Qa`ida in Yemen and an Islamic State supporter cooperated. They had all been part of the same network of al-Qa`ida supporters within France that sent foreign fighters to Iraq and Yemen in the 2000s.[23] Both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State consider attacks in Europe legitimate and wish for them to happen, and as the author will come back to in the next section, their European networks have overlapped.

Jihadi Networks Matter More

While most Islamic State plots have occurred in France and the United Kingdom—the countries that have been most heavily involved in the fight against the group—countries with lighter or less visible contributions have also been targeted.[24] Germany, for example, has faced a high threat, although its contribution to the anti-Islamic State-coalition has been relatively limited compared to France and Britain.[25] The reason Germany has seen significant jihadi attack plotting is arguably because of the strength and evolution of extremist networks in the country.

Historically, jihadis have sought to launch attacks in European countries they see as legitimate targets, provided they have the capability to operate in those countries. The capability to operate, in turn, relies strongly on links and interaction between groups in conflict zones (al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State) and local networks in Europe. As such, opportunistic attacks may occur in countries that are not at the very top of the jihadis' list of enemies, but where network links make attacks more likely to succeed. Such links usually come into existence when European Islamist extremists seek out armed groups in conflict zones as foreign fighters. The foreign fighters then become the bridgehead through which groups in conflict zones may gain access to extremist networks within Europe and exploit them either as logistical support networks or for attacks.

After al-Qa`ida embarked on global jihad in 1998, for example, the jihadi networks in Europe became an important weapon against the United States' European allies. Multiple European jihadis who traveled to conflict zones as foreign fighters were recruited by al-Qa`ida for attacks at home. The threat to the United Kingdom increased in the mid-2000s when al-Qa`ida in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region recruited British-Pakistani foreign fighters as terrorists. Another example is that the threat to Germany increased in 2007 after a network composed of German converts and German Turks in Neu-Ulm connected with the al-Qa`ida-linked Uzbek Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) in Waziristan, Pakistan. The network was recruited by a Pakistani who operated as an agent for al-Qa`ida-affiliated groups in Germany and members trained with IJU before returning to plot attacks.[26]

This pattern repeated itself with the Islamic State. A crucial reason why Britain, France, Belgium, and Germany have experienced so many Islamic State-plots is that these countries have had substantial jihadi networks since the 1990s, which produced many foreign fighters for Syria. The main recruitment platform for the Islamic State in Europe was a network that grew out of the U.K.-based al-Muhajiroun movement that initially supported al-Qa`ida and mobilized a new generation of European jihadis during the 2000s.[27] After being banned in the United Kingdom, this movement reappeared under the name Islam4UK and under the leadership of the British-Pakistani lawyer and radical preacher Anjem Choudary. It then branched out transnationally across Europe, establishing Sharia4Belgium, Sharia4Holland, Sharia4Spain, Sharia4Denmark (Kaldet til Islam), Sharia4Finland, Sharia4Italy, Sharia4France (Forsane Alizza), Millatu Ibrahim (Germany), and The Prophet's Umma (Norway).[28] In addition to the transnational Sharia4, which staged public events and demonstrations in support of jihadism, European foreign fighters were also dispatched by different local jihadi networks that were more secretive in their support for global jihad. One such network was that of Khalid Zerkani

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l   For example, the November 2015 Paris attacker cell. See Kim Willsher, "Attack at Paris's Bataclan: 'two or Three Men Began Shooting Blindly at Crowd," *Guardian*, November 14, 2015. Or the Islamic State supporter who attacked police outside Notre Dame. See "Paris: French Police Shoot Attacker Armed with Hammer at Notre-Dame Cathedral," *Local*, June 6, 2017.

in Brussels, which recruited Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the ringleader of the Paris attacks of November 2015.[29] Another example is the Abu Walaa network in Germany to which the attacker of the Berlin Christmas market in 2016 was linked.[30]

A significant number of Europeans who joined the Islamic State via Sharia4 or networks such as Zerkani's became implicated in the group's program for international operations, and ended up as entrepreneurs of attack cells in their home countries.[31]

Terrorist Entrepreneurs Matter Most

There is a reoccurring pattern in how jihadi terror cells form in Europe, in that a core cadre of experienced jihadis with links to groups in conflict zones, such as al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, recruit attackers locally on European soil. These terrorist entrepreneurs are activists who dedicate themselves to furthering the aims of the groups they represent.

The entrepreneurs reach out to misfits (criminals and social losers) and offer them purpose and community, or recruit drifters from their own social networks, and mold them into terrorists.[32] The process is truly transnational in that entrepreneurs operate across borders within Europe and interact with jihadis in Muslim countries. The entrepreneurs also represent historical continuity in European jihadism because of the way that many of them have turned up in different terror investigations over time. In several cases, people who acted as entrepreneurs in Europe during the 2000s and even the 1990s have reappeared in plots by Islamic State since 2014.

Oftentimes, the entrepreneurs have built attack cells in a very hands-on fashion, in the context of radical mosques and underground networks in Europe. At other times, they have coordinated cells from conflict zones, using middlemen or social media. Then there are examples of entrepreneurs who have operated within jails and influenced people who later participated in terror attacks. A new development with the Islamic State is that "virtual entrepreneurs" have recruited and directed terrorists for attacks in Europe and elsewhere in the West solely via encrypted apps such as Telegram.[33]

A famous example of a terrorist entrepreneur who has reappeared is the French Algerian Djamel Beghal who recruited for the GIA in Europe in the 1990s, built terror cells for al-Qa`ida around the millennium (for which he was arrested in 2001), and then influenced the perpetrators of the attacks on Charlie Hebdo and a kosher supermarket in January 2015. He interacted with some of them while he was in jail and all of them when he was out on parole in 2010.[34] Another example of historical continuities and the role of jails is the entrepreneur of the terrorist cell, linked to or inspired by the Islamic State, behind the attacks in Barcelona in August 2017. Abdelbaki Es Satty reportedly came under the "malign influence" of a central member of the terrorist cell that launched the attacks in Madrid in 2004 and other extremists while in prison.[35] A third possible example on how veteran terrorist entrepreneurs re-emerge in the backdrop of new plots was revealed in 2017. It was reported that another imprisoned GIA veteran, Lionel Dumont, was linked to Islamic State supporters arrested in 2017 in Wattignies in northern France was suspected of recruiting and plotting an attack for the group in France or Belgium. Before his arrest in 2003, Dumont had as a terrorist entrepreneur directed the activities of the Roubaix Gang, which robbed banks and plotted attacks in support of the GIA in the mid-1990s, and had then spent time in Southeast Asia, where according to some investigators he may have worked on behalf of al-Qa`ida. One of the purported plotters arrested in Wattignies had spent time in prison with Dumont and was alleged to have been influenced by him. Both of them had communicated with the veteran in jail, and a search of Dumont's cell turned up Islamic State propaganda. Dumont denied any involvement in a terror plan and said the pair had provided him with the propaganda.[36]

A hands-on entrepreneur from the Islamic State era is Abdelhamid Abaaoud who directed the cell behind the deadly attacks in Paris in November 2015. Abaaoud had also directed an Islamic State terror cell in Verviers, which was planning attacks, possibly on police stations, a plot that was thwarted after a shootout with Belgian counterterrorism commandos in January 2015. Abaaoud escaped the dragnet of the security services and went back to the Islamic State in Syria, only to return to coordinate the biggest attack in Europe since the Madrid bombings.[37]

What caught European security services off guard and contributed strongly to the high frequency of plots and attacks by Islamic State in Europe was the ability of European foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq to act as entrepreneurs from conflict zones via encrypted apps. Examples include, among others, the French foreign fighter Rachid Kassim[38] who directed multiple plotters in France, such as Larossi Abdalla who killed a policeman and his wife in Magnanville in 2016,[39] and British foreign fighter Junaid Hussein who guided cells in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia.[40]

Conclusion

Despite the fact that the number of attacks has decreased, it is way too early for Europe to lower its guard against jihadism. It must be expected that Islamic State followers will continue to seek to punish Europeans for their contribution to bringing down the 'caliphate.' Also, it cannot be ruled out that European governments in the future will again intervene militarily in Muslim countries.

Furthermore, if history repeats itself, the unprecedented number of Europeans who departed for Syria will lay the groundwork for future jihadi networks that will target Europe. The foreign fighting has undoubtedly strengthened transnational ties between jihadis within Europe as well as their ties to groups in multiple conflict zones. If jihadis find new safe havens in war-torn countries such as Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan, or in the Sahel region in the time ahead, such ties could be exploited as bridgeheads by groups that want to take the fight to Europe.[m] And among the large number of European foreign fighters, there is almost certainly a substantial number of individuals who could emerge as tomorrow's entrepreneurs of terror cells.

Adding to this, the broader jihadi mobilization caused by the civil war in Syria has undoubtedly increased the pool of Islamist extremists in Europe. A recent report set the number of Islamist extremists in Germany at 25,000. The report stated that 2,240 of them had the potential of becoming jihadi terrorists.[41] The United Kingdom is home to up to 25,000 Islamist extremists, of whom about 3,000 are seen as a threat and about 500 are under constant surveillance.[42] In France, some 20,000 were included in the FSPRT watchlist as radicalized in February 2018. The list contains a broad

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m   According to the United Nations, there have already been foiled plots in Europe linked to Islamic State militants in Afghanistan. "Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," United Nations, July 27, 2018, p. 16.

spectrum ranging from men who reject shaking the hands of women to potential terrorists, and is constantly updated. Some 4,000 are seen as a potential terrorist threat and monitored closely.[43] European prisons have also been filling up with jihadis. Of the 1,500 foreign fighters who have returned, several hundred have been imprisoned.[44] Some of them will likely leave extremism behind, but others will re-join an extremist scene that has grown in recent years. Moreover, jihadis who have been imprisoned during the 2000s are being released. It was estimated, for example, that 80 of the 193 individuals convicted of terrorism crimes in the United Kingdom since 2007 (about 40 percent) were scheduled to be released by the end of 2018.[45]

Since the Islamic State threat escalated, European governments have allocated resources to counterterrorism, and Europe's stance on terrorism has toughened considerably. There is more surveillance; more people are arrested for extremist activities; and some countries, such as France, have pursued a policy of killing their own citizens in Islamic State-held areas because they are seen as a threat.[46] The tougher measures have surely stopped attacks, but the terrorists keep plotting, and can frame the harder measures as a 'War on Islam' to mobilize new recruits.

The most recent wave of jihadi terrorism in Europe appears to have crested, but European security agencies should prepare themselves for a future wave that may already be forming.   CTC

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The Islamic State's Revitalization in Libya and its Post-2016 War of Attrition

By Lachlan Wilson and Jason Pack

Following its territorial loss of Sirte in December 2016, the Islamic State in Libya has rebounded to wage a war of attrition that seeks to derail Libyan state formation. During the last two years, the group has been able to 'reset,' moving through recovery, reorganization, and now re-engagement phases. The group is now waging two discrete campaigns: high-profile attacks on symbolic state institutions and a campaign in the southwestern desert—each of which constitutes a significant threat to any future progress in Libyan state-building. Despite its resurgence in Libya, the group may now face obstacles. As a result of the Libyan National Army's (LNA) ongoing campaign to 'liberate' southern Libya from terrorists and to reopen its oil fields, the Islamic State in Libya may experience an erosion of its ability to operate in the Fezzan. Conversely, the LNA's campaign may provide the group with an opportunity to exploit social fissures and perpetuate instability.

O ver the course of the last two years, the Islamic State in Libya has gradually re-emerged as a formidable insurgent force. Following its territorial loss of Sirte in late 2016 to a U.S.-backed, anti-Islamic State co-alition, the group has adopted new approaches to recruitment and financing. These reveal that the group has become more reliant on sub-Saharan African personnel in its post-territorial phase and has simultaneously deepened its connections with Libya's desert smuggling networks, which connect North Africa to the Sahel. Moreover, as will be outlined in this article, its organiza-

tional structure appears to have shifted from 'state-like' to 'guerrilla insurgency-like.'

All of these changes represent the Islamic State in Libya's inherent opportunism and adaptability, characteristics that challenge the capacity and flexibility of Libya's current security institutions. As will be outlined below, the Islamic State in Libya's post-Sirte resilience was illustrated by it being able to mount three high-profile attacks on symbolic state institutions in 2018 and to progressively intensify its campaign in the desert that takes advantage of overstretched security actors. Taken together, these developments indicate that the group has again stepped up its efforts to derail state formation in Libya through a strategy of attrition (*nikayah*). As such, a resurgent Islamic State in Libya threatens the consolidation of any modicum of progress toward peace and prosperity in the country.

The underlying information for this article is derived from the data produced and cataloged by Eye on ISIS in Libya (EOIL), a data repository of Islamic State actions, attacks, and social media statements run by the authors and available publicly at www.EyeOnISIS.com.[a]

Part one of the article presents an overview of the Islamic State's emergence in Libya in 2014 and how the group's form and spatial localization have evolved due to the country's post-Qadhafi political dynamics. In the wake of its territorial losses in 2016, the Islamic State in Libya has been pragmatic, with its proximal goal to prevent the consolidation of sovereign Libyan state structures.

In part two of the article, the authors identify two discrete, yet simultaneous, military campaigns that the group has undertaken in the wake of its eviction from Sirte in December 2016. On the one hand, the group has been launching high-profile attacks on symbolic state institutions along Libya's coast. On the other hand, it has been carrying out a campaign in the desert across a larger area of the country than ever before.

These campaigns require money, manpower, and a suitable organizational structure, which is the focus of part three of the article. Previously, the group expended most of its resources in governing, terrorizing, and then losing Sirte.[1] Therefore, to understand the enigma of the Islamic State's resurrection in Libya, its new sources

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The research from this article is derived from Eye on ISIS's dataset, which focuses on all jihadi groups in Libya, as well as detailing the actions of other militias and international actors' responses to them.

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a   EOIL's website consists of discrete text posts tracking the actions of the Islamic State and other actors in Libya, starting in mid-2014 and continuing to the present. The information underlying these posts comes from Libyan sources who need to remain anonymous for their safety. This information is then cross checked against a broad compilation of open source Arabic and English media. This report only highlights a very small subset of EOIL's data. The website contains over 1,000 discrete, time-stamped posts and draws from a repository of over 30,000 pages of primary source reports and analysis. This article is based on the last two years of data, which the authors have subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis to identify the existence of the two separate, but interlocking, Islamic State in Libya campaigns since the group's eviction from Sirte.
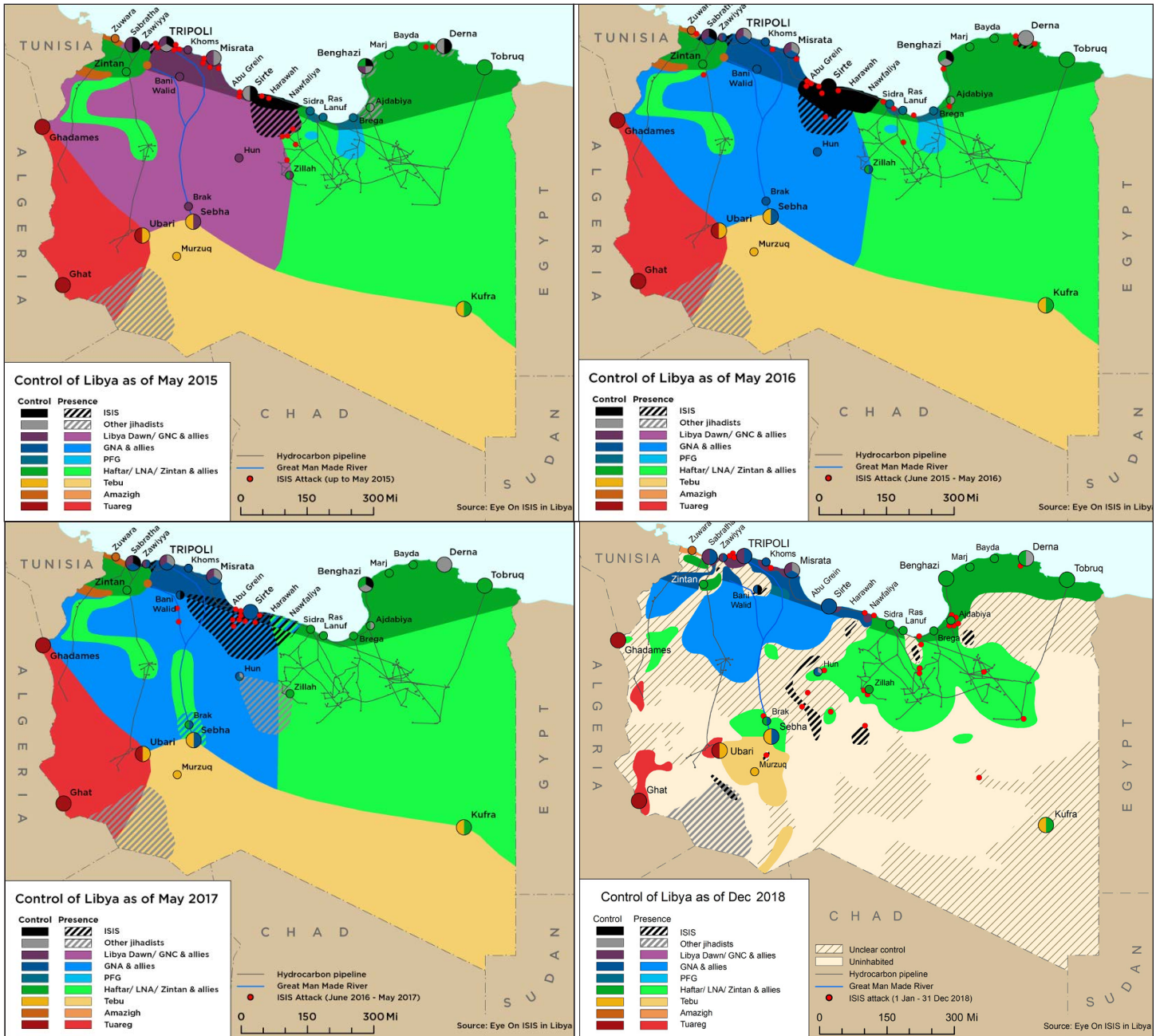
Figure 1: Maps showing control of Libya and Islamic State attacks as of May 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018.

of funding and recruitment must be understood. The authors' look at the Islamic State in Libya's recruitment efforts and composition shows how the group has become progressively disassociated from its parent organization in the Levant and how its organizational chart apparently shifted from "state-like" structures to "guerrilla-like" ones as it wages a low-cost, high-impact war of attrition.

Part four of the article examines the future outlook for the Islamic State in Libya. Despite recent gains made by LNA forces in southern Libya which are threatening the Islamic State's ability to operate in the Fezzan region, the Islamic State in Libya may actually pose a greater threat to Libyan state-building processes in 2019 than it did in 2016. During its peak of power in 2016, the group seems to have exerted a greater degree of governance over five percent of Libya's territory than the country's nominally sovereign Government of National Accord did over the remainder of

the Libyan land mass.[2] However, during that governance phase, the group was unable to undertake the sort of attacks that it has in 2018—namely three high-visibility-attacks on symbolic targets in Tripoli—combined with a series of delicate pinprick attacks that attempt to foil the nascent consolidation of security apparatuses in the south. As such, the Islamic State in Libya profoundly threatens Libya's path to peace and prosperity. The international community would be remiss to continue pushing political reconciliation while not providing sufficient attention to the intertwined 'elephants in the room' of Libya's illicit economy and the threat from a resurgent Islamic State satellite.

Part 1: The Rise and Fall of the Islamic State's Territorial Control in Libya

Following the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi in 2011, Libya's

transitional authorities were weaker than the non-state armed actors who monopolized local communities' primary allegiances.[3] After election results were disputed in 2014, Libya's political and economic institutions were split along east-west lines.[4] In response to these sudden fissures, the international community began a mediation process, which culminated in the December 17, 2015, Skhirat Agreement (also known as the Libyan Political Agreement). Since then, the Skhirat Agreement, which was meant to supersede the east-west division and reunify the country's institutions, has paradoxically hardened Libya's bifurcation into two zones. The Libyan National Army's (LNA) coalition of anti-Islamist militias increasingly controls the east of the country, while the internationally recognized, U.N.-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) loosely holds sway in the northwest and acts as Libya's nominally sovereign government on the international scene. Parallel to these political divisions, Libya's important semi-sovereign institutions in the spheres of oil, banking, and sovereign wealth are also divided.[5]

Despite slow moves toward reconciliation, political and military alliances in Libya continue to prove fickle and are prone to abrupt change. Support and interference from external actors, in particular certain European, Arab, and African countries, have in many cases accentuated these divisions.[6] As such, the ongoing political reunification process and the struggle among Libyan actors to ensure that their rivals do not come out on top has meant that the status quo (i.e., a state of perpetual disunity, a dysfunctional economy, and a fractured security sector) persists.

The Territorial Conquest and Subsequent Loss of Sirte
In the wake of Qaddafi's death and particularly after the bifurcation of the country into two political spheres, the sovereignty and security vacuum deepened, providing an opportunity for the nascent Islamic State group in the Levant to transplant itself into Libya.[7] The Islamic State in Libya's first official branch was announced via the rebranding of existing Libyan al-Qa`ida-linked groups in the area of Derna in mid-2014.[b] This then attracted an influx of experienced foreign jihadis to assume leadership roles within the nascent organization.[8]

Islamic State Core leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi formally recognized the group's presence in Libya in November 2014. Over the course of 2015, it established territorial control and governance mechanisms in parts of Derna, Benghazi, and Sabratha. It then launched a bold bid to conquer Sirte and threaten Libya's Oil Crescent.[9] By mid-2015, the Islamic State became the sole governing body in Sirte and at its peak may have had as many as 5,000 fighters occupying the city.[10]

Throughout 2015, the increasing threat of further Islamic State expansion gave urgency to Western efforts to create a unified sovereign Libyan government, which could then legally grant permission for U.S. airstrikes in Libyan airspace.[11] This process culminated in the aforementioned Skhirat Agreement in December 2015. After a very short grace period to consolidate his legitimacy, GNA Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj authorized coalition airstrikes, which commenced on August 1, 2016.[12] These—combined with prior local anti-Islamic State uprisings against the group's brutality—virtually eliminated the group's presence in Sabratha and Derna.[13] Hence, by the end of August 2016, the group's territoriality was concentrated in an ever-narrowing swath of coastal territory surrounding Sirte. (See Figure 1.)

The group's territorial remit had been expanding from January to May 2016, but then after Islamic State forces encroached upon Abu Grein in May 2016 (i.e., precariously close to Misrata, the civic center of many of Libya's most powerful militias), forces from the GNA-aligned, Misratan Bunyan al-Marsus coalition of militias advanced on Sirte and soon took over its outer suburbs. Bunyan al-Marsus had been lying dormant until this provocation; afterward, it took territory hastily until it met with resistance in pitched urban warfare battles in downtown Sirte. In August 2016, the United States began to provide it with air support, launching strikes on soft targets throughout the city.[14] After more than 500 Bunyan al-Marsus combat deaths and much street-by-street fighting, especially around Sirte's Ouagadougou center, on December 6, 2016, the Islamic State was declared to be "fully" defeated and expelled from Sirte.[15]

In the months that followed, the United States undertook a series of airstrikes throughout Libya,[16] killing as many as 80 Islamic State fighters in one day in January 2017.[17] At that time, knowledgeable sources estimated that the number of experienced Islamic State fighters in Libya had dwindled to some 200 fighters.[18] Yet, follow-up to finish the group off was not decisive. Banyan al-Marsus forces were never able to coordinate with Zintani militia or Libyan National Army units tasked with fighting jihadis, and U.S. involvement in mopping up operations waned when the Trump administration came into office in January 2017.

Preparing for the Aftermath of Sirte
Prior to the coalition's siege of Sirte in August 2016, the Islamic State claimed it had already begun conserving its forces for the eventuality of the loss of the city,[c] after which it planned to disperse into the desert and wage an insurgency.[d] The group's emir in Benghazi, Abu Mus'ab al-Farouq, released a message claiming that the

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b   In June 2014, the Islamic Youth Shura Council (IYSC), an extremist organization that announced its presence in Derna in April 2014, formally declared its support for the Islamic State. The group was then able to consolidate control over a number of strategic areas and impose the Islamic State's strict interpretation of sharia law in these areas. Throughout September 2014, clashes raged in Derna between the al-Qa`ida-aligned Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade, Ansar al-Sharia's branch in Derna, and the IYSC, each fighting for control of the city. In October 2014, the IYSC and some members of Ansar al-Sharia met iteratively in Derna, ultimately deciding to pledge their allegiance to al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State, forming the Cyrenaica Emirate, or *wilaya*.

c   It is worth noting, however, that the Islamic State in Libya's leadership had never been completely eliminated as Banyan al-Marsus' assault on Sirte was planned so as to avoid pitched battles and to flush Islamic State fighters out of the city, rather than to encircle and eradicate the group. For more on why this suboptimal tactical approach was chosen, see Jason Pack, "After Sirte, What's Next for ISIS in Libya?" Tony Blair Faith Foundation, August 17, 2016.

d   In a televised interview, a senior Islamic State prisoner, Fawi al-Ayat, described how attacks by the Islamic State pushing toward Misrata in April 2016 were a ruse to provide cover for senior Islamic State leaders to escape Sirte and establish sleeper cells in the surrounding countryside. Tom Westcott, "Islamic State in Libya: Fighters are regrouping in the lawless desert," Middle East Eye, August 2, 2018.

leader of its Wilayat Tarabulus[e] had fled and was already implementing a plan of recovery.[19] This striking admission suggests that the Islamic State's transition post-Sirte has been one of pragmatism, embracing the change of form forced upon it by territorial loss and new circumstances to continue to derail state formation in Libya by acting as a spoiler.[f]

Part 2: The Islamic State's Post-2016 War of Attrition in Libya

In order to continue to play this spoiler role after the territorial loss of Sirte, the Islamic State appears to have shifted strategy. Since the start of 2017, the Islamic State in Libya has been undertaking a strategy of *nikayah*, or a 'war of attrition,' as its new military principle—even going so far as to explicitly state this in 2018.[20] This mirrors both rhetorical and strategic developments in the Levant after the Islamic State lost its territoriality there.[21] In 2018-2019, the Islamic State in Libya's actions and statements indicate that, for the time being, it no longer aims to win or hold territory. Rather, it appears to have deliberately returned to the Islamic State's first phase of insurgent activity, termed "Vex and Exhaust" by the jihadi theorist Abu Bakr Naji.[22]

The Islamic State emerged in both the Levant and in Libya in the wake of protracted civil wars and concomitant state collapse. This apparent "Vex and Exhaust," or attrition, strategy aims to further weaken 'the enemy' (the Arab nation-state)—with which the Islamic State competes for resources, manpower, and dominance—as well as to prevent the post-Arab Spring re-establishment of state security apparatuses and sufficient social cohesion that could restore political order and "challenge the presence of the jihadis."[23] Post-2016, the Islamic State in Libya appears to be implementing this strategy of attrition through two mutually reinforcing campaigns: high-profile attacks on symbolic state institutions and a guerilla campaign in the desert.[24]

High-Profile Attacks on Symbolic State Institutions

The more visible of the Islamic State in Libya's two simultaneous campaigns involves sleeper cells undertaking spectacular, but infrequent, attacks targeting institutions that symbolize and administer the three key issues facing Libya post-Qaddafi: political reunification, foreign engagement, and economic reform. Within the last 12 months alone, the Islamic State in Libya has undertaken three such attacks, all of which targeted Tripoli and involved a suicide bomber or bombers. The attacks targeted the Libyan Foreign Ministry, the National Oil Corporation (NOC), and the High National Electoral Commission (HNEC).[25] By attacking these institutions, the Islamic State appears to be attempting to unsettle foreign assistance, weaken Libya's recovering oil sector (on which the whole economy depends), and disrupt elections.

These attacks are directly in line with the group's articulation of the Islamic State Core's global strategic objectives to break or prevent the reconstitution of regional states and remove Western presence.[26] The media arm of the Islamic State Core's central command, Nashir, claimed responsibility only hours after the attack on HNEC on May 2, 2018, identifying the assailants and stating that the attack was in response to its spokesman's call to "attack the apostate electoral centers and those calling for [the election]."[27] Likewise, in the group's claim of responsibility for the NOC attack on September 10, 2018, the Islamic State in Libya referred to its activities as a "continuation of the attacks against the economic interests of Libya's tyrant governments that are allied with the crusaders."[28] Furthermore, the attacks on the GNA and institutions aligned with it (i.e., the NOC, HNEC, and the Foreign Ministry on December 25, 2018) are not only a physical and conceptual assault on the principle of state sovereignty and governance, but also a symbolic attack on the role of the international community in Libya.

All of the Islamic State's high-profile attacks on symbolic state institutions in 2018 focused on the GNA rather than Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's LNA. This may seem surprising given Haftar's strident anti-jihadi stance. But the group may be making a strategic calculation assessing that the U.N.- and Western-backed GNA is the most likely source of successful state building.

All three of the Islamic State's high-profile 2018 attacks in Tripoli appear to have been coordinated through a network of cells linked to southern Libya. In January 2019, the Tripoli-based Special Deterrence Force (Rada) made a call for public information on two Islamic State members based in Sebha, in southwestern Libya, due to their suspected participation in, and coordination, of the attacks on Tripoli's HNEC, NOC, and the Foreign Ministry.[29] Likewise, at the start of 2018, Rada arrested two would-be Islamic State bombers in Tripoli who had arrived from the desert areas near Sebha.[30] Despite the distance of over 750 kilometers, this suggests that access to Libya's south is important to operations in the capital. This linkage in the jihadi sphere mirrors similar south-north connections in the spheres of oil, migrants, water, and electricity, and demonstrates that Libya's political problems cannot be fixed solely by securing a détente among coastal actors. The Islamic State's ability to undertake coastal operations depends upon its maintenance of a supply network that transverses the Sahara.

The Campaign in the Desert

The Islamic State's terrorist campaign against symbolic state institutions has, in the last year, been supplemented by a rural and desert-based jihadi guerilla insurgency in the interior parts of the Oil Crescent and in southwestern Libya (Fezzan). As Figure 2 shows, the Islamic State in Libya's attacks show a greater geographic dispersal across the country over time, indicating the group has significantly increased its capacity to geographically spread attacks across

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e   Islamic State in Libya denotes its territorial provinces or *wilayat* along the three traditional Ottoman era provinces of Libya—Cyrenaica (or Barqa) in the east; Tripolitania (or Tarabulus) in the northwest; and Fezzan in the southwest.

f   The Islamic State in Libya's leadership has never formally stated the overarching 'goal' of its organization nor how it differs from the objectives of Islamic State Core, which are more clearly articulated in the group's propaganda. The authors' view on the Islamic State in Libya's immediate goal emerges from analysis of the group's strategic and tactical decisions. Conceptually, the Islamic State in Libya's actions form a coherent whole as they all seek to impede state-building or the emergence of a single force with enough governance capacity to deprive the group of sanctuary: from attacking already closed oil terminals, to its multi-pronged rhetorical war against both the GNA and LNA, to its combination of guerilla and terrorist tactics, to its attempts to undermine oil production and Libyan economic growth.
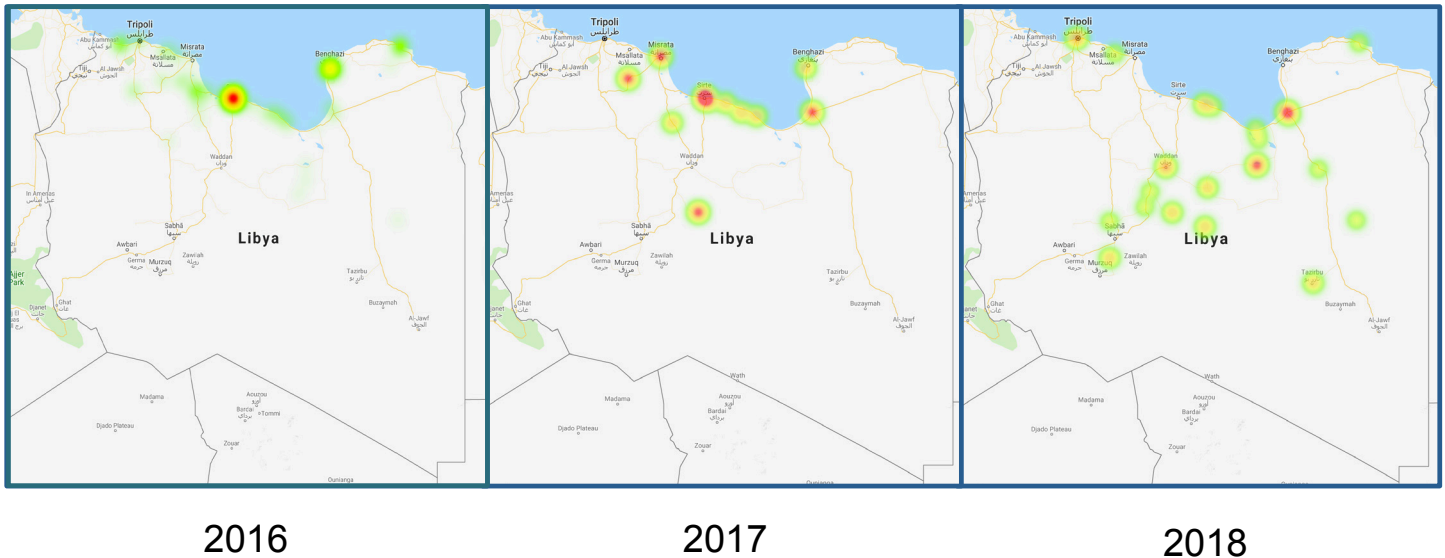
2016   2017   2018

Figure 2: Heat maps of violent incidents that the Islamic State in Libya engaged in, or perpetrated, per year from 2016 to 2018. The maps highlight the increasing dispersion of incidents toward southern Libya over time. It is important to note that 'intensity of heat' denoted by the size of the circle and its color on the graphic is relative to the number of attacks per year for that year only, not relatively from year to year. The intensity of the color change from green to yellow to red reflects an increase in the total cumulative number of incidents at that location.

the Libyan deserts.[g] The Islamic State in Libya's 'southern strategy' provides it not only with a base to plot attacks, train operatives, and gain resources, but its attacks on local security forces in the desert, primarily the LNA, allows it to simultaneously disrupt attempts of coastal actors to foster governance in the south.[h]

In its campaign in the desert, the Islamic State in Libya undertakes hit-and-run attacks in formations ranging in size from half a dozen to two dozen fighters.[i] The attacks themselves, the use of sanctuaries, and the relationships to various local community hosts follow a similar approach to the classic theories of Mao Tse-tung on the stages of guerilla/revolutionary warfare, in which insurgent groups can use their attacks to harm the enemy, increase their re-

cruitment, cement their local alliances, and build their internal organization, all simultaneously.[31]

Footage released by the Islamic State in Libya's 2018 "The Point of Death" video, along with GoPro footage captured following an assault on al-Qanan police station, illustrates its 'Campaign in the Desert' in action.[32] Like any well-executed guerilla campaign, it is well adapted to take on an overstretched military actor operating in a vast, inhospitable territory occupied by an ambivalent or hostile populace. Indeed, these tactics are currently being employed against the LNA to stretch its limited resources and troops across the Oil Crescent and Sirte Basin. For example, the Islamic State in Libya—as well as other Libyan militant groups such as those under the command of Ibrahim Jadhran[j]—capitalized on the LNA's inability to simultaneously coordinate its forces during its campaign in Derna and protect the far-flung Oil Crescent. As a result, most of Libya's key oil installations have proven remarkably vulnerable to hit-and-run attacks, despite the LNA increasing its fortifications.[33]

It is worth noting that the Islamic State's increasing activity in southern Libya has not been defined exclusively by opportunism.[34] Rather, its movement away from operations in the Sirte Basin was due also to a lack of support from the local population in response to the crimes and brutality it committed in 2015 and the loss of its economic extraction networks.[35] Furthermore, the Islamic State in Libya faced initial trouble inserting itself into the Fezzan, due to having limited connections in the area. It resorted to buying its way into the region by sending out envoys to the towns of Zwelia, Temess, and Ubari with piles of cash to establish relationships with local groups.[36]

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g   This ongoing project drawing upon the "Eye on ISIS database" was recently corroborated by the United Nations report published in early 2019, which stated that "the area of operation of ISIL expanded along the coast between Ajdabiya and Tripoli, and southwards toward Fuqaha' and Tazirbu [deep in Libya's interior]. This signified increased activity and geographical dispersal." "ISIL (Da'esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee: Monitoring Team's Twenty-Third Report," United Nations Security Council, December 27, 2018, p. 10.

h   At the beginning of 2019, the LNA and the GNA were struggling for dominance of the Fezzan region. The LNA won this battle as it facilitated the reopening of Libya's largest oil field—Sharara. The Islamic State in Libya understands that the introduction of a coastally linked security apparatus into the Fezzan capable of securing the field would represent the extension of either the GNA's or the LNA's authority into this previously ungoverned space. As such, another way of conceiving the Islamic State's overarching goal in Libya is to prevent its competitors from being able to coherently unify Libya's disparate coastal and desert domains.

i   According to a recent United Nations report, "The [Islamic State in Libya] increasingly resorts to hit-and-run operations out of several points of concentration in Sabha and Jufrah Governorates near the rugged Haruj area, and in Kufrah Governorate." The report also stated, "ISIL frequently raided and held inner-town police stations in shows of strength and to secure arms. This tactic was repeated in Uqayla', Zlitan, Fuqaha' and Tazirbu." "ISIL (Da'esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee: Monitoring Team's Twenty-Third Report," p. 10; Eye on ISIS data.

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j   Jadhran is a revolutionary, federalist militia commander advocating for greater autonomy for Cyrenaica and increasingly linked to Islamist currents backed by Turkey and Qatar. He led several blockades on oil facilities.

A Resurgent Group

The Islamic State may never be able to concentrate power as it could when it controlled Sirte, but its geographic scope of operations is now broader, having dispersed across the country to occupy the interstices in Libya's post-Qaddafi security order.[37]

Moreover, the international community's mediation process in Libya's civil war has reached a crucial moment.[38] The U.N. Envoy Ghassan Salamé's frequently delayed three-step plan is supposed to culminate in a national conference and elections, and the Islamic State's leadership in Libya most likely understands the symbolic and practical threat posed by progress in either of these two areas. Failure for the U.N. to bring about elections in 2019, could result in the termination of the state building project as previously conceived and pursued by international actors since the Skhirat Agreement.

Figure 3 shows that the Islamic State in Libya over the course of 2018 has re-engaged in the Libya crisis, after a 15-plus-month lull
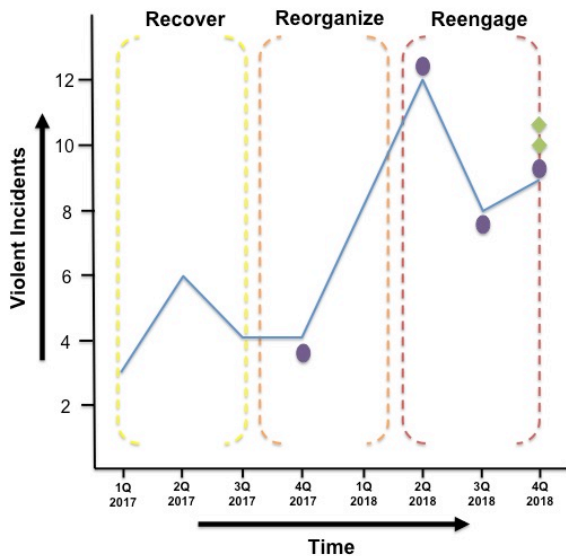

Figure 3: The number of violent incidents the Islamic State in Libya engaged in or perpetrated per quarter from 2017-2018. The blue line denotes the total number of attacks for each quarter. The green diamonds indicate a specifically important organized attack on a town while the purple circles indicate a specific spectacular attack on a state institution. The violent incidents on the Y-axis are the total number of violent incidents perpetrated by Islamic State in Libya per quarter as identified in the Eye On ISIS database. Violent incidents are defined as deliberate actions that caused or attempted to cause bodily harm or material damage, for example: bombings, killings, attempted killings, abductions, kidnaps, shootings, sieges, and skirmishes. According to Eye on ISIS data, the recovery phase is characterized by remnants of the group undertaking a limited number of attacks as they took refuge in the valleys outside of Sirte and further south. The reorganization phase is defined by an elevation in the number of non-violent acts (such as the establishment of checkpoints and observation of mobilization in certain areas) connected to the group bolstering its resources and securing safe havens. During this time, the group's membership began to increase beyond the 200 members thought to have survived beyond Sirte. (More information on membership figures is presented in Part 3.) The re-engagement phase is defined by a notable increase in the total number and frequency of attacks coinciding with increased complexity.

from December 2016 to early 2018 during which the group had a smaller impact. The rate at which the group is undertaking spectacular attacks on the coast, as well as the targeting and coordination of hit-and-run attacks on desert towns, increased significantly in the third quarter of 2018. (See Figure 3.) Quantitatively and qualitatively, this trend is indicative of the group's re-emergence as a force capable of altering nationwide dynamics. What this also indicates is a renewed enthusiasm and confidence by the group, which now appears to exhibit a higher tolerance of risk (given the rise in attack tempo despite its fewer members post-Sirte) and willingness to sacrifice precious manpower and resources to achieve its goals of derailing state formation and political progress.

Equally, the Islamic State in Libya has demonstrated the on-the-ground intelligence needed to allow its members to carry out complex operations. Its operatives display situational awareness of how their cells in cities are monitored via surveillance and informants.[k] These were areas of weakness for the group in 2014-2016 when it upset local communities with its brutalism and crudeness, highlighting its lack of cultural sensitivity and local knowledge.[39]

Part 3: Delivering a High-Impact War of Attrition at Low Cost

The Islamic State in Libya's dual campaigns apply different tactics, yet they share a common feature. Both are executable by limited numbers of fighters, while still delivering high-impact results. By adapting its structure and employing low-cost hit-and-run (in the desert) and spectacular attacks (on the coast), the Islamic State in Libya has been able to maintain its presence in Libya and weaken its enemies—despite its limited, self-funded revenue and loss of its former riches.

Funding

Though it is no longer in possession of its tens of millions of dollars acquired from bank robbery nor able to finance its prior budget of millions of dollars a month in salaries[40] through the taxation of the territories it controlled during 2015-2016, the Islamic State in Libya continues to extort civilians through temporary checkpoints,[41] kidnapping for ransom,[l] raids on local security outposts, and undertaking smuggling-related activities.[42] The group likely retains a minority part of the monies accumulated in Sirte and processed by its Dar al-Muhasaba (accounting department), though the exact amount remains unknown. The organization also continues to participate in migrant and other smuggling rackets.[43] Its movement toward southern Libya has helped facilitate an expansion into the realm of migrant smuggling to compensate for losses in its taxation capabilities.[44]

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k   The Eye on ISIS team has detected multiple posts on Telegram by suspected Islamic State members gloating (without providing specific details) about scoping out locations for an attack. Later, it emerged that these Telegram posts were made just prior to major attacks that have taken place in Tripoli and in Sirte.

l   According to a recent United Nations report, "[Islamic State in Libya] carried out kidnapping for ransom operations against locals in Sabha, Jufrah and Kufrah. This is a growing source of income for the group." "ISIL (Da'esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee: Monitoring Team's Twenty-Third Report," p. 10.

The Reliance on Foreign Fighters

By employing military tactics that only require small units, the Islamic State in Libya post-Sirte has been able to maximize its impact despite limited membership. At the conclusion of 2018, according to AFRICOM, the Islamic State had as many as 750 members in Libya.[45][m] There has not been a noticeable influx, as once was feared, of seasoned jihadis fleeing the Levant after the fall of Mosul and Raqqa.[46] In fact, over the past two years, the Islamic State in Libya appears to have become more disconnected, from both a personnel and a command-and-control perspective, from Islamic State Core.[n] In part, this may be due to the depletion—through either death or arrest—of senior leaders in the group with established ties to the Levant, such as Abdelhakim al-Mashout who had previously fought with the Islamic State in Syria before returning to Libya.[47]

It is difficult to ascertain the membership profile of any clandestine group, but according to "AFRICOM sources" cited in an article recently published by The Jamestown Foundation, non-Libyans make up almost 80 percent of the Islamic State in Libya's current membership.[48] This is consistent with what the authors have deduced from their Eye on ISIS dataset. Whatever the precise numbers, it seems clear that the group has an extremely high proportion of foreign fighters.[49] Yet, the Levantine nationalities that dominate the Islamic State Core's leadership are underrepresented in the Islamic State in Libya. According to data released by Libya's Attorney General in 2016, at the group's peak, the majority of foreign fighters were from Tunisia, Egypt, and Sudan, with notable representation from Chad, Niger, Senegal, Gambia, Ghana, Eritrea, and Mali.[50] Individuals from Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Morocco, Mauritania, Yemen, and Algeria were also in the group's ranks, though they were speculated to have been in much lower numbers.[51] Syrians and Iraqis are essentially absent from the Islamic State in Libya post-Sirte, suggesting one of three possible scenarios: one, that those fighters appear wedded to the ongoing struggle in their homelands; two, that they have not been interested in seeking sanctuary in Libya's less governed spaces; or three, that clandestine travel from the Levant to Libya has been difficult to achieve or deemed dangerous.[o]

Current Tunisian membership figures in the Islamic State in Libya remain unclear, but it is believed they once constituted around 50 percent of the group's membership.[52] In addition to dominating the commander rungs of the Islamic State in Libya, Tunisian jihadis had their own separate base in Sabratha, 78 kilometers west of Tripoli and a mere 102 kilometers east from the Tunisia border.[53] Sabratha functioned something like an extraterritorial sanctuary beyond the reach of Tunisian authorities, allowing them to wage jihad in Libya while also preparing for attacks back home.[54] Sabratha

was the command-and-control nexus for Tunisian jihadis with its own direct channels to Islamic State Core for communication and command-and-control. It served as an external operations hub for the Islamic State in Tunisia and was central in mobilizing Tunisian fighters to Sirte and Benghazi.[55] The Tunisian Sabratha wing of the Islamic State was effectively dislodged from the city following U.S. airstrikes on the base in February 2016 and a crackdown by locals on the armed groups in their midst.[56] Importantly, certain critical figures—such as Abdelhakim al-Mashout—involved in bringing Tunisians through the western border have been either killed or arrested.[57] However, Tunisian foreign fighters are still attempting, at the time of publication in March 2019, to enter Libya through the western border, and it remains a possibility for the Sabratha network to be re-established.[58]

Since the fall of Sirte, sub-Saharan Africans have had a progressively stronger presence in the Islamic State in Libya with the group taking advantage of its links to human trafficking networks to recruit from among migrants attempting to reach Europe.[59] According to a Libyan official dealing with illegal immigration interviewed by Libya expert and journalist Tom Westcott in the summer of 2018, the group's southern ranks are composed of both those who fled Sirte and "new migrant recruits." The same official described the group's desert forces as a blend of Libyans and foreigners, predominantly sub-Saharan Africans.[60][p] Given these developments, it should no longer be a surprise that sub-Saharan Africans are currently represented more than any other ethnic groups in the Islamic State in Libya's propaganda videos, likely in an effort to continue to draw recruits.[61]

The fact that many, if not most, of the Islamic State's fighters in Libya are non-Libyan likely reflects its struggle to recruit locally and has reinforced the perception that the group is in, but not of, Libya. Libya's intense localism has been attributed as one of the key limiting factors on the Islamic State in Libya's ability to recruit Libyans, who given the fractured internecine struggles in their homeland generally fail to identify with the group's global narrative.[62] However, in certain instances, the Islamic State in Libya previously took advantage of local grievances due to feelings of economic marginalization in places like Derna and Benghazi and political marginalization elsewhere.[63] By modifying its rhetoric in those areas, the group was able to find tentative support among Qaddafi loyalists in Sirte and Bani Walid who felt excluded from the post-Qaddafi political process.[64] Capitalizing on the marginalization of young Libyans for recruitment is no longer a significant factor in coastal Libya, which has dramatically turned against the Islamic State and most jihadi groups.[65] Conversely, the economically and politically disenfranchised south, where the group is now embedding itself, may provide a pool from which it can draw recruits, albeit as part of a crowded recruitment marketplace where the Islamic State has to contend

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m   According to a United Nations report published in early 2019, "During the [previous half year] reporting period, some Member States assessed a decrease in the number of ISIL fighters in Libya." "ISIL (Da'esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee: Monitoring Team's Twenty-Third Report," p. 10.

n   This is based on comparison of Eye on ISIS data from 2015-2016 referencing connections between the Islamic State in Libya and Islamic State Core and data from 2017-present. See also Alex Thurston, "North African's Jihadis," Woodrow Wilson Center, April 6, 2018.

o   Previous research by the authors (especially Jason Pack, Rhiannon Smith, and Karim Mezran, "The Origins and Evolution of ISIS in Libya," Atlantic Council, June 2017) demonstrated that in the period 2011-2016, jihadis traveled relatively easily to and fro from Libya to Syria with remarkably few interdictions, hence the authors assume that option one or two is the most likely explanation.

p   Reinforcing this point, Wilayat Barqa released a video in July 2018 titled "Point of Death," which featured interviews from four non-Libyan suicide bombers—a Somali and three others identified as *muhajir* (an Arabic term for migrants that possesses favorable Islamic resonances). Simultaneously, sub-Saharan Africans appear to have a strengthening presence in the group, not only as operatives but as prominent leaders. For example, in August 2018, Wilayat Barqa released a eulogy in its "Caravans of Martyrs" for an apparent Kenyan fighter named Abu Mousa al-Kanyi. Islamic State, "The Point of Death – Wilayat Barqah;" Islamic State, "Caravan of the Martyrs: Islamic State Libya (ISL) announced death of a Kenyan Abu Mousa al-Keni," August 13, 2018.

with other armed groups and established jihadi organizations such as al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).[66]

In sum, despite rebounding from their nadir of possibly as low as 200 fighters,[67] the Islamic State in Libya's membership numbers have not returned anywhere near their Sirte governance levels, due in part to limited local Libyan recruitment and the absence of a burgeoning foreign fighter contingent (except among sub-Saharan Africans). Nonetheless, the group's current strategy and tactics in Libya have succeeded in turning these limited numbers into an asset—and as will be outlined below—its leadership has restructured accordingly.

Structure

The Islamic State in Libya's organizational structure appears to have changed from three separate *wilayat* (provinces demarcated along the supposedly traditional Ottoman/Italian/monarchial provincial boundaries) with defined state-like departments (*diwans*) and a hierarchal chain of command, into guerilla-style desert brigades and networked cells with more horizontal command structures.[68q] The small size of these cells makes their detection more difficult, allowing the group to better achieve the hit-and-run tactics needed for its 'Campaign in the Desert.'[r] It is crucial to remember that when the Islamic State was seeking to expand its territorial reach and financial catchment area outward from Sirte in 2015-2016, it very infrequently dispatched cells for hit-and-run attacks far away from its base of operations. As shown in Figure 3, since 2017, the group has demonstrated new capacities to launch hit-and-run attacks in Libya's vast deserts, even as it has shrunk in size.

In effect, the Islamic State in Libya has undergone a transition backwards from Stage III to Stage II of Mao Tse-tung's classic trajectory of revolutionary warfare organizations.[s] In effect, the Islamic State in Libya has reverted to disparate insurgent cells.[69]

Although it is impossible to know the actual organizational structure of the group at present, the authors' data indicates that the Islamic State in Libya is now focused around a few prominent commanders.[t] After the loss of Sirte in 2016 and the sustained U.S. airstrike campaign in 2017 targeting key Islamic State camps and hideouts near Sirte, Bani Walid, and Sabratha, the group's top- and mid-tier leadership were significantly weakened.[70] Despite this, the group managed to preserve a modicum of its initial rank-and-file manpower post-Sirte, and now several notable top-tier leaders have emerged to facilitate its new strategy.

This leadership cadre has included Mahmoud al-Barassi (a Libyan national from a prominent eastern tribe) and Al-Mahdi Rajab Danqou. Al-Barassi, who founded the group's Benghazi branch and led the bombing and assassination operations against local security forces, is thought to have led the group's remnants operating in the desert areas between Ajdabiya and Bani Walid.[71] Paradoxically, he is also suspected of being killed in the clashes around Wadi al-Jaf along with the rest of the assailants responsible for the attack on Al-Uqaylah in late July 2018.[72] In contrast, Al-Mahdi Rajab Danqou (aka Al-Mahdi Salem Dangou, aka Abu Barakat), who headed the "Soldiers and Military Diwan" (i.e., the Islamic State in Libya's former Ministry of Defense), is thought to be alive[u] and believed to lead the group's 'Desert Brigades.'[73]

Part 4: Future Outlook

Ultimately, the Islamic State's presence in Libya is a symptom of the country's instability; the root cause is state implosion and the perverse incentive structures of a dysfunctional economy—one in which the GNA's budget subsidizes easy-to-smuggle goods, such as fuel (that can be sold at a higher profit over the porous border, for example in Tunisia), and the central bank pays most militia members a government salary.[74] Under these prevailing conditions, the Islamic State in Libya and other jihadi actors appear poised to continue their current trajectory of gradually rebuilding their capabilities to impede U.N. mediation efforts and domestic state-building. The ongoing Libyan political crisis has provided a security vacuum in which the Islamic State and other non-state actors can freely operate, as well as opportunities to recruit from the politically and economically disenfranchised, to profit from the migrant crisis, and to establish connections to transnational crime and trafficking networks. As a result, over the last two years, the Islamic State in Libya has re-emerged after its territorial defeat: progressively rebuilding its capabilities, restructuring its organization, and regaining its confidence to wage a war of attrition against Libyan national unification, political stability, and economic growth.[75]

However, there could be obstacles ahead for the group. As a result of the Libyan National Army's (LNA) ongoing campaign to 'liberate' southern Libya from terrorists and to reopen its oil fields, the Islamic State in Libya may see an erosion in its ability to operate in Libya's Fezzan.

In the first two months of 2019, the LNA took control of Sebha,

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q   It is worth noting that the Islamic State in Libya still publishes videos or claims credit for attacks using the separate *wilayat* nomenclature.

r   Footage released by the Islamic State in Libya's 2018 "The Point of Death" video, along with GoPro footage captured following an assault on al-Qanan police station, illustrates the Islamic State in Libya undertakes hit-and-run attacks in formations ranging in size from half a dozen to two dozen fighters. Additionally, security camera footage from the various speculator attacks in Tripoli show fewer than five operatives.

s   Roughly put, as explained by Mao, revolutionary/guerrilla groups need to pass through three stages to defeat, and then replace, the state structures they are confronting. Stage I is conducting propaganda, finding sanctuary within remote and sympathetic populations, and organizing isolated insurgent cells. Stage II is polarization of local populations by conducting terror attacks on soft targets, seeking to disrupt state security networks, while simultaneously obtaining arms, supplies, and political support. Stage III is fielding a state-like army or administrative structure able to directly confront the enemy in battle, replicate its administrative functions, or to hold pockets of territory. Mao theorized that progression through the three stages would allow the insurgents to first gain support, then increase their military and administrative capacities to eventually replace (potentially only in a limited area) the service provision of the state they are fighting. In the case of the Islamic State in Libya, as well as in the Levant, after the group's defeat in Stage III, its reversion to Stage II allows its continued survival and potentially enhanced effectiveness. Mao Tse-Tung and Samuel B. Griffith, *Mao Tse-Tung on Guerrilla Warfare* (Whitefish, MT: Literary Licensing, 2011).

t   Eye on ISIS data highlights the recurrence of specific commanders' names in Islamic State actions and rhetoric. This point is also echoed by Fred Wehrey in "When the Islamic State Came to Libya," *Atlantic*, February 10, 2018.

u   The LNA claimed that he was killed at the end of January 2019 in Sebha, but various news outlets have suggested otherwise. See, for example, *The Libya Times*, "CONFIRMED: Mahdi Rajab Danqou (pictured), head of the #IslamicState's 'Soldiers and Military Diwan' (IS's defence minister) WAS NOT among the three militants killed yesterday by the LNA raid in al-Shaati. #Libya," Twitter, January 19, 2019.

Murzuq, and Ghat and is moving to control Qatrun and Wigh Airfield—allowing it to be the first force since the fall of the Qadhafi regime to effectively extend its control into the Fezzan. This territorial expansion has brought all of Libya's major onshore oil fields under the LNA's aegis.[76]

The LNA looks set to push into the Harouj Mountain region, where it had previously pursued the Islamic State following the group's attack on Tazirbu on November 23, 2018, and where the latter is known to have found sanctuary.[77] Taken together, the LNA's significant progress in the Fezzan in early 2019 presents the most significant threat to the Islamic State's re-emergence since the group was evicted from Sirte more than 26 months ago and has progressively elected to base its supply and sanctuary networks in the Fezzan.[78]

If the LNA is able to effectively link its nascent security structures in key southern locations to operational and intelligence hubs in coastal Libya and to use this new network to undertake coordinated counterterror actions, then the Islamic State in Libya may be forced into another period of decline. Although the group has gained momentum, recruits, and money over the past year, it is still incapable of standing up to coherent and consolidated security forces able to effectively share information and undertake active pursuit against it. Indeed, according to several theorists of asymmetrical warfare, insurgent actors cannot regain ground and then simply stand still. They either continue to gain momentum and grow, or if their power is decisively checked they wither and die.[79]

Conversely, if a new round of tribal and ethnic fighting erupts in the Fezzan as a result of the disruption of the social and power dynamics due to the LNA's campaign or the inability of the GNA and LNA to work together, the Islamic State has amply demonstrated that it is able to recruit and amass financial resources amid instability. At present, the authors do not see the worst-case scenario of prolonged chaos and an Islamic State victory in the Fezzan as inevitable. Even though the LNA has been gaining momentum and expanding its network of alliances, a jihadi counterstrike or a collapse of coastal power centers could still materialize. Even amidst the LNA's encroachment on its sanctuary and supply chains, clear and credible threats of an attack by the Islamic State in Tripoli persist.[80] This ability to simultaneously operate in multiple theaters, even under duress, is indicative of the group's staying power and adaptability. Additionally, loose regional territorial control by its opponents is unlikely to be enough to disrupt the group's geographically dispersed, but coordinated operations. Given the resurgence of the Islamic State in Libya, as catalogued in this article, the security situation could be improved if Libyan authorities and their international allies were able to coordinate the security apparatuses in the south with those in coastal Libya, as well as undertake long overdue economic and structural reforms so as to close the loopholes through which the group and other destabilizing armed actors finance themselves.

Looking further ahead over the next year—and assuming that sufficiently bold and coordinated actions from Libyan authorities and their international partners fail to materialize—the status quo in Libya will most probably be maintained: an inconclusive national conference may or may not take place; national elections are likely to be further pushed back; and if/when elections are held, they are not likely to produce a truly unified or sovereign governance body.[81] Indeed, a push to have premature elections may even lead to a full-scale civil war.[82] In this and other similar scenarios, the Islamic State in Libya is poised to exploit latent social fissures to help facilitate a descent into a large-scale conflict. In doing so, the group will be fulfilling its proximal ambition: maintaining the vicious circle of instability in Libya, which provides it with an ideal breeding ground.   **CTC**

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AQIM Pleads for Relevance in Algeria

By Geoff D. Porter

Algeria is a rare and oft unacknowledged counterterrorism success story. After struggling with terrorism in the 1990s and 2000s, the last al-Qa`ida-related attack took place in 2016, and there have only been a handful of Islamic State-inspired attacks in recent years. Nevertheless, al-Qa`ida's regional affiliate, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), continues to urge its supporters not to abandon the Algerian fight. Although there is little likelihood that AQIM will be able to revive its former 'fortunes' in Algeria, giving up on Algeria would be to admit defeat and would strike at the very core of the group's *raison d'être*.

On January 29, 2019, the United States' Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) published its Worldwide Threat Assessment.[1] The assessment addresses threats thematically and geographically. For example, there are sections on "online influence and election interference," "transnational organized crime," and "terrorism." The section that assesses the threat posed by terrorism is illustrated with a color-coded map that indicates where al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State were active "as of 2018."[2] The map portrays Algeria as one of the countries in which both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State are active despite Algeria never actually being mentioned by name in the Threat Assessment.

ODNI's map notwithstanding, 2018 was the first year in more than two decades that Algeria did not suffer a single terrorist bombing.[3] Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) may be growing and becoming more active elsewhere in the Sahel, but it is struggling in Algeria and has been for some time. A series of AQIM communiqués over the last 30 months seems to suggest that the group is pleading for relevancy in Algeria. It can be argued that a dozen years after its foundation, AQIM is a shadow of its former self within Algeria's borders. The regional group's assets are dedicated elsewhere like Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger, which have recently provided more fertile ground for jihadi activity and where the likelihood of success is higher. It is no longer a viable violent extremist organization in Algeria.

Whither AQIM?

There was once a time when al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb was a deadly menace in Algeria. From the December 2006 attack on a bus carrying expatriate oil sector workers outside of Algiers[4] that won it Usama bin Ladin's approval to use the al-Qa`ida name in

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the first place,[5] to the 2007 attacks in Batna in advance of a visit by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika on a coast guard base in Dellys that killed 57 people[6] and on a U.N. building in Algiers and the constitutional court that killed dozens more,[7] AQIM demonstrated its lethality.

However, by 2010, that began to change. The pace of AQIM's attacks in Algeria began to diminish. In part, this was possibly due to the opening of other areas of operation for AQIM, particularly in northern Mali.[8] In part, it was due to the healing of political schisms in the Algerian security services that had resulted in disagreements about law enforcement and security priorities and incoherent counterterrorism policies from 1999 to 2010.[9] By 2011, AQIM, like other jihadi organizations, was struggling to determine how the events of the Arab Spring would impact it and what role it would have in North Africa's new political order.[10] AQIM in Algeria sheltered in place, primarily a passive observer of the unrest unfolding around it. And it has remained largely so ever since. Despite frequent communiqués urging action, the last significant AQIM attack in Algeria was at the Krechba gas facility at In Salah in March 2016.[a]

In recent years, AQIM's area of operations in Algeria has shrunk considerably and the group is constrained to areas south of Tizi Ouzou in the Kabylie region and possibly the Aurès Mountains in the east of the country. The areas' geography poses significant counterterrorism problems. Because of the forested terrain, surveillance and the use of helicopter gunships and artillery is difficult. In addition, the steep slopes prevent the use of armored vehicles. Lastly, the region's ravines and gullies mean that ground patrols are vulnerable to ambush.[11] In fact, Algerian security services are well aware of the challenges of penetrating the mountains of Kabyle: Algerian fighters took refuge there from French during the Algerian war of independence.[12]

This is not to say that Algeria is now free of the threat of terrorism. There has been a smattering of Islamic State attacks, beginning with the September 2014 murder of a French tourist on Tikdja Mountain in southern Tizi Ouzou and culminating with a handful of larger attacks throughout 2017, including an April 2017 attempted bombing in Constantine, a June 2017 attack on a military patrol near Blida,[13] and an August 2017 suicide bombing targeting a police station in Tiaret. There is no indication that these attacks were directed by the Islamic State, suggesting that they were instead inspired by the group.

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a It is important to note that the catastrophic 2013 Tigantourine Gas Plant attack at In Amenas was not carried out by AQIM, but instead was orchestrated by a terrorist who had recently broken with AQIM and was apparently determined to demonstrate his new organization's mettle. It is also important to note that the attack did not originate from inside of Algeria but exploited the deteriorated circumstances in northern Niger and southwestern Libya to launch the attack into Algeria. Geoff D. Porter, "Terrorist Outbidding: The In Amenas Attack," *CTC Sentinel* 8:5 (2015).

Nonetheless, there was not a single terrorist bombing anywhere in Algeria in 2018, marking the country's first year without a bombing in more than two decades.[14] In fact, the last terrorist bombing was the aforementioned Islamic State attack in Tiaret in August 2017.[15] This trend has continued in the first two months of 2019. This is a remarkable achievement. And it is in contrast to terrorist activity immediately to the east and to the west of Algeria. In Tunisia, the Islamic State-affiliated Jund al-Khilafa continues to carry out periodic attacks, including the beheading of a local as recently as February 2019 near Mt. Mghilla.[16] To the west in Morocco, two tourists were murdered in December 2018 in what has been reported as an Islamic State-inspired attack.[b] As for Algeria, though, AQIM has not undertaken an attack there in three years.

Why Has Terrorism Declined in Algeria?
It is difficult to isolate any one single cause for AQIM's demise in Algeria, and it is equally hard to determine which of the demise's causes was most prominent. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Algeria's security services' reinvigorated counterterrorism measures have played a significant role. Algerians' own personal experiences with the brutality and ravages of terrorism during the 1990s civil war (and ultimately its ineffectiveness as a vehicle for effectuating political change) has worked to limit AQIM's appeal in Algeria. Lastly, the emergence of the Islamic State as an alternative to AQIM may have siphoned off AQIM's pool of potential recruits.

Security Services' Counterterrorism Measures
The simplest explanation for AQIM's ineffectiveness in Algeria is that Algerian security services are dialed in to the threat and have honed their approach to countering it. According to the Algerian Ministry of Defense, Algerian security services "eliminated" more than 500 terrorists during the period from 2015 to 2018.[17]

In January 2019, the Algerian Ministry of Defense published National Popular Army (ANP) statistics for the year 2018 in the ministry's monthly journal, *El Djeich*. The statistics show a robust and effective counterterrorism approach: 32 terrorists killed; 25 terrorists arrested; 132 terrorists surrendered; 170 support elements disrupted; and 22 members of terrorists' families identified.[18] In addition, the army seized more than 1,000 weapons of different types (assault rifles, mortars, grenades, IEDs, etc.) as well as other materiel (including 11 drones and seven GPSs.)[19]

Along at least some of its massive borders, Algeria has deployed long-range surveillance optronics with night-vision capabilities. In addition, Algeria has deployed air assets (primarily helicopters but also recently acquired drones) and ground troops to the border regions for surveillance, patrols, and incident response. Until recently, Algeria was also in negotiations with private defense manufacturers to acquire aerostat (stationary airborne) radar capabilities that would augment ground-based radar arrays already in place along the borders. For reasons that are unclear, aerostat discussions between the government and defense vendors have stalled but are likely to be revived in order to build out Algeria's border surveillance capabilities.[20]

The cumulative effect of these measures is that it is difficult for

terrorists to operate within Algeria, and it is difficult for terrorists outside Algeria to penetrate the country's borders. Airborne surveillance has indicated that groups engaged in illicit activity (criminal organizations or violent non-state actors) have deliberately skirted Algeria's borders when moving among Libya, Niger, and Mali.[21] Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that Algeria is the largest country in Africa in terms of landmass, and its borders are long and remote, making them difficult to permanently police.

Memories of the Dark Decade
During terrorism's worst years in Algeria from approximately 1993-1998, a period that Algerians refer to as "the Dark Decade," more than 100,000 individuals were killed and thousands more traumatized by the ubiquitous violence. The Dark Decade undoubtedly continues to weigh heavily on everyday Algerians' perception of jihadi groups of any stripe, including AQIM.

In fact, in 2017, AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel commented on the impact the Dark Decade had on AQIM and its efforts in Algeria, saying that "that particular phase ... was very dark and painful in its own right, and also because of the negative imprints it left on the innocent victims of the crimes committed by the despotic regime or the deviant extremist remnants of [the Armed Islamic Group.]"[22] Although Droukdel has claimed that AQIM's predecessor, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), was established precisely to correct the wrongs committed by the Armed Islamic Group, he clearly acknowledged in his 2017 interview in Inspire magazine that the consequences of terrorism in Algeria in the 1990s had made it harder for AQIM to win supporters there.

The dynamics are the same in 2019. After two decades of fighting the state, Algeria's political system is structurally unchanged from what it was in the 1990s, and the population is preparing for presidential elections in April 2019, the seventh such poll since terrorist organizations first began trying to topple Algeria's political system. In short, it appears that very few Algerians believe in jihad as a means of changing their political circumstances.

The Islamic State as an Alternative
Another possible explanation for AQIM's collapse in Algeria is that the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and then the appearance of Islamic State affiliates throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa depleted AQIM's conventional recruiting pool. Faced with the Islamic State's fury versus AQIM's lackluster performance, aspiring jihadis in Algeria may have been drawn to join the former rather than the latter. If this is indeed the case, though, the Islamic State may have been drawing from an already small pool of potential recruits (reinforcing the aforementioned theory that enthusiasm for jihad is much lower in Algeria than in other North African countries.) Just months after its founding in 2014, the Islamic State chapter in Algeria reportedly had fewer than 30 fighters and that number has decreased since then to possibly fewer than 25.[23] In addition, reportedly only between 78[24]-170[25] Algerians left Algeria to fight alongside the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

AQIM Pleading the Case in Algeria
AQIM's diminished capacity in Algeria does not mean, however, that the group is abandoning operations in Algeria or that it has left Algeria to look for lower-hanging fruit. To the contrary, AQIM has issued a series of communiqués over the last two and a half

b   Curiously, despite the Islamic State-inspired double murder, the ODNI Threat Assessment map did not indicate that the Islamic State was active in Morocco.

A desert road marks the border between Libya (foreground) and Algeria (background)
(Ahmed Jadallah/Reuters)

years urging members, followers, and sympathizers not to quit the Algerian fight and not to give up the Algerian cause.

In its communiqué claiming the March 2016 Krechba attack, AQIM said that it had undertaken the attack to prevent Algerians' natural-resource wealth from being pilfered by foreign companies, and it tried to make the case that it was fighting for Algeria and Algerians' interests.[26]

Nine months later, in January 2017, AQIM's Droukdel again implored Algerians to fight the state.[27] However, by the summer of that year, Droukdel had seemingly become desperate. In the summer 2017 issue of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's magazine Inspire, Droukdel lamented jihad's status in Algeria:

"...the Algerian front, which has been bogged down by a long-drawn war ... suffers from a rarity – and at times almost complete absence – of those willing to support and assist, whether internally or externally. So this has had its impact (in Algeria) ..."[28]

But while Droukdel may have been dispirited by jihad's prospects in Algeria, his second-in-command and head of the organization's Council of Dignitaries, Sheikh Abou Ubaidah Youcef Anabi, soldiered on. On October 30, 2018, Anabi urged Algerians to resist the state because it itself was resisting Islam in banning the niqab head covering from public schools.

On January 21, 2019, Anabi again called on Algerians to resist the Algerian state. In his communiqué, he underscored the need for AQIM not to give up on the Algerian front, beseeching Algerians to desert from the Algerian military and not to pay their taxes. Anabi's comments also echoed AQIM's statement issued after the 2016 Krechba attack that claimed the country's natural-resource revenue was being mismanaged.[29] In 2019, Anabi returned to this grievance, saying that under proper 'Islamic' governance, natural-resource revenue would be divided equitably among the believers.[30]

A month later, on February 18, 2019, al-Andalous, AQIM's media arm, issued another communiqué, this time weighing in on the Algerian Ministry of Education's decision to prohibit prayer in Algerian public schools.[31] AQIM presented itself as the advocate for the "40 million Algerians who believe in Islam."[32]

Why Does Algeria Preoccupy AQIM?

A critical question then is why AQIM is seemingly so preoccupied with Algeria if it has not been very effective there in recent years. The question is all the more puzzling because AQIM, under the umbrella of Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), is meeting such success beyond Algeria's southern borders.[33] It would seem that Algeria is out of reach, so why does AQIM keep striving for it?

One possible explanation is that Algeria was the birthplace of both national jihad in the Maghreb and the transnational jihad associated first with al-Qa`ida and then later the Islamic State. Algeria is a central part of AQIM's origins story, and for AQIM to forsake jihad in Algeria means acknowledging that it has been defeated from whence it came. In addition, jihadi groups are at their very core nostalgic, pining for a time that they imagine to once have been: the very notion of salafi jihad is to return to the past, or to recreate the past in the present. Arguably, AQIM is nostalgic for Algeria, for when the group was predominantly Arab, for when the group operated in its members' homeland, for when the group was vibrant and feared.

The evolution of jihad in Algeria has been well-documented over the last three decades: the armed faction of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) known as the Army of Islamic Salvation (AIS) evolved into the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which in turn spawned the GSPC. The GSPC had to contend with an exhausted population, a lost sense of mission, and a program of national reconciliation that

depleted its ranks, including its top leader Hassan Hattab.[34] Enter Algerian native Abdelmalek Droukdel, the GSPC's new leader, looking to breathe new life into an atrophied organization, which he did by transforming the group's mission from solely Algerian to global salafi jihadi and rebranding the organization as al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb. In fact, in his Inspire interview, Droukdel himself recounts the evolution of jihad in Algeria, emphasizing its "Algerianess" from its origins.[35]

However, even as AQIM's operations expanded beyond Algeria and its activities in Mali and Niger outpaced those in Algeria itself, AQIM core leadership, including Droukdel, remained in Algeria (from where he is presumably still posting communiqués[36]), never abandoning the group's homeland even in spite of its new commitment to global jihad.[37] Were the group to now abandon Algeria and retreat from the territory entirely, that would be tantamount to admitting that it has lost and that the Algerian state, which it fought against for at least the last 12 years as AQIM—and 21 years including its activities under the GSPC banner—has won. Even though by most measures AQIM has already lost in Algeria, it is loath to admit it, hence its preoccupation with the country despite its ineffectiveness there.

Even after AQIM began to expand outside of Algeria, its core leadership remained Algerian. The most famous of which was, of course, Mokhtar Belmokhtar who was initially known for running a lucrative kidnap-for-ransom racket and then became recognized internationally for the 2013 Tigantourine attack, which was only *after* he had quit AQIM. Another Algerian, Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, fought alongside Belmokhtar. Abou Zeid was killed in 2013 during the early stages of Operation Serval, the French counterterrorism operation in Mali.[38] Although there has been no confirmation from AQIM, it appears that Belmokhtar may have been killed in 2016.[39] Another Algerian AQIM leader in the Sahara was Djamel Okacha (aka Yahya Abou el Hammam) who was reportedly killed by French forces in Mali in February 2019.[40] Okacha had allegedly orchestrated the March 2016 attack on the Krechba Gas Facility at In Salah before shifting his focus to the Sahel.[41] In addition to operational leadership, Algeria figured prominently in the group's media outreach, which until his death in January 2018 was led by the Algerian Adel Seghiri (aka Abou Rouaha el Qassantini).[42]

AQIM arguably no longer operates as a group capable of carrying out terrorist attacks in Algeria, with the bulk of its activities taking place instead in the Sahel. In addition, the bulk of its leadership is no longer of Algerian origin. In March 2017, the group joined forces with two Malian jihadi groups, Ansar al-Din and the Masina Liberation Front, and formed the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin (The Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims), which is led by the Malian Iyad Ag Ghali.[43] The head of the Masina Liberation Front, another JNIM member, Amadou Kouffa, is also Malian. The head of another AQIM battalion in Mali, Almansour Ag Kassam, was also Malian.[44] It remains deadly, but not to the extent that it once was. It remains feared, but largely by local populations in remote areas. And it does attract some attention internationally, but not nearly as much as it used to. On the other hand, JNIM, the organization under which AQIM now operates in the Sahel is a deadly group, but its most lethal activities are carried out by other JNIM members, like the Masina Liberation Front.[45] It is possible that the group's remaining Algerian leadership (Droukdel and Anabi) holds out hope that a return to the Algerian front would restore it to its former glories.

Another possible reason for AQIM's Algerian preoccupation is that Algeria is the 'biggest kid in the schoolyard.' As mentioned, Algeria is the largest country in Africa in terms of landmass. It is remarkably stable (despite political circumstances that have been uncertain for several years). And it has an enormous, well-equipped military. All of this is in contrast to Algeria's neighbors, which are smaller, less stable, and not as well equipped. The adage is that the fastest way to make a name for oneself is to pick a fight with the biggest kid in the school yard. The strategy's guile is that one does not even have to win the fight; just picking it in the first place may be enough to cement standing. For example, AQIM may be able to undertake attacks in Mali, the Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso, but attacking them does not boost AQIM's reputation. Were AQIM to return to Algeria and be able to carry out a significant attack, however, its reputation as a force to be reckoned with would be restored.

Conclusion

Results from the last year alone show that Algeria has made significant counterterrorism progress in the last decade. To be sure, this does not diminish the tragedy of outlier attacks that have occurred in the past and could potentially occur again. Nonetheless, it appears that even though Algeria remains a desirable target for AQIM, robust counterterrorism measures in conjunction with an unpersuaded population and correspondingly small pool of potential recruits prevents AQIM from transforming its memories and desires into action. The fact that Islamists of any stripe—jihadi or otherwise—have been conspicuously absent from the enormous demonstrations that have taken place in Algeria in February and March 2019, in conjunction with the complete absence of any Islamist rhetoric supporting the demonstrations, suggests that Algeria may be moving into a post-jihad phase.

On March 10, 2019, al-Andalous Media, disseminated a tape of Anabi again trying to insert AQIM into Algerian events by encouraging demonstrators in Algiers and other cities not to give up and to cause the Algerian government to fall in order to allow for the implementation of Islamic governance.[46] But Anabi's encouragement seems to have fallen on deaf ears, and the demonstrations remained free of Islamist or jihadi discourse. If, of course, Algeria's political transition to a new presidency does not go smoothly, it could open the door to a potential terrorist revival, but any attacks would be unlikely to represent a structural change in favor of terrorism's re-emergence in the country.   **CTC**

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