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CTCSENTINEL

OBJECTIVE · RELEVANT · RIGOROUS | MARCH 2020 · VOLUME 13, ISSUE 3



FEATURE ARTICLE

The Hanau Terrorist Attack

How race hate and conspiracy theories
are fueling global far-right violence

BLYTH CRAWFORD AND FLORENCE KEEN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Jonathan Evans

FORMER DIRECTOR GENERAL, MI5

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FROM THE EDITOR

Far-right terror is going global, propelled to a significant degree by an on-line ecosystem of extremists posting in English. Since 2018, attackers have targeted synagogues in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; the towns of Poway, California, and Halle, Germany; mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand; and a Walmart in El Paso, Texas. In this month's feature article, Blyth Crawford and Florence Keen examine the February 19, 2020, far-right terrorist attack that targeted shisha bar customers in the German town of Hanau and led to the death of nine victims. They write that the influences on the deceased Hanau attacker Tobias Rathjen were "a combination of traditional far-right, race-based, and anti-immigration narratives, alongside several more obscure conspiracy theories." They argue that a common denominator between the Hanau attack and the aforementioned attacks in the United States, New Zealand, and Germany "is the perpetrators' shared adherence to the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy narrative ... which perceives the cultural and biological integrity of the white race to be endangered by increased levels of (non-white) immigration and the stagnation of white birth rates."

In our ongoing "A View from the CT Foxhole" series, Raffaello Pantucci interviews Jonathan Evans, who served as the Director General of the U.K. Security Service MI5 between 2007 and 2013.

Colin Clarke examines the issues raised by the December 6, 2019, terrorist attack by the Saudi Air Force Officer Mohammed Alshamrani, which killed three U.S. Navy sailors at Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida. He writes, "In early February 2020, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) claimed responsibility for the attack. It is not clear yet whether the group had a direct role in the attack, but if it did, it would make the shooting the first deadly terrorist attack on U.S. soil since 9/11 directed by a foreign terrorist organization." By analyzing "all related-court cases since 2013," Lorenzo Vidino, Jon Lewis, and Andrew Mines find that "save for a few exceptions, the vast majority of U.S.-based Islamic State supporters left a remarkably small financial footprint. Most, in fact, simply relied on personal savings to pay the small costs required for their activities."

Christopher Anzalone examines al-Shabaab's PSYOPS (psychological operations) messaging, which he argues "takes advantage of the lack of transparency in certain instances from its opponents, including some governments, and the demand by the international news media for details from on the ground, with the group framing itself as a reliable source of on-the-ground information."

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Cover: Police tape is seen on February 20, 2020, in the area after a shooting in Hanau, Germany. (Kai Pfaffenbach/Reuters)

The Hanau Terrorist Attack: How Race Hate and Conspiracy Theories Are Fueling Global Far-Right Violence

By Blyth Crawford and Florence Keen

The number of lone-actor attacks committed by far-right extremists have surged in recent years, most notably in the West where mass-casualty attacks have occurred, including the United States, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Germany. The fatal attack in February 2020 in Hanau, Germany, revealed the perpetrator's influences to be a combination of traditional far-right, race-based, and anti-immigration narratives, alongside several more obscure conspiracy theories. This case demonstrates the need for further research into the intersection of these ideas and the online ecosystems in which they thrive, where notions such as the "Great Replacement" theory, aspects of which were echoed in the Hanau attacker's own manifesto, are heavily propagated. It is this overarching idea that connects seemingly disparate attacks in a global network of ideologically analogous acts of terror.

At approximately 10:00 PM on February 19, 2020, Tobias Rathjen began a firearms attack inside the Midnight shisha bar in Hanau—a town within the Main-Kinzig-Kries district of Hesse, Germany—killing three people. From there, he drove around two kilometers to the neighborhood of Kesselstadt, opening fire at the Arena Bar & Cafe, killing five people. He then made the short drive back to his family home on Helmholtzstraße a few hundred meters away, where he fatally shot his mother before finally committing suicide.¹ In the hours following his attack, it emerged that Rathjen had uploaded various materials online that revealed his far-right sympathies but that also referenced various niche conspiracies not typically associated with the extreme right.

On February 13, 2020, he had created a YouTube account, before uploading a single video entitled "Tobias Rathjen" the follow-

ing day² addressing "citizens of the United States of America" in English, and directly warning them of covert underground military bases used by secretive forces in the torture of young children.³ On a personal website linked in the video's description, Rathjen had uploaded three subsequent videos in German, of which only two have been fully recovered, as well as a 24-page 'script' also in his native language⁴ and interpreted by many as his manifesto, accompanied by two shorter annexes.⁵ Within these materials, Rathjen outlined both his perception of "non-German" (non-white) immigration as a threat to the (white) German people and referenced his hostility toward Islam, as well as outlining various conspiracy theories in detail. Most notably, he stated that an unnamed "secret service" had surveilled him since birth and that he was able to observe various atrocities, covertly orchestrated by governments internationally, using the power of his mind via a vaguely defined technique termed "remote viewing."⁶ In an attempt to corroborate these outlandish theories, Rathjen also uploaded nine links to outside sources, including supposed victims' testimonies and blog posts by well-known conspiracy theorists.⁷ The mixture of English- and German-language resources published on the website and Rathjen's decision to record his initial video in English are indicative of his intentions to reach a global audience and point toward the broader internationalization of far-right terrorism, rather than confining the impacts of his attack to a purely German-speaking audience.

While the attack follows a number of other, seemingly similar incidents in Germany—most notably, the Halle firearms incident allegedly carried out by Stephan Balliet in October 2019,⁸ where he allegedly attempted to carry out a mass shooting inside a synagogue—it is one of the deadliest, with nine victims killed in total.⁹ In the immediate aftermath of the attack, it was determined by authorities to be fueled by "xenophobic motives,"¹⁰ and in a statement made following the incident, Chancellor Angela Merkel declared racism and hate a "poison" to society.¹¹ In line with the motif of previous attacks such as the Christchurch¹² and Bærum (suburb

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a For an examination of the March 2019 Christchurch attack in this publication, see Graham Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age," *CTC Sentinel* 12:6 (2019).

of Oslo) mosque shootings^b and the El Paso Walmart shooting in 2019,¹³ all victims, with the exception of Rathjen's mother, were from immigrant backgrounds, with Turkish and Kurdish individuals among the dead.¹⁴

This article will first briefly consider the profile of Tobias Rathjen, before situating his attack within the broader context of Germany's political climate, which has notably seen its far right buoyed in recent years, both in mainstream political movements as well as by organized violent groups. Given that investigators have stated that Rathjen acted alone,¹⁵ it will next discuss lone-actor terrorism on the far right, which although not being a new phenomenon, gained traction through the philosophy of American Klansman Louis Beam's "Leaderless Resistance." The impact of technological change upon far-right attacks will also be explored, given most recent attacks (including Rathjen's) have included an online dimension, be it the uploading of a video or manifesto, or in some cases livestreaming the attack itself. Moreover, digital spaces are manifestly fueling momentum for far-right attacks, in some instances decreasing the radicalization period of individuals, and in others, inspiring copy-cat attacks and the gamification of terrorist violence.

This article will then provide a detailed examination of the intersection between conspiratorial thought and the far right, which is particularly pertinent in light of Rathjen's clear absorption in a number of conspiracy theories, and will suggest that these attacks can be linked by their adherence to the "Great Replacement" narrative. However, it will then suggest that Rathjen's attack must be somewhat differentiated from this wave given his parallel obsession with more outlandish, less explicitly racist conspiracies. It will conclude by outlining the need for further research into the connection between the nature of conspiracy beliefs—racist or otherwise—and radicalization into violence.

The Hanau Shooter

The profile of the alleged Hanau shooter Rathjen is itself relatively nondescript. He gained a business degree from the University of Bayreuth in 2007, and worked in a number of financial firms in Germany during his career. At 43 years of age, he still lived with both of his parents and was supposedly single throughout his life, indicating an insular figure, potentially at odds with his peers. However, various aspects of his attack and ideology indicate that it is somewhat different from both the German and indeed global landscape of far-right terror. Rathjen adhered not only to traditional far-right racist narratives, but was also obsessed with a number of

b On August 10, 2019, 21-year-old Philip Manshaus allegedly entered the Al-Noor Islamic Center in Bærum, Norway, carrying two firearms, and attempted to carry out a mass-casualty attack. Manshaus was quickly overpowered by one of the worshipers inside, while another called the police, and he was soon arrested. In the hours preceding his attack, Manshaus had allegedly posted to the imageboard forum 'Endchan,' publishing his intentions to carry out an attack inspired by Brenton Tarrant, the alleged Christchurch shooter, and allegedly attempted to set up a Facebook livestream of his actions, which malfunctioned and was ultimately unsuccessful. It was later reported that prior to traveling to the Islamic center, Manshaus had allegedly also shot his stepsister, Johanne Zhangjia Ihle-Hansen, three times, killing her. Ihle-Hansen had been adopted by Manshaus' mother from China at two years old, and Norwegian authorities have confirmed that her murder was racially motivated. "Norway mosque attack suspect appears in court," *Guardian*, August 12, 2019; "Norway mosque shooter Philip Manshaus killed stepsister over her 'Chinese origin', police say," *South China Morning Post*, September 18, 2019.

comparatively niche conspiracies.

While this is likely indicative of an "extremely online"¹⁶ individual, it is also possible that he was affected by mental health problems. The linking of mental health issues and lone-actor terrorism is often contentious, not least because of the fair accusation that if a perpetrator of terrorism is white, they are frequently deemed mentally unwell, negating their agency in a privilege that is rarely extended to terrorists from other racial backgrounds.¹⁷ Yet, the overlap between mental illness and lone-actor terrorism should not be overlooked, as researchers at University College London have shown a strong association between mental illness and lone-actor terrorism in comparison to group-based terror.¹⁸ Accepting the contributing role poor mental health may play in *some* attacks, this most recent incident exemplifies the interconnected relationship between racial hate and conspiracy theories, demonstrating that an understanding of both remains crucial to understanding this fresh wave of far-right, lone-actor attacks in the normalizing age of social media. By lone-actor terrorism, the authors refer to the Royal United Service Institute (RUSI)'s 2015 working definition of lone-actor terrorism as:

The threat or use of violence by a single perpetrator (or small cell), not acting out of purely personal material reasons, with the aim of influencing a wider audience, and who acts without any direct support in the planning, preparation and execution of the attack, and whose decision to act is not directed by any group or other individuals (although possibly inspired by others).¹⁹

The Far-Right Landscape in Germany

While it is broadly agreed that the traditional 'organized' far right is at a weak moment in its history in the United Kingdom, this cannot be said of all countries.* The notion that its ideology of hate has become more normalized within public discourse is difficult to refute, as is demonstrated in the increasingly racist and anti-immigrant rhetoric of political parties worldwide.²⁰ By far right, the authors refer to Tore Bjørgo and Jacob Aasland Ravndal's comprehensive definition, which encompasses both the 'extreme' and 'radical' right-wing factions. The radical right is deemed to be non-violent, and notably operates within democratic boundaries—and thus refers to political parties with far-right policies—whereas the extreme right believe that democracy should be replaced and that violence against the so-called 'enemies of the people' is justified.²¹

Germany, in particular, has seen an influx in the normalization of far-right ideology, most evidently in the rapid growth of the nationalist political party *Alternativ für Deutschland* (AfD).^c Since its formation in 2013, it is now the largest opposition party in the Bundestag, holding 89 seats,²² a success that is largely attributed

c For example, Charles Lees has shown how the AfD's ideology shifted as its leadership became successively more 'hardline' between 2015 and 2017, moving beyond Euroscepticism and into a more explicitly populist position that centered around opposition to Syrian refugees and other forms of immigration. See Charles Lees, "The 'Alternative for Germany': The rise of right-wing populism at the heart of Europe," *Politics* 38:3 (2018): pp. 296-210. Kai Arzheimer's analysis of the AfD's 2014 manifesto located its politics within the far-right end of the political spectrum in Germany, due to its explicit nationalism, stance against state support for sexual diversity, and gender mainstreaming. See Kai Arzheimer, "The AfD: Finally a successful Right-Wing Populist Eurosceptic Party for Germany?" *West European Politics* 38:3 (2015): pp. 535-556.



*Police officers stand outside the Midnight shisha bar on February 20, 2020, after a shooting in Hanau, Germany.
(Ralph Orłowski/Reuters)*

to its challenge to Chancellor Merkel's policy on welcoming a large number of migrants and refugees into the country. It was this policy that the regional politician Walter Lübcke, a member of Merkel's CDU party, had spent years defending when he was fatally shot on his doorstep in June 2019 by a suspected far-right extremist and former campaigner for the AfD.²³

Furthermore, at the beginning of 2020, the Militärischer Abschirmdienst (Germany's Military Counterintelligence Service) launched investigations into 550 German soldiers for alleged connections to right-wing extremism, with its elite special forces unit described as a particular hotbed.²⁴ The researcher Daniel Koehler has explored the connection between the far right and the military, showing how in some instances, violent right-wing extremists have attempted to infiltrate the military so as to gain skills and access weapons.²⁵ The implications of these findings are relevant for all countries facing a growing far-right threat.

This political climate appears to be fertile ground for explicitly violent organizations, as cross-national neo-Nazi groups such as Atomwaffen Division and Combat 18²⁶ have found strongholds in Germany, alongside domestic right-wing groups such as Gruppe Freital, Revolution Chemnitz, and Gruppe S.²⁷ While German investigators have stated that Rathjen acted alone,²⁸ and the influence of this wider context cannot be concretely quantified, it must be noted that he did not become radicalized in isolation and ultimately may have been impacted by this potentially permissive political environment, in addition to that of the digital ecosystem.

Lone-Actor Terrorism and the Leaderless Resistance

While lone-actor terrorism is not a novel phenomenon, it is increasingly being adopted by actors across the ideological spectrum, including those on the far right, with research showing that attacks perpetrated by individual actors on the far right proportionally outweigh violence committed by organized far-right groups in Western Europe.²⁹ To understand this surge of violence, it may be beneficial to consider the essay "Leaderless Resistance" written in 1983 (but not widely published until 1992) by the American Klansman Louis R. Beam in which he rails against "orthodox" theories of organization that conform to a pyramid-type structure. In its place, he advocates for an organizational system based upon "phantom cells" that operate without centralized control or direction, but are linked by adherence to the same worldview and will thus respond uniformly to a given situation.^d "Leaderless Resistance," he writes, "leads to very small or even one-man cells of resistance. Those who join organizations to play 'let's pretend' or who are 'groupies' will quickly

^d The notion of a Leaderless Resistance parallels the work of the jihadi Abu Musab al-Suri, a principal architect of al-Qa`ida's post-9/11 strategy, in his call for "Global Islamic Resistance," published in 2004. In this, he argued that in order to survive, the movement should become decentralized, moving away from its traditional hierarchical (and more vulnerable) structure. See Paul Cruickshank and Mohannad Hage Ali, "Abu Musab Al Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30:1 (2007).

be weeded out.³⁰ Events that followed its publication, including the FBI shootings at Ruby Ridge³¹ in 1992 and the Waco siege³² in 1993, cemented the importance of Leaderless Resistance as a key organizing strategy of far-right and Christian Identity groups in the United States, who were encouraged to operate in isolation from one another so as to evade the supposed dark forces of big government.³³ As the scholar Jeffrey Kaplan explained, “suddenly, the term Leaderless Resistance was on everyone’s lips.”³⁴

This lone-actor/small-cell model was influential in the deadliest far-right attack in history, the 1995 Oklahoma bombing that killed 168 people, committed by Timothy McVeigh, who, despite collaborating with a former military colleague in his attack-preparation, ultimately carried out the attack alone.³⁵ It continues to influence the modern-day far right as exemplified in a blog post written by the editor of Alt-Right.Com, Vincent Law, in the wake of the 2017 Charlottesville “Unite the Right” rally where he stated: “every single one of you has to become an officer capable of independent activism. Our movement needs to start resembling a Leaderless Resistance.”³⁶ There is a clearly a distinction between those who actively adhere to the philosophy of a Leaderless Resistance and those who simply act alone. It would be unwise, therefore, to assume that all of the recent and more historical acts of lone-actor terror perpetrated on the far right have been directly influenced by Louis Beam. Nevertheless, as a principle, it has been widely seen in the most recent wave of far-right attacks. For example, Brenton Tarrant, the alleged perpetrator of the Christchurch attack of March 2019 that killed 51 people, appears to have acted in isolation of any established groups, despite his alleged financial donation of €1500 to the Austrian branch of Generation Identity in 2018.³⁷

This structure poses particular problems for law enforcement agencies as individual actors may be inspired by, although unconnected to, established groups³⁸ and thus leave no trace of their intentions to commit an act of terror.³⁹ However, recent research suggests that the increasingly online face of far-right terrorism may somewhat compromise the anonymity of this tactic, as actors may “leak” indications of their intent to act online before carrying out an attack⁴⁰—as the Hanau shooter Rathjen did in uploading a video to YouTube five days before his attack^e—which may create some opportunity for law enforcement to pre-empt terrorist threats.

Technological Change

Indeed, aspects of technological change have significantly impacted the face of far-right terrorism, with the radicalization period of lone actors believing to have decreased in line with the rate of technological change.⁴¹ As Graham Macklin recently argued in this publication, the digital ecosystem is fueling a “cumulative momentum” of far-right attacks, whereby individuals’ “thresholds” to violence decrease each time another act of violence occurs, wherever that happens to be in the world.⁴² Furthermore, recent studies from the Soufan Center⁴³ and the George Washington University Program on Extremism⁴⁴ have shown that the far right is increasingly operating

transnationally, motivated by shared identities and common grievances formed and spread online. While the far right has always been “innovative”⁴⁵ in its utilization of the internet, in recent years it has become embedded within online imageboard forums such as 4chan and 8kun (the successor to 8chan following its removal from the Clearnet), and encrypted social media platforms such as Telegram, which has been known to host hateful and violent content,⁴⁶ and remains the preferred platform for a number of far-right movements.⁴⁷ These sites, alongside the more mainstream platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, allow for a kind of diffuse form of radicalization, where individuals may become immersed within a sphere of “alternative influence,”⁴⁸ isolated from less radical, or dissenting ideas.

A notable development in recent attacks, is that a number of perpetrators have attempted to livestream their atrocities, beginning with Brenton Tarrant, who allegedly was able to stream the first 17 minutes of his attack to Facebook. In his broadcast he told viewers, “Let’s get this party started,” before opening fire outside the first mosque.⁴⁹ It is possible that John Earnest, the alleged Poway Synagogue shooter, also intended to livestream his attack, having posted a link to a Facebook page where he later allegedly intended to livestream the attack,⁵⁰ in addition to being found with a GoPro camera in his vehicle following his arrest, which is believed to have malfunctioned.⁵¹ Philip Manshaus, the alleged attempted mosque shooter in the Oslo suburb of Bærum, was also unsuccessful in his attempt to livestream his alleged attack to Facebook.⁵² Only the alleged Halle synagogue attacker Balliet was able to replicate Tarrant’s success, streaming the entirety of his attack via the Amazon-owned company Twitch, which was viewed by 2,200 people before being removed.⁵³

The essence of this copy-cat approach to terrorist tactics is also exemplified in the notion of the “gamification of mass violence,” which the investigative reporter Robert Evans suggests originated on 8chan’s ‘/pol/’ (politically incorrect) board, and highlights as one of the main “innovations” of global far-right terrorism.⁵⁴ The sentiment refers to the practice within far-right online spaces where users challenge each other to “get the high score” by killing “as many people as possible” in acts of mass causality violence,⁵⁵ continuously out-performing previous attackers, and thereby framing terrorism as a competitive act. Indeed, as Graham Macklin has noted in this publication, in the case of the El Paso shooting, one 8chan user wrote of the alleged El Paso shooter Patrick Crusius: “The new guy deserves some praise ... he reached almost a third of the high score.”⁵⁶ This dynamic may feed into the now common practice of far-right lone-actors uploading manifesto-style documents online directly before committing an attack, with some explicitly referencing those who have come before them, such as Patrick Crusius who allegedly praised Tarrant and cited his manifesto “The Great Replacement” as a direct influence.⁵⁷ Such documents not only publicize the perpetrator’s intentions and ideology, but also enable them to garner attention from their immediate online communities and thus be emblemized as a “saint” by online extremists following their attack, as shooters like Tarrant, Earnest, and Crusius have been.⁵⁸ Online communities, therefore, not only provide opportunities to consume extremist content, but may also incentivize violence as a way of generating subcultural status.⁵⁹

The Far Right and Conspiracy Theories

Online culture has also long played host to conspiracy theory com-

e Rathjen also reportedly contacted the YouTuber ‘Bernd Gloggnitzer’ up to one month before the Hanau attack, asking for advice and sending him a copy of his manifesto. Gloggnitzer appears to own the YouTube channel ‘Remote-Viewing.TV’ where he hosts remote viewing sessions, offering tips to his subscribers, and promotes the remote viewing school he founded that offers online courses in the mindfulness technique. Gloggnitzer is not related to any far-right movement. Bernd Gloggnitzer “Stellungnahme,” Remote-Viewing.TV, 2020.

munities. While conspiratorial belief is not an inherently far-right concept, the ideological frameworks prevalent within the far right may be “uniquely receptive”⁶⁰ to conspiracies, enabling their emergence as the movement’s “lingua franca.”⁶¹ Much of the appeal of conspiracies lies in their ability to explain complex events within the framework of a “titanic struggle between the forces of Good and Evil,”⁶² wherein seemingly unexplainable—often malicious—events are orchestrated by a wicked and inherently “othered” manipulative force.⁶³ As the scholar Michael Barkun has explained, there are various levels of conspiracy belief. At the most isolated level, event conspiracies refer to a “limited, discrete event or set of events,” whereas systemic conspiracies have wider goals, conceived as “securing control over a country, a religion, or even the entire world.” At the broadest level, super-conspiracies are formed when “multiple [more isolated] conspiracies are believed to be linked together” in the construction of a far-reaching world-view.⁶⁴ This mutually reinforcing, structured relation of conspiracies is evidenced in the compounding of anti-government sentiment within the far-right American militia movement in the late 20th century, which the scholar Mark Pitcavage has argued was enabled by the cumulative influence of a number of isolated incidents throughout the late 1990s, in particular, Ruby Ridge and the Waco siege, where multiple civilians were fatally shot by government agents, generating a sense of ambiguity and public distrust surrounding government’s intentions.⁶⁵

This hierarchical structure of conspiracy belief is a fundamental component of the “red-pilling” ideology central to the alt-right. The term draws upon a trope from *The Matrix* film trilogy and is commonly used within the alt-right sphere as “a metaphorical description of attitudinal change,”⁶⁶ as individuals become progressively more receptive to radical ideology. This indoctrination is gradual, as individuals become red-pilled by single issues—or event conspiracies.⁶⁷ Red-pilling, therefore, relies on the notion that the truth of various situations is being deliberately concealed from the public—presumably by an all-powerful, secretive force.⁶⁸

Inherent in the notion of red-pilling is the same paradoxical logic upon which conspiracy theories are grounded, wherein the fundamentally unfalsifiable nature of a narrative is perceived as further proof of its credibility. For example, rather than accepting a lack of proof as a sign that a theory may not be true, adherents of conspiracies may perceive this lack of evidence as a sign that the dark ‘reality’ of the matter has been covered up by secret (often government) forces, thereby strengthening their belief in the theory.⁶⁹ Thus, although after being initially exposed to conspiracy belief, an individual’s interest and curiosity surrounding subsequent conspiracies may become heightened, Barkun’s model paradoxically shows that finding tangible evidence for these beliefs becomes decreasingly important to adherents.⁷⁰ In short, belief in one conspiracy theory may predict belief in others. This dynamic has been described as a “monological belief system” wherein individuals reject knowledge that contradicts their worldview and instead use their current beliefs as evidence in support of other theories, making them more receptive to new conspiracies.⁷¹ After being exposed to one conspiracy theory, therefore, it is then easier to ‘snowball’ and become convinced by other conspiracies. In this vein, scholars Benjamin Warner and Ryan Neville-Shepard have suggested that the online sphere may be particularly conducive to the production of conspiracy belief via “echo-chambers,” where collective agreeance in the absence of dissenters frames illogical conspiracies as rational.⁷²

Conspiracy theories have played an integral role in a number of recent attacks. This is evidenced by social media posts made by Robert Bowers on October 27, 2018, hours before he allegedly murdered 11 people in the Pittsburgh Tree of Life Synagogue, in which he suggested the Jewish America non-profit organization HIAS was orchestrating increased levels of non-white immigration into the United States in an attempt to sabotage the white race.⁷³ Subsequent attackers have referenced other anti-Semitic conspiracies. For example, it has been reported that when introducing himself during a livestream of the Halle attack, Balliet stated “My name is Anon and I think the Holocaust never happened.”⁷⁴ Here, the Halle shooter appears to have been alluding to the ‘HoloHoax’ conspiracy theory prevalent within far-right communities, which generally regards the Holocaust as a “deliberate myth,” constructed by Jewish people “for their own exploitative aims.”⁷⁵ Furthermore, in his manifesto, Earnest, the alleged Poway Synagogue shooter, references the “Jew-media,”⁷⁶ appearing to channel the Cultural Marxism conspiracy, which holds that a number of Jewish elites control the global media in an attempt to establish ideological control over the white race.⁷⁷

Yet, what connects each of these attacks (Pittsburgh, Halle, Poway as well as El Paso and Christchurch) more generally is the perpetrators’ shared adherence to the ‘Great Replacement’ conspiracy narrative,⁷⁸ which reformulates a key tenet of historical far-right thinking. This is perhaps made most explicit by alleged Christchurch attacker Brenton Tarrant in his manifesto of that name,⁷⁹ which perceives the cultural and biological integrity of the white race to be endangered by increased levels of (non-white) immigration and the stagnation of white birth rates.⁸⁰ Subsequent alleged attackers also demonstrate adherence to this narrative. For example, John Earnest makes reference to non-white immigrants “replacing” white people in the United States.⁸¹ So too does Stephan Balliet reference “declining birth rates in the West” in an introductory section of his alleged livestream,⁸² while Patrick Crusius specifically emphasizes the “cultural and ethnic replacement [of white Americans] brought on by an invasion [of non-white people]” within his manifesto.⁸³ Thus, many of the actors in this current wave of attacks reference key themes of the Great Replacement conspiracy as justification for their violent actions, implicitly or explicitly linking their attacks together with this theme. This overarching conspiracy unites these attacks in a shared ideological framework and is complementary to other, more isolated conspiracies expressed by individual lone actors.

Differentiating Features of Rathjen’s Ideology

It is in this regard that Rathjen’s attack must be differentiated from the current wave of lone-actor terrorism; while each attack in this way is, of course, idiosyncratic in some way, Rathjen’s ideological justification for violence differs somewhat notably from previous attackers. In the main document uploaded, Rathjen is explicit in his racist beliefs, stating that the only people he thinks should own a German passport must be “pure-bred and valuable,” and that non-German immigrants are “destructive in every respect” and pose an inherent risk to the German people.⁸⁴ This sentiment echoes some of the ideas contained in Tarrant’s manifesto, however Rathjen does not reference the Great Replacement narrative by name. Instead, he frames his actions as a “double strike, against the secret organisation and against the degeneration of our people,”⁸⁵ thus explicitly framing less-tangible conspiracies as a major motiva-

tion for his actions. From subsequent materials he uploaded, he was likely to have been deeply influenced by a range of niche conspiracies, in particular by several paranoid narratives relating to various disappearances of young children across the United States. In the English-language video Rathjen uploaded to YouTube, he outlines the “reality” of “Deep Underground Military Bases” in the United States, where members of “invisible secret societies ... praise the devil himself [and] abuse, torture and kill little children.”⁸⁶ Here, Rathjen refers to the Deep Underground Military Bases conspiracy theory perpetuated by the alleged former government structural engineer Philip Schneider in the 1970s⁸⁷—known ironically as the D.U.M.B conspiracy—which stipulates that government elites are concealing the existence of military bunkers, often believed to be used for their own conspicuous purposes.⁸⁸

In addition, Rathjen posted links to the CanAm Missing project, a site run by conspiracy theorist David Paulides, which claims to be comprised of “retired police officers, search and rescue experts (SAR) and other professionals”⁸⁹ attempting to trace the disappearances of missing children across North America, and often perpetuating the unfounded notion that supernatural forces are behind these events.⁹⁰ Rathjen also uploaded two testimonies from young women claiming to have been graphically abused as children at the hands of Free Masonry and as part of Project MK-Ultra’s^f “Project Monarch”—a conspiracy first perpetuated in the 1970s, which claimed that children were being systemically abused by a secret CIA-run government ring.⁹¹ Despite being reinforced by little tangible proof, the narratives contained within these sources feed the notion of the systemic victimization of helpless children at the hands of secret government agencies.

Indeed, each of the conspiracies shared by Rathjen were markedly anti-establishment. He also referenced websites claiming to report UFO sightings and alien abductions, which hinted at a wider government cover-up of the truth, and advocated for the practice of “remote viewing,” a mindfulness technique supposedly enabling him to observe events, past or present, regardless of their physical location—as corroborating proof of various government atrocities.⁹² These narratives indicate that Rathjen was deeply entrenched within online conspiracy communities. Drawing upon Barkun’s model of conspiracy belief, it is therefore possible to suggest that Rathjen was a supporter of a number of isolated conspiracy theories, which, when compounded, may have influenced his broader sense of paranoia and anti-establishment mindset. However, perhaps the most pervasive narrative throughout his manifesto—that he had been observed by a “secret service” organization since birth, which read his mind and influenced his ability to socialize—is indicative of a deeper paranoia and may signal underlying mental health problems.⁹³

Nevertheless, these materials may also shed light on his radicalization trajectory. It is notable that both the narratives espoused by Rathjen and other conspiracies rely on the fundamental distrust of dominant explanations, such as those portrayed in mainstream

media,⁹⁴ and upon the demonization of the “other.” The researchers Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller identify this black-and-white style worldview as a feature of conspiracies that may act as a “spur to violent action,”⁹⁵ inducing an inherently apocalyptic sense of doom, which frames violence as the only available option. It is notable that various narratives espoused by Rathjen have considerable overlap with the QAnon conspiracy theory, which now thrives amongst online communities such as 8kun, following its origination on 4chan in 2017.⁹⁶ While QAnon broadly advocates for various unlikely conspiracies that envisage U.S. President Donald Trump as a “sleeper agent” working to uncover government corruption, one of the most prominent narratives within the community is that various members of the Democratic Party are covertly running a child sex-trafficking ring, echoing aspects of Rathjen’s own concerns. Indeed, these notions were closely linked to the “Pizzagate” conspiracy of 2016, which influenced 29-year-old Edgar Maddison Welch to storm a restaurant in Washington, D.C., with a firearm, in an attempt to free young children he believed to be held there.⁹⁷ Furthermore, it should be stressed that in a recent intelligence briefing by the FBI, QAnon was noted as a community with the potential to escalate into violence owing to the nature of these theories.⁹⁸

This overlap with online conspiracy communities suggests that the influence of Rathjen’s attack may be felt in spheres beyond those traditionally associated with the far right. Indeed, within online far-right spaces, Rathjen’s attack has garnered a mixed response; at times, he is hailed as a “saint” and at other times with some degree of ambivalence. On Neinchan—a more extreme sibling site of 8chan—for example, extensive meme threads were created in his honor in the wake of his attack, akin to those created for Tarrant. However, within these threads, users also mockingly dubbed him a “schizo.”⁹⁹ This ambivalence is perhaps indicative of the wider reaction throughout the online far right, where Rathjen’s attack itself and his general hostility to Western governments were celebrated, and the more niche conspiracies cited within his manifesto and videos were largely mocked.

Therefore, while it is premature to predict the long-term influence of the Hanau attack, and the reaction to Rathjen’s manifesto from within conspiracy communities is not immediately clear, it is possible that not only may Rathjen have been largely radicalized by ideas originating from spheres outside the online far right, but that his attack may potentially influence prospective actors in online communities not explicitly associated with far-right extremism. Indeed, researcher and journalist Elise Thomas shows that there is a “growing overlap” in the narratives espoused by the far right and more isolated conspiracy communities and that “their paranoia, aggression and propensity to violence are two sides of the same coin.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, it may be that Rathjen exemplifies this joint proclivity for mobilization, meaning that his attack must be differentiated from previous incidents, and thus that the long-term implications of his actions may be somewhat different from other, more definitively far-right acts of violence.

Conclusion

While the long-term ramifications of Tobias Rathjen’s attack on the global far-right landscape remains to be seen, his actions should be somewhat differentiated from the recent string of far-right terror attacks that preceded it. The global far right may be perceived to be in a critical moment of flux as its structure becomes more inherently transnational, with an apparent emphasis on lone-actor attacks.

f Project MK Ultra is the code name given to a series of experiments the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reportedly carried out in the United States between 1953 and 1964. While the exact scope of these experiments remains unclear, they are reported to have involved psychedelic drug testing, sensory deprivation, and research into mind control. The project remains a key topic of discussion within online conspiracy communities. Jack Anderson, “Lawsuit forces CIA confession on MK-ULTRA,” *Washington Post*, August 28, 1982; Kim Zetter, “April 13, 1953: CIA Oks MK-Ultra Mind-Control Tests,” *Wired*, April 13, 2010.

While the model of lone-actor terrorism has been a key influence among the far right for some time, the increasing centrality of technology and social media to the modern-day far right's rationale has bolstered its importance within the wider global movement.

In the most recent wave of far-right, lone-actor attacks, the conspiratorial Great Replacement theory has been foregrounded as a cohesive link between each incident, connecting apparently disparate attacks in a global network of ideologically connected acts of terrorism. Yet, in contrast, whereas Rathjen made reference to racial motivations for the attack, these racist overtones were somewhat overpowered by his continued preoccupation with conspiracy theories not directly connected to the broader far-right sphere. This ideological bifurcation signals a shift from many of the previous lone-actor far-right extremist attackers and may represent a fusing between modern, far-right, racist narratives and more insular online conspiracy communities.

Few studies have comprehensively explored the link between

conspiracy theories and the emergence of violence—particularly attacks that are not directly connected to racist worldviews. Rathjen's attack and his motivations signal the need for further research into the link between conspiracy theories, hostility toward the mainstream, and violence. While the racial component of this attack, therefore, cannot be discounted as a major motivational force, the nature of the conspiratorial beliefs cited by Rathjen problematizes its easy categorization as a purely far-right attack and raises the need for further investigation into the impact of conspiracies on terrorism. **CTC**

**This sentence was updated shortly after publication to make clear that the broad agreement that the "traditional 'organized' far right is at a weak moment in its history" refers to the situation in the United Kingdom rather than the overall global picture.*

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Jonathan Evans, Former Director General, MI5

By Raffaello Pantucci

Lord Evans of Weardale served as Director General of the U.K. Security Service MI5 between April 2007 and April 2013. He joined the Security Service in 1980, and he first worked on counter-espionage investigations. During the late 1980s and 1990s, he had various postings in Irish-related counterterrorism. From 1999 onward, Evans was directly involved in countering the threat from international terrorism. In 2001, he was appointed to the Security Service's Management Board as Director of international counter terrorism, 10 days before the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. Evans became Deputy Director General in 2005. It was announced in October 2014 that he would become a Cross Bench life peer, after a personal nomination by the Prime Minister for his public service.

CTC: Your career in the Security Service, MI5, spanned a series of terrorist threats. Could you tell us which were the biggest evolutions you noted across ideologies and groups?

Evans: There were a number of key developments over the period I was in the Service [MI5]. First amongst them was the rise of Irish terrorism as a strategic threat rather than just something that was of concern in Northern Ireland. During my time in the Service, it became very central to London government concerns, and the Service was very involved in countering it. But it was very political terrorism, carefully calibrated to try to have a specific policy impact on the British government in contrast to the different focus of some other groups.

At the same time, we were also looking at a variety of other smaller—from the U.K. point of view—threats in terms of Palestinian terrorism in the late 70s and particularly into the 80s, and terrorism arriving from the various diaspora communities in the U.K. At one stage, we were putting a lot of focus on Sikh extremism, as there was quite a lot of support activity here which was important to the Sikh extremist activities in India. The same with the PKK^a who were doing a lot of fundraising in the U.K. from Kurdish communities. A lot was done through intimidation, basically racketeering, by PKK elements in north London.

But the other really big development was the emergence of al-Qa`ida as an issue in the 1990s. From a U.K. point of view, this issue impacted us through the fact that quite a lot of the ideologues from whom groups sought *fatwas* were based in the U.K., like Abu Qatada, Abu Hamza, and so on. A number of people involved in the

Algerian GIA—the early forerunners of what then became al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb [AQIM]—were based in the U.K., and so we were looking at al-Qa`ida from that point of view. Partly because the Americans were so focused on it, because of the attack on the USS Cole and the Africa embassy attacks, and then that transferring into the domestic threat in the period after 9/11. After then, it became by far the biggest terrorism threat that we were facing.

The initial turning point at which we took this seriously was in the second half of the 1990s, when we found that some of our European partners—in particular, the French—were very focused on the Algerian threat. Their view was that there were significant elements of this based in the U.K. This is the Londonistan period. They assessed that the Algerian elements in London were feeding into the threat that expressed themselves through the metro bombings in 1995 in Paris. So, in a sense, our initial response was in support of European friends, rather than on our own account.

There are various conspiracy theories about the Londonistan period including the notion that Her Majesty's Government (HMG) in some way gave a free pass to the terrorist sympathizers in the U.K. on the basis that they would not attack us. This is a complete fabrication. The problem was that we didn't actually know what was going on because we were not looking. There was all sorts of stuff going on that we just were not aware of. It was not that we were deliberately turning a blind eye, just that we had not noticed. With the creation of al-Qa`ida, the threats in the Middle East, and the problems in France particularly from the Algerians, we started to pay more attention, and once we started looking, the more we found. But at that stage, it was not actually plots to mount attacks in the U.K.

The first indication that we had an actual, live, real threat in the U.K. was in November 2000 with the arrest of Moinul Abedin and a co-conspirator in Birmingham.¹ The co-conspirator was completely exonerated by the courts and subsequently rearrested on other charges. There was some precursor activity by them in Manchester some years before the attempt.

The lead that started the Birmingham investigation came to us from another European country, where, because they had come across an attempt to purchase terrorist equipment through criminal circles, they tipped us off and said “we came across this; you probably ought to look at these people.” That was the first time we'd come across them. We investigated and eventually realized that they were doing something which was immediately threatening. They were arrested on the 23rd of November [2000], which was the first arrest of anybody in the U.K. linked to al-Qa`ida who was planning an attack here. We knew they had to be planning an attack here because they had a large quantity of very volatile homemade explosive in their apartment, although we [still] don't know the target.

At the time, we couldn't directly link it into al-Qa`ida, although it looked as though it probably was. However, with the fall of the Taliban and the Afghan camps in 2001/2002, evidence came to

a Editor's note: The PKK is the Kurdish Workers Party, a Kurdish militant group based in Turkey focused on creating a free Kurdish state. They have recently become known for their links to Kurdish groups fighting against the Islamic State, but are more prominently known for their decades-long terrorist campaign against the Turkish state.

light which demonstrated that this was an at least inspired al-Qa`ida plot of some sort. A few individuals such as Tariq Mahmood, known as T-Bone, who subsequently became very instrumental in fomenting terrorism out of Pakistan's tribal areas into the West, appear to have been involved in the margins of that operation.^b

CTC: Having been involved in the investigation into the United Kingdom's first al-Qa`ida-linked plot, you then watched as the threat evolved and matured through a whole series of plots including the July 7, 2005, attack on the London public transport system. Could you tell us about how that pre-9/11 investigation was similar or different to subsequent plot investigations?

Evans: That particular pre-9/11 investigation was the only one that appeared to have an element of direct threat to the U.K. in it. After 9/11, obviously, there was a lot of pressure on MI5 to provide assurance to HMG that if there were anything like a 9/11 being planned in the U.K., that that was identified. And in fact, there was not, as far as I recall, a huge amount of directly threatening activity that we could identify immediately after 9/11. We had a lot of resources given to us, but it was entirely proportionate to the threat we found. We were able to put the resources to good use. But in the immediate wake of 9/11, it was certainly not the sort of level of threat that developed later.

We started to see attempted attacks from 2002/2003 onwards, the most visible and probably the best known of which was the attack plan that we called Operation Crevice. It was a complex interlocking set of activities involving individuals in the U.K. home counties based out of Crawley and up into Luton. They were mostly likely planning to attack the Bluewater shopping center, but they had also talked in some detail about central London. They did not appear to have necessarily pinned down exactly what their target was going to be. But there was also a separate leg to the plot, which was an attempt to purchase what they thought was radiological material in Belgium. In fact, they were unable to source anything radiological, and it turned out to be a relatively common scam at the time, which was called Red Mercury.

The plot itself, however, appeared to be encouraged and fomented by al-Qa`ida in the tribal areas. It was one of the early ones we saw. It involved predominantly British citizens or British residents of Pakistani heritage, something which became something of a theme for this period.

One of the people who appeared in the margins of Operation Crevice was Mohammed Siddique Khan. At the time, we assessed him—probably rightly actually—as not being a terrorist himself but being a criminal who had some little scam going on at the edges of the Crevice group. He was noted and not prioritized because there was a lot going on and there were a whole series of investigations running at that point. We saw a very significant change in temperature between the second half of 2001 and the second half of 2003/2004. We saw a lot more apparent attack planning of various sorts, some of which was clear to us as a result of the questioning of American detainees who were giving information on networks in

the U.K. Prioritization became very acute during this period, and unfortunately, one of the individuals who was prioritized out was Mohammed Siddique Khan, who went on to be the primary instigator of the 7 July [2005] bombings in London.

One notable thing about the July 7 bombings is that while they were an appalling and ambitious attack that killed many, the group of plotters did not fundamentally differ from all the other plans that failed to come to fruition. The only difference between the July 7 cell and all the others was that the police weren't able to arrest them beforehand.

What you had that was different about the threat picture then versus now was the deliberate initiation or promulgation of plans from Pakistan, using intermediaries from al-Qa`ida Central into the U.K., using U.K. residents or citizens as the people who mounted the attack. Rashid Rauf is the most obvious of these intermediaries.² Tariq Mahmood, T-Bone, became another of them, and there were one or two others. And that was characteristic of the period. From an intelligence point of view, this was a vulnerability because they were planning and trying to have an element of command and control over what was going on, which gives you some attack surface from an investigative perspective.

Whereas if you are merely facing the sort of terrorism that one has been seeing in the last few years involving low ambition and technology, without a command and control network, there is not nearly as much to investigate. On top of this all, the 'flash to bang' [in this more recent type of terrorism] can be very rapid.

After the July 7, 2005, attack, the next lowlight—so to speak—was the liquid bomb plot, Operation Overt, in 2006. With the police and the other agencies, we developed very good coverage of the plot as it matured. Again, it was fomented from Pakistan, there was command and control back into al-Qa`ida senior leadership in the tribal areas, and we were able to watch carefully and then move to intervene at the critical point in order to stop anything happening. That plot felt like some of the later-stage investigations into Irish terrorism that we had been doing. Because we had good intelligence coverage of what the Irish terrorist cells were doing, we could intervene at the relevant point, and we felt like we had a good insight into individual plots that were being prepared. Had that plot come to fruition, it would have possibly killed more people than were killed by 9/11 and would have been extremely difficult in terms of Anglo-U.S. relations. At the time, we were working extremely closely with the U.S., and we owe them a huge debt of gratitude for the support they were giving to us over that period. The U.S. have a quite extraordinary scale and spread of intelligence capabilities, and those were being used very regularly to help safeguard the U.K. There were some tensions in the run-up to the conclusion of Overt, but the fact of the matter is that actual arrest decision was triggered maybe just 24 hours earlier than might have been the case had we not had that American pressure. But it was a matter of judgment; I do not think it was a very critical issue.

CTC: To move to the present day, could we turn to the topic of resource allocation? If you think back to 2017, the volume of people being investigated for Islamist terrorism in the United Kingdom was around 3,000, and there was discussion of another 20,000 posing a residual risk.³ Could you talk through the capability to manage this kind of threat volume?

Evans: The question of managing the volume of threat intelligence,

^b Editor's note: Tariq Mahmood, a U.K. national from Birmingham, was announced arrested by Pakistani authorities in late 2003 and accused of links to al-Qa`ida. "Pakistan holds British al-Qa`eda suspect," *The Telegraph*, November 17, 2003.



Jonathan Evans, former director general of MI5

or potential threat intelligence, has been one of the continuing themes of the last 20 years. As you grow your intelligence capability, as the public become aware of the fact that they need to be alert and not alarmed, as the police are very focused on terrorism cases, then that does create a lot of incoming material that may indicate potential threats. But you cannot, despite the enormous investment in capacity that the British government has made over the past 15-20 years, follow up everything with equal speed and attention. So, you have to make judgments.

We developed quite a lot of resource into what one might call triage: looking at the whole flow of incoming intelligence, deciding what was most credible and most indicative of a threat, and focusing on that. This helped us decide how to deploy resources to deal with the most credible and threatening material in order to chase down any threats, which is the only logical way of dealing with it. During the time that I was involved in counterterrorism, I do not think we ever had a successful terrorist attack that came about from one of the top priority operations we were focused on. This was because we were able to put a lot of resources into priority investigations, get insight into what was going on, and make sure that the threat did not materialize. The problem was always with the material that had been assessed to be of a lesser priority, because it was in there that risks would suddenly eventuate. Because even though it was entirely logical and sensible to not focus on them on the basis of what you knew, actually you never have perfect insight.

As you grow the intelligence machinery, we started to know something about everybody who did something threatening on the streets of the U.K. And having this information but not acting upon

it could be said to be a demonstration of the reach and effectiveness of the intelligence service or it could be interpreted as a blunder. But it is almost intrinsic to the nature of intelligence prioritization that the most important decision made is what not to do. And it is there that the risk lies. That is now well recognized, and post the 2017 attacks in the U.K., there was a review into this area, some work done on additional resources and further work into whether there are ways in which you can provide a degree of automation of this process. The idea being that it becomes an anomaly detection issue: you have normal activity taking place, then something changes, and this provides you with some direction about where in the potential target population you should look for a threat. Logically, this makes a lot of sense, as long as you've got good enough intelligence coverage to be able to detect anomalous or changed behavior. But again, if what you are looking for is a 9/11-sized plot, then you have quite a lot of opportunity to gather intelligence. If you've got somebody who's been self-radicalized and whose weapon of choice is a hire [rental] car, then what is it that you're going to spot? Hiring a car and driving to London does not necessarily suggest that there is a threat, but it does mean you could if you choose to kill people.

It is surprising to me it has taken so long for terrorist groups to get to this stage. I can remember talking 10 or 12 years ago and saying if al-Qa`ida stopped trying to outdo themselves with a plot that was even more dramatic than 9/11 and just got on with killing some people, that would be really difficult for us. Unfortunately, that's exactly what happened. But what I would say—and this sounds rather a harsh point, but it is an important one—as a society, we can, if we choose to, continue with normal life relatively unaffected

by occasional stabbings and vehicles being driven into the general public. Horrible and terrible as those events are, they are not a strategic threat to us. We are speaking soon after the atrocious events on London Bridge where [on November 29, 2019] two individuals were killed through stabbing by a known terrorist. I don't know for certain, but I suspect if you look across London that week, there were probably other people killed in stabbings that have nothing to do with terrorism and do not get the publicity. We give the terrorists something of what they want in the way in which we react to their terrorism, which of course is classic terrorism theory from the 1960s. We need to think about how we respond to this and just not play up to what the terrorists are trying to get us to do.

CTC: Looking at the case of the November 2019 London Bridge attacker Usman Khan in particular, this raised a whole series of issues about people who have been in prison. A lot of those you were investigating are now coming toward the end of their prison sentences, if they have not already. How do you think HMG can manage or mitigate this problem, and do you think there are adequate measures in place to deal with it?

Evans: I do not think there are adequate measures in place to deal with this problem. I personally feel that we should have considerably longer sentences for terrorist aggravation where there are offenses. Deradicalization and the whole Prevent agenda is absolutely critical, but it is also by far the most difficult for government of the four pillars of the Contest strategy.^c Because, from a government perspective, if you want more of the Pursue pillar, which is the part of the response which is following terrorists around and stopping them [from] doing nasty things, then you give more money to the Security Service, Police, and so on, and it happens. The Protect pillar, which focuses on hardening targets and building defenses, is similar: if you want to reduce vulnerability in the environment you allocate adequate resources, and it happens. But Prevent is about changing people's minds. It is about arguing with them about their theology, something Western governments are peculiarly badly equipped to do. It is also very difficult to tell whether it's working because how do you know whether somebody has genuinely repented or whether they are merely saying it because they want to be released from prison? There are clear successes in the Prevent strategy, but equally, there are some pretty spectacular failures.

We need to keep trying to find the best way of working on deradicalization [and] anti-radicalization. Anti-radicalization might be a bit easier than deradicalization, but it is always going to be something which is difficult for a secular Western government to engage with. I believe that there is a strong religious element in some of the Islamist terrorism. In the early days, [the U.K.] government was very uncomfortable about anything that had religion in it and did not want to talk about it and did not want to see it as a religious issue. They would much rather see it as an issue to do with politics, economic deprivation, or whatever. And while I am sure all those have a contributory element to them, religion does as well.

c Editor's note: There are four pillars to CONTEST, the U.K. government's counterterrorism strategy. These are: "Prevent: to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism; Pursue: to stop terrorist attacks; Protect: to strengthen our protection against a terrorist attack; Prepare: to mitigate the impact of a terrorist attacks." See "CONTEST: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism June 2018," p. 8.

However, having an argument about religion is something which government departments are not that great at. It is much easier for the Emiratis who used to be very puzzled as to why we didn't do more about this. They would issue the sermons for mosques from their government to be read out in the mosques every Friday. I do not think the British government has many people who could write credible sermons for the mosques around the U.K. even if they had the ambition to do so.

There is also the question about what is the definition of success. The British government has been slightly in two minds about this over the years. Is the measure of success that people stop terrorism, or is it that they stop adopting what might be perceived as extremist views? Government has changed its mind periodically on that question. It is probably easier to stop people adhering to terrorism than it is stopping them adhering to views that be might be not aligned to what might be perceived as British values.

A number of the programs in the Middle East [that] seem to have had some success are successful in giving strong theological support to the idea that people should not be attacking the regime because it is an Islamic government and deserves at least their acquiescence. But this acceptance is [a] very different thing from saying that somebody necessarily signs up to what might be seen as mainstream British values on rights of women and so on. The government has chopped and changed a bit on where it stands. Some of what appeared to be fairly successful anti-radicalization measures that were being implemented at one stage were dependent upon support and engagement from some parts of the Muslim community that had extremely conservative views on issues such as women, and may have had views on Israel that diverged from the British government's. But crucially, on the issue of whether Muslims have a moral and religious duty to attack the United Kingdom, they and the U.K. government had come to the same conclusion. All this complicated things: you are giving government support to a group who, in a number of their areas of their belief, are very far from the mainstream and whose views might be seen as extremist. As a result, I am always slightly skeptical of the viability in the U.K. of the counter-radicalization efforts some Arab countries have proclaimed to be successful, because it is not always clear to me that this is transferable to the U.K. And even if it was, it would probably be struck down by the courts in the U.K.

CTC: Turning to the question of foreign terrorist fighters [FTFs], what kind of a threat do you see from the contingent of people who went to Syria and Iraq, those who are still at large? And what do you think the government should be doing with the ones in SDF [Syrian Democratic Forces] custody?

Evans: I think there is a threat. I have considerable sympathy for the view that Ed Husain takes,^d which is that if people have been involved in violent extremism and then decide that this actually has been an error and a mistake on their part, we could reasonably expect them to actively seek to counter extremism in this country

d Editor's note: See Ed Husain, "Take these claims of 'rehabilitation' with a bucket of salt," *Daily Telegraph*, December 7, 2019. Ed Husain is a British commentator who rose to prominence in 2007 when he published *The Islamist*, an account of his experiences as a member of Hizb ut Tahrir in the United Kingdom. Having left the group and repudiated extremism, he rose to prominence as a commentator, author, and activist speaking, writing, and advising on Islam around the world.

rather than just saying “oh I made a mistake, I’m very sorry.” If there is genuine belief that they made an error and they have seen the error of their ways, then I do not know why you would not expect them to be giving evidence against people with whom they were cooperating and who took part in appalling crimes in Iraq and Syria. There has been a problem with getting evidence from those areas that could be accessible in the British courts. The question is why are the repentant members of that group not giving evidence and audibly reaching out to the community in saying that they want to help push back against extremism. Some people are contributing in this way, but many are not. I would like to see actions as well as words if we are going to accept that people have changed their minds.

CTC: On the FTF question, how does this compare to the earlier flows that you saw going? For example, those who went to Afghanistan.

Evans: There are some parallels. If you look at the history of radicalization in the U.K., there are similarities with earlier flows. The whole Kashmir dispute and conflict was very important in pushing people towards political, in fact relatively extreme political, positions and then across into more general extremism. Then there was the Balkans conflict, which radicalized a broader pool, where quite a lot of the grand old men of British Islamism were involved, and then went on to be very influential in bringing those sorts of messages back to the U.K. Then finally you had the same process in Afghanistan in 1999-2001 with the al-Qa`ida camps there [being] a sort of university of terrorism. From that, 9/11 was spawned alongside lots of the attacks that we saw in 2003-2010 period.

Syria has many of the same characteristics. There were people going out knowingly and actively taking extremist positions, others instead taking humanitarian positions to get out there. But once they are there and have the experience of being out there, the teaching they receive on the battlefield, the bonds of comradeship they form, the actual physical experience of battle, all work together to make them more radicalized and then ultimately bringing the threat back with them. It was absolutely clear during the post-9/11 period that this threat had been exported from Afghanistan and by those that had gone to Afghanistan, and I think that even from my slightly more distant position today, Iraq/Syria has many of the same characteristics.

The unique selling proposition for IS [the Islamic State] was the fact that it presented itself [as] a caliphate and it held territory. I always took the view that the very first thing you have to do in this particular case is take the territory away from them so as to demolish their claim to a status of a caliphate. But you needed a military process to take away some of their legitimacy. And now we will go, I guess, into a long period of threat from the [jihadi] alumni of Iraq/Syria.

CTC: I did want to pick up on your mention of the Kashmir issue and its capacity to be a push-factor toward radicalization in the United Kingdom, given the recent tensions in the region.

Evans: My main point there was that because of the particular shape of the Pakistan-Kashmiri diaspora in the U.K., Kashmir is a real hot-button issue. Inevitably, the recent actions of the Indians in Kashmir are likely to further have inflamed tempers. People

care desperately about Kashmir in places like Bradford, and it is a radicalizing issue. So I would have thought that it is an exacerbating factor, although I don’t have a particular reason to believe that it will then turn itself against the U.K., given the fact this is an India-Pakistan conflict point. I can certainly see it as an intercommunal issue, although on the whole over the years, intercommunal issues haven’t really played out very heavily in the U.K. People have very strong views, but surprisingly, they don’t tend, for the most part, to play out on the streets of our cities.

CTC: An ideology that has increasingly worried people and has come under greater focus recently is the extreme right wing. Has its rise as a threat surprised you? Was it something you were focused on?

Evans: Yes, I was focused on right-wing extremism. I have always taken an interest in the far right, partly zoologically, because some of the individuals involved are so wacky that it is quite fascinating to watch them. I can remember back in the 1980s and 1990s, the saving grace of far-right extremists is that because they had such extreme and odd views, they tended to be extreme and odd people who did not tend to be very good at working with each other. You saw groups that tended to fragment and split like something out of a Monty Python film into smaller and purer groups. So, they never quite managed to get their act together into something more substantial. But from the early 2000s, and in those days it was mostly a police focus, from time to time individuals would come to light who were on the fringes of the far-right groups, who had been building bombs in their garden sheds, and who hated Muslims and so on. These cases were redolent of other earlier cases such as the London nail bomber, David Copeland, who went on a bombing campaign in London in 1999.⁴ He was on the fringes of the far right, not an active member of any particular organization, but took it upon himself to build bombs which he used to attack the ethnic and gay communities in London. Around the same time, there was a group called Combat 18, which was quite active and was itself a fragment of the far right. There were a few individuals in that group who started to espouse the idea of terrorism. The [Security] Service worked closely with police to undertake some disruptions in the late 1990s of Combat 18 associated individuals who were consorting with people of similar cast of mind in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet bloc. These groups had explicitly decided that terrorism was part of the way forward in order to try to destabilize what they characterized as the Zionist Organized Government (ZOG).

We’re seeing similar sorts of actors again now in the far-right scene. Partly I suspect it is a reflection of the social pressures on communities as a result of austerity measures [in the U.K. in the years after the 2008 financial crisis]. There seems to be a constituency of disaffected males (for the most part, but not entirely) who find extreme right-wing beliefs attractive. And they have started to get their acts together to organize into groups and plot. And there is some evidence that they have been consciously and deliberately inspired by the perceived success of the violent Islamists in getting their grievances on the table as a result of violence and thought and thinking “well, we can do something like that.” Certainly during my time, it was the English Defence League (EDL) who had started to develop this narrative. The EDL was not quite the same as other extreme right-wing groups, but they were a reactionary group that fed off and were mutually symbiotic with [the British Islamist extrem-

ist grouping] Al Muhajiroun (ALM). The EDL emerged explicitly in response to ALM activity, though in fact they both needed each other ideologically to advance. ALM needed the EDL because they gave them justification for their position and vice versa. So, they were both mutually beneficial to each other. Looking at the threat picture now and how it is evolving, I am not surprised that we have an extreme right-wing threat. We have seen signs of it emerging for 10 years-plus, and the fact that it is now more organized with groups like National Action [a proscribed U.K. extreme right-wing group] was almost predictable.

CTC: Turning to the threat from Irish terrorism and its current state, you mentioned the importance of the threat when you joined the Service. Currently, the threat to Northern Ireland from Northern Ireland-related terrorism is assessed to be higher than the terrorist threat facing the United Kingdom as a whole from all forms of terrorism.^e Could you give us some reflections on the current state of this threat?

Evans: MI5 took over primacy for national security in Northern Ireland when devolution took place in 2007, given national security cannot be devolved.^f This led to greater responsibilities for MI5 in the region, and it became fairly evident quite quickly that despite the tremendous political success of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, there was a rather fissiparous, but significant group of dissidents who did not accept the political settlement and wanted to foment terrorism. The solution, insofar as it was a solution, to IRA terrorism at the time was a political solution, which was to reach a negotiated accommodation between the different communities which both sides could just about manage to accept. There was a deliberate decision back then on the part of the republican groups to go down the political route because they saw that as a more effective way of achieving their aims, and as a result of that, there was also a diminution of support for terrorism for violence by the loyalist groups.

The current problem is that there is not a similar deal to be done with the dissidents that are left because they are irreconcilable and therefore the response to them over past 10 years has been a straight security response. During the time I was the Director General of MI5, we had more officers *pro rata* in Northern Ireland than we had in the rest of the U.K. because of the fact that there were many potentially lethal plots being fomented by the dissident groups. And from time to time, one of those would succeed. There has been a periodic drumbeat of terrorism for the last 10 or 15 years in Northern Ireland, with occasional attacks or attempted attacks on police or prison officers. There was a bomb outside our headquarters just outside Belfast in 2010⁵ [and then subsequently another in 2015⁶].

e At the time of publication, the assessed threat to the United Kingdom from terrorism is “substantial” and the threat to Northern Ireland from Northern Ireland-related terrorism is “severe.” See “Threat Levels,” Security Service MI5.

f Editor’s note: The United Kingdom is made up of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland but administered from London. Devolution has occurred over time and meant that greater powers have passed to regional assemblies like the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, the London Assembly, and the Northern Ireland executive. This grants these regional legislatures and their executives powers over certain legislation. National security sits outside this system, however, and is controlled and implemented centrally across the entire country.

This hasn’t gone away. And there is the additional problem that because of the link between criminality and terrorism, various people have an interest in it not entirely going away.

The question of the moment is whether the political tensions in Northern Ireland around Brexit and the potential for a hard border with the Republic will mean terrorism will rebound? My view on this [is that] it will give probably a little twist and boost to the dissident groups. They will be able to say that the entire settlement that created the more stable current situation was based on the false premise of European unity. But I would be completely astonished if Sinn Fein [the political party that was closely associated with the IRA] decided to go back to terrorism because the Good Friday Agreement has worked well for them; they are the only political party which has got significant and substantial representation north and south of the border [in both Northern Ireland and Ireland]. If anything, the recent developments with regard [to] Brexit probably give them more hope that a future poll might lead to reunification through the ballot box, so why spoil that potential opportunity by going back to violence. So I would totally discount the idea that the IRA might decide to return to terrorism. The dissidents will probably get a boost, but they [would] struggle to get things back to where they stood in 1985. Partly because security capabilities have developed considerably over that period and [because] there is much greater investment, and therefore I think it would be harder for them. And also, I don’t think they have a core of community support which is sufficient to sustain a big, long-term terrorism threat in the way that Sinn Fein were able to do for the IRA during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s.

CTC: To talk briefly about Brexit, you’ve been vocal about the negative consequences on U.K. security. Could you comment on that more broadly than Ireland? And how it will impact the United Kingdom’s response to terrorism?

Evans: I think the narrow question of intelligence sharing in Europe will not be immediately impacted by Brexit because intelligence sharing and intelligence matters have never been within European Community (E.C.) competence, and therefore the structures for enabling that are not E.U. structures. Those relationships will continue. The U.K. has been an overall net contributor to those relationships, and it is valuable to both sides that those relationships continue. But when it comes to interventions [disruption operations], those are very often law enforcement interventions. And law enforcement, policing, is within E.C. competence, and therefore things like Europol will be impacted. Whilst I would imagine that we will be able to negotiate sensible engagement with Europol, we will not be part of the core Europol community because we will not be part of the European Union. So, remaining involved with Europol will, at the very least, require extensive negotiation; it is not simply a case of people saying, “well, we want them in, so we let them in.” It would be a legal question, and it is unlikely we will be in as advantageous a position in terms of law enforcement cooperation as when we were members. The net effect will be a less effective response, in my view.

Secondly, and very importantly, the U.K. has been for some time a voice in political discussions within Europe for the security dimension of problems to be given appropriate weight. On issues such as data sharing, data protection, and so on, the fact that the U.K. has very forcefully promoted the importance of national security, as well

as data privacy, has meant that the overall policy positions that the E.U. have come to have tended to be ones which were different than would have been the case if the U.K. had not been there. The U.K. has had allies in achieving these outcomes, of course, but we have been very vocal and effective in lobbying to get these goals. Now we are not going to be at the table in the same way, and while we have a wonderful diplomatic service who will excellently represent our interests and seek to influence others, it will not be the same as being at the table with a vote. From that point of view, one of the dangers is that the E.U. will take policy positions which are less security-friendly than they would otherwise have been had the U.K. been there in the debate as a full member. And whilst we will not be a member of the European Union, we will still be deeply affected by the decisions they make because we are a close neighbor and we are still going to be closely connected. The danger is that we get a policy framework which is less facilitative of information sharing and security concerns than would otherwise have been the case, something that will be a net negative in national security terms.

CTC: Finally, a more future-looking question. You mentioned earlier the attention you historically paid to the PKK and Sikh extremism, and we have talked about the threat from extreme right-wing terrorism. Are there any other issues or ideologies out there which you see as brewing terrorist threats?

Evans: I do find that a very difficult question. I suppose the question is whether there is an unspoken-for political movement out there which could become the fuel for future terrorist threats. There was a kind of canary in the mineshaft in regard to what happened with Islamism in the U.K. in the Salman Rushdie affair^g because it demonstrated that there was a very vigorously held strand of thought out there which was in tension with the assumptions of the way in which British society should work in the 1980s and 90s. And I'm not trying to overemphasize the linkage, but the protests and anger around the Rushdie Affair amongst Britain's Muslims did show that there was an issue here, which, because of circumstances, grew. The problem is identifying similar issues in the future. Predicting the future is an unsatisfactory process, because the truth is

you do not know what is going to happen and how things will develop. I cannot identify here and now what the next such issue might be, but the key to establishing what might emerge in the future is to look at the areas where there is political tension which is not being addressed as this is where problems are likely to emerge.

CTC: Some have, in the past, expressed concern about the radicalization of the environmental movement might lead to violence. Do you think this is a possible risk?

Evans: I suspect it is not an area where terrorism would be the response. The truth is that non-violent activism by [environmental activists] has had an impact over the last few months and is changing people's political minds. Within this context, terrorism would be counterproductive. It is like animal rights in many ways: there will always be a small group of people who will go for violence because they have a predilection for it. Animal rights was quite a concern 15 years ago, and there were moves in the late 1990s towards terrorism by some of the extremists amongst the movement. And you could maybe see something like that emerge amongst the more extreme environmental position, but that's different to mainstream environmentalism. So you might see individuals going down the route of violence, but I doubt that it will develop into the major phenomenon that Irish terrorism was for a generation, that Islamist terrorism has been, or even the far right, because you need a particular set of issues to take place to it for it to mature to that point. Key to this is a large, unaddressed political issue.

So whatever you think of the outcome of the recent election in the U.K., the fact that some of the legitimate concerns, that were being used as a pretext by English nationalists, have now been formally acknowledged at the ballot box might be a good outcome, even though it is sort of disconcerting for southern liberals. There was a significant alienated and disenfranchised group out there who didn't think the system was taking any notice of them. And that's where you need to be concerned about extremists exploiting legitimate concerns. Disaffected English nationalists were manifesting themselves at the extremes in things like the British National Party (BNP) and National Action, which fed the undertone that articulated itself as extreme right-wing terrorism. And attention still needs to be paid to this group, as it is not clear that they will feel entirely assuaged as a result of the fact that people are paying wider attention to them now. Terrorist problems emerge when you have a significant population who feel alienated and nobody takes notice of them, causing frustration and anger. **CTC**

^g Editor's note: Salman Rushdie's 1988 novel *Satanic Verses* resulted in anger among a significant number of Muslims around the world, including inside the United Kingdom. In 1989, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* against Rushdie. In 1998, the Iranian government declared that it no longer sought Rushdie's death. For more, see "Satanic Verses, Novel by Rushdie," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

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The Pensacola Terrorist Attack: The Enduring Influence of al-Qa`ida and its Affiliates

By Colin P. Clarke

On December 6, 2019, Saudi Air Force Second Lieutenant Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani killed three U.S. Navy sailors and injured another eight individuals at Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida. In early February 2020, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) claimed responsibility for the attack. It is not yet clear whether the group had a direct role in the attack, but if it did, it would make the shooting the first deadly terrorist attack on U.S. soil since 9/11 directed by a foreign terrorist organization. Alshamrani's repurposing of the words of Usama bin Ladin and Anwar al-Awlaki in a social media posting just prior to the attack point to the enduring influence of al-Qa`ida propaganda. As the Federal Bureau of Investigation seeks to gain access to Alshamrani's Apple iPhones, which may help it ascertain what role, if any, AQAP played in the attack, the U.S. Department of Defense is conducting a comprehensive review of security cooperation activities with foreign countries.

On Friday, December 6, 2019, a 21-year-old Saudi Air Force Second Lieutenant named Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani murdered three U.S. Navy sailors and injured eight others in an unprovoked attack at Naval Air Station Pensacola in the Florida panhandle.¹

The shooting occurred in a classroom building.²

"During the attack, the shooter fired shots at pictures of the current U.S. president and a former president, and a witness at the scene recounted that he made statements critical of American military action overseas," according to FBI Deputy Director David Bowdich.³

Alshamrani, who hailed from Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province of Al Ahsa, was killed by one of two local sheriff's deputies who arrived at the scene as first responders.⁴ He was also confronted by two unarmed Marines and a Navy airman who was shot five times.⁵ The shooting lasted approximately 15 minutes.⁶

In mid-January 2020, U.S. Attorney General William Barr labeled the shooting an act of terrorism.⁷ After the shooting, it was discovered that Alshamrani was a follower of al-Qa`ida propagan-

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da, including lectures from al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) propagandist Anwar al-Awlaki.⁸ Just prior to the attack,⁹ Alshamrani posted an anti-American message on his Twitter account, which repurposed the words of al-Awlaki as well as longtime al-Qa`ida leader Usama bin Ladin.¹⁰ In the posting, the attacker openly denounced the policies of the United States and Israel. Before the attack, he also retweeted articles that referenced Israel's harsh treatment of Palestinians and a tweet referencing the Trump administration's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.¹¹

Nearly two months after the attack, on February 2, 2020, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula released a video claiming "adoption" of the attack.¹² The video features a message from beyond the grave from Qassim al-Rimi, the AQAP emir who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in January 2020 in Yemen, according to an official statement released by the White House.¹³ In the tape, al-Rimi stated, "Alshamrani carried out his martyrdom operation on one of the dens of evil ... the US Naval Air Station Pensacola."¹⁴

"Our hero moved for several years between several U.S. military bases in America to select his target among them. He searched for his prey. Allah bestowed on him great patience," al-Rimi stated.¹⁵

The video noticeably failed to explicitly spell out the nature of the connection between Alshamrani and AQAP. It did, however, display a screen grab of an apparent iPhone Notes document timestamped September 6, 2019, purportedly containing Alshamrani's last will and testament addressed to his family.¹⁶ (See bottom-right image in Figure 1.)

"If you have received this message while I am imprisoned, be patient and do not feel weak ... And if Allah graced me with death, I ask Allah to accept me as a martyr for His sake," the document reads. "I assure you that the issue is not an adolescent mindset or excessiveness and extremism in takfir [excommunication from Islam]. Instead, it is a way out for the crisis that the Islamic ummah [worldwide community] is experiencing for close to a century now."

AQAP does not offer proof that Alshamrani is the author of the last will and testament, and Alshamrani never references AQAP in the document. Still, faking such a document would be risky on

a References to the AQAP tape are based on the author's work in tandem with a translator who is a native Arabic speaker, in order to ensure that the literal translation provided the most accurate verbiage and that there was no room for error or misinterpretation. At certain points, the translation of what al-Rimi said in Arabic differs from the subtitle AQAP provided. Perhaps most importantly, while the subtitles used the phrase "full responsibility" in reference to the attack, the literal translation is "adoption." This could be the result of poor translation by AQAP, which is the most likely explanation, but it could also be a deliberate attempt to send mixed messages. While "full responsibility" is more indicative of communication, command, and control, "adoption" could suggest a much looser link to the attack and could be read to suggest that AQAP was merely approving of and attempting to express strong solidarity with Alshamrani after the attack.



The main gate at Naval Air Station Pensacola on Navy Boulevard in Pensacola, Florida, is pictured on March 16, 2016. (Patrick Nichols/U.S. Navy)

theological grounds, even for a terrorist group.

The AQAP video also featured a quote, written out by the group on the screen, from what it claimed was the “correspondence of the martyr.”¹⁷

“During the last month I was in preparation for this program. I started last Friday running tests and I passed it all thanks to God. Starting on Monday there will be swimming tests for a week. Then there will be academy tests for five weeks. The program graduates a batch every week.”¹⁸ The battery of physical tests is a common part of the training associated with the program that Alshamrani was enrolled in, something that would be difficult for AQAP to have specific knowledge of if the correspondence was fabricated.¹⁹

Taken at face value, this could suggest Alshamrani had been in contact with AQAP. However, the group did not explicitly state that the message was sent to them by Alshamrani, nor did the group provide any images of correspondence in its original form.

The AQAP video also included pictures purportedly showing Alshamrani, a picture apparently taken with photographic flash of a framed letter purportedly addressed to Alshamrani from the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia Armed Forces office acknowledging his level of English-language learning, and a picture of a purported “Certificate of Completion” of an “aviation preflight indoctrination course” from the U.S. Naval Aviation Schools Command. This is another aspect of the video that would have been difficult, yet not impossible, for AQAP to fake.²⁰

In probing the connectivity between the attacker and AQAP, one possible avenue of inquiry for the FBI has been ascertaining the authenticity of these documents and whether they existed in the public domain prior to AQAP’s release of the video. Although this author is not in a position to confirm the authenticity of the documents and photos used in the video, the totality of what AQAP showed in the video *appears* to point to at least some connectivity between AQAP and the attacker.

It is important to note that if this attack were directed, and not merely inspired by AQAP, it would be the first successful directed attack on U.S. soil by a foreign terrorist organization since 9/11.²¹

Alshamrani arrived in the United States in August 2017 on an A-2 Visa for military training.²² He was initially stationed at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, for English-language instruction.²³ After Lackland, Alshamrani moved on to aviation

training in Pensacola and eventually advanced strike fighter training in the fall of 2019.²⁴ Although Alshamrani filed a formal complaint against one of his instructors for repeatedly mocking him with a nickname, “Porn Stash,” a moniker that apparently infuriated him,²⁵ investigators believe that the attack was premeditated and not a result of this incident, as evidenced by the U.S. government’s terrorism label. There is also AQAP’s claim that Alshamrani had been planning the attack for years and scouting various targets.²⁶ Indeed, Alshamrani was interested in extremist videos, literature, and social media postings as early as 2015.²⁷ While he was in the United States for training in July 2019, Alshamrani used a hunting license to legally purchase a 9mm Glock 45 handgun.^b

The week before the attack, Alshamrani and three other Saudi military trainees traveled to New York City, visiting several museums and Rockefeller Center.²⁸ On this trip, Alshamrani also visited the September 11th Memorial in New York City. Months prior to his December 2019 visit to New York City, Alshamrani posted a cryptic message on the internet on September 11, 2019, noting that “the countdown has started.”²⁹ The evening before the attack, Alshamrani hosted a dinner party where he showed videos of mass shootings.³⁰ Attorney General William Barr subsequently made clear that while several fellow Saudi Air Force officers attending the training facility took videos of the attack’s aftermath, reports that they filmed the attack as it unfolded were false and that they had fully cooperated with investigators.³¹ At least one of the individuals who attended the dinner party was among those who filmed the aftermath of the attack.³²

This article examines several issues raised by the attack. First, it analyzes the enduring influence of al-Qa`ida propaganda and how it continues to resonate with the group’s supporters. This section also examines the degree to which the attack may provide an opening for al-Qa`ida to reassert itself among jihadis around the world and renew its appeal to jihadis in Saudi Arabia. Second, it discusses the impact the attack may have on U.S.-Saudi relations, which has experienced particular volatility over the past several years. Third, it explores the issue of foreign military personnel vetting in the United States and whether a stricter and more rigorous vetting regime will

b Alshamrani was issued a hunting license on July 11, 2019, by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and purchased the weapon used in the attack nine days later from a federally licensed firearms dealer in Florida, Uber’s Lock and Gun in Pensacola. Alshamrani was also in possession of an extended magazine, several additional magazines, and approximately 180 rounds of ammunition. Under U.S. law, there are several exceptions that allow for foreigners who have been lawfully admitted to the country to purchase and own a firearm. In May 2019, the FBI issued a warning about the hunting license loophole in a report titled “Federal Hunting License Exception Could be Exploited by Extremists or Criminal Actors Seeking to Obtain Firearms for Violent Attacks,” which was issued to by the bureau’s private sector outreach team. See Patricia Mazzei and Eric Schmitt, “Pentagon Restricts Training for Saudi Military Students,” *New York Times*, December 12, 2019; Janita Kan, “Attorney General Barr Says Pensacola Shooting Was an ‘Act of Terrorism,’” *Epoch Times*, January 13, 2020; Bill Chappell, “Saudi Gunman Legally Purchased Pistol Used in Pensacola Air Station Attack,” NPR, December 9, 2019; Jana Winter and Hunter Walker, “FBI Warned Six Months Ago About Loophole Pensacola Shooter Used to Obtain a Gun,” Yahoo News, December 10, 2019; and “Pensacola Attack Labeled Terrorism as U.S. Expels Saudi Military Students,” Soufan Center IntelBrief, January 15, 2020. See also “FBI Deputy Director David Bowdich’s Remarks at Press Conference on Naval Air Station Pensacola Shooting,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, January 13, 2020.

allow Washington to be able to sustain the rate at which it trains military personnel from Saudi Arabia and other partner countries in the continuing fight against terrorism. Fourthly and finally, the article looks at how the attack will impact the privacy-security debate, especially given the inability of investigators to gain access to the attacker's iPhone.³³

Issue 1: The Enduring al-Qa`ida Threat

Just prior to the attack, a Twitter account with the handle @M7MD_SHAMRANI, believed to belong to Alshamrani, posted a message criticizing the United States and Israel and accusing the United States of crimes against Muslims, with references to Guantanamo and the presence of U.S. troops in Muslim nations. Although Alshamrani opted not to refer to any al-Qa`ida leaders by name, his message repurposed the words of bin Ladin and AQAP's longtime American propagandist, until his death in 2011, Anwar al-Awlaki.³⁴

Al-Awlaki's influence has been a key factor in some of the most significant terrorist attacks of the past decade, including the Boston Marathon bombings (2013), the Charlie Hebdo attack (2015), the San Bernardino shootings (2015), and the Orlando nightclub massacre (2016), in addition to numerous other attacks.³⁵ Despite highly publicized efforts to remove terrorist content from the internet, his sermons glorifying "martyrs" and calling for attacks against the West can still be accessed on YouTube and other social media platforms.³⁶

The Pensacola attacker's social media account echoed some of al-Qa`ida's key themes, including anger over the presence of U.S. troops in the Muslim world and U.S. support for Israel. These themes have been a mainstay of al-Qa`ida propaganda since the group's inception, and as recently as the 18th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, the organization's current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri called for attacks on the West, specifically against the U.S. military.³⁷

The Pensacola shooter reportedly gravitated toward social media postings that described Americans and Israelis as "crusaders" and openly celebrated the concept of jihad.³⁸ *The Washington Post* reported that by late 2015, Alshamrani followed several well-known extremist ideologues on Twitter, including Saudi nationals Abdulaziz al-Turaifi and Ibrahim al-Sakran, Kuwaiti Hakim al-Mutairi, and Jordanian Eyad Qunaibi.³⁹ The newspaper reported that these individuals are alleged to have varying degrees of association with jihadi ideology and networks.⁴⁰ Al-Turaifi was arrested in 2016 after criticizing the Saudi government for stripping the Saudi religious police of their powers, *The Jerusalem Post's* Maayan Groisman reported. Groisman noted that al-Turaifi's arrest was decried by al-Qa`ida ideologues, including Sheikh Abdullah al-Muhaysini, a Saudi cleric then affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra.⁴¹ Al-Sakran was detained in 2016 and accused of having links to terrorist organizations.⁴² Al-Mutairi is a religious scholar and Secretary General of Saudi Arabia's al-Ummah party, which is banned in the Kingdom.⁴³ According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, al-Mutairi is a charismatic figure who established a network

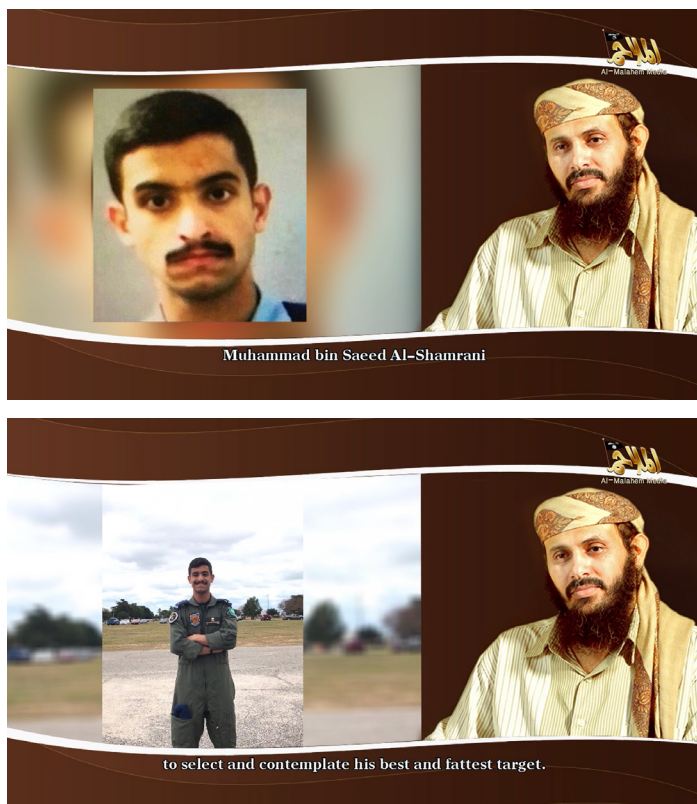


Figure 1: Still images from the video "And Heal the Breasts of a Believing People: Blessing and Declaration of Responsibility for the Attack on the US Naval Air Station Pensacola Florida" released by AQAP's al-Malahem Media Foundation on February 2, 2020. The pictures (which the author has not authenticated) purport to show Mohammed Alshamrani in military uniform as well as part of his last will and testament (apparently written on the iPhone Notes App). The screen captures also include images of now deceased AQAP leader Qasim al-Rimi.

of activist salafis in Saudi Arabia.⁴⁴ In the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in January 2015, Qunaibi, who *The New York Times* described as a jihadi theoretician, took the opportunity to complain that attacks against non-Muslims are always given more media attention than attacks against Muslims.⁴⁵ As with the Pensacola attack, the Charlie Hebdo attack was claimed by AQAP.⁴⁶ *McClatchy* noted that Qunaibi was a supporter of Jabhat al-Nusra, previously al-Qa`ida's franchise in Syria.⁴⁷

Most of the recent terrorist attacks on U.S. soil motivated by jihadi ideology have had connections to the Islamic State, not al-Qa`ida or its affiliates. If the continuing investigation concludes that the Pensacola attack was directed by AQAP, not only would it be the first successful FTO-directed attack on U.S. soil since September 11, 2001, but it could also signal that AQAP retains the capability, albeit limited, to launch high-profile external operations despite facing numerous setbacks in terms of fragmentation and leadership decapitation.⁴⁸

Whether AQAP's claims to have directed the attack turn out to be true or false, the Alshamrani attack still provided the group with a boost, elevating it in the jihadi propaganda sphere and providing the overall al-Qa`ida network with leverage as it competes with the Islamic State as the most prominent global jihadi brand. Following the death of al-Rimi, AQAP selected Khaled bin Umar Batarfi as its new leader, and given his role as the former head of the group's external operations unit, this could signal a renewed emphasis on attacking the West.⁴⁹

With the Islamic State still reeling from the loss of its caliphate, there may be an opening for al-Qa`ida to seize momentum and portray itself and its affiliates as again capable of something the Islamic State was never able to achieve—directing a successful attack inside the United States—in the competition for recruits and prestige.⁵⁰ This may help it recruit in Saudi Arabia in particular because the country has historically been what the scholar Thomas Hegghammer termed “a heartland of al-Qaeda support.”⁵¹ Other longtime analysts of Saudi Arabia, including Bruce Riedel and Bilal Y. Saab, have noted that “the al-Qaeda message about its historically intimate relationship with the United States resonates with many Saudis who have a deep antipathy for the United States.”⁵²

Saudi Arabia continues to grapple with a major radicalization challenge. More than 3,000 Saudi foreign fighters traveled to Iraq and Syria to join the Islamic State and other terrorist groups.⁵³ Before that, throughout the mid- to late 2000s, a significant number of Saudis traveled to Iraq to fight with al-Qa`ida in Iraq and other Sunni jihadi groups battling U.S. troops.⁵⁴ It remains unclear how pervasive support for al-Qa`ida and other jihadi groups is within the Saudi armed forces.

As al-Qa`ida works to reassert itself in 2020 and beyond, the group could seek to redouble its efforts in the Kingdom, particu-

larly looking to garner sympathy or curry favor with those in Saudi society who strongly oppose Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's reform agenda. In order to refashion the country's image from an exporter of radical Wahhabism to a moderate nation attractive to foreign direct investment, the Crown Prince has begun to relax some social mores, hosting rock concerts and inviting so-called influencers to praise Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination.⁵⁵ Underlining the continued al-Qa`ida threat to Saudi Arabia, at a concert in November 2019, a man identified only as a 33-year-old Yemeni resident according to Saudi state television, working under orders from al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, went on a stabbing spree, attacking performers at King Abdullah Park in Riyadh.⁵⁶ One dimension to the Pensacola attack that will likely particularly worry Saudi authorities is the fact that the attacker was a serving member of the Royal Saudi Air Force.

Issue 2: The Impact on U.S.-Saudi Relations

While the attack may have created an opening for al-Qa`ida, it has not undermined the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia. President Trump was quick to praise Saudi Arabia after the attack as a stalwart ally and seek to reassure the Kingdom. On Twitter, Trump noted that “The King said that the Saudi people are greatly angered by the barbaric actions of the shooter, and that this person in no way shape or form represents the feelings of the Saudi people who love the American people.”⁵⁷ Attorney General Barr acknowledged that the Saudis were playing a useful role in assisting the investigation. In a hastily assembled internal report analyzing the assailant's Twitter feed, the Saudi government blamed clerics considered enemies of the ruling regime, in particular those associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, for exerting a negative influence on Alshamrani.⁵⁸

More than a year ago, a Saudi hit team acting at the behest of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, murdered U.S. resident and prominent journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Istanbul consulate, the CIA reportedly assessed with a high degree of confidence.⁵⁹ The Saudis attempted to cover up the crime but were later exposed for the brutal murder.⁶⁰ Citing the Khashoggi killing and the disastrous Saudi-led war in Yemen, which has killed untold numbers of Yemeni civilians, the U.S. Congress has pushed for a reduction in military aid to the Saudis, something the White House has consistently resisted. Late in 2019, the U.S. State Department reportedly rejected a plan to train the General Intelligence Presidency (GIP), as Saudi intelligence is known, because it is widely believed that Riyadh continues its campaign to silence dissidents abroad and arrest human rights activists.⁶¹

In October 2019, the United States announced plans to deploy nearly 2,000 more troops to Saudi Arabia to counter Iran and reinforce support for Riyadh following the September 2019 missile attack against Saudi oil facilities suspected to have been conducted by Iran.⁶² Following the January 3, 2020, strike that killed IRGC-QF commander Qassem Soleimani and the further increase in tensions between Washington and Tehran, more U.S. troops were mobilized to the Middle East.⁶³ The move to send more troops to Saudi Arabia specifically might be seized upon by al-Qa`ida, which

c Although the Islamic State has not to date directed a successful terrorist attack in the United States it has inspired several fatal terrorist attacks, including the 2015 San Bernardino shooting, the 2016 Orlando shooting, and the 2017 Manhattan West Side Highway attack. Faith Karimi, Jason Hanna, and Yousuf Basil, “San Bernardino Shooters ‘Supporters’ of ISIS, Terror Group Says,” CNN, December 5, 2015; Steve Visser and John Couwels, “Orlando Killer Repeatedly Referenced ISIS, Transcript Shows,” CNN, September 24, 2016; Benjamin Mueller, William K. Rashbaum, Al Baker, and Adam Goldman, “Prosecutor’s Describe Driver’s Plan to Kill in Manhattan Terror Attack,” *New York Times*, November 1, 2017.

d As of January 4, 2020, there were 3,000 total U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia. Miriam Berger, “Where U.S. Troops Are in the Middle East and Afghanistan, Visualized,” *Washington Post*, January 3, 2020.

used the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia as one of its primary justifications for attacking the United States.⁶⁴ But the relationship between Washington and Riyadh is an enduring one, as the Saudi ruling family depends on the United States for “protection and preservation,” which in turn makes the country’s leadership an enduring target for jihadi groups like al-Qa`ida.⁶⁵ One of bin Ladin’s long-stated goals was to overthrow the Saudi monarchy, which he came to consider an apostate regime.⁶⁶ Al-Qa`ida waged a deadly terrorist campaign in Saudi Arabia between 2003 and 2006 in which the group targeted Westerners, Saudi oil facilities, the Ministry of the Interior, and the U.S. Consulate in Jeddah, in addition to other housing.⁶⁷

While the attack has not undermined U.S.-Saudi relations, it is certainly possible that more rigorous vetting requirements, combined with lingering stigma from the attack, could potentially impact the ability of the two countries to partner on counterterrorism missions in the future, shaping the nature of U.S. security cooperation programs with Saudi Arabia, leading to a less robust relationship over time.

Issue 3: Vetting for Security Cooperation Programs

The attack led members of Congress to call for increased scrutiny on the security cooperation and training exchange programs that the U.S. military participates in within the United States with foreign countries. Previously, attention has focused on training programs overseas. The U.S. military has suffered numerous so-called ‘green-on-blue’ attacks in Afghanistan, where members of the partner nation’s military being trained by Americans turn their weapons against U.S. soldiers.⁶⁸

In the immediate aftermath of the Pensacola attack, the Department of Defense implemented a safety and security stand-down and ordered the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security to strengthen the vetting process for the more than 5,000 foreign military students in the United States, while also conducting a comprehensive review of the current policies and procedures for screening foreign military students and granting them base access.⁶⁹ The new vetting standards for training foreign military personnel in the United States were used to screen all Saudi military students in the aftermath of the Pensacola attack, and are part of a personnel vetting transformation initiative.⁷⁰ The initiative combines traditional investigative procedures with automated data record searches that “look at intelligence community-derived data sets that include government data, commercial data, and publicly available data,” according to the March 4, 2020, testimony of Garry Reid, director for defense, intelligence, counterintelligence, law enforcement, and security at the Office of the Under Secretary for Defense for Intelligence and Security.⁷¹

These new standards will inevitably impact various relationships between the U.S. military and many of its partners and allies. In particular, given the intensive nature of the personnel vetting transformation described by Reid, it is questionable whether the U.S. military will be able to sustain the rate at which it trains military personnel from Saudi Arabia and other partner countries in the fight against terrorism. Accordingly, the net result of the Pensacola attack could very well be fewer American-trained partner forces combating terrorism in their home nations. In regions like the Arabian Peninsula, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa, the fallout could be significant.

There are always going to be challenges to identifying individuals who are radicalized and who are planning to conduct a terror-

ist attack, however this incident raises serious questions about the previous security/threat vetting procedures employed by both Saudi Arabia and the United States. Given that Alshamrani’s Twitter account demonstrated an affinity for extremist ideology dating back to 2015, it begs the question why Saudi authorities failed to uncover Alshamrani’s radicalization. The internal Saudi report suggests that Alshamrani’s Twitter account did not display his full name and contained no pictures or biographical information that would have allowed authorities to ascertain his identity.⁷² Still, the account did have his first and last name in Arabic and was tied to several posts which, at least after the fact, made it clear Alshamrani was responsible for operating the account and its content.⁷³

The Pentagon’s initial reaction was to suspend training for 852 Saudi students while it conducted a more thorough investigation. In addition to those individuals, an additional 5,000-plus international students were subjected to extra scrutiny as part of a broader security review.⁷⁴ On January 14, 2020, the United States announced that it was expelling 21 Saudi military students from a training program after it was discovered that these individuals were linked to child pornography and violent extremism.⁷⁵ The Justice Department’s criminal investigation into the incident discovered that while there was not any evidence that other members of the Saudi military had preexisting knowledge of the attack, 21 of these individuals possessed “derogatory material,” 17 of whom were found to be participating in social media exchanges that contained jihadi-related content.⁷⁶

In addition to stricter vetting standards to determine who is eligible to participate in security cooperation programs, the Pentagon also announced that it would be imposing more stringent regulations on those students who do arrive in the United States, detailing new limitations on travel within the country, possession of firearms, and access to U.S. military bases and other facilities.⁷⁷ Still, on January 21, 2020, the Pentagon offered conditional approval for resuming training Saudi nationals “once the military services have met certain conditions.”⁷⁸ In a press conference two days later, U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper noted that vetting changes will be “far more comprehensive” and entail a more thorough background investigation of potential foreign military students, including an examination of their social media accounts and interactions, as well as “continuous monitoring” during their stay in the United States.⁷⁹

Issue 4: Privacy Versus Security

The U.S. Department of Justice requested that Apple provide access to the data stored on two iPhones that were used by the gunman prior to the attack.⁸⁰ Alshamrani attempted to destroy both phones, and FBI director Christopher Wray confirmed that Alshamrani put a bullet through one of the phones in his possession.⁸¹ And although FBI crime lab experts have since repaired both of the phones, they have been unable, as far as is publicly known at the time of publication, to access the data stored on them.⁸² The phones remain locked and encrypted, despite efforts by the U.S. government to persuade Apple to offer more help.⁸³

In a January 2020 press conference, FBI Deputy Director David Bowdich stated:

*Even with a court order, to date we cannot access the contents of two phones in this investigation—and countless devices in other investigations. We want to work together with private sector companies, so that we can lawfully access the evidence and information we need to keep our country safe.*⁸⁴

The case is similar to the aftermath of the December 2015 terror-

ist attack in San Bernardino, California, when a husband and wife team inspired by the Islamic State killed 14 people and injured two dozen more at an office holiday party.⁸⁵ In the San Bernardino case, the FBI worked with a private sector firm to access the encrypted data stored on the male shooter's iPhone.⁸⁶

Apple chief executive officer Tim Cook has been under pressure⁸⁷ surrounding allegations that his company has not fully cooperated with DoJ in the investigation into the Pensacola attack.⁸⁸ Apple asserts that building a so-called "back door" into its devices would make all of its iPhones more vulnerable to being hacked by criminals, terrorists, or rogue governments seeking to monitor their own citizens.⁸⁹ As is understood, in many cases, especially regarding authoritarian governments, this would provide them with the opportunity to monitor, harass, and arrest political opponents unfairly labeled and inaccurately characterized as dissidents. In the San Bernardino case, and again with Pensacola, Apple has argued that if the company cedes to FBI demands over unlocking Alshamrani's phone, it would be compelled by governments in Moscow, Beijing, and elsewhere to act in a similar and consistent manner.⁹⁰ The issue of a back door is also a clear example of the privacy versus security debate, with a host of unanswered and fiercely debated legal, moral, and ethical implications.⁹¹

Conclusion

As far as is publicly known, as of late March 2020, the FBI was still struggling to access Alshamrani's encrypted Apple iPhones despite probable cause and a court authorization. The FBI investigation has involved more than 500 interviews and the collection of more than 42 terabytes of digital media.⁹² The claim of responsibility from AQAP has likely created an even greater sense of urgency for the FBI, which is seeking to work closely with the private sector to lawfully access potential evidence. This could help identify key figures in the broader network involved in the attack. Such links have thus far not been apparent, and while the FBI initially noted that it had "not identified any solid evidence that the shooter acted with any co-conspirators or that he was inspired by a specific group," the claim by AQAP could lead the bureau to revisit this assessment.⁹³

Indeed, the potential AQAP link makes the information and data stored on Alshamrani's phones that much more critical to the investigation. Gaining access to this data could furnish the U.S. government with further insight into Alshamrani's activities, exactly what kind of jihadi propaganda he was viewing, and who he was in touch with in the months leading up to the attack. This could confirm or dispel AQAP's claim of responsibility. If, for example, investigators were able to retrieve his purported last will and testament (apparently typed up on iPhone Notes that was shown in the AQAP claim video) from Alshamrani's iPhones, it would add credence to AQAP's claims.

The issue of private companies providing the U.S. federal gov-

ernment with access to data from individuals' phones does indeed raise serious concerns over privacy. This is not an issue that will resolve itself. Moving forward, it will be essential for the government and Silicon Valley to work together to make tangible progress. The ideal solution is one that protects the privacy of law-abiding citizens while also lawfully granting authorities with access to user data on mobile devices in specific cases of investigating terrorism.⁹⁴ Given the complexity of encryption, it may not be possible for both sides to reach what they each view as a reasonable compromise, given the legitimate concerns of both the government and private sector corporations.

The Alshamrani attack has not so far significantly affected the U.S.-Saudi relationship, and is unlikely to do so during the tenure of the Trump administration. Ties between Washington and Riyadh have clearly overcome more turbulent periods, including the immediate aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, as well as the year that followed the Khashoggi murder and the numerous revelations that influential Saudi government officials had knowledge of his assassination.⁹⁵ The more immediate impact of the Pensacola attack is that it will likely cause complications for U.S. efforts to engage in security cooperation with foreign governments, long a lynchpin of U.S. defense policy. As the United States continues to consider drawing down forces in unstable regions around the globe, from West Africa to South Asia, Washington will likely need to rely more than ever on efforts to build partner capacity to supplant a dwindling commitment of U.S. troops in unstable countries.⁹⁶ Working 'by, with, and through' partner nations and continuing programs to train, advise, and assist U.S. allies to counter terrorism will inevitably be impacted by more stringent vetting procedures, including the personnel vetting transformation initiative, which will ultimately be applied to the more than 5,000 foreign military students in the United States.⁹⁷ The current challenge of the coronavirus (COVID-19) will be another major obstacle to the exchange and training of students. Per guidance issued by the United States Army, foreign military students from countries with CDC alert level category 2 and above for COVID-19 will not participate in U.S. scheduled exercises, exchanges, or visits.⁹⁸

The Pensacola attack demonstrates that a number of failures occurred throughout the security cooperation vetting process. And while all efforts should be made to manage and limit the risk, security cooperation is just one facet of a broader relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia, and building partner capacity programs do indeed provide a benefit to both Washington and Riyadh, particularly in counterterrorism operations. Taken together, this demonstrates that even as the threat can be mitigated by stricter and more comprehensive vetting standards, as the Alshamrani attack proves, it can never be altogether eliminated and exists as a tradeoff in the broader realm of U.S. foreign and security policy.

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Dollars for Daesh: The Small Financial Footprint of the Islamic State's American Supporters

By Lorenzo Vidino, Jon Lewis, and Andrew Mines

An analysis of all related court cases since 2013 shows that, save for a few exceptions, the vast majority of U.S.-based Islamic State supporters left a remarkably small financial footprint. Most, in fact, simply relied on personal savings to pay the small costs required for their activities. Some engaged in specific fundraising activities, which tended to be fairly unsophisticated. The crime-terror nexus prevalent in Europe has been virtually absent in the United States with respect to the Islamic State-linked cases, and very few U.S.-based supporters engaged in financial transactions with full-fledged Islamic State members, with only one known case of an individual who received funding to carry out an attack domestically. The small size of the financial footprint of U.S.-based Islamic State supporters is, in itself, good news for U.S. authorities but has a flipside, as the scarcity and inconspicuous nature of the financial transactions of many U.S.-based Islamic State supporters can represent a challenge for investigators.

Over the last few years, the United States has witnessed an Islamic State-related domestic mobilization that is proportionally smaller than that of most Western countries but unprecedented for a country that had historically seen low levels of radicalization of jihadi inspiration. Since the first arrest in 2013, U.S. authorities have arrested 204 individuals for Islamic State-related activities as of January 2020 and estimate that more than 250 Americans have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria and Iraq to join the group.^{1a}

Previous research has analyzed various aspects of this mobilization, from its demographic profile to the role social media played in it.² This article, which summarizes the findings of a forthcoming George Washington University Program on Extremism (PoE) report, examines the financial component. It analyzes how U.S.-based Islamic State supporters have raised and moved funds for their activities, whether that entailed traveling abroad to join the Islamic State, sending funds overseas to support the group and/or its operatives, or carrying out attacks in the group's name.

In order to do so, PoE researchers collected all publicly avail-

able court documents for all the individuals charged in the United States for Islamic State-related activities and integrated the information contained in them with interviews with national security professionals and news articles. There are inherent limitations in conducting a study of this kind. While court records are generally reliable and accurate sources of information, some details will naturally be missing or withheld depending on how far the case has progressed procedurally and the sensitivity of some information. They may also be limited by the scope of an investigation, which might not be primarily focused on the financial details and records of the Islamic State's American supporters. In addition, there are no court records available for the subset of Americans who traveled abroad to join the Islamic State but have not been charged, and the handful of individuals that died carrying out attacks. Despite these limits, this stands to be the first comprehensive study on the subject and provides a solid overview of the financial dynamics of the U.S.-based Islamic State scene.

A Small Financial Footprint

The vast majority of U.S.-based Islamic State supporters left a remarkably small financial footprint, rarely more than a few thousand dollars. While outliers exist, the financial activities of the vast majority of the 204 U.S.-based Islamic State supporters in the Program on Extremism database were extremely low in both scale and sophistication. The most common funding source for American Islamic State supporters was personal savings. Most of the suspects studied, in fact, held jobs, which ranged from menial and relatively low paying to, in a few cases, fairly high-earning positions. This allowed these individuals to count on amounts that were enough to support the generally low-cost activities they engaged in to support the Islamic State.

In substance, most American Islamic State supporters appear not to have felt the need to engage in specific activities to obtain more funds. Those who did so engaged in either legal or illegal fundraising activities. While terrorism financing constitutes a federal crime, there are several terrorism-aimed fundraising activities that are not by themselves illegal in nature. In fact, 46 American Islamic State supporters (22.5 percent) used funds that came from donations (38 cases), legal asset sales (five), opening a new credit line (two), and injury lawsuits (one, the curious case of Minnesota resident, Mohamed Amin Ali Roble, who allegedly used his \$91,654 settlement for the injuries he sustained in the 2007 collapse of the I-35W bridge over the Mississippi River to travel to Syria to join

a In interviews with George Washington University Program on Extremism researchers in late 2019, FBI officials have spoken of 300 individuals.

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the Islamic State³) to fund their Islamic State-related activities.^b A smaller number of American Islamic State supporters (14, 6.9 percent)^c employed various illegal methods to support the group's or their own activities. They include financial aid fraud (four cases), illegal firearms sale (three), armed robbery (two), drug trafficking (two), bank fraud (two), and embezzlement (one).

Many American Islamic State supporters operated as lone actors, without any known or identifiable forms of direct support from the organization.^d This dynamic is common throughout the West but particularly prominent in the United States, where there is a smaller jihadi scene and Islamic State sympathizers often find it particularly challenging to connect with like-minded individuals outside of the virtual space. From a financial point of view, this means that many Islamic State supporters raised funds (in most cases, amounts no more than a few thousand dollars) for themselves, without transferring them to anybody else.

In several cases, American Islamic State supporters acted in small groups. Some of these clusters were constituted by individuals whose relations predated their radicalization. A textbook example of this dynamic is the relatively large group of high-school friends and relatives from the Minneapolis-St. Paul area that allegedly pooled resources to facilitate the travel to Syria of some of their members around 2014.⁴ Other clusters were formed by individuals who did not have preexisting ties but who fell into each other's orbit, for the most part on social media platforms, because of a joint interest in jihadi ideology. While some of these connections evolved purely in the virtual realm,^e others eventually transcended into the physical world.

Most commonly, these small groups consisted of only two to four individuals and involved small amounts of money. Jaelyn Young and Muhammad Dakhllalla, for example, made plans to travel to-

b Charges against Roble were announced on August 24, 2016. However, since Roble's departure to Istanbul and alleged subsequent travel to Syria to join the Islamic State in December 2014, he is not believed to have returned to the United States and his whereabouts are unknown. "Eleventh Twin Cities Man Charged with Conspiracy to Provide Material Support to ISIL," U.S. Department of Justice, August 24, 2016.

c This subset is not exclusive to the subset of supporters who used legal fundraising methods.

d A particularly comprehensive definition of lone actors is provided by Edwin Bakker and Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn in a 2015 RUSI report. In it, they provide a working definition of lone-actor terrorism as "[t]he threat or use of violence by a single perpetrator (or small cell), not acting out of purely personal material reasons, with the aim of influencing a wider audience, and who acts without any direct support in the planning, preparation and execution of the attack, and whose decision to act is not directed by any group or other individuals (although possibly inspired by others)." "Lone-Actor Terrorism Definitional Workshop," Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 2015.

e That is the case, for example, of Shannon Conley, a then 19-year-old resident of Colorado who met online her partner, a Tunisian national fighting with the Islamic State in Syria. Though they never met in person, this individual purchased Conley's ticket for her, but she was ultimately prevented from leaving by U.S. authorities. Conley was sentenced in 2015 to 48 months in prison for conspiring to provide material support to the Islamic State. For more information, see "Arvada Woman pleads Guilty to Conspiracy to Provide Material Support to a Designated Foreign Terrorist Organization," U.S. Department of Justice, September 10, 2014, and "Colorado Woman Sentenced for Conspiracy to Provide Material Support to a Designated Foreign Terrorist Organization," U.S. Department of Justice, January 23, 2015.

gether in August 2015 to Istanbul and from there join the Islamic State in Syria.⁵ The two met at Mississippi State University, where they started dating and eventually married in June 2015.⁶ By that time, they had already expressed their desire to travel to Syria to FBI undercover agents online, and took steps to make that travel possible.⁷ The two applied for passports in June 2015, for which Dakhllalla paid \$340 to have them expedited. After receiving the passports, they used Young's mother's credit card to purchase flight tickets to Istanbul where they expected to meet an Islamic State recruiter who was, in fact, an FBI online undercover. Young and Dakhllalla were arrested on August 8, 2015, before they could board their flight.⁸ Their story is representative of dynamics seen in many U.S. Islamic State cases, the financial component consisting only of a couple of small purchases (two passports and two tickets, the latter purchased using a relative's credit card) and no specific fundraising activities. Both were sentenced in August 2016 for conspiring to provide material support to the Islamic State.⁹

Still other cases did not even pass that small financial threshold. For example, Joseph Jones and Edward Schimenti, two 35-year-old Zion, Illinois, residents, were arrested in April 2017 for conspiring to provide material support to the Islamic State.¹⁰ The two men began helping an FBI cooperating source plan travel to join the Islamic State overseas in the fall of 2015.¹¹ Although they did not purchase flight tickets for the cooperating source and did not make any plans to travel themselves, Jones and Schimenti did provide the source with several cell phones they believed would be used by Islamic State fighters overseas to detonate explosive devices in attacks. When asked by the cooperating source how much he paid for the phone, Schimenti responded "five dollars," and added that he hoped they would have been used to kill "many kuffar [infidels]." Whether seeking to travel themselves, facilitate travel for others, provide support to the Islamic State overseas (as in the case of Jones and Schimenti), or plan attacks in the United States, in the vast majority of cases the financial threshold was very low and no specific fundraising activity was implemented. The Zion, Illinois, pair were convicted of conspiring to provide material support to the Islamic State in June 2019.¹²

Fund and asset movement methods employed by American Islamic State supporters vary, but like the Jones-Schimenti case, they generally tend to be fairly unsophisticated. In most of the cases, the small amounts raised were simply transported and hand delivered to Islamic State operatives in person.^f Only occasionally were funds

f For example, attempted traveler Akhror Saidakhmetov received cash in person from a co-conspirator that belonged to the same network of Central Asian New York-based Islamic State sympathizers, Abror Habibov, before purchasing flight tickets to join the group abroad. Saidakhmetov has been sentenced, while Habibov has pleaded guilty and is awaiting sentencing. *USA v. Abdurasul Hasanovich Juraboev, Akhror Saidakhmetov, and Abror Habibov*, Criminal Complaint, Eastern District of New York, 2015; *USA v. Akhror Saidakhmetov*, Judgment in a Criminal Case, Eastern District of New York, 2018; *USA v. Juraboev et al*, Criminal Cause for Pleading, Eastern District of New York, 2017.

moved through bank wires,^g while money transfer services^h and prepaid cardsⁱ were used with greater frequency. Despite the increasing talk about terrorist use of cryptocurrencies, there are records of only one individual (Zoobia Shahnaz,^j whose case will be detailed below) having used them.¹³

Finally, it is noteworthy that while movement of funds among U.S.-based Islamic State sympathizers are not uncommon,^k transfers to and from full-fledged Islamic State members operating overseas have been a rarer occurrence. Among all 204 individuals charged for Islamic State-related activities in the United States from 2013 to January 2020, only eight engaged directly in financial

transactions with foreign-based Islamic State operatives.^l In most of these cases, the recipient of funds originating from the United States was a U.S. citizen or resident who had traveled to Islamic State-controlled territory and was receiving support from contacts back home. There is only one known case of someone, Mohammed Elshinawy, receiving funds from the Islamic State to conduct an attack in the United States.¹⁴

The Outliers

The Elshinawy case stands out not just for being the only known example of an individual receiving funds from the Islamic State to attack the homeland, but also for its complexity, which makes it one of the outliers in the U.S. pro-Islamic State scene. In early 2015, Maryland resident Elshinawy made online contact with a senior Islamic State operative, Siful Sujjan, through a childhood

g Another individual in the same New York City-based network of Islamic State sympathizers, Akmal Zakirov, received funds through a bank wire. *USA v. Juraboev, Saidakhmetov, and Habibov*, Criminal Complaint. Zakirov pleaded guilty and is awaiting sentencing. *USA v. Akmal Zakirov*, Decision and Order, Eastern District of New York, 2018.

h For example, Mohamed Rafik Naji received around \$5,000 in Western Union transfers from home while in Yemen trying to join the Islamic State's local affiliate. *USA v. Mohamed Rafik Naji*, Criminal Complaint, Eastern District of New York, 2016. Mohamed Rafik Naji was sentenced to 20 years in prison in 2019. See "Brooklyn Man Sentenced to 20 Years' Imprisonment for Attempting to Join ISIS in Yemen," U.S. Department of Justice, June 14, 2019.

i For example, Nicholas Young was convicted of sending around \$250 in prepaid gift cards to an individual he believed to be an Islamic State supporter. *USA v. Nicholas Young*, Criminal Complaint, Eastern District of Virginia, 2016.

j Zoobia Shahnaz pleaded guilty on November 26, 2018, to providing material support to the Islamic State. "New York Woman Pleads Guilty to Providing Material Support to ISIS," U.S. Department of Justice, November 26, 2018.

k For example, Abdul Malik Abdulkareem was convicted of providing money to purchase some of the weapons and ammunition used by Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi in their attack on the Curtis Culwell Center in Garland, Texas. "Arizona Man Sentenced to 30 Years for Conspiracy to Support ISIL and Other Federal Offenses," U.S. Department of Justice, February 8, 2017.

l Three (Shannon Conley, Zoobia Shahnaz, and Mohamed Elshinawy) are covered in this article. The remaining five are:

(1-2) Ramiz and Sedina Hodzic, who coordinated donations from several other Bosnian-Americans to send money and ship equipment to Abdullah Ramo Pazara, a Bosnian-American who ended up joining the Islamic State in Syria. The Hodzics shipped military supplies and other items to a number of intermediaries in Bosnia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, who then re-routed the supplies to Pazara and other Bosnians fighting for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. All defendants were charged and convicted of conspiring to provide material support and resources to terrorists. *USA v. Ramiz Zijad Hodzic, Sedina Unkic Hodzic, Nihad Rosic, Mediha Medy Salkicevic, Armin Harcevic, and Jasmink Ramic*, Indictment, Eastern District of Missouri, 2015; "Missouri Man Sentenced for Providing Material Support to Terrorists," U.S. Department of Justice, November 14, 2019; "Illinois Woman Sentenced for Conspiring to Provide Material Support to Terrorists," U.S. Department of Justice, June 18, 2019; "Bosnian National Sentenced for Providing Material Support to Terrorists," U.S. Department of Justice, August 9, 2019; "New York Man Pleads Guilty to Providing Material Support to Terrorists," U.S. Department of Justice, December 10, 2019.

(3) Indiana resident Samantha Elhassani, who traveled to Syria with her husband, brother-in-law, and infant son. In the months prior to their departure, Elhassani made multiple trips to Hong Kong, where she deposited cash and gold items worth more than \$30,000 in safety deposit boxes used by Islamic State facilitators to help her family both get to and survive in Syria. Samantha Elhassani pleaded guilty to a one-count information charging her with concealment of terrorism financing in violation of 18 U.S.C § 2339C. "Former Indiana Resident Pleads Guilty to Concealing Terrorism Financing," U.S. Department of Justice, November 26, 2019; *USA v. Samantha Elhassani*, Government's Response to Defendant's Motion for Release, Northern District of Indiana, 2018.

(4-5) Mohamed Bailor Jalloh and Aaron T. Daniels are two of five individuals known to have left or attempted to leave the United States to join the Islamic State's affiliate in Libya. Both men sent small amounts of money (\$700 and \$250, respectively) to Abu Saad al-Sudani, aka Abu Issa al-Amriki, a Syria-based Islamic State recruiter and virtual entrepreneur who networked a number of Western Islamic State supporters before his death in an April 2016 airstrike in Syria. *USA v. Mohamed Bailor Jalloh*, Affidavit, Eastern District of Virginia, 2016; *USA v. Aaron T. Daniels*, Arrest Warrant, Southern District of Ohio, 2016. Jalloh was sentenced to 11 years in prison in 2017 for attempting to provide material support to the Islamic State, while Daniels was sentenced to six and a half years in prison in 2018 for attempting to provide material support to the Islamic State. "Former Army National Guardsman Sentenced to 11 Years for Attempting to Provide Material Support to ISIL," U.S. Department of Justice, February 10, 2017; "Columbus Man Sentenced to 80 Months in Prison for Attempting to Provide Material Support to ISIS," U.S. Department of Justice, July 6, 2018.

friend from Egypt who had joined the Islamic State in Syria.^{15 m} Suján, a United Kingdom-educated computer systems engineer of Bangladeshi origin was, prior to his death in a coalition airstrike, an external operations planner for the Islamic State.¹⁶ At the time of his communications with Elshinawy, Suján also directed the Islamic State's computer operations, a position previously held by notorious Islamic State virtual planner Junaid Hussain.¹⁷

To channel funds to foreign-based recruits, Suján used an IT, electronics, and web services company based in Cardiff called Ibacstel Electronics Limited.¹⁸ It was from Ibacstel that Elshinawy received his first transfer of \$1,500 on March 23, 2015. Ibacstel requested equipment from Elshinawy, who masqueraded online as an electronics vendor, and paid Elshinawy for non-existent equipment. Elshinawy used part of this money to purchase a phone, laptop, and VPN to communicate securely with Suján and other Islamic State-affiliated individuals.¹⁹ Suján continued to send payments via PayPal from his front company, through other intermediaries in Bangladesh, Turkey, and Egypt, and via Western Union transfers directly to Elshinawy, totaling around \$8,700 over a four-month time period.²⁰ Suján and Elshinawy had agreed that the Maryland native would use those funds to conduct an attack on behalf of the group on U.S. soil. Elshinawy kept his Syria-based handler abreast of his preparations, and also allegedly attempted to recruit his brother—who was living in Saudi Arabia—to join the Islamic State.²¹ Unbeknownst to Elshinawy, however, the FBI had tracked both the transactions and the conversations. Elshinawy was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to 20 years in prison in March 2018.²²

Similarly complex were the activities of the aforementioned Zoobia Shahnaz, a naturalized U.S. citizen born in Pakistan who worked as a lab technician in a Manhattan hospital on a \$71,000 salary.²³ Starting in August 2015, Shahnaz began searching online for information on how to join the Islamic State.²⁴ Six months later, she left the United States on a two-week medical volunteer trip to a refugee camp in Jordan “where ISIS exercises significant influence,” but it is unclear if she used the trip in any way to connect with the Islamic State.²⁵

Shortly after returning to the United States, she started applying for—and fraudulently obtaining—over a dozen credit cards.²⁶ After opening these lines of credit from a number of institutions, in addition to using the multiple credit cards she previously owned, Shahnaz was able to purchase over \$62,000 in cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin.²⁷ She then converted the vast majority back into U.S. dollars that she deposited into a checking account under her name.²⁸ In addition to the funds acquired from these cryptocurrency transfers, Shahnaz obtained a loan of about \$22,500 from a Manhattan bank.²⁹ In total, the fraudulently obtained funds from U.S. financial institutions amounted to more than \$85,000.

Using these funds and the existing money in her checking account, Shahnaz began to send money abroad to multiple individuals and shell companies accused of being associated with the Islamic State. On May 23, 2017, she sent \$4,000 and \$3,000 in two separate

payments to an anonymous individual in Pakistan using a money remittance system based in Queens. Later that day, she wired just over \$10,000 to a medical supply company based out of Zhejiang Province, China.³⁰ Finally, Shahnaz made a remittance wire transfer of just over \$100,000 to Ankara on July 21, 2017.³¹ After quitting her job, she obtained a Pakistani passport and purchased tickets for a flight to Islamabad with a multi-day layover in Istanbul. (She intended to skip her connecting flight and travel south to Syria.) She was detained by law enforcement agents at JFK on July 31, 2017.³² Shahnaz pleaded guilty to providing material support to the Islamic State on November 26, 2018, in the Eastern District of New York, and was sentenced to 13 years in prison on March 13, 2020.³³

Completely differently, and also indicative of the broad demographic and socio-economic diversity of the U.S. Islamic State scene, is the case of Jason Brown. According to U.S. prosecutors, Brown was the 37-year-old leader of the AHK, a gang based in the Chicago suburb of Bellwood. AHK, which derives its name from the alternative spelling of “akh” (the Arabic word for “brother”), is accused by the U.S. government of trafficking large quantities of narcotics like heroin, cocaine, and a fentanyl analogue in the Chicago area.³⁴

Brown had reportedly radicalized while serving time in prison in Georgia and watching videos of Jamaican preacher Abdullah el-Faisal.³⁵ According to the criminal complaint in his case, upon leaving prison and taking the helm of AHK, Brown required fellow gang members to convert to Islam and sought to radicalize them.³⁶ Brown allegedly became an avid consumer of Islamic State propaganda, and throughout 2019, he allegedly provided three separate cash payments totaling \$500 to an intermediary he believed would send the funds to Syria to aid Islamic State fighters, but was actually an FBI undercover employee.³⁷ Brown's November 2019 arrest on material support charges was part of a larger federal operation to shut down AHK's drug trafficking operations.³⁸ Several AHK members were arrested alongside Brown on federal drug charges, but only Brown was indicted on terrorism-related charges.³⁹ On February 27, 2020, Brown pleaded not guilty to all charges.⁴⁰

Takeaways

The financial component of the U.S. Islamic State-related mobilization stands in stark contrast with dynamics observed in other Western countries. While cases of isolated individuals who finance their activities in support of the group purely through personal savings are not uncommon in Europe,⁴¹ in the United States they are overwhelmingly the norm. Moreover, save for a few exceptions, American Islamic State supporters do not seem to engage much in sophisticated funding schemes that are, on the other hand, fairly common in Europe.⁴²

The crime-terrorism nexus that has characterized the Islamic State mobilization in many European countries is also virtually absent in the United States (the Brown case being a notable exception within the United States). European authorities, in fact, have noted that a growing percentage of radicalized individuals supportive of the Islamic State possess a criminal background and funded their activities through petty crimes.⁴³ While in countries like Germany and the Netherlands, for example, the percentage of foreign fighters with a criminal past was above 60 percent, only roughly 10 to 15 percent of charged American Islamic State supporters had a

m While Elshinawy's court documents do not name Suján explicitly by name, the confluence of numerous court documents and open source information indicates that “Individual 2” is Siful Suján. For additional information, see Don Rassler, *The Islamic State and Drones: Supply, Scale, and Future Threats* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018) and *USA v. Mohamed Elshinawy*, Memorandum Opinion, District of Maryland, March 28, 2018.

criminal background.⁴⁴ And, as noted above, only a few resorted to criminal activities (for the vast majority, non-violent) to fund themselves.

The lack of sophistication of the U.S. Islamic State scene from a financial point of view is also evident when compared to dynamics observed in the United States in previous decades. In the 1990s and 2000s, in fact, many domestic supporters of al-Qa`ida, taking advantage of a more permissive environment, had engaged in relatively elaborate tactics to raise amounts, which were significantly larger than those collected by Islamic State supporters in recent years.⁴⁵ The post-9/11 investigations against the Illinois-based Benevolence International Foundation and Global Relief Foundation, for example, revealed sophisticated, multi-million-dollar funding operations that, from the United States, reached jihadis around the world and provided material support to the upper echelons of al-Qa`ida.⁴⁶ Nothing even remotely comparable appears to have been detected by U.S. authorities in support of the Islamic State.

Pro-Islamic State financial efforts seem unsophisticated also when compared to those currently undertaken by other Islamist groups operating on U.S. soil. It is well documented that Hezbollah possess an elaborate funding mechanism, whose sources include legal businesses, illegal activities, and donations within some sections of the Lebanese-American community throughout the country.⁴⁷ Hamas has historically also done so, and while some of its fundraising mechanisms were dismantled in the 2000s, the group reportedly still manages to collect funds in the United States through various sources.⁴⁸ And even other jihadi groups, such as al-Shabaab, appear to engage in fundraising activities on U.S. soil that, while less widespread, are more sophisticated in nature.⁹

The small size of the financial footprint of U.S.-based Islamic State supporters is unquestionably good news. But there is a flipside. The fact that most Islamic State supporters—with, as seen, a few notable exceptions—relied predominantly on personal savings; rarely engaged in criminal activities to obtain additional funds; raised and moved small sums; and did not often rely on the banking sector to transfer funds constitutes a challenge for law enforcement. Financial transactions are, in fact, often one of the first triggers of an investigation, the first element that flags a specific individual for potential involvement in terrorism.⁴⁹ By the same token, financial transactions often constitute the best evidence to be produced in court to demonstrate material support for a designated terrorist organization. The scarcity and inconspicuous nature of the financial transactions of many U.S.-based Islamic State supporters does therefore represent a challenge for authorities. At the same time, to be sure, the lack of operational skills, including when dealing with financial matters of many U.S.-based Islamic State supporters

n While the data used in this study examines only American Islamic State supporters who have been charged, as opposed to all known European foreign fighters who may or may not have returned and been charged in their home countries, the absence of a known crime-terror nexus among American Islamic State supporters is nonetheless significant.

o That was the case, for example, with Muna Osman Jama and Hinda Osman Dhirane, two women from Kent, Washington, who were the convicted ringleaders of the so-called “Group of Fifteen,” a network of 15 women that spanned eight countries (Somalia, Kenya, Egypt, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States). “Two Women Sentenced for Providing Material Support to Terrorists,” U.S. Department of Justice, March 31, 2017. See also Peter Bergen and David Sterman, “Al-Shabaab backed by money from U.S.,” CNN, September 29, 2013, and David Hanners, “Minneapolis Mosque Spurned al Shabaab Fundraiser,” *Free Press*, October 27, 2011.

have been repeatedly exploited by authorities. Several of them were arrested after making small donations to what they believed to be Islamic State members or intermediaries and were, in reality, FBI assets.^p

While it is clear that, so far, financing has not been a significant component of the Islamic State threat to the homeland, U.S. authorities, like their counterparts throughout the world, are concerned about a more sustained use of the internet for fundraising purposes in the near future.⁵⁰ While very few individuals operating in the United States were charged with the following kinds of activities, an increased use of online crowdfunding, cryptocurrencies, and deep/dark web transactions in the near future is a concrete possibility.^q Many U.S.-based Islamic State supporters, in fact, have long made the web their main domain, something that became quite evident from how they operated on various social media platforms in the heyday of the group’s mobilization.^r It is reasonable to suspect that other U.S.-based Islamic State supporters might use their technological skills to find resourceful ways to fund the group or its affiliates.

Law enforcement, regulators, and the financial sector are well aware that the challenge posed by the abuse of web-based fundraising and transfer mechanisms for terrorism purposes is one of the priorities for the near future.⁵¹ Yet, taking a step back and looking at the Islamic State mobilization in the United States since it began around seven years ago, it is fair to say that the counter-terrorism financing system in the United States, for the most part, worked.^s Mechanisms put in place in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks helped detect several Islamic State supporters.⁵² In many cases, they likely deterred Islamic State supporters from using mainstream financial tools, making their transactions less efficient, as well as easier for authorities to trace.⁵³ This is even truer when it comes to other terrorist groups, such as Hezbollah, which possess significantly more sophisticated fundraising apparatuses on U.S. soil. At the same time, the counter-terrorism financing system needs to be fine-tuned to keep pace with the evolving nature of terrorist networks (which in the case of the Islamic State in the United States, paradoxically, means less sophistication) and technological developments. **CTC**

p One example is Jason Brown (see above). Another is Muse Abdikadir Muse, Mohamed Salat Haji, and Mohamud Abdikadir Muse, who each allegedly sent \$300 to an FBI undercover that they believed would forward the funds to the Islamic State overseas. *USA v. Muse Abdikadir Muse, Mohamed Salat Haji, and Mohamud Abdikadir Muse*, Criminal Complaint, Western District of Michigan, 2019.

q The only exception in the authors’ records is the above-mentioned Shahnaz case. Of note, but outside the universe of Islamic State-related cases, in May 2019 authorities arrested 20-year-old New Jersey resident Jonathan Xie, who allegedly donated money via Bitcoin to Hamas. “Somerset County Man Charged with Attempts to Provide Material Support to Hamas, Making False Statements, and Making Threat Against Pro-Israel Supporters,” U.S. Department of Justice, May 22, 2019. As of January 30, 2020, the prosecution and defense have applied for an order granting continuance of proceedings to allow the parties to conduct plea negotiations and attempt to finalize a plea agreement. *USA v. Jonathan Xie*, Order for Continuance, District of New Jersey, 2020.

r Thomas Osadzinski, for example, is alleged to have designed a computer script to scrape and archive Islamic State propaganda to store and share the group’s propaganda with other supporters online. *USA v. Thomas Osadzinski*, Criminal Complaint, Northern District of Illinois, 2019.

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Addressing the Enemy: Al-Shabaab's PSYOPS Media Warfare

By Christopher Anzalone

The Somali jihadi insurgent group al-Shabaab retains both significant armed capacity and well-honed and sophisticated media operations warfare capabilities. A key aspect of al-Shabaab's media insurgency is its PSYOPS (psychological operations) messaging, targeting both rank-and-file enemy soldiers as well as the domestic electorates in enemy countries, including the United States, Kenya, Uganda, and Burundi. In its PSYOPS and other propaganda messaging, al-Shabaab takes advantage of the lack of transparency in certain instances from its opponents, including some governments, and the demand by the international news media for details from on the ground, with the group framing itself as a reliable source of on-the-ground information. The militant group actively seeks to extend the penetration of its media messaging by attracting attention from international news media, though this practice has proved to be of mixed value.

Al-Shabaab, despite being forced to withdraw from most of Somalia's major urban centers between 2011 and 2014, has proven to be markedly resilient in the face of numerically, economically, and technologically superior enemies, including the Somali Federal Government (SFG) and its main international supporters, the United Nations, United States, European Union, and African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces.¹ It continues to retain significant, deadly military capabilities as well as the ability to plan and successfully execute mass-casualty attacks in the heart of Somali cities, including the federal capital, Mogadishu, and on government military bases.² The Somali militant group, which engages regularly in anti-civilian violence both in its terrorist attacks and as a tool of the proto-state governance of areas under its control, also continues to run a highly capable media operations apparatus that produces glossy propaganda material aimed, often in the same media product, at domestic Somali, regional East African, and international audiences.³

Al-Shabaab's media apparatus is particularly adept at PSYOPS

(psychological operations),^a targeting both the rank-and-file soldiers in the forces of its enemies—for example, AMISOM—as well as the voting publics in enemy countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, Kenya, Uganda, and Burundi.^b PSYOPS are part of the group's broader information operations and warfare campaign.^c In its PSYOPS messaging, the Somali militant group seeks to influence domestic politics in these countries,^d particularly

- a The RAND Corporation's definition of "psychological warfare" is a type of warfare that "involves the planned use of propaganda and other psychological operations to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, and behavior of opposition groups." See "Psychological Warfare," RAND Corporation. PSYOPS, together with electronic warfare, operational security, physical and information attacks on enemy information processes, and deception, make up information warfare. See Brian Nichiporuk, "U.S. Military Opportunities: Information-Warfare Concepts of Operation," in Zalmay Khalilzad, John White, and Andy W. Marshall eds. *Strategic Appraisal: The Changing Role of Information in Warfare* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1990), p. 180. Information operations and PSYOPS, according to the U.S. military and NATO, seek to "create desired effects on the will, understanding and capability" of enemies and potential adversaries. See Major Rob Sentse and Major Arno Storm, "The Battle for the Information Domain," *IO Journal* (2010), p. 7.
- b This is the author's assessment based on an in-depth review of al-Shabaab media productions and propaganda messaging since 2007. PSYOPS are particularly attractive for both non-state and state actors because of their lower cost—when compared to costlier ground operations—and potentially high impact on target populations, both friendly and unfriendly. PSYOPS can carry multiple meanings, representing different messaging to different target audiences. PSYOPS can also take multiple forms including written leaflets or other publications, aural, and audiovisual. See Jeffrey Jones and Michael P. Matthews, "PSYOP and the Warfighting CINC (Commander in Chief)," National Defense University, 1995, p. 29.
- c PSYOPS are also known as influence operations. See "Information Operations," RAND Corporation, and Edward Waltz, *Information Warfare: Principles and Operations* (Boston: Artech House, 1998).
- d Al-Shabaab has been able to attract international news media attention—and a broader audience than its propaganda by itself could reach. For example, in its pseudo-documentary-style film documenting its September 2013 attack on Nairobi's Westgate Mall, *The Westgate Siege: Retributive Justice*, the al-Shabaab narrator spent one minute of the one-hour-and-16-minute film urging Western "lone wolf" terrorists to carry out "Westgate-style" attacks on malls in their own countries including the United States, Canada, France, and the United Kingdom, going so far as to name specific potential targets. This one-minute-long segment attracted international news media attention. See, for example, Tom Whitehead and Peter Foster, "Extremists call for terror attacks on major London shopping centres," *Telegraph*, February 23, 2015; Eric Bradner, "Johnson warns Mall of America patrons," CNN, February 23, 2015; Faith Karimi, Ashley Fantz, and Catherine E. Shoichet, "Al-Shabaab threatens malls, including some in U.S.; FBI downplays threat," CNN, February 21, 2015; Ben Candeia, Lee Ferran, and Pierre Thomas, "Mall of America Heightens Security After al-Shabab Threat," ABC News, February 22, 2015; "RCMP investigating Al-Shabab video calling for terrorist attack on West Edmonton Mall," *National Post*, February 22, 2015; and "Terror group Al-Shabaab singles out West Edmonton Mall in video calling for attacks on shopping centres," *National Post*, February 22, 2015.

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those in East Africa, as a way of gaining an advantage on the battlefield in Somalia, where a relative military stalemate exists. This stalemate is the result of al-Shabaab remaining capable of carrying out small- to large-scale attacks on a weekly basis but incapable of capturing the Somali state and overthrowing the SFG.

This article examines the history of al-Shabaab's PSYOPS by analyzing six al-Shabaab messaging campaigns, paying particular attention to the broader military and political contexts in which this messaging occurred. The six case studies look at al-Shabaab PSYOPS in relation to the:

1. The January 2020 Manda Bay airfield attack
2. The 2010 stalemate between al-Shabaab and AMISOM forces in Mogadishu
3. The 2011 ambush of Burundian AMISOM forces in Dayniile
4. The 2014 attacks in and around Mpeketoni in Kenya
5. The leadup to Kenya's 2017 general election
6. Mass shootings and wildfires in the United States in 2019

In its PSYOPS messaging in each of these cases, as well as in the aftermath of its January 2016 and January 2017 attacks on and capture of the Kenyan military bases in El Adde and Kulbiyow, Somalia, respectively, al-Shabaab has sought to not only broadcast its own claims about the events in question but has also taken advantage of questions about the extent—or even lack—of government transparency in some cases concerning facts on the ground, including casualty figures and the chronologies of attacks. This lack of official transparency eases the way for al-Shabaab's own messaging to muddy the waters further by playing off of preexisting questions and exacerbating doubts about governments' official narratives. The militant group has further sought to take advantage of continuing questions regarding the numbers of civilian casualties in U.S. airstrikes and other military operations in Somalia, playing off of the problems in verifying information on the ground.^{4 e}

Case Study 1: The January 2020 Manda Bay Attack

On January 5, 2020, an al-Shabaab team from its elite “martyrdom-seekers brigade” (*Katibat al-Istishhadiyyin*)⁵ composed of an unknown number of fighters launched a dawn attack on the Manda Bay Airfield in Kenya's Lamu county, successfully penetrating part of the base's perimeter and killing a U.S. soldier and two Department of Defense contractors while also damaging a number of aircraft and vehicles.⁶ Cutting off power to the nearby county ward of Hindi before the attack,⁷ the al-Shabaab force—which reportedly included fluent Swahili-speakers⁸—took photographs during the attack, 17 of which were released the day of the attack by the Somali militant group's external media department, the Al-Kataib Media

Foundation.^{9 f} Al-Shabaab also prepared and released three print statements during or immediately after the attack,^g prioritizing the release of propaganda in “real time” to capture the attention of news media in a manner reminiscent of its media strategy during its September 2013 assault on Nairobi's Westgate Mall.^{10 h}

Claiming to have destroyed seven aircraft and “more than” five military vehicles while inflicting 17 U.S. and nine Kenyan casualties,¹¹ al-Shabaab's media apparatus, as it did during the Westgate siege via-à-vis the Kenyan government,¹² engaged in a war of words with U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), which also released a series of press statements after the attack. Labeling al-Shabaab's statements as “exaggerating the security situation” in order to “bolster their reputation to create false headlines” at Manda Bay, AFRICOM dismissed the militant group's claims.¹³ In response, al-Shabaab accused AFRICOM of an “incoherent” response that attempted to downplay the significance of its attack on the airfield, the site of U.S. air operations in Somalia and U.S. military training for Kenyan forces.¹⁴ Here, al-Shabaab sought to build on its longstanding claim, however unbelievable, to be a reliable and impartial source “meticulously consistent with their facts [corroborating] them with hard evidence,”¹⁵ purporting that its media apparatus only reports the ‘realities’ on the ground hidden by its enemies and their lackeys in the international news media.¹⁶

Al-Shabaab pursued several lines of messaging regarding the Manda Bay attack. First, it took aim at the U.S. government and military, engaging in a war of words to control the narrative of the attack. Second, al-Shabaab sought to solidify its place as one of al-Qa`ida's most enduringly dangerous and resilient regional affiliates in naming the attack as being part of an ongoing campaign by al-Qa`ida and its regional affiliates to “avenge” the U.S. government's decision to recognize the contested city of Jerusalem

e In response to reports that it does not adequately investigate reports of civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure, property, and the killing of livestock, AFRICOM said that it takes “all allegations of civilian casualties regardless of their origin” seriously, alleged that al-Shabaab was lying about the number of civilian casualties and coercing locals to make “untrue claims,” and said that it conducted “additional analysis to ensure the military objectives were met and that there were no civilian casualties” and considers “information from all available sources” after all of its airstrikes. “U.S. Africa Command statement on Amnesty International Report,” U.S. AFRICOM, March 19, 2019.

f Kenyan civilians near the airfield reported being accosted by at least 11 withdrawing al-Shabaab fighters following the base attack. See Mohamed Ahmed and Kalume Kazungu, “How al-Shabaab militants plotted raid on Manda naval base,” *Daily Nation*, January 6, 2020.

g While it is difficult to precisely identify the timing of the statements' releases in relation to the timeline of the base attack, details of which remain unclear, the three written statements and the photoset were released the same day of the attack and within hours of it being reported by local and international news media outlets. On confusion about what happened immediately before, during, and after the base attack, see Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Eric Schmitt, Charlie Savage, and Helene Cooper, “Chaos as Militants Overran Airfield, Killing 3 Americans in Kenya,” *New York Times*, January 22, 2020.

h During the Westgate attack, al-Shabaab—through its both its real-time Twitter posts and statements and other insurgent media released during and immediately after the attack—took advantage of confused and sometimes contradictory statements by different parts of the Kenyan government and security forces about the attack, including when the attack finally ended, whether government forces engaged in looting of shops during the siege, and the number of perpetrators. For details, see Christopher Anzalone, “The Nairobi Attack and Al-Shabab's Media Strategy,” *CTC Sentinel* 6:10 (2013); Patrick Galthara, “Five years after the Westgate Mall attack, a culture of silence still haunts Kenya,” *Washington Post*, September 27, 2018; Daniel Howden, “Terror in Nairobi: the full story behind al-Shabaab's mall attack,” *Guardian*, October 4, 2013; and Robyn Dixon, “Video shows Kenyan soldiers looting besieged mall,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 2013.

as Israel's capital.¹ Third, al-Shabaab used the attack to take aim at members of the Kenyan military, security forces, and civilian electorate, warning them not only of further attacks but also noting the weakness of their military and security forces as well as their national borders: "In order to attack the U.S. naval base in Lamu, the Mujahideen had to traverse large swathes of territory under Kenyan occupation [areas of eastern Kenya with Muslim majorities or large Muslim populations], circumventing several weaker, poorly defended Kenyan military bases en route."¹⁷

Although al-Shabaab's claimed casualty figures were clearly exaggerated—a common practice for the insurgent group—its series of media releases sought to take advantage more broadly of remaining questions about what exactly happened during the base attack, including how the militants were able to penetrate the base's perimeter, the state of the base's defenses, and the behavior of the Kenyan military during the attack.¹⁸ By attempting to undermine a part of the official Kenyan and U.S. press narrative on the base attack, al-Shabaab sought to influence international reporting in a similar way to its PSYOPS and broader media messaging following its attacks on the Kenyan military bases in El Adde and Kulbiyow, Somalia in 2016 and 2017.

By attacking U.S. forces at the airfield, al-Shabaab said that Kenyans should now understand the "vulnerability of your American masters on whom you so trustingly depend [...] the fragility of the American military might and the humiliating defeat of your trainers."¹⁹ The group threatened Kenyan businesspeople, merchants, and civilians with further attacks that it stated would severely damage the country's economy, tourism sector, and the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia-Transport Corridor project (LAPSSET) as well as cost the lives of its soldiers and police unless Kenyans pressured their government to withdraw from what al-Shabaab presented as the unwinnable war in Somalia.²⁰ Future attacks would be carried out, al-Shabaab strongly hinted, by returning foreign fighters "who speak your language and know your culture" and who have embraced the concept of "*al-wala wa-l-bara*," loyalty to Muslims and disavowal of disbelievers, a core tenet frequently invoked in militant form by Sunni jihadis.²¹

Al-Shabaab also warned AFRICOM to make a "full public disclosure" about what really happened during the attack before insurgent media "publishes a damaging revelation of the attack," citing the domestic controversies caused by the Kenyan government's attempts to cover up what happened during the January 2016 and January 2017 attacks by insurgents on Kenyan military bases at El Adde and Kulbiyow, respectively.²²

Further doubt about Kenyan government claims that the El Adde and Kulbiyow attacks had been repelled and the bases had never been captured by the insurgents was cast by al-Shabaab media materials. These materials included photosets, each released within days of the temporary capture of the bases and, later, by the militant group's two lengthy pseudo-documentary films that showed their capture and the retreat of their surviving Kenyan garrisons.²³ The release of these insurgent photographs and, later, extended video footage of the two base attacks increased domestic Kenyan and international questioning of the official government narratives about what happened at the El Adde and Kulbiyow bases, respectively.²⁴ The Kenyan Ministry of Defence claimed that its forces had only suffered nine dead and 15 wounded in the Kulbiyow attack and also initially denied that the KDF lost control of the base and said instead that al-Shabaab had been repulsed. Local residents, however, reported not only the base's capture but also seeing KDF survivors fleeing into the countryside as al-Shabaab advanced as well as seeing a large but unclear number of Kenyan casualties.²⁵

In its January 2020 Manda Bay attack statement, al-Shabaab also warned Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) troops and other AMISOM countries' soldiers that they were being sacrificed as "cannon fodder for the Western crusade against Islam"²⁶ in the interest of the United States. "Know that when the situation gets difficult [for them], the U.S. forces will abandon you just as they abandoned the [Kurdish] YPG forces in Syria after getting them embroiled in a long, unwinnable war," al-Shabaab stated, referencing recent confusion about U.S. policy toward Syrian Kurdish forces fighting against the Islamic State.²⁷ This messaging mirrored the Somali militant group's earlier PSYOPS messaging in 2010 and in the run-up to the August 2017 Kenyan general elections.

Case Study 2: The 2010 Mogadishu Stalemate

During the summer 2010 stalemate that preceded the group's renewed push to capture all of Mogadishu during its "Ramadan Offensive" in 2010,^j al-Shabaab introduced a new PSYOPS messaging push seeking to increase pressure on the Ugandan and Burundian governments to withdraw their troops from AMISOM by influencing their domestic public opinion. Al-Shabaab began producing pseudo-documentary propaganda films posing as frontline news coverage of the ongoing battle for Mogadishu²⁸ while also underlining the key importance of media operations to the group's military campaign.^k This influence operations push sought to increase domestic pressure in Uganda and Burundi for a withdrawal of both countries' troop contingents that, at that time, made up the bulk of

i Between December 6 and 9, 2017, al-Qa`ida Central, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and al-Shabaab released statements condemning the U.S. government's decision to move its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. See al-Shabaab statement, "The Meeting Place is Bayt al-Maqdis: Statement from the general leadership concerning the American administration's declaration of al-Quds [Jerusalem] as the capital of the Jewish Occupation," December 9, 2017; al-Qa`ida Central statement, "Hatred has already appeared from their mouths and what their hearts conceal is greater," Al-Sahab Media Foundation, December 7, 2017; al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, "Statement concerning Trump's declaration of Jerusalem as the Zionist Entity's Capital," Al-Andalus Media Foundation, December 7, 2017; and al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, "Statement concerning Trump's declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish occupation," Al-Malahim Media Foundation, December 6, 2017.

j Ramadan in 2010 ran from around August 11 to September 9. The exact start date of Ramadan each year depends on which location Muslims are in and which jurists they follow.

k As part of this push, al-Shabaab renamed its "Media Department" as both the Al-Kataib Media Foundation and, occasionally, the Al-Kataib News Channel, modeling its new logo and the framing of its reporting after satellite television news channels. From al-Shabaab statement, "Al-Kata'ib News Channel," July 24, 2010: "The media battle that is now being waged by the *mujahideen* is one of the fiercest and most important battles in our war with the disbelieving Zionist-Crusaders, which leads us, as those responsible on the media jihad front in Somalia to strive toward developing methods and tactics for the media war in order to communicate the truth to the people concerning the events on the battlefields and conveying the voice of the *mujahideen* to the entire world and to defend those dedicated to God, with His help and grace."

AMISOM's forces.²⁹

Casting its media operatives, and in particular an unidentified British English-speaking narrator, as jihadi 'journalists,' al-Shabaab released a film in late June 2010, *The African Crusaders: Fighting the West's War*, aimed at the Ugandan and Burundian contingents of AMISOM as well as both countries' civilians, portraying their soldiers' suffering and sacrifices in Somalia as being only in the interest of the "West" and not their own domestic security.³⁰ Showing one of the many clashes between al-Shabaab and AMISOM forces in Mogadishu, edited to show an insurgent victory, the film asked why Ugandans and Burundians were sacrificing their "sons" as cannon fodder in the interest of "America's war" when they have their own domestic security needs, including fighting to protect Ugandans from the predations of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebel group led by fugitive Joseph Kony.¹ The continued failure of the Ugandan and Burundian electorates to pressure their respective governments for withdrawal from Somalia was one with profound consequences, the film said.³¹

Two weeks after its suicide bombers carried out two attacks in the Ugandan capital, Kampala, on July 11 during the 2010 FIFA World Cup final,³² al-Shabaab released a second film that built on the PSYOPS messaging introduced in *The African Crusaders*. Narrated by the same unidentified British English-speaking 'journalist' media operative, who now appeared on screen, this second film, *Mogadishu: The Crusaders' Graveyard*, included edited footage that seemed to show the destruction of an AMISOM tank during running street battles in Mogadishu. The film then interspersed edited footage of an AMISOM press conference following the clashes in which spokesman Major Ba-hoku Barigye claimed the tank shown burning in insurgent battlefield footage was destroyed due to a "mechanical fault" and not—as al-Shabaab footage seemed to show—an insurgent projectile.³³ "The dishonest lackeys [AMISOM] were caught lying again," the al-Shabaab narrator said, going on to allege that AMISOM commanders were callously indifferent to the deaths of their own soldiers.^{34m}

The film connected the deadly Kampala attacks with the failure of Ugandans and Burundians to heed al-Shabaab's earlier call for them to pressure their respective governments to withdraw from Somalia. "How many more of your sons are you willing to sacrifice for this American-led Western cause," the narrator asked, warning that if the losses of their soldiers in Mogadishu was not enough of a warning, "then perhaps lessons a little more closer to home [ref-

erencing Kampala] would be the only solution."³⁵ The film closed with the al-Shabaab narrator touring the Mogadishu battlefield and standing in front of the wreckage of an AMISOM tank where he delivered a scripted report as if a legitimate war journalist: "They say a picture tells a thousand words. It was only last night when the chants of 'Allahu Akbar' resonated throughout this neighborhood and as the bullet shells litter the scene a clear message is sent to the so-called 'reinforcement forces' of the African Crusaders that this [death] is the destiny that awaits them," he said, reaching out to lay a hand on the gun barrel of the burned-out tank.³⁶ Mimicking a television news correspondent, the narrator signed off, "Al-Kataib News Channel, live from the frontlines of Mogadishu."³⁷

In highlighting the dangers to Ugandan and Burundian soldiers in Mogadishu and framing them as 'cannon fodder' unimportant even to their own officers, al-Shabaab sought to increase domestic disaffection in the two countries as well as build on resentment among the military rank-and-file whose members were already unhappy with the frequent late payment of salaries while their governments benefited from international funding for the AMISOM mission.³⁸ In addition to not being paid, al-Shabaab alleged that AMISOM commanders and their political bosses were also concealing from their own domestic electorates the exact numbers of casualties in Somalia as well as the horrific manner in which their soldiers were being killed in a war with no relevance to Ugandan or Burundian domestic security.³⁹ This theme of government concealment and the pointless expenditure of financial and human resources is a theme that remains constant in al-Shabaab PSYOPS propaganda, including, as outlined above, its messaging about the January 2020 Manda Bay attack.

Case Study 3: The 2011 Dayniile Ambush

On October 20, 2011, a few months after it announced in August that it would begin strategically withdrawing forces from Mogadishu amidst a major AMISOM and Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) offensive,⁴⁰ al-Shabaab ambushed a Burundian AMISOM convoy in the Dayniile district on the outskirts of Mogadishu, killing a significant number of Burundian troops.ⁿ Public confusion over the exact number of Burundian soldiers killed in

n Al-Shabaab publicly displayed between 60-76 bodies, according to local eyewitnesses interviewed by *The New York Times*, and claimed that it had killed at least 101 Burundian soldiers. A video al-Shabaab posted of the aftermath of the attack, and reviewed by the author, appeared to show dozens of corpses. AMISOM denied such large numbers had been killed, but reporting by the Associated Press suggested that 51 may have been killed, much higher than the initial six the Burundian government said were killed and the official AMISOM number of 10 killed and two missing. Local Somali civilians said that at least 60 soldiers had been killed. Al-Shabaab film, *The Burundian Bloodbath: The Battle of Dayniile*, Al-Kataib Media Foundation, November 12, 2011. On the various estimates of the number of Burundian dead, see "Al-Shabab claims peacekeepers' killings," Al Jazeera, October 21, 2011; "AU rejects al-Shabab bodies 'stunt' in Somalia," BBC, October 21, 2011; Josh Kron and Mohamed Ibrahim, "African Union peacekeepers killed in Somalia battle," *New York Times*, October 21, 2011; "Mogadishu massacre – 70 AU troops killed," news24, October 20, 2011; and "Burundi anxious over 51 dead soldiers in Somalia," Associated Press, October 28, 2011. Al-Shabaab later released photographs of ID cards and other identity papers it said had been captured from some of the Burundian soldiers killed, though only for 10 soldiers. See Christopher Anzalone, "Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen Releases Statement & Information on Burundian AMISOM Soldiers Slain at Battle of Dayniile," al-Wasat, December 12, 2011.

l In 2010, the Lord's Resistance Army, which operates in parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Uganda, and the Central African Republic (CAR), killed and kidnapped hundreds of civilians. See Michael Wilkerson, "Why Can't Anyone Stop the LRA?" *Foreign Policy*, April 15, 2010, and "DR Congo: Lord's Resistance Army Rampage Kills 321: Regional Strategy Needed to End Rebel Group's Atrocities and Apprehend Leaders," Human Rights Watch, March 28, 2010. That same year, U.S. President Barack Obama also pledged U.S. support to help fight the LRA. See Max Delaney, "Obama commits US to helping hunt for LRA leader Joseph Kony," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 25, 2010.

m In other edited footage from Major Ba-hoku Barigye's press conference, he is shown asking rhetorically, "And if you lose one soldier, so what?" The al-Shabaab narrator noted, "And in addition to the major defeats suffered on the battlefield in recent months, the lives of your sons are considered worthless even by their leaders here in Mogadishu," with following footage showing the badly burned body of an AMISOM soldier killed when the tank in question caught fire.



Al-Shabaab's U.K. English-language narrator and media operative, who has never been identified by the group, stands against a backdrop showing Kenya Defence Forces vehicles the group claimed to have seized during its attack and temporary capture of the KDF's El-Adde military base in Somalia's Gedo region on January 15, 2016. (Al-Kataib Media Foundation film, The Sheikh Abu Yahya al-Libi Raid: Storming the Crusader Kenyan Army Base at El-Adde – Islamic province of Gedo, released on April 9, 2016).

the ensuing battle was increased by press reports suggesting many more casualties than officially acknowledged, leading to domestic unease among families of missing or killed soldiers in Burundi.⁴¹ This allowed al-Shabaab to step in and muddy the waters further with its own PSYOPS media push that began with a public event a day after the battle during which the bodies of some of the Burundian casualties were put on display.⁴² This event, along with battle footage, was later featured in a documentary-style film released on November 12, 2011, by al-Shabaab, *The Burundian Bloodbath: Battle of Dayniile*.

In the film, al-Shabaab's British English-speaking narrator built upon the PSYOPS messaging framework and style laid down in Al-Kataib's June and July 2010 videos.⁴³ Walking around the rural battleground, he picked up a rotting apple core and commented, "this is probably the last bite [of the apple] one of the Burundian soldiers took before the final moment came for him."⁴⁴ The film was released, the narrator said, as part of al-Shabaab's media campaign to report on the reality of the Somali conflict, with the group recognizing that the media field was a key part of the ongoing war.⁴⁵

o The film cast al-Shabaab's media campaign not as propaganda but instead as a needed intervention and alternative view to that provided by international journalists who, it alleged, "are either complicit or unwittingly serving as pawns of Western governments." The insurgent narrator claimed, "It's the media of the mujahideen that has succeeded in capturing the accurate image of the battlefields of jihad."

Case Study 4: The 2014 Attacks in and around Mpeketoni

On June 15 and 17, 2014, al-Shabaab fighters carried out a series of attacks in and around the town of Mpeketoni in Kenya's Lamu county targeting a police station, hotels, and government offices and killing at least 60 people.⁴⁶ Despite local residents reporting that the attackers seemed to be targeting Christians and shouted "Allahu Akbar" as well as claims of responsibility from al-Shabaab,^{47p} Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta instead blamed local political opponents of perpetrating the attacks and denied that al-Shabaab was behind them.⁴⁸ Even before al-Shabaab released its own footage of the attacks in March 2015, footage that matched the reports of local residents who witnessed the 2014 attacks,^q Kenyan journalists, news analysts, and politicians openly questioned Kenyatta's claim, seeing it as a politically motivated response meant to counter mounting criticism and questioning of Kenya's 2013 military intervention in Somalia and noting that it was directly contradicted by

p Local residents' reports were consistent with al-Shabaab's own propaganda film documenting the attacks, *Mpeketoni: Reclaiming Muslim Lands Occupied by the Kenyan Crusaders*, released on March 2, 2015, in which militants are shown lecturing local Kenyan Muslim residents after Kenyan Christians had "fled." The film was an installment in Al-Kataib's *No Security except by Faith or a Covenant of Security* series.

q In part of the film's footage, al-Shabaab militants were shown in the town—signs and store names identifying the location as Mpeketoni—rounding up Kenyan Christians it accused of being government workers, haranguing them about their religion before summarily executing them.

the testimony of multiple local residents.⁴⁹

Al-Shabaab took advantage of Kenyatta's insistence that his local political foes and not the militant group were behind the Mpeketoni attacks in a major propaganda film released in three separate versions in Arabic, Swahili, and English in early March 2015, *Mpeketoni: Reclaiming Muslim Lands Occupied by the Kenyan Crusaders*.⁵⁰ It compounded preexisting questions about the lack of the Kenyan government's transparency and the truthfulness of the president's public claim that his local political opponents and not al-Shabaab were responsible.

Opening with a montage of clips drawn from international and Kenyan news media reports on the attacks and Kenyatta's televised address to the nation, the film was entirely framed around the president's strident denials despite mounting evidence to the contrary as well as the rhetorical question the film posed, "What would compel a country's president to lie to his people so unashamedly?"⁵¹ The film and the subsequent April 3, 2015, attack by al-Shabaab targeting Kenyan Christians at Garissa University College also sought to frame the militant group's operations in Kenya as legitimate retaliation, from an Islamic legal perspective, for Kenyan government abuses against Kenyan Muslims. The Garissa University College attack had angered locals who blamed longstanding government corruption and poor performance by the security forces for allowing al-Shabaab to operate with relative impunity.⁵²

Case Study 5: The Leadup to Kenya's 2017 Elections

In the months leading up to Kenya's hotly contested 2017 national general elections, al-Shabaab released a coordinated, multi-part influence operations campaign seeking to sway the results against President Kenyatta and his Jubilee Party and, as a result, continued Kenyan military presence in Somalia.⁵³ This campaign included the release of over a dozen films and video messages from al-Shabaab that sought to sway Kenyan public opinion against the incumbent president and the KDF remaining militarily in Somalia.

Ali Mohamud Rage, al-Shabaab's spokesman and a senior official, told the Kenyan electorate that their country's military involvement in Somalia, Operation Linda Nchi ("Protect the Country"), far from resulting in greater domestic security, had dramatically worsened the security situation as well as the national economy due to a significant downturn in the tourism sector thanks to his group's attacks.⁵⁴ Al-Kataib also released a two-part video interview with Kenyan militant preacher Ahmad Iman Ali, the head of al-Shabaab's Kenyan foreign fighters contingent, in which Ali declared any alliance or employment with the Kenyan government impermissible according to Islamic law and Qur'anic injunctions.⁵⁵ Also released by al-Shabaab's external media department were a series of video testimonials and recruitment pitches from deceased foreign fighters, including Kenyans,⁵⁶ and short videos featuring

current Kenyan foreign fighters delivering messages to the Kenyan public.⁵⁷

The most noteworthy of al-Shabaab's stream of election-centered media productions was a 37-minute documentary-style film, *The Kenyan Invasion before and after Linda Nchi*, which appears to have been narrated by Al-Kataib's aforementioned British English-speaking media operative. Weaving together selective news clips, citations from international bodies and NGOs, video clips of Kenyan politicians and analysts, and insurgent battlefield footage, the film framed Kenya's intervention in Somalia as a military and economic failure that was endangering the Kenyan public's safety and severely harming the country's economy by hitting the tourism sector and diverting much-needed monies from other vital domestic needs.⁵⁸ Al-Shabaab alleged that the only people benefiting from Kenya's failed Somalia policy were a select group of corrupt politicians and military commanders.⁵⁹

The film's messaging—and particularly its warnings about additional casualties of Kenyan soldiers—was augmented by a series of hostage videos that built upon al-Shabaab's earlier use of hostage videos to exert pressure on enemy governments.⁶⁰ The hostage videos placed emphasis squarely on the incumbent president, Kenyatta, as the KDF prisoners, who were highly likely forced to follow an al-Shabaab script, pleaded with him to negotiate with al-Shabaab and withdraw Kenyan forces from Somalia and not to "abandon them" like Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni had his own army's captives.⁶⁰ In 2012 and 2013, al-Shabaab released hostage video messages from two Kenyan government employees it had taken captive, Edward Mule Yesse and Fredrick Irundu Wainaina, even-

s One propaganda video, *Are You Content with...: Questions to the Muslims in Kenya*, released on July 27, 2017, featured nine East African foreign fighters addressing the Kenyan electorate in eight regional languages or dialects spoken in Kenya (with Swahili and English subtitles): Oromo, Swahili, Bajuni, Digo, Luo, Kikuyu, Nairobi "Sheng" slang, and Swahili.

t The film referenced violence by armed nomadic herders and mass demonstrations by Kenyan doctors. See Adam Cruise and Bibi van der Zee, "Armed herders invade Kenya's most important wildlife conservancy," *Guardian*, February 2, 2017; Eyder Peralta, "In Kenya, Nomadic Herders And Police Clash Over Pastures," NPR, April 3, 2017; Jacob Kushner, "Kenya's health system on the verge of collapse as doctors' strike grinds on," *Guardian*, February 13, 2017; Eyder Peralta, "The Doctors Aren't In At Kenya's Public Hospitals," NPR, January 5, 2017; and Rael Ombur, "Amid medical protests, Kenyan court releases imprisoned doctors' union officials," *Washington Post*, February 15, 2017.

u Al-Shabaab's hostage videos released between September 2016 and May 2017 featured Kenyan and Ugandan soldiers captured during the militant group's attacks on and capture of AMISOM bases in Janaale in September 2015 and El Adde in January 2016. Al-Shabaab had previously released several other hostage videos including ones showing pleas and scripted messages from French Directorate-General for External Security (DGSE) agent Denis Alex and Kenyan government employees Edward Mule Yesse and Fredrick Irundu Wainaina. On Alex's capture and the failed DGSE commando raid and his subsequent death, see Leela Jacinto, "French spy held captive in Somalia pleads for release," *France24*, October 5, 2012; Feisal Omar, "Second French commando dies of wounds: Somali rebels," Reuters, January 14, 2013; and "Somali Islamists say French hostage sentenced to death," Reuters, January 16, 2013. On Yesse and Wainaina's release, see Jill Langlois, "2 Kenyan officials kidnapped by Al Shabaab freed," PRI, July 30, 2013; Julius Kithuure, "Kenya: Edward Mule Yesse Free After 18 Months in Al-Shabaab Captivity," *allafrica.com*, August 2, 2013; Duncan Miriri, "We will not bargain with al Shabaab over hostages: Kenya," Reuters, January 24, 2013; Feisal Omar, "Kenya says no talks with rebels who claim killed soldier," Reuters, February 15, 2013; and Kipchumba Some, "Al Shabaab threatens to kill captives," *Standard*, January 27, 2013.

r In its April 5, 2015, statement claiming responsibility for the Garissa University College attack, al-Shabaab said that it was the result of repeated warnings by the militant group to the Kenyan public that the actions of their government "will not be without retaliation." The statement laid out what al-Shabaab said was a history of Kenyan persecution, "massacres," and other "crimes" against Kenyan-Somalis specifically and Muslims generally. "Not only are you condoning your government's oppressive policies by failing to speak out against them but [you] are reinforcing their policies by electing them. You will, therefore, pay the price with your blood," the statement said. Al-Shabaab statement, "Garissa Attack: Burying Kenya's Hopes," April 4, 2015.

tually releasing them after the Kenyatta government was pressured into entering into negotiations with the militant group through Kenyan-Somali clan elders.⁶¹

Case Study 6: Mass Shootings and Wildfires during 2019 in the United States

In November 2019, al-Shabaab opened a new media salvo aimed directly at the American public. Following three years of devastating wildfires in California^v and a record number of mass shootings in 2019 in the United States,⁶² the group's emir, Ahmad "Abu Ubayda" Umar, released an audiovisual message that included a direct message to the American people that played off of domestic economic, political, and security issues.⁶³

Centered in part on al-Shabaab's significant, though failed, attack in late September 2019 on the Baledogle Airbase in Somalia, which is reportedly a site of U.S. military training of Somali "Dabab" commando forces and used to launch drone strikes,⁶⁴ Umar's message to the American public centered on a cost-benefit analysis, arguing that their domestic interests—economic as well as security—were being harmed by U.S. "meddling" in Somalia and other Muslim-majority countries.⁶⁵ Rather than investing their tax money into providing security at home against mass shootings in schools and public places or addressing natural disasters, unemployment, and homelessness, he claimed that the U.S. government was instead using the money to engage in military adventures against Muslims abroad.⁶⁶ By electing their leaders, Umar said, the American public was complicit in the "crimes" of their federal government, and Americans—in al-Shabaab's eyes—are legitimate targets for revenge attacks, Umar stressed that the American people should pressure their government to stop meddling in Muslim countries and instead address its own domestic problems including school security and natural disaster relief.⁶⁷

His message to Americans, like al-Shabaab's earlier 2010 messaging to the Ugandan and Burundian publics during the "Ramadan Offensive," also came at a time when the Somali militant group, though at its strongest and most resilient since 2011-2012, was stuck in a stalemate. Despite its ability to strike regularly in the heart of Mogadishu and other cities and major urban centers, al-Shabaab still cannot overthrow the SFG to capture the Somali state. Like past al-Shabaab media operations materials, Umar's message sought to attract broader attention from the mainstream news media, particularly in the United States, but largely failed to do so, highlighting the challenges to get wider reporting on its pro-

paganda despite framing it, in part, to attract media attention.^w

Conclusion

Although it retains significant capabilities and territorial reach in Somalia, al-Shabaab remains stuck in a relative stalemate. Despite being al-Qa`ida's most resilient regional affiliate and a major threat to Somali domestic and regional East African security, the militant group cannot capture the Somali state because it cannot militarily defeat AMISOM. Its ability to implement civil governance—though significant in the local context and even, at times, rivaling the capabilities and capacity of the SFG⁶⁸—is also limited by both finite economic as well as human resources. In terms of its attacks, al-Shabaab's activities have declined slightly in 2019, and the number of reported fatalities caused by them has significantly declined since both 2018 and 2017.^{69 x}

Understanding these constraints, al-Shabaab continues to rely not only on regular asymmetrical warfare and large-scale terrorist attacks to weaken its adversaries' resolve but also on media operations—and in particular PSYOPS—in a bid to weaken domestic support for AMISOM and international interventions in Somalia. This is in line with al-Shabaab's past strategic behavior of producing and disseminating a particular type of media operations product—PSYOPS messaging—to gain an edge on the physical battlefield when its physical on-the-ground capacity remains limited in an asymmetric war. This PSYOPS messaging, in the cases reviewed in this article, has sought to erode domestic public support in East African countries including Kenya, Uganda, and Burundi for continued involvement in AMISOM and, more recently, in the United States by playing off of existing questions about the lack of East African government transparency regarding events on the ground in Somalia in the eyes of the domestic public.

Al-Shabaab appears to recognize that media operations—of which PSYOPS messaging is a key part—are a lower-cost and potentially high-yield warfighting tool, even more so for non-state groups

v In his video message, Ahmad Umar said that the ongoing wildfires in California were part of God's punishment on the United States for its sins and crimes against Muslims. Ahmad Umar, "We Bow to None Other Than Allah," Al-Kataib Media Foundation, November 5, 2019.

w The uncertain success rate of this strategic bid to attract mainstream news media attention—thus garnering a broader audience for at least parts of its media operations and information warfare propaganda—is due in large part to the inability of al-Shabaab to control what aspects of its media releases are reported on. In some cases, such as with its Westgate attack pseudo-documentary, it has been able to attract significant international news media attention while in other cases, such as Umar's November 2019 message to Americans, it largely failed in its effort to reach the broader American public through news reporting. For example, in its reporting, *The New York Times* mentioned Umar's message but only very briefly and without mentioning the al-Shabaab emir's discussion of domestic versus international financial expenditures and national interests. See Gibbons-Neff, Schmitt, Savage, and Cooper.

x Despite this decline, al-Shabaab was in 2019 responsible or suspected in approximately 38 percent of all African militant Islamist events and 27 percent of all reported fatalities, according to Africa Center for Strategic Studies data.

in asymmetric conflicts like that in Somalia.^y Already possessing a formidable media operations capability, al-Shabaab, much like state militaries, uses PSYOPS and influence operations as a lower-cost and, potentially, high-impact way of reaching friendly and hostile audiences as well as enemies and other foreign audiences.^z However, al-Shabaab, like states themselves, also faces the challenges of both reaching all of its intended audiences and its messaging having the intended effects.⁷⁰ The group seeks in part to ensure that its messaging reaches a broader audience in the United States, Kenya, and other countries—beyond its own supporters—by trying to attract the attention of the news media, which then, it hopes, will report on it. As noted with regard to Umar’s most recent audiovisual message, this is far from always the case—resulting in an unpredictable rate of success and extent of messaging penetration.^{aa}

While, to the degree it is successful, this can extend the reach of al-Shabaab’s propaganda, this indirect method is also out of al-Shabaab’s control and does not always result in all parts of its PSYOPS messaging reaching all of the intended audiences, though the militant group seeks to produce media products that are more

- y Al-Shabaab has long recognized the strategic value in building up its own media operations capabilities in order to counter the ‘distortion’ of mainstream news media reporting and claims of the “Western Crusader media” about it. Al-Shabaab statement, “Important clarification regarding Al-Jazeera’s promotion of fake news about the Movement [Al-Shabab],” November 24, 2008, and “Al-Kataib News Channel,” July 24, 2010. Al-Qa’ida strategists have also recognized that their ongoing war against ‘Western Crusader’ governments includes a central media component, in part to counter Western ‘propaganda’ against jihadi organizations and in part to disseminate these groups’ own messaging. See Jarret M. Brachman and William F. McCants, *Stealing Al-Qa’ida’s Playbook* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2006) and Jarret M. Brachman, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2008), in particular Chapters 4 and 5.
- z This is similar to how state militaries, including the U.S. military, seek to use PSYOPS as part of broader cyber and ground campaigns and operations. See Jones and Matthews, p. 29; Nichiporuk, p. 180; Kathy J. Perry, “The Use of Psychological Operations as a Strategic Tool,” U.S. Army War College, April 10, 2000; and Colonel Curtis D. Boyd, “Army IO is PSYOP: Influencing More with Less,” *Military Review* (2007): pp. 67-75. In 1992 and 1993, the United States, as the leader of the United Nations-backed Unified Task Force (UNITAF) mission in Somalia, conducted a multi-pronged PSYOPS campaign that included daily radio broadcasts and the publication of a print newspaper. See Lt. Colonel Charles P. Borchini and Mari Borstelmann, “PSYOP in Somalia: The Voice of Hope,” *Special Warfare* 7:4 (1994): pp. 2-9; Staff Sgt. Dillon Heyliger, “U.S. involvement in Mogadishu before the Battle of Mogadishu,” U.S. Army, October 3, 2018; and *Psychological Operations in Support of Operation Restore Hope*, Unified Task Force Somalia, May 1993.
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likely to attract the attention of the news media—for example, with the short ‘lone wolf’ mall attack messaging segment in its 2015 pseudo-documentary film about the Westgate Mall attack and in a 2013 video praising the murderers of off-duty British soldier Lee Rigby.⁷¹ The record of al-Shabaab’s PSYOPS messaging is mixed: though it has not succeeded in expelling AMISOM or overthrowing sitting presidents like Kenya’s Uhuru Kenyatta, it has in some cases noticeably affected the wider reporting of events, such as the El Adde,⁷² Kulbiyow, and Manda Bay military base attacks, particularly through the release of visual media such as photographs.^{73 ab}

Al-Shabaab’s PSYOPS messaging is both a sign of the continued sophistication of its media operations and warfighting capabilities but, conversely, is also arguably an inadvertent admission of its limitations—namely the group’s inability, despite its resilience, to completely take over the Somali state. The insurgent group likely knows that this goal—or even another form of relative success such as the continuance of a semi-territorial proto-state existence⁷⁴—will not be achieved solely (or even mainly) on the battlefield. Instead, al-Shabaab likely recognizes their aims could, to a significant degree, be achieved by fostering war weariness—primarily among AMISOM-participating countries in East Africa but also within the broader international coalition arrayed against it, which in turn would result—al-Shabaab wagers—in the decline of financial and military support to the Somali federal and regional state governments from AMISOM-participating countries, the European Union, and the United States. The jihadi-insurgent group is banking on war weariness increasing because the SFG remains beset with corruption, preoccupied with domestic political infighting, and its continued failure to meet security benchmarks. It is this sentiment that al-Shabaab’s PSYOPS are attempting to further foster and compound.^{75 ac} **CTC**

- ab As already noted, following the militant group’s attack on the Manda Bay airfield in Kenya in January, U.S. AFRICOM’s media office even responded directly to al-Shabaab’s media releases, understanding that they do reach both the news media and broader audiences, in part due to social media platforms like Twitter. See “Attack at Manda Bay Airfield, Kenya” U.S. AFRICOM, January 5, 2020, and “Senior U.S. Africa Command Officials Visit Troops at Manda Bay,” U.S. AFRICOM, January 9, 2020.
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