Contents

FROM THE EDITOR

One painful lesson from the history of terrorism is just how dangerous one single capable international attack planner can be. Little has been written in English about Basil Hassan, a radicalized Danish engineering graduate of Lebanese descent who became one of the most dangerous international attack operatives within the Islamic State. In this issue's first feature article, Mette Mayli Albæk, Puk Damsgård, Mahmoud Shiekh Ibrahim, Troels Kingo, and Jens Vithner build on a two-year investigative report for the Danish public broadcaster DR to provide a detail-rich profile.

The authors write: "As the key figure in a drone procurement network that stretched from Europe through Turkey to Syria, [Hassan] was instrumental in furthering the Islamic State's drone-warfare capabilities. As 'the Controller' behind the 2017 Sydney airline plot, he pulled the strings from Syria in directing one of the most ambitious and innovative terrorist plots ever seen." There are claims Hassan was killed in the second half of 2017, but the authors note that Danish counterterrorism officials are still not certain that he is dead.

In our second feature article, Michael Knights and Alex Almeida find that "the Islamic State has recovered from its territorial defeats since 2017 to mount a strong and sustained resurgence as an insurgent force inside Iraq." Their analysis of attack metrics from the past 18 months paints "a picture of an Islamic State insurgency that has regained its balance, spread out across many more areas, and reclaimed significant tactical proficiency." The authors write that "now operating at the same levels it achieved in 2012, a number of factors suggest that the Islamic State could further ramp up its rural insurgency in 2020 and 2021. An input of experienced cadres from Syria, a downturn in Iraqi and coalition effectiveness, and now the disruption of a combined COVID and economic crisis will likely all feed into an escalating campaign of attrition against the Iraqi state, military, and tribes."

May 2020 marks the third anniversary of the suicide bombing attack at the Manchester Arena in the United Kingdom. Two brothers from Manchester of Libyan descent, Salman and Hashem Abedi, were responsible for the attack. Following the conviction of Hashem Abedi in a trial that concluded two months ago in the United Kingdom, Eran Benedek and Neil Simon outline what is now known about the genesis of the attack, the brothers' web of connections in a British-Libyan jihadi nexus, and their links to Islamic State extremists.

Finally, Nakissa Jahanbani provides a high-level analysis of attack trends from 2008 to 2019 of Iranian proxies in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa using several open-source datasets.

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

The Controller: How Basil Hassan Launched Islamic State Terror into the Skies

By Mette Mayli Albæk, Puk Damsgård, Mahmoud Shiekh Ibrahim, Troels Kingo, and Jens Vithner

After trying but failing to assassinate a critic of Islam in Denmark in 2013, Basil Hassan, a radicalized Danish engineering graduate of Lebanese descent, left Denmark for the final time and became one of the most dangerous international attack operatives within the Islamic State. As the key figure in a drone procurement network that stretched from Europe through Turkey to Syria, he was instrumental in furthering the Islamic State's drone-warfare capabilities. As "the Controller" behind the 2017 Sydney airline plot, he pulled the strings from Syria in directing one of the most ambitious and innovative terrorist plots ever seen. Denmark's police and security services have been on the trail of Hassan since soon after his assassination attempt. Despite a setback in 2014 when Turkey arrested Hassan but then let him go, Danish investigators were eventually able to shut down his drone procurement network and secure the conviction of his accomplices in Denmark. There are claims Hassan was killed in the second half of 2017, but his death has never been confirmed and he may remain a threat. *Authors' note: The case against the Danish drone terrorist network has been appealed to the High Court in Denmark.*

One day in February 2013, the bell rang at the home of well-known historian and Islam critic Lars Hedegaard on a residential street in Copenhagen. It was a mailman delivering a parcel, and Hedegaard went down to the front door to receive it. According to the police, the mailman drew a gun and fired a shot at close range that barely missed Hedegaard's right ear. They got into a scuffle, and the assailant fled on foot.[1]

Danish police believe Basil Hassan, a radicalized Danish-Lebanese engineering graduate, was the fake mailman. But by the time, weeks later, that they established he was a suspect (which they would keep secret as their investigations progressed),[a] Hassan had left the country to embark on the next stage of a terrorist career that would see him become one of the most dangerous Islamic State

international attack operatives.

This article tells the story of Hassan's path to terrorism, his role in building up the Islamic State's drone-warfare program, and his orchestration of the Islamic State's 2017 Sydney airline plot.[2] It also tells the story of the multi-year investigation by Danish police and security services, which eventually shut down the drone procurement network and put several of Hassan's accomplices behind bars. This article is based on a two-year investigative report by the authors for DR, the Danish public broadcaster, that included reporting inside Syria and Iraq, as well as in Turkey, Denmark, other European countries, and the United States. These efforts culminated in the broadcast of two documentaries, a 16-episode podcast series, and the publication of a series of news reports in 2019.[3] The article draws on hundreds of pages of transcripts from the trial of Hassan's drone procurement accomplices in Denmark, which was attended by the authors and resulted in three individuals—Fady Mohammed, Coskun Simsir, and Umut Olgun—being convicted in December 2019.[b] It also draws on dozens of interviews with close

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a   The police found a dark blue Volkswagen Transporter close to Hedegaard's house. They did not find it interesting at first because it was registered in a woman's name. But six weeks after the assassination attempt, the car was still parked on Hedegaard's street. The police discovered that it was sold three days prior to the attack to a man who signed the contract with a fake address and the fake name of a well-known Palestinian terrorist. Information from the sale of the car led the police to suspect that Basil Hassan was behind the attack. Lotte Scharff, "Sådan kom politiet på sporet af Hedegaards attentatmand," *B.T.*, April 27, 2014.

b   All three of those convicted denied guilt. They claimed in court that they did not know that the equipment they bought was supposed to end up with the Islamic State. Trial Information.

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associates of Hassan as well as law enforcement and counterterrorism officials in Denmark, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States.[4]

The Making of an Assassin

On a summer's day in 1987, in a housing project in the medium-sized provincial Danish town of Askeroed near Copenhagen, Basil Hassan—the youngest of three children—was born.[5] As a child, Hassan played soccer in the yard and Donkey Kong on his Game Boy with the other boys. The Hassans were moderate Muslims, and their home seemed open and loving. When Basil Hassan was a teenager, the family moved to the multicultural district of Nørrebro in Copenhagen. Hassan did well in high school and was popular, however, he and one particular schoolmate drew attention. Hassan and his friend, Rawand Taher, sometimes dressed in Islamic clothing, and they eagerly discussed religion during breaks and warned their classmates against being non-believers.[6]

In their 2006 school yearbook, their classmates jokingly predicted that the two friends would end up as the leaders of "the new Islamic State" and that the Danish intelligence service should "watch out."[7] Ironically, Hassan and his friend would become top Islamic State terrorists less than a decade later. Taher became front-page news in Denmark when he was killed in 2015 in a targeted U.S. drone strike in Syria.[8]

In a 2006 class photo, Hassan and Taher are seen standing side by side, smiling. By that time, Hassan had started frequenting Islamist circles in the Greater Copenhagen area, and several of Hassan's acquaintances had been arrested in the first Danish jihadi terrorism case after 9/11. In late 2005, Danish authorities charged four people in the Copenhagen suburb of Glostrup with terrorism offenses. Hassan was questioned as a witness, making it clear that he has been on the Danish Intelligence and Security Service's (PET) radar since at least 2006. In fact, because of his close relations to several convicted Danish jihadis, PET tried to recruit Hassan as an informant in 2011, but he rejected them several times.[9]

In the Glostrup case, Abdul Basit Abu-Lifa, a 17-year-old friend of Basil Hassan, received a seven-year sentence for planning terrorism. The Glostrup case was connected to a group of Islamist extremists in Bosnia, which included several people from Scandinavia. One of them was a young Turkish man called Abdulkadir Cesur, who had befriended Hassan while living in Denmark. Cesur was arrested in Bosnia in October 2005 and in 2007 received a 13-year sentence for traveling "to Sarajevo to carry out a terrorist attack on the territory of Bosnia or another European country."[10] The sentence was later reduced to six years and four months.[11] Danish investigators believe that years later, Cesur played a key role in Hassan's Islamic State drone procurement network.[12]

While some of his friends went to prison for terrorism, Hassan got into engineering school. He was technically adept and loved gadgets, and people close to him in his teenage years recount how he tried to hack other people's computer systems. He was also security conscious, taping over his laptop camera and avoiding speaking near telephones.[13]

In 2010, Basil Hassan received his engineering degree from the Technical University of Denmark, but he wanted to learn other skills. Among other things, he started training to become a pilot. The Danish intelligence agency PET believes that the skills Hassan was acquiring later helped propel him into his role for the Islamic State.[14]
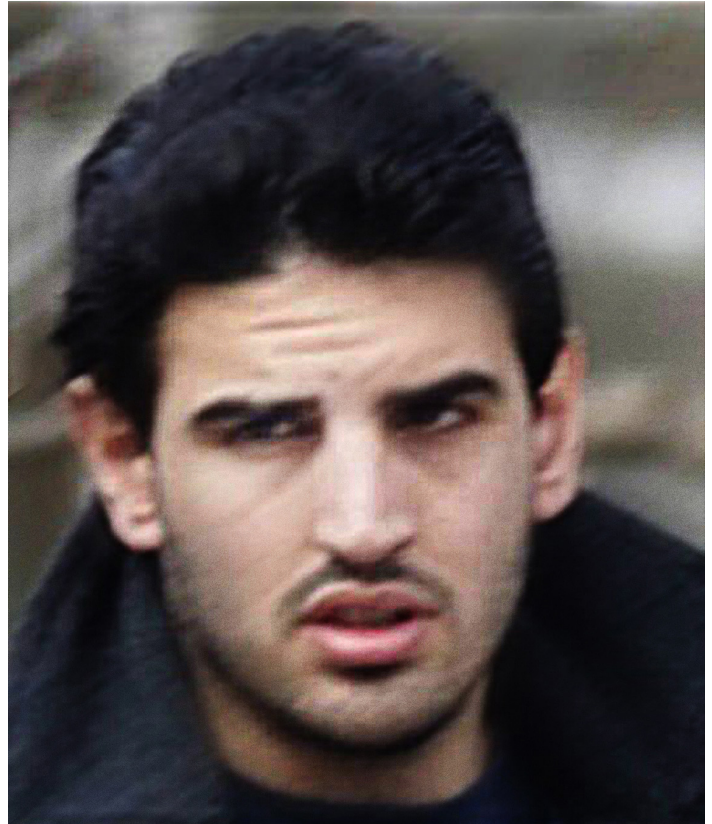
Basil Hassan in a photo provided to the authors

Linking Up with the Islamic State

After the February 2013 assassination attempt, Basil Hassan fled by train to Germany and then took a flight to Turkey. In the years that followed, he alternately stayed there, in Lebanon, and in Syria.[15]

It is not clear how or when Hassan was recruited into the Islamic State, but five of the individuals convicted for their role in the Glostrup-Sarajevo network are believed to have become closely involved with the group. Danish investigators believe this helped pave the way for Hassan to join the group. The risk he took in attempting to kill Hedegaard likely not only gave him a certain cachet among jihadis but could have contributed to him being trusted by the Islamic State as well as helped him into a senior operational position.

Hassan had kept in touch with the Sarajevo terrorist plotter Cesur since 2010 and visited him in prison in Bosnia, and when Cesur was released early and moved to Turkey, their friendship continued. While Basil Hassan was being hunted by the Danish police, he stayed with Cesur in Turkey, among other places. The Danish intelligence services believe they can link Cesur to the Islamic State through the terrorist organization's internal documents that were found in the possession of Hassan's Danish terrorist network. Some of these documents were discovered on a USB flash drive and others on several hard drives.[16]

Another of Hassan's friends from the Glostrup-Sarajevo case, Abu Lifa, joined the Islamic State after being released from prison in 2010, according to Danish authorities.[17 c]

According to Bosnian authorities, two Bosnians who were con-

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c   The authors were not able to find reliable information on Abu Lifa's current status or whereabouts.

victed for their role in the Sarajevo group—Bajro Ikanovic[18] and Senad Hasanovic—went to Syria in 2013,[19] and there are many photos online of the two posing with weapons alongside the Islamic State.[20] *The Atlantic* reported that prior to his death in the spring of 2016, Ikanovic was the leader of the biggest Islamic State military training camp in northern Syria.[21] He is also believed to have been close to the Georgian Islamic State senior leader Omar al-Shishani.[22]

Mirsad Bektasevic, a Swedish national who was convicted for his role in the Sarajevo group, also developed ties to the Islamic State. In 2017, he was convicted in Greece of having joined the Islamic State and intending to go to Syria with weapons.[23]

The Spreadsheet of Drone Purchases

Within months of Hassan becoming a suspect, Danish police began monitoring Basil Hassan's travel pattern in the Middle East, his bank accounts, and his friends in Denmark. In the fall of 2013, the police were alerted when Hassan purchased numerous parts for model planes and gadgets for simple drones through various Danish and non-Danish websites. Investigations eventually established that Hassan was the one setting up the network and pulling the strings. He had the equipment delivered to various Danish addresses, and then his friends went to the post office and sent it on to Basil Hassan in Turkey or Lebanon, often packed with chocolate, children's clothes, or potato chips.[24] According to court documents filed by Danish prosecutors, Basil Hassan made sure the equipment ended up with the Islamic State.[25] At the time, police were not sure of the intended purpose of the equipment. Only later did it become apparent that he was making purchases for what would evolve into the Islamic State's drone program.[26]

The purchases were meticulously recorded in an electronic spreadsheet that the Danish investigators believe was created by Hassan and named "Expenses and tracking"—a document that the Danish police later found during an April 2014 search in Copenhagen targeted against what would later turn out to be accomplices in Hassan's drone network. In the document, Basil Hassan had recorded the parcel tracking numbers, purchase invoices, and prices of the drone parts, and the accounts show that Hassan from the fall of 2013 until his arrest in the spring of 2014 was responsible for purchasing model plane parts amounting to more than $120,000.[27][d]

According to testimony provided by military drone experts at the 2019 trial, the purchases show that Basil Hassan and the people around him were experimenting with and developing an advanced and professional drone program. They were buying individual parts for building drones such as remote controls, propellers, current regulators, and speed controllers.[28]

According to the analysis of Danish investigators, the accounts tie Basil Hassan directly to the Islamic State (or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, as it was then known) at a very early stage—in the fall of 2013. The spreadsheet states that the accounts belong to "Katibet al baraa bin malik," which several intelligence services have established was the Islamic State brigade in charge of developing drones and chemical weapons. Furthermore, Hassan's jihadi *kunya* (fighting name) Abu Hani al-Lubnani is noted in the account documents.[29]

The Islamic State Drone Footage

In the winter of 2013/2014, Basil Hassan was busy communicating with his network in Denmark through various channels. He communicated via Skype, a designated burner phone bought in Denmark, and draft emails. The email accounts were created in the names of fictitious individuals such as "Peter Sam" and "Peter Roses."[30] To communicate with his network, Hassan created draft emails in the accounts, having shared log-in and password details with his accomplices.[31] The network's communication was documented during the October to December 2019 trial of Hassan's drone procurement accomplices in Denmark, which, as already noted, resulted in the conviction of three individuals for procuring equipment for the Islamic State.[32][e]

The trial also documented that in December 2013, Hassan got two of his subsequently convicted friends in Denmark to buy GoPro cameras. Years later, as will be outlined later in the piece, Danish investigators, working in collaboration with the FBI, established that at least one camera bought by Hassan's Danish terrorism network was used to record footage published by the Islamic State in its film documenting its August 7, 2014, attack on the Syrian regime military base in Ain Issa.[33] The footage consists of an overhead video view of what is the Ain Issa base according to the trial testimony of an official from Denmark's military intelligence service. The trial established that it was a reconnaissance flight before the attack.[34]

During the April 2014 search in Copenhagen targeting Hassan's friends, one of the videos that was found showed what the police believe to be a known Danish Islamic State fighter operating a reconnaissance drone near the Ain Issa base. The video included raw aerial footage that matches footage from a 13-minute long propaganda video published by the Islamic State in connection with the Ain Issa attack.[35]

The propaganda video the group posted shows a group of Islamic State members sitting on the ground, studying a large map. They can be seen pointing at it and seem to be planning how to carry out an attack in a certain area. The video the Islamic State posted cuts to drone footage of the Ain Issa military base found during the search in Denmark. Onscreen it says, "from the lens of a drone belonging to the Islamic State's army." It then shows a man in an armored vehicle filled with explosives. Several vehicles approach in the cover of darkness, and suddenly there is a huge flash of light from three suicide bombers' explosions followed by Islamic State fighters on the ground attacking with automatic weapons. In another scene, Syrian regime soldiers with their hands tied behind their backs are shot at close range.

With the help of the FBI, the Danish police traced some of the drone footage found in the USB flash drive found in Denmark to a specific GoPro camera, in part through the serial number from the American manufacturer, and sales tracking and invoices belonging

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d   Basil Hassan's network was one just of several drone supply networks providing the Islamic State with drone components. Another network was centered around Siful Sujan, a Bangladeshi Islamic State operative who had previously been based in Wales and was killed in a drone strike near Raqqa, Syria, in late 2015. The authors have not been able to conclusively link the two networks. For more on the Sujan network, see Don Rassler, *The Islamic State and Drones: Supply, Scale, and Future Threats* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018).

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e   In total, around 18,000 pages of evidence was shared by prosecutors with the defense during the trial. The authors attended the trial, took notes, and obtained hundreds of pages of trial transcripts.

A screen capture of aerial drone video footage in the Islamic State propaganda video about the group's August 7, 2014, attack on the Syrian regime military base in Ain Issa. According to the authors, the aerial drone video footage of the military base in the Islamic State video matches the raw footage found on a USB flash drive in the possession of the Danish drone network. "Disperse Those Who Are Behind Them," the Islamic State's al-I'tisam Foundation for Media Production, August 13, 2014.

to this particular camera show that it was sold in Denmark in December 2013. The court in Denmark was satisfied that the camera was bought by individuals in Basil Hassan's network.[36]

There is one piece of evidence that suggests the possibility Hassan himself spent time in the Ain Issa area months before the attack. In the spreadsheet recovered in the April 2014 search in Copenhagen recording spending on drone parts and other items by the Islamic State brigade "Katibet al baraa bin malik," Danish police found an item of spending that stated: "petrol 10-50 liters, two months of pay, petrol car Abu Hani Ain Issa, January 2014." As mentioned earlier, Abu Hani is Basil Hassan's jihadi fighting name.[37]

Further Information From the USB Flash Drive

While the Danish police in the spring of 2014 were hot on the trail of Basil Hassan, whom they secretly suspected of being behind the assassination attempt on Islam critic Lars Hedegaard, they started collaborating with the Turkish police. On April 25, 2014, Basil Hassan was arrested in Turkey.[f] Despite the security consciousness he had previously exhibited, Hassan carelessly arranged a meeting with his parents who were to visit him in Turkey, and when Hassan arrived at Istanbul's Atatürk airport to pick up his parents, he was arrested by the Turkish police.[38]

This was a significant breakthrough for the Danish police, who

announced to Hedegaard and the Danish public that they had identified a suspect and that he was behind bars abroad.[39] While Danish authorities awaited a simple and routine extradition from Turkey, the Danish police could proceed more assertively with their investigation now that it was no longer confidential. Accordingly, police searched several addresses belonging to Hassan's friends and acquaintances, and several figures from militant Islamist circles in Copenhagen received a visit from the police.[40] It was during these searches that Danish police retrieved both the drone procurement network's spreadsheet "Expenses and tracking" and the drone footage that matched the Islamic State' film documenting the Ain Issa attack.[41]

Among the addresses searched in April 2014 were two belonging to Hassan's friends, Fady Mohammed and Coskun Simsir, who were both subsequently convicted in December 2019 of having sent drone equipment to the Islamic State.[42]

At the time of the searches, Mohammed was a newly graduated engineer in his mid-20s and a well-known figure in Islamist circles in Denmark, well-spoken, educated and with a large circle of acquaintances that included several Danish jihadi fighters in Syria and convicted terrorists.[43]

Neither Fady Mohammed nor Coskun Simsir was arrested after the searches in 2014. It was not until September 26, 2018—four years later—that Danish police arrested them and charged them with sending drone equipment to the Islamic State.[44] During the trial, Mohammed testified that he met Hassan in engineering school and they became close friends; and so it was perfectly natural for Mohammed to help Hassan with various things in 2013. For

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f   Danish investigators believe that Hassan spent time in Syria before his arrest in Turkey. Niels Brandt Petersen, "Mistænkt for drabsforsøg rejste ud af landet på gerningsdag," Berlingske, April 27, 2014.

example, Mohammad let Hassan use his Copenhagen address to get social benefits, even though Hassan had not been in the country since the assassination attempt early that year on Hedegaard.[45]

Both Mohammed and Hassan were acquaintances of Abdulkadir Cesur, the Turkish terrorist plotter who spent several years in prison in Bosnia. Mohammed testified during his 2019 trial that in 2013 and 2014, he had regularly met with Cesur in Turkey because Cesur was helping Mohammed's family buy an apartment under warmer skies than cold Denmark.[46]

Mohammed landed back in Denmark from one of those trips to see Cesur in Turkey, just days before his residence was searched by plain-clothes officers in April 2014. In his wallet, Fady Mohammed had the aforementioned USB flash drive that the police seized and spent years examining and analyzing and that also contained Ain Issa drone footage and the "Expenses and Tracking" drone purchase spreadsheet. After several failed attempts, the forensic team managed to recover 2,400 documents from the USB flash drive, of which several were shown on a large screen during the trial of the Danish terror network in late 2019.[47]

The USB flash drive was a treasure trove for the Danish intelligence services. Among other things, it contained several photos of a man believed by the police to be Basil Hassan. The series of images shows the man wearing blue gloves making a simple bomb, step by step. In the images, the bomb maker is wearing a special watch on his right arm. Hassan's Lebanese ex-wife testified to the Danish police that Hassan had a similar wristwatch.[48] Furthermore, the police forensic team examined the sequence by comparing a tabletop seen on the photos with a tabletop seen in a picture of Basil Hassan's public services login card[g] also found on the USB flash drive. They concluded that in all probability, the tabletops were the same. The police also had experts compare the arm and veins from the man on the bomb-making photos with Hassan's arm and veins as seen on private photos from his high school days and a photo of Hassan taking a bath. Their conclusion was that nothing ruled out that the arm and the veins belong to the same person.[49]

The bomb-making photo sequence matched internal Islamic State material that the Danish security and intelligence service PET obtained through a foreign collaborator in late summer 2019. In the Islamic State materials provided by the collaborator, the bomb-making photos appear in the form of a bomb recipe. This led Danish intelligence services to believe that Basil Hassan was one of the people used by the Islamic State to show how to make explosives. It was not until years after finding the USB flash drive that the Danish police learned that the man on the video was Basil Hassan.[50]

When Fady Mohammed's house was searched in April 2014, uncovering the USB flash drive among other things, he told the police that the USB flash drive belonged to him. He changed his explanation during his trial in 2019 claiming that he had received the USB flash drive from Cesur, who in turn got it from Hassan. Mohammed also claimed that the USB flash drive was intended for a fourth man in Denmark.[51]

In October 2014, Danish authorities were busy investigating Hassan's network when they learned that Turkish authorities, without informing them, had decided to release Hassan from custody. Denmark immediately sent representatives from the Ministry of Justice and the PET to Ankara, but failed to get an answer from

Turkey as to why Basil Hassan was no longer detained, even though Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt was also disgruntled and called the case totally unacceptable.[52] It has since come to light that Hassan was one of Islamic State jihadis who were part of a prisoner exchange in September 2014 between Turkey and the Islamic State.[h] Turkey has never officially commented on the controversial exchange.[i]

Building Up the Islamic State's Drone Program

What happened to Basil Hassan after the prisoner exchange only came to light years later as part of a jigsaw puzzle of information from the police investigation that was made public bit by bit during the trial of Hassan's drone procurement accomplices in Denmark in late 2019 as well as the authors' own two-year-long investigative reporting and their interviews with a significant number of sources in Islamist circles and intelligence services in Denmark and other parts of the world, including the Middle East.[53]

Danish intelligence services subsequently established that Hassan quickly rose through the ranks of the Islamic State in the fall of 2014 and that he also became much more security conscious, which was understandable given the error that had led to his arrest in Turkey.[54] According to a foreign fighter from Bangladesh who testified in the Copenhagen trial of Hassan's drone procurement accomplices in late 2019, Hassan made sure after the prisoner exchange never to talk directly with friends or other connections in Europe.[55] Still, the United States kept tabs on what Hassan's role was in Raqqa, Syria, and in late 2016 designated Hassan a global terrorist.[56] Jason Blazakis, the director of the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Counterterrorism at the time of the designation, has since said that Basil Hassan was added to the list because he

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h   The hostages—46 Turks and three Iraqis—were seized during the Islamic State takeover of Mosul, Iraq, in June 2014. On September 20, 2014, they returned to Turkey with many questions unanswered about what led to their release. "There are things we cannot talk about. To run the state is not like running a grocery store. We have to protect sensitive issues, if you don't there would be a price to pay," Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was quoted telling some of the released hostages and their families. One report stated the number of fighters freed by Turkey in the exchange was as high as 180. "Turkey remains cagey about hostages freed by ISIS," CBS News, September 21, 2014; John Simpson and Alex Christie-Miller, "UK jihadists were traded by Turkey for hostages," *Times*, October 6, 2014; "UK jihadist prisoner swap reports 'credible,'" BBC, October 6, 2014.

i   According to the U.S. government, "After being arrested in Turkey in 2014, [Hassan] was released as part of an alleged exchange for 49 hostages held by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)." See "State Department Terrorist Designations of Abdullah Ahmed al-Meshedani, Basil Hassan, and Abdelilah Himich," U.S. Department of State, November 22, 2016. Additionally, the interesting following details were reported in a monthly newspaper produced by Iraq's Supreme Judicial Council. According to testimony shared by Moroccan Islamic State member Abu Mansour, who was involved in the September 2014 prisoner exchange between the Islamic State and Turkey, a Danish-Lebanese individual called Abu Hani (which as has been noted was the jihadi fighting name of Basil Hassan) was among the Islamic State members the organization wanted released from Turkish prisons. Abu Mansour was quoted telling Iraqi authorities, "The exchanges took place by handing over the Turkish consul and diplomats in exchange for the release of 450 members of the organization who were detained by the Turkish authorities. The most prominent of those released was Abu Hani, a Danish [man] of Lebanese origin, who is in charge of the Manufacturing and Development Committee and others." Haidar Zuwayir, "Irhabi Maghribi li 'al-Qadaa': Sa'aina li-Jalib al-Aslihah al-Kimyaiyyah min Korea al-Shimaliyyah"(A Moroccan Terrorist to 'al-Qadaa': We sought to acquire chemical weapons from North Korea), al-Qadaa, Issue 34, August 2018.

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g   Most Danes have a personal public log-in card to access their public records.

played a vital part in developing the Islamic State's drone program and that he was authorized by the group's top leaders to develop the technology. "Basil Hassan is one of the most dangerous people we have ever added to the terrorism list. We added him because of his role in ISIS's drone program and his extensive European network," Blazakis explained.[57]

This is corroborated by information the authors received in 2018 in Kobane, Syria, when they met with a high-ranking Kurdish intelligence official. The official said that the Kurdish forces had been monitoring the Islamic State's use of drones for several years, and in Raqqa alone, after liberating the city, had collected more than 200 drones used by the Islamic State. The intelligence officer showed the authors examples of collected drones, some of which were homemade models made from Styrofoam with a cut-out hole for a bomb. Just such a drone was found in one of the warehouses in Raqqa where, according to the Kurdish intelligence official, Hassan in all probability had been, and the intelligence official said the Kurdish forces had information that Hassan was in charge of training new drone pilots, of keeping the group updated on drone technology, and that he also played a significant role in the logistics/transport system that brought the drones into Raqqa. The intelligence official also told the authors that Hassan was on the list of Islamic State fighters who were priority targets for the coalition when it launched its campaign on Raqqa.[58]

The court proceedings against Basil Hassan's Danish network provided significant insight into the development of the Islamic State's drone program. Basil Hassan's purchases of model planes and drone parts in 2013 may have seemed hobby-like and experimental, but in later years, the Islamic State's drone army was filled with advanced, professional, and expensive equipment.[59]

Despite the April 2014 searches targeting Basil Hassan's friends/drone procurement accomplices, Hassan continued to source drone components from Denmark as he worked to develop the Islamic State's drone program.[60 j] Umut Olgun, a Copenhagen Uber driver who was one of the three men convicted in the 2019 trial of Hassan's accomplices, worked with Hassan to supply the Islamic State drone components between 2016 and his arrest in September 2017. Police had begun monitoring Olgun in 2016 because of source information. In the months that followed, the police and PET would have a front-row seat to his drone purchases. The police wiretapped his Uber car and his apartment and secured the cooperation of two salespeople in a Copenhagen drone store at which Olgun came to buy drone parts. Investigators were therefore able to document that Olgun bought drone computers and other components in the amount of around USD $30,000, and the court in Copenhagen was satisfied that the parts were intended for Hassan and the Islamic State through a middleman in Turkey, the aforementioned Abdulkadir Cesur.[61]

Voice recordings back and forth between Olgun and Cesur were among the evidence introduced during the trial. The trial revealed how Danish investigators were able to pick this up despite the fact that Olgun and Cesur were using the encrypted messaging app Telegram. This was because Olgun recorded the audio messages in his car and residence, which had been bugged by Danish investi-
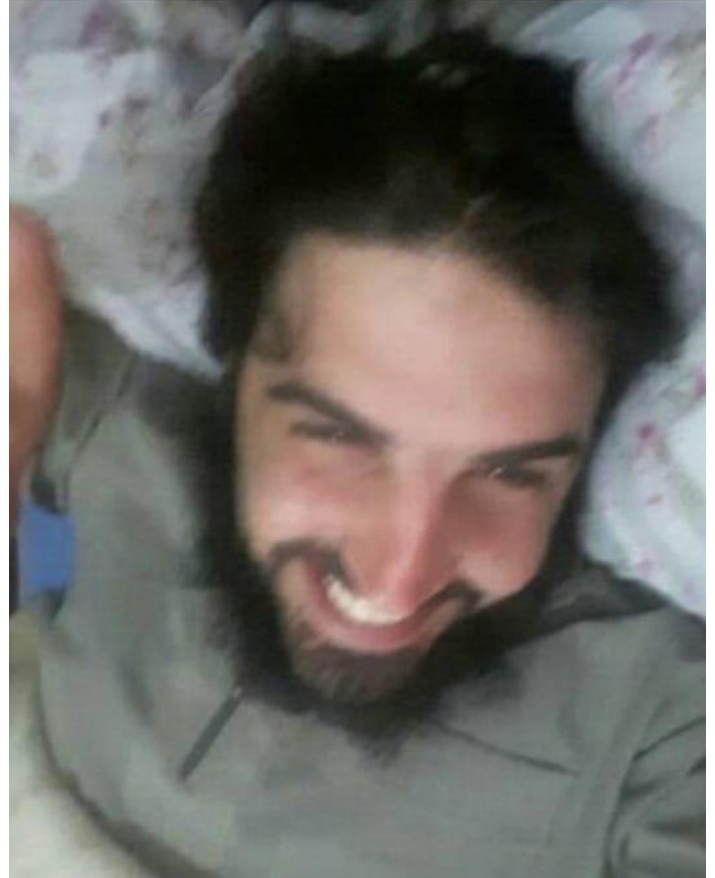
Basil Hassan in a photo taken in Raqqa, Syria, provided to the authors

gators. He also played out loud the audio messages he received via Telegram from Cesur, allowing those audio messages to be picked up as well.[62]

Hassan and Cesur were not on trial in Denmark.[63] After serving his sentence for terrorism in Bosnia and moving to Turkey, Cesur has been banned from entering Denmark and has been the subject of an international arrest warrant since Olgun's arrest. In the winter of 2018/2019, the authors managed to track down Cesur in a small Turkish town. One of the authors, having identified themselves as a journalist for DR, recorded their conversation with him using a concealed camera.[64] During the conversation, Cesur revealed that he was a close friend of Basil Hassan and that he had been helping him while he was on the run after the assassination attempt in Denmark. When asked about his involvement in smuggling drones into the Islamic State in Syria, he merely concluded that he did not understand why he would use couriers from Denmark when he could simply buy drones in Turkey. He also admitted to knowing two of the three people convicted in 2019 for being part of the Danish drone terror network.[65 k]

Basil Hassan's Life within the Islamic State

The DR reporting team were able to develop a clearer picture of the role Hassan played for the Islamic State by interviewing women who had met and lived with him in the caliphate. One is Layla

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j   The involvement of the two friends who initially helped Hassan—Fady Mohammed and Coskun Simsir—seemed to stop when their homes were searched in April 2014.

k   Cesur will probably never be put on trial in Denmark because he is a Turkish national and as such cannot be extradited from Turkey.

Talou, who was one of thousands of Yazidi women and children captured by the Islamic State when the group stormed the northern Iraqi town and region of Sinjar in August 2014. The terrorist group killed Talou's husband and abducted her and her two young children to the Iraqi town of Tal Afar. For two years, she lived as a hostage and was sold as a slave to Iraqi and Saudi Islamic State men who regularly beat and raped her.[66]

By her own account, Talou was bought and sold eight times before her family succeeded in purchasing her freedom from slavery in January 2017. The family paid more than USD $7,000 to a Saudi Islamic State member in a transaction kept secret from the rest of the terrorist group, and as a result the Islamic State court signed a document ending her status as a slave. She was not free to leave Islamic State territory, however.[67]

Talou told one of the authors that she had a secret agenda: If she could fool the Islamic State into thinking she was a good 'Muslim' by converting and marrying an Islamic State fighter, she might be able to escape one day. In a living room in Raqqa, Talou waited to meet the man who had been selected for her. A man with shoulder-length hair entered and introduced himself by his warrior name Abu Hani al-Lubnani. Layla Talou did not learn his real name was Basil Hassan until after her escape, when she was interrogated by U.S. soldiers.[68]

The wedding was held at the special sharia court in Raqqa, and Basil Hassan was ordered to pay a dowry of one dinar in the Islamic State's own currency for his new bride. Once they were married, Talou moved into a corner apartment in Raqqa's Bedouin district with her two children, her sister-in-law, and new husband.[69] At the time, she did not know that Basil Hassan was wanted by the United States, who considered him extremely dangerous.[70]

Special rules applied in Basil Hassan's home, and Talou was quick to learn them. At first, Hassan denied her a cellphone, and when he came home, he rang the doorbell twice. That was the code allowing Talou to unlock the front door. There were also rules for how Talou was to answer a call to the apartment's landline phone. "This was normal procedure among ISIS people. The person at the other end would then give me a message, and then I pressed the button again to indicate that I understood, and then the call ended," Talou told one of the authors.[71]

Hassan allowed her a modicum of liberty—for example, letting her sit, veiled, behind him on his motorbike when they went shopping. She was also allowed to leave the home alone to shop at a small store nearby. But if she rejected Basil Hassan in bed, he forced himself on her. "When I didn't want him to touch me, he didn't accept it. He told me I couldn't reject him because I was his wife," Talou told one of the authors.[72]

Hassan was influential in the Islamic State, and according to several individuals who met him in the caliphate and were interviewed by the authors, he regularly wore a suicide belt and communicated on a scratchy radio, the Islamic State's internal radio communication. Talou also says that Hassan told her that the white drone in his bag was used to provide aerial footage of suicide bombings carried out by the Islamic State. Talou said her relationship with Hassan was different to when she had been kept as a slave. He accepted her children living with them and told them that the children were not supposed to play with the drone he kept in the living room. After a bit more than a month living with Hassan in Raqqa, Talou said she managed to escape through a secret network helping Yazidi women get out of Islamic State hands, while Hassan was busy at the frontline. During their time together in Raqqa, Hassan had told her that he had been arrested by the Turkish police and later released as part of a prisoner swap.[73]

Talou's depiction of Hassan is corroborated by two other women that the authors located and interviewed. One of them, a Moroccan woman by the name of Islam Mitat, traveled to the Islamic State in the spring of 2015 and married Faisal Sahib, an Australian Islamic State fighter. Two years later, Mitat fled from the terrorist organization. She told one of the authors that during her time with the group, she met Basil Hassan, who her husband told her made bombs and was wanted by the Americans.[74]

The other woman, a Yazidi by the name of Nidal Ali Ismael, was only 16 when she was captured by the Islamic State. She told one of the authors[l] that upon Hassan's release in Turkey and return to Syria, he took her as his slave, and for two years she traveled around with him in large parts of the Islamic State's territory, in towns such as Deir ez-Zor, Aleppo, and Raqqa as well as Tal Afar and Mosul in Iraq. In many of the places, Nidal Ali Ismael had to help Hassan attach explosives to model planes and drones, she said. "Abu Hani made explosive charges and bombs for use against the enemy," she said.[75]

According to Layla Talou, when Basil Hassan spoke on the phone or held meetings at the apartment in Raqqa, he spoke English primarily, but on two occasions, she overheard conversations in Arabic, which she was better able to follow.

"He spoke to someone on the landline phone. They were planning to send someone to another country to carry out an attack, but I didn't know which country. I got the feeling that it was in Europe or another place in the West," Talou told one of the authors.[76]

Her suspicion that Basil Hassan was planning attacks in the West was correct.[77]

Controlling the 2017 Sydney Plane Plot

Around the time Layla Talou managed to escape from the Islamic State in 2017, Basil Hassan was busy planning such an attack in the West. Several intelligence sources told the authors that Basil Hassan was part of a group in Raqqa who in 2016 and 2017 tested aviation security in several countries. From Raqqa, Basil Hassan and others had parcels airmailed from Turkey and the Maldives among other countries. The group was testing aviation security vulnerabilities. Basil Hassan collaborated on airmailing test parcels to Qatar, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States, among other countries.[78]

This set the stage for a 2017 plot to blow up a passenger aircraft leaving from Sydney international airport in Australia that Basil Hassan and his group came close to carrying out.[79] A detailed description of the plot was presented at the trial against Australian brothers Khaled and Mahmoud Khayat who in December 2019 were sentenced to 40 and 36 years of prison, respectively, for the failed terrorism attack.[80] In April 2020, *CTC Sentinel* published an article by Andrew Zammit outlining in detail Basil Hassan's role orchestrating the terrorist plot, which drew on these court documents and the authors' DR reporting.[81] Sources made clear to DR that Ba-

l   She spoke from Canada in a phone interview. Canada granted her and her family asylum in 2017 after she escaped from the Islamic State. The interview was made with translation help from her father because Nidal has an epileptic condition that causes her to have speech and sensory difficulties.

A still image from an Islamic State propaganda video showing one of the group's fighters launching a drone

sil Hassan was the Islamic State operative described by Australian authorities as "the Controller" in the plot.[82] During the course of the plot, he provided guidance and instructions via the Telegram messaging app to the Khayat brothers in Sydney.[83] They had been connected to Hassan by a third brother, Tarek Khayat, who had joined the Islamic State and, like Hassan, was based in Raqqa, Syria.[84]

In April 2017, Basil Hassan's Islamic State group airmailed a parcel from Turkey by DHL to Australia that contained an almost-functioning bomb requiring final assembly. As Zammit noted, "Completing construction of the bomb nonetheless required close tutelage. On April 22, 2017, Basil Hassan sent Khaled Khayat an audio message through Telegram with instructions for how to wire the bomb."[85]

The group planned to place the bomb in a meat grinder, pack the grinder in a bag, and get the bag aboard a flight from Sydney to Abu Dhabi.[86] A fourth Khayat brother, who had no knowledge of the plot, was booked on a flight to Abu Dhabi on July 15, 2017, offering the group an opportunity to get the explosives onboard by giving him luggage as gifts to take to family members. As outlined by Zammit, "On July 14, 2017, the day before the planned flight, Basil Hassan advised Khaled on how to set the timer to ensure that the bomb would explode mid-flight. Hassan instructed Khaled to write down the calculations and to send a picture of his work."[87]

The trial established that a commonplace incident at Sydney airport on July 15, 2017, foiled the attempt. Without the traveling brother's knowledge, his hand luggage now contained the bomb. But when he checked in, a passenger service agent said the carry-on bags would weigh too much and, as outlined by Zammit, "that he would have to either pay to check in some of these bags as cabin baggage or would need to repack his hand luggage."[88]

Worried that the exchange with the passenger service agent had

increased the risk of the device being discovered, the plotters took the device out of their brother's hand luggage and disassembled the bomb at home.[89] According to the authors' information, the Danish intelligence services believe the exceeding of the weight limit was a stroke of luck.

The trial established that the Australian brothers were also planning a poison gas attack inside Australia and that they intensified efforts after they aborted the passenger plane plot. As outlined by Zammit, "On July 24, 2017, Hassan sent instructions to prepare and test the gas within a week. He also provided instructions on how much of the gas would be needed to create a lethal effect in the sorts of public spaces where they were planning to use it." On July 27, 2017, Hassan made clear to the Sydney plotters that the poison gas plot was the top priority.[90]

However, the poison gas attack plot failed, because 11 days after the flight from Sydney bound for Abu Dhabi, Australia was warned by a foreign intelligence service. Three days later, on July 29, 2017, the two brothers in Sydney were arrested.[91] According to several of the authors' sources inside and outside Denmark, it was in part intelligence from the Danish Defence Intelligence Service (FE) that led to the Australian arrests.

Nevertheless, the terrorist conspiracy was one of the most ambitious and innovative terrorist plots ever seen.[92] The emphasis Hassan placed on operational security doubtlessly contributed to the plot not being detected until after the aborted attempt to get the bomb on the plane. According to Zammit, Hassan's "direct provision of materials over a long distance, combined with the instructions necessary to use them, represented a key innovation in Islamic State cybercoaching."[93] His role orchestrating the plot also underlined how dangerous one single capable international attack planner can be, and had similarities to the coordination the

Pakistan-based British al-Qa`ida operative Rashid Rauf provided to U.K.-based plotters in al-Qa`ida's 2006 transatlantic airline plot.[94] Danish terrorism studies scholar Tore Hamming observed that "The Sydney aviation plot ... illustrates the role of Basil Hassan. Hassan can to some extent be labelled the Khalid Sheikh Muhammad of the Islamic State due to his alleged role in ExOps and his ambition to innovate."[95]

After the sentencing of the Khayat brothers, court documents were released that suggested Basil Hassan might have played a role in a terrorist attack in Egypt that killed 224 passengers on an airplane. In October 2015, Russian Metrojet 9268 took off from Sharm el-Sheik but exploded over the Sinai desert. The Islamic State claimed it placed an IED inside a soda can, which detonated mid-air.[96]

Police notes paraphrasing Khaled Khayat's comments during a police interrogation after his arrest stated that he claimed, "there was a plane blown up over Egypt" and that "it was done by these same people offshore, using the same methodology."[97]

Based on interviews with intelligence sources, in November 2019 the authors reported that investigators believed that Khaled Khayat appeared to be referring to Basil Hassan and his own brother (Tarek Khayat, the Islamic State operative in Raqqa, Syria).[m] After this was reported, other intelligence sources who spoke to the authors disputed this interpretation. One intelligence source told the authors that the investigation so far into the Metrojet bombing has not found any evidence that Basil Hassan was linked to the attack.[98]

Dead or Alive?

In the summer of 2017, one of Basil Hassan's closest relatives in Denmark got a text message saying that Hassan was dead. The messenger was a Dutch-African woman by the name of Umm Baraa, who voluntarily went to Syria around 2014. In Mosul, Umm Baraa married Hassan, and in the spring of 2017, she gave birth to their daughter.[99]

Umm Baraa and her two-year-old daughter arrived at the Al-Hol camp in 2019, having been among the very last Islamic State sympathizers to surrender at the group's last stronghold in eastern

Basil Hassan, Copenhagen police handout

Syria. A member of the DR reporting team met with her in Al-Hol, and she insisted that Hassan was dead. "I was told of his death by text message but also by someone in person." According to Umm Baraa, Basil Hassan had left Raqqa with her when the war against the Islamic State neared the town. According to her account, the couple then went to the town of Mayadeen in the province of Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria, but Hassan later went back to Raqqa and then Umm Baraa was told that he had been killed in Raqqa. "I have heard that some people don't believe he is dead. But I am sure of it and I don't understand why anyone would doubt it. He died on July 9 or 10, 2017."[100]

This timing appears to contradict information introduced at the trial of the 2017 Sydney plane plotters. As already outlined, the "Controller" (who the authors' reporting has established was Hassan) was still communicating with the Sydney-based plotters until very shortly before their arrest on July 29, 2017, sending one communication to the plotters in Australia, for example, on July 27, 2017.

However, in August 2017, a report in the Lebanese media outlet al-Diyar pointed to Hassan being killed in different circumstances. The outlet reported that an Islamic State commander by the name of "Basil H.H.," nicknamed al-Danmarki (the Dane) because of his Danish nationality, had been killed in the vicinity of the Lebanese town of Aarsal, near the border with Syria on August 21, 2017.[101]

The death of Basil Hassan has never been officially confirmed.

"We are in a situation today where we can't confirm it with 100% accuracy. We can't rule out that he hasn't been tempted to play dead," Lars Findsen, the director of Denmark's Defence Intelligence Service, said in 2017.[102]

Danish counterterrorism officials are still not certain that he is dead.[103]   CTC

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m   As already noted, Tarek Khayat had connected his two Sydney-based brothers Khaled and Mahmoud Khayat to Hassan. For more on Tarek Khayat's role in the 2017 Sydney airline plot, see Andrew Zammit, "New Developments in the Islamic State's External Operations: The 2017 Sydney Plane Plot," *CTC Sentinel* 10:9 (2017) and Andrew Zammit, "Operation Silves: Inside the 2017 Islamic State Sydney Plane Plot," *CTC Sentinel* 13:4 (2020).

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Remaining and Expanding: The Recovery of Islamic State Operations in Iraq in 2019-2020

By Michael Knights and Alex Almeida

The Islamic State has recovered from its territorial defeats since 2017 to mount a strong and sustained resurgence as an insurgent force inside Iraq. A new analysis of attack metrics from the past 18 months paints a picture of an Islamic State insurgency that has regained its balance, spread out across many more areas, and reclaimed significant tactical proficiency. Now operating at the same levels it achieved in 2012, a number of factors suggest that the Islamic State could further ramp up its rural insurgency in 2020 and 2021. An input of experienced cadres from Syria, a downturn in Iraqi and coalition effectiveness, and now the disruption of a combined COVID and economic crisis will likely all feed into an escalating campaign of attrition against the Iraqi state, military, and tribes.

The Islamic State continues to show very significant resilience inside Iraq, undertaking a surge in attack activities in the second half of 2019 and the first quarter of 2020. According to the authors' dataset, the number of reported Islamic State attacks increased from 1,470 in 2018 to 1,669 in 2019, with 566 reported attacks in the first quarter of 2020 alone.[1] These national-level figures, supported by detailed qualitative and province-by-province breakdowns in the following sections, paint a picture of a militant organization that is reestablishing itself in Iraq, possibly drawing (in the authors' assessment) on a cadre of experienced tactical leaders and bomb makers that returned from the Syrian battlefields in 2019.[2][a] As prior articles in *CTC Sentinel* have noted,[3] the movement has undertaken

an agile, fluid, and pragmatic shift back to insurgency in every area of Iraq where the group has lost physical control of populations and resources. In areas such as Diyala province, which this publication identified in 2016[4] as the likely future locus for Islamic State operations,[5] the insurgency has been continuously operating since 2003 and is now recovering strongly, becoming the most active Islamic State wilaya (province) in 2019 and 2020.[b]

This article extends the metrics-based analysis used in two prior *CTC Sentinel* pieces in 2017 and 2018,[6] adding a further year and a half of Islamic State attack metrics in Iraq, picking up from October 2018 (where the last analysis ended) to the end of March 2020.[c] As in the prior study, this article looks at Islamic State attacks in Anbar,

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a   A theme that will be developed and evidenced throughout is the proliferation of high-quality attacks in higher numbers in Iraq in the middle months of 2019, coincident with the relocation of Iraq cadres following the fall of the last Islamic State territorial holdings in Syria in early 2019.

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b   All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset. The dataset brings together declassified coalition SIGACT data plus private security company and open-source SIGACT data used to supplement and extend the dataset as coalition incident collection degraded in 2009-2011 and was absent in 2012-2014. New data since 2014 has been added to the dataset to bring it up to date (as of the end of March 2020). The dataset includes non-duplicative inputs from open source reporting, diplomatic security data, private security company incident data, Iraqi incident data, and U.S. government inputs. The author adopted the same conservative standard as was used in prior attack metric studies to produce comparable results. The dataset was scoured manually, including individual consideration of every SIGACT in the set, with the intention of filtering out incidents that are probably not related to Islamic State activity, such as murders, and this is achieved by applying a highly selective filter in areas where criminality is as or more likely than Islamic State action, such as Baghdad city and many other urban environments. This process includes expansive weeding-out of "legacy IED" incidents (caused by explosive remnants of war) and exclusion of likely factional and criminal incidents, including all incidents in Baghdad city. The dataset also tries to include only enemy-initiated (i.e., Islamic State, not Shi`a militia) actions, and filters out SIGACTS that appear to be security force-initiated actions, meaning security force raids that result in combat. A difficult coding issue relates to security force encounters with explosive devices during patrols, which are included as a form of enemy-initiated action and which will be discussed below. As a result, readers should note that the presented attack numbers are not only a partial sample of Islamic State attacks (because some incidents are not reported) but are also a conservative under-counting of low visibility Islamic State incidents (for instance, because some urban criminal activity may, in fact, be Islamic State racketeering).

The dataset includes numerous subcategories of attacks such as small-arms fire, improvised explosive device, indirect fire, drive-by shooting, and so on. To qualify as an attack, the action must be started, but may not necessarily be completed as intended, which would be very difficult to judge. Thus, a suicide bomber detonating at a checkpoint would count as an attack, but one who self-detonated during a raid would not count. Further methodological notes on the refinement of the dataset are included in other footnotes below.

c   The author's December 2018 *CTC Sentinel* study included metrics up to the end of October 2018. Data from October 1, 2018, was included in the new study to facilitate quarterly comparisons of data. Michael Knights, "The Islamic State Inside Iraq: Losing Power or Preserving Strength?" *CTC Sentinel* 11:12 (2018).
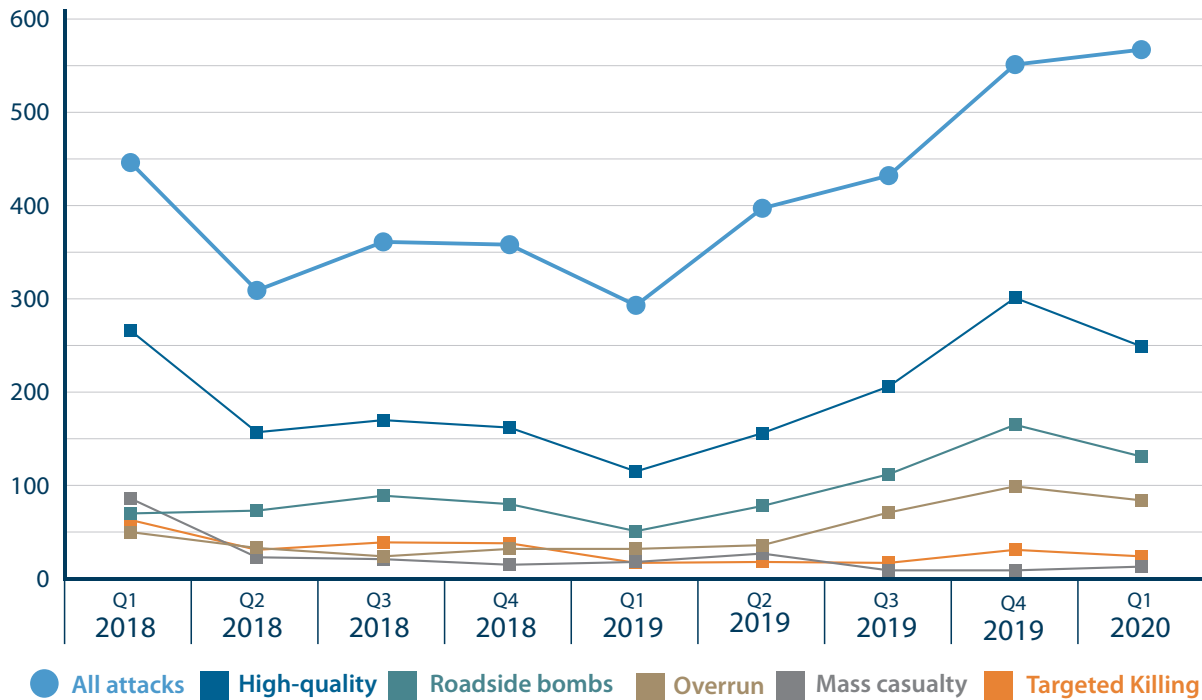
Figure 1: Iraq national attack trends, by attack type. *The graph plots all attacks, high quality attacks, and the four types of high quality attacks (roadside bombs; overrun; mass casualty; targeted killing)*

Salah al-Din, Baghdad's rural "belts,"[d] Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Diyala. To maximize comparability, this analysis used exactly the same data collection and collation methodology[e] as the December 2018 *CTC Sentinel* study. Attacks were again broken down into explosive[f] or non-explosive events, and also by the four categories of high-quality attacks (effective roadside bombings,[g] attempts to overrun Iraqi security force checkpoints or outposts,[h] person-specific targeted at-

tacks,[i] and attempted mass-casualty attacks[j]). Like any set of attack metrics, this analysis is drawing on a partial sample, which probably favors more visible attacks types (explosions, major attacks) over more subtle enemy-initiated actions (such as kidnap or intimidation). Nevertheless, much can be learned from the immersive, manual coding of thousands of geospatially-mapped attacks.

In the following sections, the authors will look at national attacks trends, then proceed governorate-by-governorate to view the variegated nature of attack trends in different tactical environments, and finally review qualitative trends in attack quality and discuss the possible factors behind the Islamic State's partial recovery inside Iraq.

Overall National Trends in Islamic State Activity

The December 2018 *CTC Sentinel* study of Islamic State attack metrics told the story of a steep decline in operational activities in Iraq in late 2017 that extended into the following year. The Islamic State

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d   The rural districts bordering Baghdad but not within the city limits (*amanat*) include places like Taji, Mushahidah, Soba al-Bour, Tarimiyah, Husseiniyah, Rashidiyah, Nahrawan, Salman Pak, Suwayrah, Arab Jabour, Yusufiyah, Latifiyah, Iskandariyah, and Abu Ghraib.

e   The authors updated their dataset of Iraq attack metrics to include November and December 2018, all of 2019, and the first quarter of 2020.

f   Explosive events include SIGACT categories such as Improvised Explosive Device (IED), Under-Vehicle IED (UVIED), vehicle-carried or vehicle-concealed IEDs, all categories of suicide bombing, indirect fire, hand grenade and rocket-propelled grenade attacks, guided missile attacks, plus recoilless rifle and improvised rockets. Self-detonation of suicide vests to prevent capture are not counted.

g   Defined in the author's dataset as IED attacks on vehicles that are assessed to have struck the specific type of target preferred by the attacker, and to have initiated effectively. This is clearly highly subjective but such uncertainty is inevitable and acceptable if recognized from the outset and applied consistently.

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

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i   Inferred in the author's dataset by connecting the target type with circumstantial details of the attack to eliminate the likelihood that the individual was not the intended victim of the attack. As noted, Baghdad city has been excluded from the dataset, and a heavy filter is applied to most urban areas and areas known to suffer high levels of criminal, ethno-sectarian, and militia murders (for instance, Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu cities). If the area or target has seen similar Islamic State assassinations, the SIGACT stands a better chance of being counted in the Islamic State attack metrics used in this study. The authors have endeavored to exclude apparent revenge attacks on suspected Islamic State members by Iraqi tribes, which are common.

j   Defined in the author's dataset as IED attacks on static locations that are assessed as being intended to cause 10 or more civilian or security force casualties. This excludes most roadside bombings, which target vehicles with lower capacity than 10 persons.

undertook a monthly average of 490.6 attacks in 2017, dropping sharply to 122.5 per month in 2018.[7] This decline continued into 2019, with attacks bottoming-out at an average of 97.3 attacks per month in the second quarter of 2019.[8]

In every quarter since then, the overall national tally of Islamic State attacks has grown. In Q2 2019, there were 132 attacks per month, followed by 143.6 attacks per month in Q3 2019.[9] In the last quarter of 2019, there were 183.3 attacks per month, and there were 188.6 attacks per month in Q1 2020.[10] The year-on-year comparison of attacks in Q1 2019 versus Q1 2020 shows a 94% increase in attacks, from 292 in the first quarter of 2019 to 566 in the first quarter of this year.[11] The almost doubling of attacks in a year is strong and steady recovery by anyone's standards,[k] even if the Islamic State is still a shadow of its former self in overall attack numbers. According to the SIGACT database, in 2019, the Islamic State undertook 1,669 attacks in Iraq, much lower than the 5,888 in 2017 or the 6,216 in 2013, and a tiny fraction of the 50,159 enemy-initiated attacks in the year of peak violence in 2007.[12]

A breakdown of the attack metrics by broad categories provides further insights into the nature of the partial recovery. At the national level, the proportion of explosive to non-explosive events stayed roughly stable over the coverage period (18 months or six quarters, from October 1, 2018, to March 31, 2020), with explosive incidents varying from 41-53% of all attacks across the quarters.[13] Explosive incidents more than doubled in raw numbers between the low of 40.3 per month in Q1 2019 and 87.3 per month in Q1 2020.[14] The rough mirroring of the increase in explosive attack events to the growth of all attack events provides reinforcing evidence of an overall trend of steady recovery of Islamic State attacks, due to the relatively high confidence analysts can have that explosive events will be missed less often and represent a more reliable category of metric (if counted diligently).[l] Once again, though the Islamic State is capable of delivering 826 explosive attacks a year (in 2019),[15] this is still a pale shadow of the industrial-scale bombings of 2017 (2,868), 2013 (3,316), or even a previous low point of Islamic State operations in 2011 (1,704) when the group operated under the name the Islamic State of Iraq.[16]

At the national level, high-quality attacks (which also tend to be higher-visibility) also rose by 141%, from 104 high-quality attacks in Q1 2019 to 251 such incidents in Q1 2020.[17] Between these two bookend quarters, the recovery was steady, with high-quality attacks rising to 153 in Q2 2019, 195 in Q3, and 298 in Q4.[18] This recovery of quality attacks was not uniform across the different subclasses, however: 2019 witnessed strong growth in effective roadside bombings (from 308 in 2018 to 402 in 2019)[19] and in overrun attempts on checkpoints and bases (from 135 in 2018 to 234 in 2019).[20] The number of targeted killings (of tribal chiefs and village

elders, called *mukhtars*) steeply declined from 167 in 2018 to 79 in 2019, as did attacks intended to create mass casualties (from 141 in 2018 to 59 in 2019).[21] In Q1 2018, there were eight attempted mass-casualty attacks, reportedly causing 32 deaths and 124 persons wounded. In Q1 2019, there were five attempted mass-casualty attacks and 11 killed and 51 wounded. In Q1 2020, there were three attempted mass-casualty attacks, and two killed and 21 wounded. This suggests a downward trend in mass-casualty attacks and per attack lethality.[22] Qualitative analysis of attack patterns at the local level (which will be explored in full in the below sections) suggests an influx of higher-quality tactical leaders and bomb makers in the second quarter of 2019, a date range that coincides with the collapse of the last pockets of Islamic State territorial control in Syria.[m]

Table 1: Iraq national attack data, by attack type

	All Attacks	High-Quality	Road-side Bombs	Overrun	Mass Casualty	Targeted Killing
Q1 2018	445	265	69	49	85	62
Q2 2018	308	156	72	32	22	30
Q3 2018	360	169	88	23	20	38
Q4 2018	357	161	79	31	14	37
Q1 2019	292	114	50	31	17	16
Q2 2019	396	155	77	35	26	17
Q3 2019	431	205	111	70	8	16
Q4 2019	550	300	164	98	8	30
Q1 2020	566	248	130	83	12	23

Some of the most interesting trends can be observed by looking at the differing situations in the provinces suffering from Islamic State insurgency—Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Kirkuk, Nineveh, and Salah al-Din. In 2018, Kirkuk was the most attacked province (370 attacks), followed by Diyala (340) and Baghdad (328).[n] In 2019, the order changed: Diyala was by far the most attacked (550), well ahead of newly second-ranked Nineveh (293), Kirkuk (228), Baghdad (214), Salah al-Din (142), and Anbar (105).[23][o]

In Q1 2020, Kirkuk slipped even lower—ranked fifth of the six

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k   The U.N. Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team noted that the Islamic State had "begun to reassert itself in both the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq, mounting increasingly bold insurgent attacks" in its December 2019 report. See "Letter dated 27 December 2019 from the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team ... concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities," United Nations, p. 3.

l   Of particular note, it is vital to eliminate detonation or disposal of old mass-emplaced "legacy IEDs." The authors paid particular attention to this distinction, which is often mentioned explicitly in reporting and hinted at in imagery of IED finds.

m   Baghouz, the last stronghold of the Islamic State in Syria, was liberated in March 2019. "Islamic State group defeated as final territory lost, US-backed forces say," BBC, March 23, 2019.

n   Nineveh ranked fourth with 211 attacks in 2018, Salah al-Din fifth with 157 attacks, and Anbar last with 91. All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.

o   A 61% increase in attacks in Diyala, a 38% increase in Nineveh, and a 15% rise in Anbar offset drops in Kirkuk (-39%), Baghdad (-35%), and Salah al-Din (-10%).
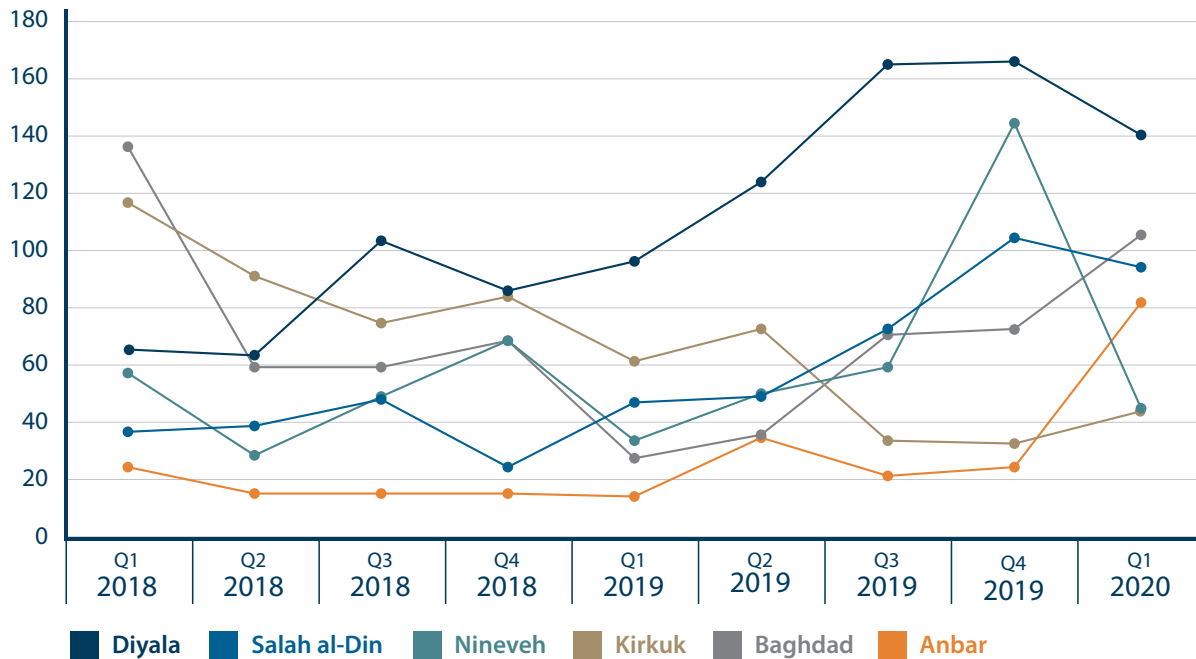
Figure 2a: Iraq provincial attack trends, by province (Note: The provincial boundaries are Iraqi provincial/governorate boundaries, not those of the Islamic State wilayat. One reason for this choice is that government provinces are stable boundaries, while Islamic State boundaries shift, allowing for comparable counting across years.)

provinces in attack numbers with 46 attacks *in the quarter* (i.e., not comparable to the annual figures above).[24] In the first quarter of this year, Diyala had the most attacks (140), followed by Baghdad (106) and Nineveh (97).[p] Across the last 27 months of metrics monitored by the authors (i.e., all of 2018 and 2019, plus Q1 2020), Diyala has been the most consistently active operating environment for the Islamic State, totaling 1,030 attacks, versus 644 for Kirkuk and 601 in Nineveh.[q] To dig more deeply into provincial dynamics and trends, the following sections will proceed governorate-by-governorate across the six areas.

Anbar

In the author's December 2018 *CTC Sentinel* metrics analysis, Anbar had the fewest Islamic State attacks, and this pattern held for most of 2019.[25] In 2018, the monthly average of Islamic State attacks in Anbar was 7.0, and in 2019, it showed little annual change at 8.7 per month.[26] Yet the insurgency in Anbar showed signs of evolution even as attack numbers stayed low. From Q2 2019 onward, Anbar saw the return of attempted mass-casualty attacks, including tentative efforts to restore an ability to strike in cities like Ramadi and Hit.[27] Intimidation of rural tribes increased, including terror tactics such as attempted suicide bombings targeting markets, mosques, and shepherds.[28] Larger and newer-looking weapons caches began to show up in the Hit to Ramadi corridor, suggestive of materiel having been moved down the Euphrates River Valley in

2019 and staged within striking distance of Hit, Ramadi, Fallujah, and Baghdad.[r]

By Q1 2020, Anbar was a much more active theater of war, with monthly average attacks jumping to 27.6—triple the average of 2019.[29] Roadside bombings are now more common, tripling from 1.9 per month in 2019 to 6.6 per month in Q1 2020.[30] A favored target set appears to be the soft-skinned civilian vehicles of the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) units moving along the desert highway system between Al-Qaim and Rutbah, which are struck from rural redoubts on the high plateau of Wadi Horan, a launchpad that is ringed on all sides by major highways.[31] The first quarter of 2020 also saw larger-scale tactical operations at platoon strength (30 or more men) with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and mortars, as well as more sniper attacks and efforts to kill village *mukhtars*.[32] As noted, Anbar ended Q1 2020 as the fourth most active province in Iraq for the Islamic State, but this trend requires constant monitoring because Anbar's insurgency has a pattern of regular peaks and troughs over the last two years,[33] possibly indicative of disruptive counterinsurgency by Iraq's very active Jazeera and al-Badi-

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p   After Nineveh ranked Anbar (83 in the quarter), then Kirkuk (46) and Salah al-Din (45). All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.

q   Over the 27 months between January 2018 and March 2020, rural Baghdad saw 498 attacks, Salah al-Din 344, and Anbar 277. All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.

r   Caches unearthed in Anbar in late 2019 appear to be in better preserved condition, in larger quantity, and more standardized. To give examples, on September 28, 2019, four tons of C4 were discovered in cache near Hit. On October 9, 2019, a large cache of 35 RPGs and 30 122mm rockets were located in the same Anbar-Baghdad corridor at Karma. On October 10, 2019, two new training camps were uncovered in Hit, specializing in remote-controlled and under-vehicle bomb-making. Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset.

The areas around Lake Thar Thar (Brandon Mohr)

yah Operations Command and Anbar Operations Command.[s] If the trend continues, then Anbar will have returned to roughly the attack levels seen in 2012, when there was an average of 33 attacks per month.[34]

Salah al-Din

Whereas Salah al-Din was a consistent provider of attack metrics in the pre-2011 insurgency (being astride the north-south Main Supply Route of U.S. forces), it remains a comparatively sleepy province for today's Islamic State. Consistently the lowest or second-lowest ranked province for attacks, Salah al-Din is nonetheless seeing signs of Islamic State recovery. In 2019, Islamic State attacks in Salah al-Din experienced four mini-surges (followed by dips) in January, May, September, and December, but each was stronger than the last one and left the overall attack numbers at a higher level after it concluded. Attacks per month rose from 13 in Q1 2019 to 24.6 in Q3 and 35 per month in Q4, and then stayed close to this level in Q1 2020.[35 t] For comparison, this is still far lower than the 116 monthly attacks in 2013 or the 84 monthly attacks in 2017, but higher than 2012 levels of 19 attacks per month.[36]

In the authors' assessment, the growth patterns in 2019 create the sense of an insurgency that is being primed and exercised, progressively warming-up different corners of the province. Qualitative analysis provides further insights. The strongest apparent trend is an injection of bomb-making and roadside bomb emplacement capability in Q3 2019,[37 u] as well as a shift toward taking on isolated checkpoints in stand-up fights involving platoon-sized Islamic State units,[38 v] suggestive (in the authors' assessment) of improved tactical leadership. Counter-collaboration strikes on Sunni preachers and Tribal Mobilization Force officers are on the increase.[39] There were three targeted killings in Salah al-Din in the first half of 2019 versus five in the second half of 2019.[40] In the authors' assessment, the strongest Islamic State operating environment in Salah al-Din is the Jallam Desert, which backs onto a range of target systems such as Samarra, the Alas oilfield, Tuz Khurmatu, and provincial borders with southern Kirkuk and western Diyala.[41 w]

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s   JBOC and AOC have been two of the Iraqi headquarters most closely advised by the U.S.-led Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), from bases in Al-Asad and Taqqudum. Based on the authors' conversations with U.S. intelligence officers working on Iraq, 2018 and 2019; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.

t   Q1 2020 attacks in Salah al-Din totaled 95, or 31.6 per month.

u   From around July 2019 onward, there are hints of better designed and conceived roadside bombs, and this trend solidifies from September 2019. Features of the new IED threat environment include increased numbers of highly lethal IED incidents, use of "come-on" tactics to lure responding security forces into IED kill zones, and increased use of house-borne IEDs (booby-trapped houses).

v   So-called "complex attacks" become more frequent in the second half of 2019, including the combined use of multiple attack types (small arms, RPG, sniper, and mortar fire) in attacks.

w   The Jallam Desert (and particularly the Mutaibijah area) is the central point in four attack cluster locations: Alas oilfield, east Samarra, the Udaim River Valley and Baghdad-Kirkuk road, and the Tigris River Valley towns north of Balad and Yethrib. Qualitative insight drawn from heat-map visualization of the authors' geolocated dataset.
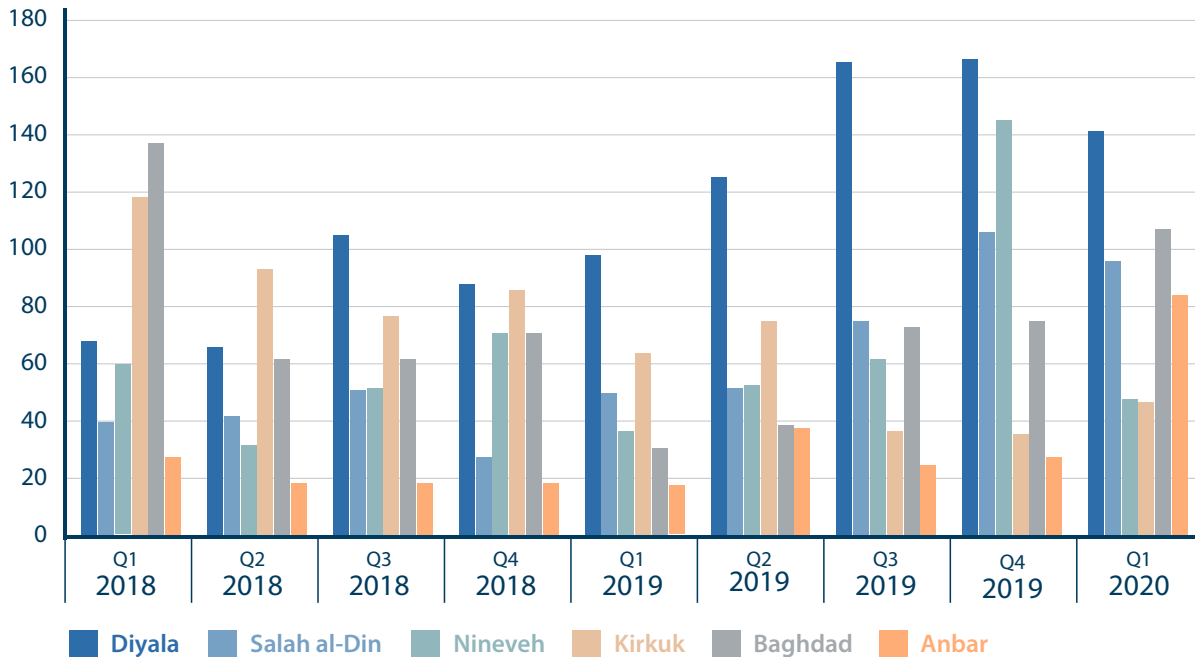
Figure 2b: Iraq provincial attack trends, by province *(Note: The provincial boundaries are Iraqi provincial/governorate boundaries, not those of the Islamic State wilayat. One reason for this choice is that government provinces are stable boundaries, while Islamic State boundaries shift, allowing for comparable counting across years.)*

Nineveh

Nineveh was fully liberated from Islamic State territorial control in August 2017 and was the scene of a patchy and reasonably weak Islamic State insurgency during 2018, averaging 17.5 attacks per month.[42] As the December 2018 *CTC Sentinel* metrics analysis noted, however, the rate of attacks was steadily increasing by the end of 2018,[43][x] with a focus on the rural Tigris River Valley (TRV) areas south of Mosul city. This gradual increase gave way to a more sudden uptick in attacks in the second half of 2019, when there were 34.1 attacks per month, about double the 2018 levels.[44] This rate of attacks was sustained in Q1 2020,[45][y] suggesting to the authors a fairly stable new plateau of attacks in Nineveh.

Today's insurgency in Nineveh is still miniscule compared to Islamic State performance in prior years: there were 278 attacks per month in 2013, of which 218.5 occurred in Mosul city.[46] In March 2020, there were just 31 attacks in the province and no enemy-initiated attacks in the city.[47] Available metrics starkly underline the de-activation of urban Mosul as an insurgent operating environment: In 2013, there were a total of 2,622 attacks in Mosul city, versus 22 in 2019.[48] This means that Mosul suffered as many attacks in a year (2019) as were occurring every three days in 2013.[49]

Out in the rural areas, the Islamic State has been much more active. The sustained surge of attacks since the summer of 2019 was driven primarily by a steep increase in the number and quality of roadside bombings.[50][z] In 2018, there were 4.1 effective roadside bombings per month in Nineveh, a rate that tripled to 13.1 such attacks per month in the second half of 2019 and which was sus-

tained near this higher level in Q1 2020.[51][aa] As in other parts of Iraq, the third quarter of 2019 saw a gradual proliferation of advanced tactics by IED teams in Nineveh: "daisy-chaining" of multiple IEDs to expand kill zones, booby-trapping houses to kill security forces, and "come-on" attacks (using tactical actions to draw forces onto roadside bombs).[52]

In 2018, the Islamic State had terrorized southern Nineveh's TRV with "*mukhtar* slayings"—nocturnal raids to kill village leaders.[53] Though the practice certainly has not stopped, it did become less frequent. In Q1 2018, an average of 5.3 such targeted assassinations were undertaken each month, while by Q1 2020 the rate had more than halved to two per month.[54] One driver for this reduction in attacks on *mukhtars* may be the added protection granted by the activation in May 2019 of an expansive network of "village guard" forces in 50 villages in the TRV south of Mosul, an initiative developed specifically to give hamlets some capacity to defend against nocturnal raids.[55] Despite this partial success, the Islamic State now has a wider range of attack cells operational in Nineveh than one year ago, with distinct attack groups operational in at least 11 areas[ab] in Q1 2020, versus six in December 2018.

Kirkuk

Kirkuk poses a real analytical quandary, having been the most active province for Islamic State attacks in 2018 (with 30.8 attacks per month) but slipping to third ranking in 2019 (with 11.2 monthly attacks) and fifth ranking in Q1 2020 (with 15.3 monthly attacks, put

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x   Q4 2018 saw 23.3 attacks per month.

y   Q1 2020 saw 32.3 attacks per month.

z   The largest rise of any class of high-quality attack was roadside bombs, jumping from 21 in Nineveh in Q3 2019 to 58 in Nineveh in Q4 2019.

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aa   Q1 2020 saw 11.6 effective roadside bombing attacks per month.

ab   In the authors' views, these comprise: East Mosul; Ash Shura/Hammam al-Alil; Qayyarah; Sharqat; Jurn triangle; the Hatra/Iraq-Turkey Pipeline corridor southwest of Mosul; Badush/Atashana/west Mosul; Tal Afar/Muhallabiyah; Tal Afar/Ayadhiyah; Sinjar/Baaj; and Lake Sunnislah/Jazeera. The December 2018 estimate of six operating areas in Nineveh can be found in footnote I in Knights, "The Islamic State Inside Iraq."

Northwest Iraq (Brandon Mohr)

in the shade by more active Islamic State cells in other provinces).[56] Attack analysis reveals there was a steep decline in high-quality attacks in Kirkuk since 2018 (with an average of 15.1 high-quality attacks per month in 2018 and only 3.2 in the latter half of 2019 and 3.6 in Q1 2020).[57] Roadside bombings halved in the same period, and "*mukhtar* slayings" appear to have almost disappeared (from 3.5 per month in 2018 to 0.75 per month in the latter half of 2019).[58 ac] Is this impression of a downturn in attacks credible, and if so, why did it occur against a backdrop of national-level Islamic State regrowth?

First, it is worth remembering that Kirkuk was never a particularly high-tempo province for the Islamic State, even in its heyday. In 2013, the average number of monthly attacks was 57, and was just 26 per month in 2011.[59] In the authors' view, the insurgencies in Kirkuk—arguably a cluster of rather localized tribal resistance actions—have always had a detached and semi-autonomous feel.[ad] A primary factor may be the swamping of the Kirkuk rural heartland with security forces since later 2018, a trend that the Decem-

ber 2018 *CTC Sentinel* analysis noted was resulting in a downturn of attack numbers.[60] The footprint of the security forces in rural areas of Kirkuk was systematically reinforced from around four Federal Police brigades in the first quarter of 2018 to the current total around 12 Federal Police and three army brigades.[61] Federal Police operations also improved during the course of 2019 as they acclimated to the local conditions and geography, pushing out into peripheral rural areas and stepping up patrolling of secondary local road systems.[62] The addition of a U.S. Special Forces effort based out of K1 airbase outside Kirkuk city in Q4 2018, which coordinated Iraqi counterinsurgency operations in the province (despite harassment by Iran-backed militias) and drove an aggressive campaign of raids into rural insurgent sanctuaries by Iraqi counterterrorism forces for most of 2019, further increased the pressure on the local insurgency.[63]

Though fewer visible Islamic State attacks were logged in Kirkuk, the ferocity of the witnessed actions in 2019 cannot be doubted. The Islamic State managed to mount a series of small anti-civilian IED bombings against Kirkuk city in the middle months of the year as well as a vindictive harassment campaign against the villages of the

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ac   In Q1 2020, there were an average of one targeted assassination per month, suggesting quite a sustained trend of reduced assassinations across three quarters.

ad   In the authors' view, building on impressions developed over the last 17 years of insurgency, there would seem to be four major insurgencies in Kirkuk: one Jabbouri-led in Hawijah-Riyadh and Zab-Abassi; one Obeidi-led in Rashad-Hamrin; one outlier rural tribal insurgency in Ghayda sub-district in the south of the province; and one suburban insurgency in the Dibis district, close to Kirkuk city.

Kakai micro-minority[ae] along the Kirkuk to Baghdad highway.[64][af] Though less frequently, community leaders have still been murdered and intimidated. (In one case, a tribal sheikh's daughter was beheaded.[65][ag]) Insurgents have been kidnapping and ransoming farmers[ah] and extorting money using the threat to destroy irrigation pumps and farm vehicles.[66] Some of the most sophisticated road-side bombing techniques in Iraq were demonstrated in Kirkuk in the last year, such as IEDs set at insurgent mortar launch locations (to hit so-called "baseplate patrols" looking for the launch point), bombs used to kill quick reaction forces trying to reach a *mukhtar* site under attack, and the explosive booby-trapping of bodies.[67]

Baghdad Belts

Rural Baghdad functions not only as the outlying agricultural districts of the capital but also as a "ring road" for the Islamic State to pass fighters from the Euphrates River Valley (linking Syria and Anbar) toward other wilayat such as Salah al-Din and Diyala.[ai] Baghdad's wealthy 'exurbs,' truck stops, and "farm-to-market" roads and transshipment points are also major potential money-makers.[68][aj] In 2017, as the December 2018 *CTC Sentinel* metrics study noted, the Islamic State mounted a very energetic rural intimidation and extortion campaign in the Baghdad belts, an effort that seemed to collapse by mid-2018 for obscure reasons.[ak] In the latter half of 2018 and the first half of 2019, the Islamic State's attack metrics in rural Baghdad were weaker than at any time since the insurgency began in 2003.[69] In 2019, Islamic State attacks in rural Baghdad averaged 17.8 per month, versus 33.6 per month in the insurgency's previous national low point in 2011.[70]

Relief did not last long. The level of Islamic State activity began a

bounce back from early in the third quarter of 2019. In the first half of 2019, attacks averaged 11.3 per month, in the second half 24.3 per month, and in Q1 2020, the average reached 35.3 per month.[71] Though still half of the 2017 average of 67.3 attacks per month, there has undoubtedly been a partial recovery of attack metrics in rural Baghdad.[72] This has partly come from a rise in high-quality attacks, including a doubling of effective roadside bombings and a steep increase in overrun attacks on rural checkpoints and small patrol bases.[73] For illustration, in the first half of 2019 there were two effective roadside bombings in rural Baghdad, versus 39 in the second half of the year and 22 alone in Q1 2020.[74] Likewise, there were only two efforts to overrun rural checkpoints in the first half of 2019 versus 26 in the latter half and 10 in Q1 2020.[75] By the start of 2020, the rural Baghdad area was back to the levels of violence seen at the start of 2018, albeit now focused primarily on security force targets as opposed to civilians.[76]

The increase in Islamic State operations around Baghdad has manifested primarily in the northern and western belts. The northern Baghdad belts fall under the Islamic State's Shamal al-Baghdad Wilayat, which also covers parts of neighboring southern Salah ad-Din province.[77] Centered on the historic insurgent bastion of Tarmiyah, the area is a vital thoroughfare connecting a range of other geographic sub-sectors of the insurgency, including the Euphrates corridor west of Baghdad and the Tigris and Diyala river valley systems extending out to the north and east. In particular, the area seems to serve as hub for fighters and materiel flowing down the Euphrates River Valley (ERV) from Syria and pooling in the triangle between Hit, Fallujah/Karma, and the southern shores of Lake Thar Thar.[78]

Since July 2019, the Islamic State has fought far harder to preserve and expand its rural freedom of movement in northern Baghdad areas like Tarmiyah, Mushahidah, Taji, and Soba Saab al-Bour.[79] The Islamic State has seen a gradual evolution from a primarily assassination-based mode of resistance in the first half of 2019 to a more varied model that includes use of advanced IEDs and bombing tactics (daisy-chaining and come-on attacks), booby-trapped houses, and sniper operations.[80] In western Baghdad, one factor boosting the province's overall numbers was the reactivation of an effective roadside bombing cell in the Abu Ghraib area in 2019.[81] In the southern belts, an old insurgent operating zone in Madain also reactivated, one factor resulting in southern Baghdad experiencing as many attacks in Q1 2020 as in the whole of 2019.[al]

Diyala

As flagged by the authors in a *CTC Sentinel* analysis in 2016,[82] the Diyala wilaya has strong potential to be the most consistent producer of Islamic State attacks in Iraq because of the intense sectarian tensions in this cross-sectarian province and because the Islamic State never actually controlled Diyala and thus never had to suffer the disruption of adjusting back to an insurgency model. This has been borne out, with Diyala showing by far the highest aggregate

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ae   The Kakai is an Iraqi micro-minority who live in relatively high concentrations along the Baghdad-Kirkuk road. Based on the authors' experience of traveling in the region and communicating with Kakai villagers.

af   The Rashad and Ghayda areas are the launchpad for regular mortar attacks on Kakai and Turkmen areas in Daquq district. In additional village raids, the Islamic State also periodically attacks pre-announced public events such as football games.

ag   The sheikh was from Hawd 13 village in Abbasi, and his daughter was found beheaded on September 30, 2019. All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.

ah   It would not be unusual for a farmer who heads a household to be ransomed for $40,000-70,000 in a successful kidnap operation. Based on the authors' conversations with U.S. intelligence officers working on Iraq, 2019 and 2020; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.

ai   This was also the case prior to 2011, with the northwestern quadrant of the Baghdad belts linking the insurgency sub-systems in the Euphrates and Tigris River Valleys. See *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War, Volume 2: Surge and Withdrawal, 2007-2011*, U.S. Army pp. 61, 201-202. The so-called "Thar Thar seam"—where various unit boundaries met—and the northern belt were al-Qa`ida in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq's most important transit routes from the Euphrates to Tigris River Valleys.

aj   The Baghdad belts are heavily irrigated farmlands that contain the ranches of former government officials and the town houses of tribal sheikhs and serve as a logistics hub for trucking companies and vegetable markets.

ak   To give a stark metric showing the collapse of the Islamic State market bombing campaign, there was an average of 21.6 market bombings in the Baghdad belts per month in Q1 2018, versus an average of 1 per month in Q1 2020, a fair representation of typical quarters recently. It remains unclear exactly why the effort ceased. All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.

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al   There were 18 attacks in southern Baghdad in the whole of 2019, versus 18 in the first quarter of 2020 alone. All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.

Diyala and surrounding areas (Brandon Mohr)

provincial attack total over the last 27 months of monitoring.[am] The steep downturn in Diyala attacks recorded by the December 2018 *CTC Sentinel* metrics analysis has now been partially reversed. Though not back up to the 2017 average of 79.6 attacks per month, the second half of 2019 averaged 59.8 attacks per month before settling down to 45.8 attacks per month in Q1 2020.[83 an] This counts as strong and sustained partial recovery.

As ever, tactical and local trends in Diyala attacks tell a fascinating and grim story of communities at war in the Diyala River Valley. Like Kirkuk's farmlands, Diyala has a somewhat disconnected dy-

namic all of its own, a war within a war, showing a quite different pattern from the Islamic State wilayat with closer connections to Syria and the western Iraqi deserts.[84] Roadside bombing in Diyala did increase in quantity and quality during the second half of 2019, hinting at a similar injection of talent as seen in other areas.[ao] Yet the surge in Diyala was broader than IED employment, with over-run attempts on security force checkpoints quadrupling from 2.4 per month in 2018 to an average of 10 per month in the second half of 2019.[85 ap] Sniping attacks also proliferated, rising fourfold from an average of 1.8 attacks in the first half of 2019 to 7.6 attacks per

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am In the 27 months between the start of January 2018 to the end of March 2020, Diyala recorded 1,030 attacks, Kirkuk showed 644, Nineveh 601, Baghdad 498, Salah al-Din 344, and Anbar 277. All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.

an   Of interest, the Islamic State claims for Diyala are higher (for instance, 65 for December 2019 versus the authors' 55) but not by a great margin. Statistics provided by Aaron Zelin, via email to the authors, April 2020.

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ao In 2018, there was an average of 6.3 effective roadside bombings per month in Diyala, versus an average of 12.3 in the second half of 2019, settling down to 5.3 per month in Q1 2020. All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.

ap In keeping with a generally observed trend in Iraq, the average settled back down to 7.3 per month in Q1 2020.

month in the latter half of the year.[86][aq] Of note, the Islamic State's use of snipers in Diyala seems particularly innovative, covering open locations where security forces can be predictably drawn for prolonged periods, such as mortar launch locations and emplaced IEDs.[87]

In addition to excluding the security forces from its rural bastions along the Diyala River Valley, the Iranian border, and the provincial border with Salah al-Din, the Islamic State still finds time to wage brutal warfare against Kurds, Shi`a, and uncooperative Sunni tribes in Diyala. In each month, Diyala witnesses ethnic or sectarian cleansing activities by the Islamic State on a scale not seen in other provinces, far exceeding such efforts in the cross-sectarian melting pots of rural Baghdad or southern Salah al-Din.[88][ar] Increasing numbers of barrages of mortar shells are regularly fired from inaccessible rural redoubts into Shi`a, Kurdish, and Kakai villages,[as] even in more lethal and disruptive daytime bombardments.[at] Houses and crops are burned, irrigation machinery is destroyed, electricity lines are dropped, and very valuable livestock is slaughtered.[89] For example, near Khanaqin in September 2019, the Islamic State rigged a herd of cows with IEDs and drove them into a Kurdish hamlet.[90] In the authors' assessment, the aim of anti-civilian attacks in Diyala appears to be not only to intimidate and extort, but even to depopulate, and there have been numerous village evacuations in the Mukhisa-Abu Saida-Muqdadiyah, Khanaqin, and Mutabijah areas.[91] This extremely vindictive campaign—unfortunately, standard practice in Diyala since 2003[92]—is beginning to re-extend into urban areas such as the provincial capital of Baquba, where a suicide vest bombing was attempted on an amusement park during the Eid al-Fitr holiday in June 2019.[93]

Table 2: Iraq provincial attack data, by province

	Diyala	*Salah al-Din*	*Nineveh*	*Kirkuk*	*Baghdad*	*Anbar*
Q1 2018	67	39	59	117	136	27
Q2 2018	65	41	31	92	61	18
Q3 2018	104	50	51	76	61	18
Q4 2018	87	27	70	85	70	18
Q1 2019	97	49	36	63	30	17
Q2 2019	124	51	52	74	38	37
Q3 2019	164	74	61	36	72	24
Q4 2019	165	105	144	35	74	27
Q1 2020	140	95	47	46	106	83

Terrain Analysis and Tactical Trends

There is enormous analytical value in getting 'granular' by immersing long-term subject matter experts in the detail of geolocated attack data, interview material, and social media-sourced imagery from attack and cache sites. In an age where artificial intelligence is beginning to usefully take over some of the 'grunt work' of sifting, collating, and characterizing attack metrics for governments in environments like Iraq,[94] there is an 'X factor' that a human analyst brings in terms of pattern recognition and relation of trends to key geographies and human terrain. Human analysts can be particularly good at asking questions, by discerning mystifying and complex trends, and identifying 'known unknowns'—the question that is simultaneously posed by quantitative data yet not easily answered by it.

One such quandary is the Islamic State's 'hugging' of a variety of hilly or ridgeline positions[au] running between the Syrian and Iranian borders with Iraq. In many cases, the Islamic State has invested considerable effort to dig in to the slopes of anticlines and plateaus, seeding pre-existing and newly excavated caves with multipurpose caches that include food, water, solar-powered or liquid-fueled power generators, explosive devices, bulk explosives, bomb-making components, trail bikes, and even completed car bombs.[95] The atomization of the Islamic State's logistical tail and bed-down locations into hundreds of subterranean shelters recalls Hassan Hassan's December 2017 description in this publication of "small, self-sustained, and autonomous localities to enable militants to de-

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aq This trend continued in Q1 2020, with an average of 7.0 precision small arms fire (i.e., sniping) attacks per month in Diyala.

ar Like Diyala, Baghdad and Salah al-Din see some specifically anti-Shi`a attack patterns, particularly around the time of Shi`a pilgrimages such as Ashura and Arbaeen, due in part to the location of Shi`a sites in Samarra and south of the Baghdad belts.

as In the first half of 2018, there were an average of 4.2 mortar attacks per month in Diyala (rising to 5.8 per month in the second half of 2019 and seven per month in Q1 2020). The number of shells reported per strike in Diyala seems to be edging upward, from a typical "stonk" of 2-5 shells at the start of 2018 to a typical bombardment of 5-10 shells by the end of 2019. All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.

at Mortar attack videos by the Islamic State increasingly show daytime attacks 'under a bright Iraqi sun.' "The attacks always used to happen only after it got dark," a security officer told one journalist in April 2020. See Shelley Kittelson, "Islamic State conducts attacks near Iraq's Syrian and Iranian borders," Al-Monitor, April 28, 2020.

au These include (running from northwest to southeast): Ayadhiyah (north of Tal Afar), Badush (northwest of Mosul), Atshana (west of Mosul city), Adayah (some of Mosul), Qara Chaug (in Makhmour), Khanukah and Makhul (north of Bayji), Mama Gharra / Batiwa and Qani Domlan ridges (west of Kirkuk), the Hamrin ridge (between the Tigris and Diyala Rivers), and Pulkhana (east of Tuz Khurmatu).

fend their areas with minimal movement and without the need for resupply from other districts."[96] [av]

These redoubts can be located perilously close to security force garrisons and might appear to be highly vulnerable to surveillance, raiding, and bombardment—or inviting the security forces to shoot fish in a barrel.[aw] Upon closer analysis, such positions—characterized by a high water table and rapid changes of elevation and uneven terrain—have obvious factors to recommend them. Though seemingly compact when viewed on a map,[ax] such areas contain masses of caves for the security forces to find and clear. Insurgents moving on foot or using trail bikes can relocate between such sites frequently.[97] Many complexes are just 100-200ft elevated above the surrounding terrain but are poorly served by roads, while the more inaccessible ones are often elevated by 300ft (Ayadhiyah, Makhul, Khanukah, Pulkhana) and the highest by 400-1,200ft (the Qani Domlan, Hamrin,[98] and Qara Chaug[ay]).

From the Islamic State point of view, where a set of foothills are not available, a high desert with deep-cut wadis and caves will do just as well.[99] The Wadi Horan area of Anbar and the Lake Sunisilah area south of Baaj are remote and water-cut deserts with a low water table, with a similarly inhospitable and cave-pitted character to low mountain ranges.[100] Another sanctuary is the sprawling wadi systems along the western edges of the Kirkuk rural belt, which back into the Hamrin range and cover some 800 square miles. In this area, wadi canyons restrict the movement of large vehicle-mounted forces, while also serving as natural movement corridors for foot-mobile insurgent raiding parties infiltrating into the farming areas around Hawijah and Daquq.[101] Above-ground sanctuaries have been developed by the Islamic State in densely vegetated 'green zones'—river delta areas and islands where vehicle movement is limited and channeled by marshes and canals.[102][az] Considerable numbers of static victim-operated (pressure-plate) IEDs are arrayed around such bastions to deter and slow government clearance operations.[103]

Some of the most important Islamic State basing sanctuaries (Qara Chaug, Pulkhana, northern Diyala, and Qani Domlan) have also become more viable since Kurdish forces were expelled from these areas by Iraqi federal troops in October 2017, which left nu-

merous 5-10 mile wide ridges, often just 10-30 miles long but sometimes (as in cases like Qara Chaug and the Hamrin Mountains) as long as 40-60 miles in which neither Baghdad nor the Kurds fully controlled the ground.[104] In the authors' assessment, the Islamic State took fully advantage of this opening and relocated some of their most active attack cells into this "crease" of ungoverned space.[105] The authors assess that the Islamic State seems to seek isolation in unpopulated areas, preferring base locations with as few potential government informants as possible.[106] In addition to seeking out areas with low population density, the Islamic State seems to try to keep its sanctuary areas depopulated.[107] Interlopers, such as shepherds and truffle hunters, are frequently killed.[108] Efforts to return displaced persons are deterred and resisted,[109] including through the use of widespread crop-burning by the Islamic State.[110] The Islamic State loves nothing better than an abandoned or demolished village,[ba] and where unmanned electro-optical camera masts have been established to oversee such places, the Islamic State is increasingly shooting out or attacking such masts.[111][bb] Desert highway corridors (such as the Bayji-Haditha pipeline road or the Bayji to Mosul pipeline road) are systematically denied to truckers and civilian traffic, to prevent interpenetration and visibility of such areas.[112] The Islamic State appears to greatly value its privacy.

Falling in on this impressive physical infrastructure of thousands of pre-stocked shelters and depopulated sanctuaries is a new influx of experienced fighters from Syria, largely Iraqis.[113][bc] In every province, most notably those touching on the Euphrates River Valley, there were signs of an increase in roadside bombing capabilities in the May-June 2019 period, followed by a widespread three-month surge of Islamic State attack operations in August-October 2019.[114] Professional bomb-making facilities have been discovered in Anbar, Diyala, Nineveh, and Kirkuk that look more like pre-2014 insurgent workshops and less like the factories used to churn out crude cylin-

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av The micro-caching of weapons was also seen in the Mosul battle in 2016-2017, to enable Islamic State fighters to adopt an unarmed appearance as they moved from cache to cache, to complicate targeting, before falling in on new equipment and weapons at their next fighting position. See Michael Knights and Alex Mello, "Defeat by Annihilation: Mobility and Attrition in the Islamic State's Defense of Mosul," *CTC Sentinel* 10:4 (2017).

aw For instance, the Batiwa and Qani Domlan ridges (west of Kirkuk) were established just 15 miles from the U.S. Special Forces base at K1, and Qara Chaug and Pulkhana are located on the foothills below major Peshmerga bases.

ax Basing areas might be categorized as small (under 10 square miles, including some parts of Ayadhiyah, Badush, Atshana, Adayah, Khanukah, Batiwa, and small anticlines in northern Diyala); medium (up to 45 square miles, such as Qani Domlan and Makhul); and large (around 100 square miles, such as the Hamrin and Qara Chaug ranges).

ay Qani Domlan (outside Kirkuk city) is about 400ft elevated versus the Arab-populated lands to the south. The Hamrin ridge (and the much-targeted Alas oilfield are 300-600ft elevated. Qara Chaug is often elevated by as much as 700-1,200ft compared to surrounding plains.

az Such as the Diyala River Valley, the Tigris River Valley in southern Nineveh, and rural outskirts of Baghdad.

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ba Examples include the range of Arab villages demolished by Kurdish forces in the Mama/Batiwa anticline west of Kirkuk, or the depopulated Sunni villages of Mutabijah on the Salah al-Din/Diyala border.

bb The masts are electro-optical, lightly-armored camera systems described by Iraqis as "thermal cameras." The masts retract into an armored box when not in use. For an image, see Mustafa Ahmad, "The SADAD-103 system (the Iraqi name "Argus") is operated by the Iraqi Border Guard and Popular Mobilization Forces," Twitter, January 24, 2020.

bc A relocation back to Iraq began in 2017 of select Iraqi cadres. The U.N. Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team seems to agree. In December 2018, the United Nations noted: "The number of fighters in the Hajin area is estimated to be between 3,000 and 4,000, with Iraqi fighters comprising the bulk of ISIL ranks ... Others, mainly from the Iraqi contingent, are crossing the border in small groups and reconstituting in cells within Iraq." "Letter dated 27 December 2018 from the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team ... concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities," United Nations, p. 7.

drical charges for the Islamic State's barrier minefields.[bd]

Tactical leadership also improved, both in terms of more advanced tactics, techniques, and procedures and also a widening of the number of active 6-25-person attack cells.[be] According to the authors' assessment, the number of areas with active attack cells seems to nearly double, from an assessed 27 areas in December 2018[115] to an assessed 47 areas in May 2020. In the authors' assessment,[116] the 47 areas are:

- *Anbar:* Akashat; the al-Qaim/Abu Kamal border area; Wadi Horan/Rutbah; Nukhayb; the Rawah-Anah-Haditha corridor; Hit; Ramadi and Lake Razazah; Karmah and southern Thar; and Fallujah/Amiriyat al-Fallujah
- *Salah al-Din:* Eastern Thar Thar/Balad; southern Jallam Desert/Mutaibijah; Udhaim, northeastern Thar Thar/Tikrit; Baiji/Siniyah/Makhul; northern Jallam Desert/Hamrin; Tuz/Pulkhana; and Zarga
- *Baghdad:* Tarmiyah; Taji/Saab al-Bour; Abu Ghraib/Zaidon; the Latifiyah/ Yusufiyah/ Mahmudiyah triangle; Jurf al-Sakhr; and Jisr Diyala/Madain
- *Diyala:* Buhriz/Kani Ban Saad; western Baquba; Mukhisa/Abu Sayda; Sherween/ Muqdadiyah; Jalula/Sa'adiyah; Qara Tapa/Hamrin; Khanaqin and Nida/Mandali;
- *Kirkuk:* Zab/Abbasi; the Mamah-Gharra / Batawi ridge; Riyadh; Rashad/Jawwalah Daquq/Ghayda; Dibis and the Qani Domlan; and Kirkuk city
- *Nineveh:* East Mosul; Ash Shura/Hammam al-Alil; Qayyarah; Sharqat; Jurn triangle; the Hatra/Iraq-Turkey Pipeline corridor southwest of Mosul; Badush/Atashana/west Mosul; Tal Afar/Muhallabiyah; Tal Afar/Ayadhiyah; Sinjar/Baaj; and Lake Sunnislah/Jazeera

By the authors' approximate but carefully considered calculation of apparent attack cells within each area, the active operational core of the insurgency probably numbers around 1,300 full-time insurgent attack cell combatants at the time of writing.[bf] According to the authors' rough calculations, these cells are sustained by a broader active support network including 2,700 logistical and financial operatives, enforcement, and other support personnel.[bg] This larger group probably brings the insurgency in Iraq to a core of around 4,000 combatant members.[117] The Islamic State insurgency is nested with a larger family and tribe-based passive support network that may number up to 10,000 adult sympathizers involved in a range of activities including procuring food and other supplies, providing safehouses and acting as spies and informants, raising the overall number of people potentially supporting Islamic State activities in Iraq to 14,000.[bh] (For comparison, in January 2020, the U.S. government estimated the presence of "14,000-18,000 [Islamic State] terrorists between Syria and Iraq," though it is unclear how

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bd For instance, radio-controlled initiation has returned in a big way: instead of almost exclusively victim-initiated IEDs (using pressure plates), today's bombers are turning back to radio-controlled command-detonated IEDs. In one bomb-making cell in Nineveh, for instance, 58 Nokia phones and 118 GSM chips were discovered. An additional example may be found in the increasingly common tactic of mating welded metal drum IEDs—thousands of which were mass-produced at industrial workshops during 2015-2017 and cached at hundreds of sites across north central Iraq—with mobile phone triggers to enable remote-controlled detonation. Even crop-burning incendiaries have been found attached to Nokia cellphones. Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset. For imagery from recent IED operations, see Calibre Obscura, "#Kirkuk: ISIS released images of an attack against apparent Federal Police using both a roadside IED and small arms …," Twitter, April 12, 2020.

be A cell is defined here as an operationally self-contained group of insurgents tethered to a specific operating area. Cells may comprise multiple raid teams, IED teams and mortar crews, often bedding down in separate locations. These cells vary substantially in size, though a stripped-down platoon (around 20-25 insurgents) seems to mark the upper limit in size for current Islamic State cells. Urban cells are more compact and usually seem to number less than half a dozen operatives.

bf This figure is derived from the authors' assessment of the number of active attack cells combined with a calculation of the manpower needed to maintain the operational tempo and volume attacks generated by each individual cell throughout the period covered by this study. This requires making educated assumptions about cell size and the number and type of cells operating in different areas. The authors' assumptions about cell size (around nine persons for assassination and raiding cells, eight for IED crews, and seven for mortar or command teams) are informed by historic review of insurgent operations in Iraq and indications from raid and coalition airstrike data. The authors also conducted an extensive review of the Islamic State's published propaganda imagery showcasing individual cell operations and pledges of bayat (loyalty) during late 2019, when numerous cells gathered their members together to pledge allegiance to the group's new leader. After identifying 47 apparent operational areas for Islamic State attack activity, the authors then ascribed the presence of absence or different types of cell within the areas. For instance, in areas with recurring mortar attacks, the authors can safely assume there is an indirect fire cell, with similar assumptions possible for roadside bombing cells, under-vehicle bombing cells, urban assassination cells, and rural raiding cells. Some areas might have some but not all types of cell (i.e., raiding and roadside bomb, but not indirect fire), while some areas might have multiples of a type. All areas are assumed to (have a command cell, a 25-person intelligence complement, and a 25-person support complement undertaking support jobs such as driving, moving equipment and weapons caches, cooking, buying materials, bomb making, and maintaining equipment. In total, this rough calculation yields a fielded attack force throughout Iraq of 1,290 fighters, which the authors have rounded off to 1,300 to underline its approximate nature. These insights are based on qualitative insights from the authors' dataset, with attention to both attack data and non-attack data (such as raids, airstrikes, and other indicators of cell location, composition, and strength). These figures are clearly approximate and are intended to give the authors' sense of the likely scale of the insurgent manpower base.

bg The calculation of 2,700 active support operatives is very approximate and based on a simple premise that for every fighter in the field, there are another two undertaking support jobs to service the whole area. These include logistical and financial operatives, enforcement, and other support personnel. Collecting taxes probably takes up a dedicated sub-element of each area's support operatives. The two-to-one ratio (1,300 x 2) gives 2,600, which the authors have rounded up to 2,700 to include some national-level leadership. The tally can easily be adjusted by the reader if they prefer a higher or lower tooth-to-tail ratio. These figures are clearly approximate and are intended to give the authors' sense of the likely scale of the insurgent manpower base.

bh Based on the authors' working assumption that 2,000 of the 4,000 combatant members are family household heads (while the other 2,000 are single men), and that these have family sizes of five adult relatives (excluding the household head) in their homes. This household size assumption is based on longstanding study of Iraqi society and insurgency. Thus 2,000 household heads have access to a support network of 10,000 adults.

this number is broken out.[118] [bi])

Explaining the Islamic State's Partial Recovery

In the December 2018 *CTC Sentinel* metrics analysis,[119] the reactivation of Syria as a source of strength for the Iraqi insurgency was one of three indicators identified in relation to a potential resurgence of the Islamic State inside Iraq. In developing this article, the authors' research process left the strong impression of an Islamic State cadre from Syria oozing down the ERV, pooling in reactivated insurgent hubs west of Baghdad (in Karma and Thar Thar) and in southern Nineveh (near Lake Sunnisilah), before feeding out into various branches of the insurgency in Anbar, Baghdad, Salah al-Din, and Nineveh, with slightly less noticeable effect on the more distant sub-theaters in Kirkuk and Diyala. This impression fits with interview coverage regarding the collapse of the Islamic State caliphate in the Syrian Euphrates and Khabur River Valleys.[120] One U.S. officer with direct experience of the Deir ez-Zor intelligence picture in 2018-2020 told the authors: "Even before the fall of Raqqa, there was an operational decision [by the Islamic State] to shift key people and materiel into Iraq. After Raqqa, there was lots of movement and relocation."[121] This fits with the Islamic State's shift to a "melt away" strategy described by Hassan Hassan in his seminal December 2017 *CTC Sentinel* article "Insurgents Again."[122]

Yet no single-driver explanation—such as a transfer of fighters—will ever capture the complexity of the mesmerizing operational patterns of an insurgent movement operating across multiple provinces. The December 2018 *CTC Sentinel* metrics analysis[123] also suggested two other interrelated drivers for the 2011-2014 regrowth of the Islamic State that could recur again: the removal of U.S-led coalition forces and a deterioration in the leadership and effectiveness of the Iraqi security forces. In the authors' assessment, both these drivers of an Islamic State resurgence are also beginning to manifest due to negative developments in 2019 and so far in 2020.

The tit-for-tat strikes between Iran-backed militias and the United States—set against the backdrop of growing U.S.-Iran tensions and probable Israeli airstrikes in Iraq[124]—have gradually diminished the ability of the coalition to support Iraq's security forces. To give tangible examples, both U.S. access to Iraqi airspace and U.S. ability to interact directly with Sunni tribal forces were circumscribed by militia-backed politicians from March and May 2019 onward, respectively.[125] [bj] Throughout 2019, U.S. advisors were excluded from some operations (in the Tarmiyah, Nineveh, and Diyala

areas) due to pushback from militias.[126] [bk] Throughout 2019, Iraqi military commanders viewed as too close to the United States were transferred out of combat commands following militia pressure on the national and military leadership.[127] Following a lethal militia attack on U.S. forces on December 27, 2019[128] (and the subsequent U.S. and Iranian retaliatory operations inside Iraq[129]), many coalition hubs faced a reduced ability to advise Iraqi headquarters or to accompany Iraqi units outside of fortified camps.[130] [bl] On January 5, 2020, in the aftermath of the January 3, 2020, U.S. killing of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Iraq's parliament issued a non-binding vote to remove foreign advisors, and while the vote lacked quorum,[131] it nonetheless had a chilling effect on cooperation, with many Iraqi headquarters left uncertain over the status of cooperation.[132] [bm]

It is too soon to analyze the full effects of the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis, and broader U.S.-Iran tensions, on the war against the Islamic State. Trends in Iraq's insurgencies often take time to play out. While there seemed to be no immediate effort by the Islamic State to take advantage of U.S.-Iran tensions in early Q1 2020,[bn] the movement appears to have launched a strong Ramadan offensive in Q2 2020.[bo] Whether it had planned to do so independently of the U.S.-Iran conflict is impossible to know at this point, but this study has pointed to evidence that the Islamic State was on an upswing in Iraq well before U.S. forces begin to strike militias in late December 2019.

What is abundantly clear is that the disruption of coalition support in Iraq is of benefit to the Islamic State. As U.S. Special Envoy for the Global Coalition Jim Jeffrey noted in late January 2020: "Obviously, there is a possibility of a degradation of the effort

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bi   In the urban clearance operations at Raqqa, Hajin, and Baghouz, the U.S. government found that it continually underestimated the number of Islamic State fighters present, sometimes by an order of magnitude, which may be feeding into a tendency to estimate on the higher side today. Based on the authors' conversations with U.S. intelligence officers and diplomats working on the Islamic State, 2018-2020; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.

bj   In March 2019, Iraq began closing large parcels of airspace to coalition surveillance aircraft, particularly locations where Popular Mobilization Forces were present. In May 2019, the United States was forbidden from directly communicating with Sunni Tribal Mobilization Forces by the Popular Mobilization Commission of the Prime Minister's Office.

bk   In operations in Tarmiyah, Diyala, and Kisik (near Mosul), U.S. advisors were ejected from operational command posts on the orders of militia commanders. Based on the authors' conversations with U.S. intelligence officers and Iraqi security force officers working on the Islamic State, 2019-2020; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.

bl   From December 27, 2019, onward, most advisors were unable to accompany Iraqi forces on operations, and many advisor cells were locked down in self-defense mode. Based on the authors' conversations with U.S. intelligence officers and Iraqi security force officers working on the Islamic State, 2019-2020; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.

bm Salah al-Din, Samarra, Diyala, Kirkuk, and Baghdad operations commands temporarily suspended cooperation with the coalition after the January 3, 2020, targeted killing of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Based on the authors' conversations with U.S. intelligence officers and Iraqi security force officers working on the Islamic State, 2019-2020; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.

bn   This lack of an immediate surge by the Islamic State is the authors' impression, judging by January 2020's attack activity, which was lower than December 2019's in all provinces except Anbar. The U.S. government seemed to see this as well, with James Jeffrey, Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, noting on January 23, 2020, that "we have not seen an uptick in violence in Iraq by Daesh in this period. They haven't taken advantage of it, as far as we can see." "Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS James Jeffrey, Special Briefing," U.S. Department of State, January 23, 2020.

bo   The offensive began on May 1, 2020, seeing a range of larger and well-publicized raids overrun Iraqi outposts and even police stations. For an open source treatment of the early incidents, see Halgurd Sherwani, "ISIS targets security forces in central Iraq for the second day in a row," K24, May 3, 2020.

against Daesh if we're not able to do the things that we were doing so effectively up until a few weeks ago."[133] Lacking coalition support, the Iraqi security forces are neither trained nor equipped to conduct counterinsurgency. Such forces will remain singularly unprepared for the challenge of higher tempo roadside bombings and overrun attacks, as one of the authors noted in an August 2017 *CTC Sentinel* study.[134] Few Mine Resistant Ambush-Protected (MRAP) vehicles are still in operation with the Iraqi security forces in early 2020, and most units undertake non-tactical movements and even clearance operations in unarmored pick-ups and lightly armored Hummers, with no road clearance activities and no counter-radio controlled IED jamming equipment.[135] Iraqi troops lack personal protective equipment[136] and often suffer preventable deaths through a lack of field surgical capabilities.[137] Field fortifications such as observation posts and vehicle checkpoints are often decrepit, lacking concrete hardcover and berms, and thus highly vulnerable to direct fire.[138] Iraqi troops increasingly rely on static infrared camera masts to surveil terrain at night, but these masts are easily destroyed.[139]

Most important, the March 2020 removal of U.S. advisors from frontline headquarters such as K1, Qayyarah,[140] Taquddum,[141] Kisik, and Mosul will make it much harder to synergize coalition intelligence and aerial strikes with Iraqi operations.[142] Development of the Iraqi security forces is deteriorating at exactly the moment it needs to be accelerating and adapting. In an area such as Kirkuk, where this study links the surge of U.S.-Iraqi joint operations to significant reduction in Islamic State attacks, the positive trend could be reversed, restoring one of the historic engines of Islamic State attacks to their effort in 2020. As one senior U.S. officer fresh from duty in Iraq told the authors on the national recovery of the Islamic State, "If caught early by the [Iraqi Security Forces], this can still be nipped in the bud. If they tackle it too late, it could get enough momentum to get away from them."[143]

The COVID-19 crisis completes this perfect storm for Iraq, which is also a perfect opportunity for the Islamic State. Relatively cut off from society, relatively small in number, and already 'socially distancing' in rural shelters (with very little connection to Iran, where there has been a large outbreak), Islamic State members are arguably the Iraqis best placed to avoid the ravages of the virus.[144 bp] Iraq's security forces have been more seriously affected,[145 bq] in part due to the COVID-related removal of most non-U.S. trainers from the international coalition.[br] The severe oil price crash, which began in March 2020 and which is likely to extend through 2021,[bs] imposes yet more strain on the the administrations in Baghdad and Erbil, which may eventually prove a further distraction to the security forces, both in terms of maintaining civil order in cities and due to disruption of the wages of security force members and negative effects on their families.[bt] Defense spending will undoubtedly decline in the coming years as Iraq faces a very deep recession.

In the authors' view, the endogenous factors that draw the most international attention—U.S-Iran tensions and COVID-19—are merely accelerants of an Islamic State recovery in Iraq that was already well underway in late 2019.[bu] Further boosted by the new conditions in 2020, the Islamic State may enjoy unexpectedly favorable conditions in which to continue—or even accelerate—its recovery. It may become easier for the Islamic State to portray itself—in some places, quite accurately—as the strongest and wealthiest local security actor, which is a proven route to boost recruitment. In early 2020, the Islamic State is a shadow of its old self in Iraq—still a third as potent as it was in 2013 or 2017—but metrics analysis suggests it has recovered to a solid 2012-level of attack activities. Today's insurgency is almost exclusively[bv] rural in contrast to its 2012 iteration but the Islamic State could return to urban mass-casualty attacks if it builds strong enough bases in the rural 'belts' of major cities[bw] such as Baghdad, Mosul, Ramadi, and Fallujah, to name just a few. The Islamic State strategy of attrition (*nikayah* in Arabic)[146] worked in Iraq from 2012-2014 and may now again begin to grind away at the Iraqi security forces, local government, and tribal resistance in the manner of a stormy sea washing away a cliff.   **CTC**

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bp The militants "reside in agricultural areas and are thus not particularly susceptible to the virus infection," Lt. Col. Stein Grongstad told Norway's VG newspaper in May 2020. In recent weeks, they have been targeting Iraqi forces "that are not currently coordinated to the same extent as before the virus struck." "Norway's top military official in Iraq says virus helps IS," Associated Press, May 13, 2020.

bq The COVID-19 outbreak has also resulted in a marked reduction in the operational tempo of the Iraqi security forces as forces have been shifted to curfew enforcement duties. For example, the number of reported counterterrorism raids undertaken by Emergency Police forces in Mosul city dropped from 26 in January 2020 and 30 in February to around nine in March 2020. Major rural clearance operations (battalion-sized or larger sweeps covering multiple villages) undertaken by Federal Police brigades in the Kirkuk farm belts dropped from four in January 2020 to only one during March 2020. Drawn from the non-attack data in the authors' SIGACT monitoring system.

br "By March 29, Australia, Spain, France, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Portugal and the Netherlands had withdrawn almost all of their trainers." Quoted in Michael Knights, "How the Islamic State Feeds on Coronavirus," Politico, April 8, 2020. The "restructuring of [the] footprint" was recognized by the coalition in "Joint Statement on Behalf of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS on the First Anniversary of ISIS's Territorial Defeat," U.S. State Department, March 23, 2020.

bs The U.S. Energy Information Administration notes in its April 2020 forecast: "Prices will average $33/barrel in 2020 ... down from an average of $64/b in 2019 .... EIA forecasts that average Brent prices will rise to an average of $46/b in 2021." See "Short-Term Energy Outlook," U.S. Energy Information Administration, April 7, 2020.

bt Iraq is highly vulnerable to a public health crisis and oil price crash. See Neil Edwards, "What Negative Oil Prices Mean To The Top Exporting Countries," Forbes, April 21, 2020, and Renad Mansour, Mac Skelton, and Abdulameer Mohsin Hussein, "COVID 19: Assessing Vulnerabilities and Impacts on Iraq," Chatham House, April 7, 2020.

bu If COVID-19 becomes a major public health crisis in Iraq, and there is a reduction in security forces patrolling, it is possible it may reduce the number of Islamic State attacks due to lower target availability.

bv The only cities in which the Islamic State periodically attacks are now Kirkuk and Baquba (the provincial capital of Diyala). In the authors' view, Baquba is well worth watching as the Iraqi city where the Islamic State may make its first efforts at restored urban attack networks. Qualitative observations drawn from the authors' dataset.

bw It is worth considering that the Islamic State appears to be developing exactly the kind of rural redoubts that could eventually be used to conduct "commuter insurgency" from the rural belts into the cities. Qualitative observations drawn from the authors' dataset.

Citations

1   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.
2   Qualitative insight drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.
3   See Michael Knights, "Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies," *CTC Sentinel* 10:7 (2017) and Michael Knights, "The Islamic State Inside Iraq: Losing Power or Preserving Strength?" *CTC Sentinel* 11:12 (2018). Also see this excellent piece: Hassan Hassan, "Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond," *CTC Sentinel* 10:11 (2017).
4   Michael Knights and Alex Mello, "Losing Mosul, Regenerating in Diyala: How the Islamic State Could Exploit Iraq's Sectarian Tinderbox," *CTC Sentinel* 9:10 (2016).
5   Knights, "Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies;" Knights, "The Islamic State Inside Iraq."
6   See Knights, "Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies," and Knights, "The Islamic State Inside Iraq."
7   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.
8   Ibid.
9   Ibid.
10   Ibid.
11   Ibid.
12   Ibid.
13   Ibid.
14   Ibid.
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18   Ibid.
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25   Knights, "The Islamic State Inside Iraq."
26   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.
27   Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset.
28   Ibid.
29   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.
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34   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.
35   Ibid.
36   Ibid.
37   Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset.
38   Ibid.
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40   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.
41   Ibid.
42   Ibid.
43   Ibid.
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46   See the author's urban Mosul SIGACT coding in Michael Knights, "How to Secure Mosul: Lessons from 2008—2014," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Research Note* 38 (2016): p. 10. All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.
47   Ibid.
48   Ibid.
49   Ibid.
50   Authors' assessment based on the geolocated SIGACT dataset.
51   Ibid.
52   Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset.
53   As explored in Knights, "The Islamic State Inside Iraq."
54   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.
55   Based on the authors' conversations with U.S. intelligence officers working on Iraq, 2019; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.
56   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.
57   Ibid.
58   Ibid.
59   Ibid.
60   Knights, "The Islamic State Inside Iraq."
61   This assessment is based on the authors' close monitoring of Iraqi security forces operational movements and order of battle data.
62   Ibid.
63   Based on the authors' conversations with U.S. intelligence officers working on Iraq, 2019 and 2020; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.
64   Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset.
65   Ibid.
66   Ibid.
67   Ibid.
68   Based on the authors' conversations with U.S. intelligence officers and Iraqi security force officers working on the Islamic State, 2018-2020; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.
69   Authors' assessment based on the geolocated SIGACT dataset.
70   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.
71   Ibid.
72   Ibid.
73   Ibid.
74   Ibid.
75   Ibid.
76   Authors' assessment based on the geolocated SIGACT dataset.
77   See the map by Alexi Konstantos, Islamic State Claimed Provinces, available at http://umap.openstreetmap.fr/en/map/islamic-state-claimed-provinces-map_29647#7/33.409/42.902
78   This latter point is the authors' assessment, based on large numbers of synthesized data points from non-attack data such as cache contents, coalition and Iraqi airstrikes and raiding patterns, and prior insurgent operating patterns.
79   Authors' assessment based on the geolocated SIGACT dataset.
80   Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset.
81   Ibid.
82   Knights and Mello, "Losing Mosul, Regenerating in Diyala."
83   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated SIGACT dataset.
84   This is the authors' view, building on impressions developed over the last 17 years of insurgency.
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94   Based on the authors' conversations with U.S. intelligence officers working on SIGACT sets, 2020; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.
95   Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset. The authors' have reviewed many hundreds of reports of cache finds, often with photographic evidence as well as text descriptions of the finds.
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97   Based on the authors' conversations with U.S. intelligence officers working on the Islamic State, 2018-2020; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.
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views withheld at request of interviewees.

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106 Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset.

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108 Ibid.

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The 2017 Manchester Bombing and the British-Libyan Jihadi Nexus

By Eran Benedek and Neil Simon

May 2020 marks the third anniversary of the suicide bombing attack at the Manchester Arena in the United Kingdom. The attack was carried out by Salman Abedi, a 22-year-old of Libyan descent born in the city of Manchester. While it is still not clear, as a matter of public record, whether the Islamic State played a direct role in the attack, Abedi knew several British extremists who joined the group. He was close friends with a key U.K.-based recruiter for the group and reportedly met with Islamic State fighters in Libya. Three years after the attack, his younger brother, Hashem, was tried and convicted in the United Kingdom of assisting and encouraging him to carry out the atrocity. The operational phase of the attack took place over a period of at least five months. The road to Salman and Hashem Abedi's attack, however, did not emerge in a vacuum. No one else has been charged in connection to the plot, but there were clusters of British-Libyan Islamists in Manchester and Libya, some of whom had connections to al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State, and other extremist groups, over two generations. The two brothers were raised within this Islamist milieu. From a young age, they had close family links to significant extremist figures in their community and later developed their own friendships with local jihadis. This context may have indirectly contributed to a culture in which the two brothers hatched their plan.

On May 22, 2017, Salman Abedi, a 22-year-old of Libyan descent born in the city of Manchester, detonated a large improvised explosive device in the foyer of the Manchester Arena as an Ariana Grande pop concert was drawing to a close. The resulting explosion was so powerful that it killed 22, physically injured 237, and traumatized hundreds more. The Manchester Arena attack came as a local and national shock. The ferocity of the bomb and the targeting of concert-goers, mainly teenagers and youngsters,

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horrified the country. What paths led brothers Salman and Hashem Abedi to commit an atrocity in their home city? Haras Rafiq, the chief executive of the Quilliam Foundation, has suggested that Salman Abedi's radicalization was the result of the salafi ideology and theology that he had absorbed in Manchester from a young age.[1] The two brothers were also influenced by their interactions with peer networks within Manchester's Libyan community and in Libya itself, although no evidence has come to light suggesting that anyone else is implicated in their attack. Yet, rather than the Islamic State radicalizing Salman, Rafiq contends, the group "cherrypicked" him.[2] If this is true, then it is possible that Hashem was influenced or mobilized in a similar way.

During Hashem Abedi's trial, the prosecution described the two brothers as follows:

> *In the years leading up to the bombing, the brothers had begun to display to [sic] some signs of radicalisation: Salman more so than Hashem. They changed in appearance, becoming more religious and devout. They talked about Libya, the conflict there and expressed support for ISIS.[3]*

In 2018, moreover, the report by the U.K. Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) into the 2017 terrorist attacks in Britain included sections about the Manchester bombing and the Abedi family. While the report is heavily redacted throughout due to national security concerns, it quoted an excerpt of oral evidence from the U.K. Security Service (MI5) that stated:

> *So we cannot even now look at the Abedi case and say it is obvious because of the father's activities over the years that two or three of the sons would become extremists, but it is relevant to the story, clearly.[4]*

In the paragraph immediately after, however, the ISC provided its own view on the nature of extremism within the family:

> *Nevertheless, post-attack it appears highly likely that SALMAN and HASHEM's extremist views were influenced by their father RAMADAN Abedi and fostered by other members of their immediate family.[5]*

Drawing on the text of the prosecution's opening arguments in the trial of Hashem Abedi, along with relevant official U.K. documents and investigative reports, this article explores the connectivity of Salman and Hashem to networks in Manchester and Libya. The article first describes some of the operational aspects of the bombing, Hashem's extradition to the United Kingdom from Libya and his subsequent trial and conviction. The article then places the brothers in the context of longstanding extremism within the milieu of the United Kingdom's Libyan Islamist diaspora, looking at family and community connections over at least two decades. While the article briefly discusses some of Salman and Hashem's links in Germany, the final sections concentrate on their jihadi connections in Libya and the nexus of their peer networks in Manchester to Libya and Syria.

Unfortunately, the potential threat posed by the Manches-

ter-Libya extremist nexus may not have been sufficiently appreci-
ated, as Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu, the United Kingdom's
Senior National Coordinator for Counterterrorism Policing, de-
scribed in a *CTC Sentinel* interview:

*Libya is very close to home for Europe and our allies, but for a
long time, it was not the focus for our attention. For us in the
U.K., what happened in Manchester was a big wake-up call
to the fact that there were people who had traveled back and
forth to Libya doing much the same thing we were preventing
people from doing in Iraq and Syria and who had a similar
hatred for this country.[6]*

Pre-Attack Reconnaissance, the Attack, and the Trial

At 10:31 PM on May 22, 2017, Salman Abedi detonated his large
improvised explosive device (IED) hidden in the 65-liter backpack
he was carrying. He was standing among the crowds departing the
Ariana Grande concert in the Manchester Arena, one of the largest
indoor venues in Europe. The explosion killed 22 and physically
injured 237 others, 91 of whom were classed as being either "very
seriously" or "seriously" injured. Of the fatalities, the youngest was
an eight-year-old girl, and nine were teenagers.[7]

Abedi arrived via Metrolink at Victoria Station at 8:30 PM. He
spent his final two hours wandering around the station and the
shared spaced adjacent to the Arena, including the City Room that
is often described as the Arena's foyer. According to the official ac-
count, Abedi appeared to be "awaiting the conclusion of the per-
formance and the then expected departure of concert goers from
the building."[8] His device was packed with TATP explosive and a
large quantity of shrapnel of screws, nuts, and cross dowels. Police
later recovered from the blast scene shrapnel and metal fragments
weighing over 30 kilos, including 3,000 nuts.[9] With the explosion
forcing the shrapnel in all directions, it caused most of the injuries
and fatalities.[10] Weighing around 36 kilos, the IED was heavy and
powerful.[11] So powerful, in fact, that the explosion dismembered
Salman Abedi,[12] propelling his head and upper torso to Victoria
Station's ticket hall, which is about 160-200 feet away from the blast
scene.[13]

At the time of the attack, Salman was not under investigation,
though he had twice been an MI5 "Subject of Interest" (SOI) whose
cases were closed.[14] His prior criminal record related to theft, re-
ceiving stolen goods, and assaulting a female at college for wearing
a short skirt.[15] Crime scene evidence, however, implicated Salman
within hours. He had carried out at least three pre-attack hostile
reconnaissance visits to the Arena.[16] Salman's first visit—four days
before the attack—was in the early evening of May 18; his return
flight to Manchester from Libya (via Düsseldorf) landed earlier the
same morning.[17] Salman visited the Manchester Arena and the City
Room, the precise location of his imminent attack.[18] CCTV foot-
age showed Salman scouting the area during a Take That concert,
while observing the crowds before the concert and the long lines at
the box office.[19] Salman visited the venue again on May 21, the day
before the attack, and a third and final time earlier in the evening
on May 22 itself.[20]

The day after the bombing, Salman's elder brother, Ismail,
was arrested in Manchester on suspicion of involvement but was
released without charge.[21] On May 24, 2017, Libya's Special De-
terrence Force (RADA), a militia acting as the police force of the
Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), arrested Salman's

*Salman Abedi exits an elevator onto footbridge to Manchester
Arena on May 22, 2017. (Greater Manchester Police)*

younger brother, Hashem, and their father, Ramadan, at the fam-
ily home in Tripoli.[22] Ramadan was released shortly after without
charge. He categorically condemned the attack: "We don't believe
in killing innocents. This is not us ... We aren't the ones who blow
up ourselves among innocents. We go to mosques. We recite Quran,
but not that."[23]

Meanwhile, RADA claimed that Hashem had confessed to
knowing all the details of the Manchester Arena bombing and also
confessed that both he and Salman belonged to the Islamic State.[24]
RADA also claimed that Hashem was a "significant player" in a ji-
hadi cell that had been plotting to attack the United Nations' special
envoy to Libya during a visit to Tripoli earlier that year.[25]

Hashem had left the United Kingdom for Libya on April 15,
2017, around a month before the attack.[26] After a two-year extradi-
tion process, he was returned to the United Kingdom in July 2019
and was formally arrested and charged. His trial commenced in
February 2020, and he pleaded not guilty to all charges. But while
the trial was slated to last two months, it concluded several weeks
early in a dramatic turn of events after Hashem dismissed his coun-
sel and decided against mounting a defense. On March 17, after
deliberating for four and a half hours, the jury found him guilty
of 22 counts of murder, one count of attempted murder, and one
count of conspiracy to cause an explosion likely to endanger life in
connection to his brother's attack.[27] [a]

Hashem's trial revealed important details on how he and his
brother plotted the attack.[28] Together with Salman, Hashem had
persuaded individuals (who were unaware of the two brothers' in-
tentions) to purchase chemicals on their behalf;[b] they obtained met-
al containers and experimented with prototypes;[29] and they bought
a car in April 2017 that was used to store their bomb-making equip-

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a   Hashem was due to be sentenced in late April 2020, but this has been
     postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

b   During Hashem's trial, the court heard details about Salman and Hashem's
     friends and associates who unknowingly assisted the brothers in various
     aspects of their plot, though they themselves have not been charged with
     any crime relating to the attack. See Daniel De Simone, "The road to the
     Manchester Arena bombing," BBC, March 17, 2020.
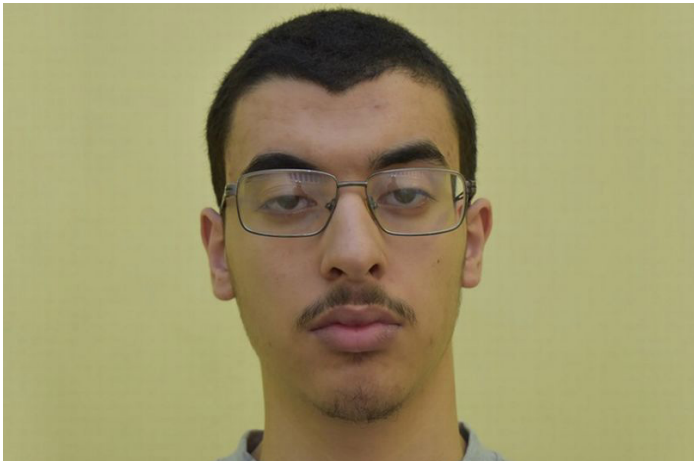
Hashem Abedi (Greater Manchester Police)

ment.[30] Hashem's fingerprints and a matching DNA profile, along with traces of TATP, were found in an apartment the brothers used in Blackley, north Manchester.[31] Hashem's fingerprints were also found on the pieces of cans that were modified for use as detonator casings,[32] as well as on the nails and screws that, in the words of the prosecution, the two brothers bought "with a view to deployment in a lethal explosion."[33]

The prosecution's case against Hashem focused on the evidence demonstrating his joint culpability, detailing how the two brothers prepared for their attack. The prosecution stated that they "expressed support for ISIS" and noted Salman's friendship with a convicted terrorist from Manchester;[34] however, the trial did not reveal the extent of guidance or direction, if any, the Islamic State may have provided for the Manchester attack. During the trial, the jury was shown footage of a jihadi bomb-making video, which the brothers may have watched and which provided instructions on how to produce an explosive device using TATP.[35] An expert witness described the similarities and differences between the two brothers' IED and the one demonstrated in the video.[36] In a summary of the trial after its conclusion, the BBC wrote that Salman and Hashem "are believed to have followed instructions from an IS video, then accessible online, although they might also have gained relevant expertise in Libya."[37]

Disturbingly, the two brothers had used an email address to purchase chemicals for their explosive that was an English transliteration of an Arabic phrase meaning "to slaughter we have come" or "we have come to slaughter."[38] This slogan, popular at the time among jihadi militants, encapsulates the two brothers' malevolent intentions. Indeed, this is an important point to which this article will return later.

Manchester's Libyan Islamist Milieu: Family and Community

The city of Manchester, United Kingdom, is home to the largest community of Libyans outside Libya. Estimates put its numbers at 5,000 or higher, with most living in the suburbs of Cheetham Hill, Chorlton, Whalley Range, and Fallowfield.[39] Many in the community came to Manchester in the 1980s and 1990s, having left Libya due to their opposition to Muammar Qaddafi's regime. Among these refugees were Islamists, including numerous members and leaders of what became the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG).[40] In the aftermath of the attack, some Libyans in the city spoke openly to

the media about their long-held concerns regarding radicalization, extremism, and anti-Semitism within sections of their community.[41]

Salman and Hashem's father, Ramadan Abedi (also known as Abu Ismail), is a Libyan national who left Libya for Saudi Arabia in 1991 after being accused of using his position as a government security official to leak information to anti-Qaddafi Islamists.[42] He and his wife subsequently sought asylum in the United Kingdom. After first living in London, they settled in 1992 in the Fallowfield area of Manchester, before moving again to nearby Whalley Range, both of them suburbs already home to a tight-knit community of Libyan Islamist dissidents many of who were part of the LIFG.[43] Ramadan is reported to have been associated with prominent jihadi figures who had associations with al-Qa`ida, such as Abu Anas al-Libi and Abd al-Baset Azzouz.[44] Additionally, a Libyan businessman informed BBC Arabic that "Abedi's father supported the radical cleric, Abu Qatada, and used to meet him in London."[45] Ramadan, however, has denied having any ties to any of Libya's militias, including LIFG, and he has never been charged in the United Kingdom with any offense.[46]

Abu Anas Al-Libi took part in the Afghan war against the Soviet Union and became a member of al-Qa`ida.[47] In 1992, al-Libi was among the al-Qa`ida operatives who relocated with Usama bin Ladin to Sudan; however, in 1995, he was among a cohort of Libyans expelled from the country after pressure from Qaddafi.[48] Al-Libi was also a longstanding senior member of the LIFG from its origins.[49] He was granted asylum in the United Kingdom in 1995, and in 1998, he settled, like the Abedi family, among the Libyan community in Manchester.[50] Al-Libi's lawyer Bernard Kleinman has stated that al-Libi was no longer an al-Qa`ida member after the early 1990s and never swore *bay`a* (allegiance) to bin Ladin. Yet according to Kleinman, al-Libi "had been really close to bin Ladin and knew him in the Sudan, and they remained very close on a friendship level."[51]

In 2000, British police had discovered in al-Libi's home in Manchester the 180-page terrorist training manual titled "Military Studies in the Jihad Against Tyrants," better known as the "Manchester Manual."[52] In December 2000, a New York grand jury indicted al-Libi in absentia for his alleged involvement in activities that culminated in al-Qa`ida's 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies

in Kenya and Tanzania.[c]

Moreover, in December 2014, *The New York Times* reported about a series of letters involving al-Libi that were captured in bin Ladin's Abbottabad compound during the U.S. raid in May 2011.[53] The documents included a letter from al-Libi to bin Ladin, as well as correspondence about al-Libi between bin Ladin and his deputy, Atiyah Abd al-Rahman.[54] Because the U.S. government had only declassified 17 documents from a much larger trove of files, U.S. prosecutors sought judicial permission to unseal the documents involving al-Libi to use during his trial. According to the *New York Times* report, the prosecutors' court filing quoted translated excerpts from some of the documents pertaining to al-Libi. In October 2010, for example, al-Libi reportedly wrote to bin Ladin describing that, "You may know the place you hold in my heart, and so I ask Allah to bring us together."[55] Additionally, Atiyah himself wrote to bin Ladin that he had assigned al-Libi to be on al-Qa`ida's security committee, although it is not clear whether al-Libi assumed the position. And in March 2011, al-Libi had reportedly asked permission to return to Libya with others to join the anti-Qaddafi rebellion.[56]

The ties between the Abedi and al-Libi families appear to have been particularly close.[57] Ramadan's wife had been a friend of Anas al-Libi's wife since their time at college in Tripoli, and the two women had lived together in Manchester.[58] When U.S. forces eventually captured al-Libi at his Libyan home in Tripoli in October 2013, Ramadan Abedi knew of the arrest within hours and posted an image of al-Libi on his Facebook page along with the words: "Prophet we know how many people have put the picture of this lion in their profiles ..."[59] [d]

After the Manchester Arena bombing, one of Salman and Hashem's cousins, who expressed his horror over the attack, told the British newspaper *The Sunday Times* that he felt Salman was radicalized through close contact in Manchester and Tripoli with the al-Libi family: "Al-Liby and his family lived here in Manchester once ... I remember them from when I was young. He was a terrorist wanted by the Americans. I think it was his family who radicalised him [Abedi]."[60] But it should be noted that according to al-Libi's lawyer Kleinman, when al-Libi returned to Libya (from Iran) at the early stages of the Libyan revolution, he came to consider the West as allies of the LIFG in the fight against Qaddafi. Moreover, as Kleinman explained, al-Libi, "along with most of the other Libyans, was much, much more committed to ridding Libya of Qaddafi than in the political/religious goals of bin Ladin."[61]

Similarly, Abd al-Baset Azzouz and his family also settled among the Libyan Islamist community in the suburbs of Manchester.[62] In around 2000, Azzouz and his family lived in the same street as the Abedi family and, following that, in homes that were never more than about a mile from each other.[63] In May 2006, Azzouz and several other Libyan nationals in Manchester were arrested as part of a counterterrorism operation, but he was later released without charge and left the United Kingdom in 2009. In 2008, Azzouz gave an interview to the U.K.-based Cageprisoners organization (known currently as CAGE) in which he described his arrest and attempted deportation, denying any connections to terrorism.[64]

In 2014, however, the U.S. State Department designated Azzouz as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT), describing him as "a key operative capable of training al-Qa'ida recruits in a variety of skills, such as IED construction."[e] Two days after Abedi's suicide bombing, the British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* reported that U.K. authorities were investigating whether Azzouz had taught Salman Abedi how to make an explosive device, given that Azzouz had set up training camps in Libya.[65] No further information confirms this, and it is unclear whether Salman Abedi himself had been to Derna, Libya (where Azzouz was based[66]) or ever had personal interactions with Azzouz in Libya. However, a *Financial Times* report in May 2017 quoted a Libyan student and activist in the 2011 revolution who described that Libyans from Manchester were influential among the foreign fighters, including in Derna.[67]

Many of the Libyan dissidents who settled in Manchester, including those linked with the LIFG, attended the Manchester Islamic Centre, known locally as Didsbury mosque. Described as being a strict Muslim and, like his wife, deeply religious, Ramadan Abedi attended the mosque and was given a job there as a muezzin performing the call to prayers.[68] According to the chief executive of Quilliam, Haras Rafiq, the mosque is believed to have an Ikhwani

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c As a senior member of LIFG, Nazih Abdul Hamed Al-Ruqai (also known as Abu Anas Al-Libi) had responsibility for running the Afghanistan end of the Sanabel Relief Agency, a U.K.-registered charity accused of raising money for the LIFG. Two of the charity's five U.K. addresses were in Manchester. In 1999, al-Libi was arrested in Manchester but was released without charge due to lack of evidence. After leaving the United Kingdom, he relocated to Afghanistan but was among a group of Libyans and al-Qa`ida members who relocated to Iran after the Taliban's overthrow. He remained in Iran for nearly 10 years before moving to Libya at the early stages of the Libyan revolution. The U.S. indictment against al-Libi included allegations that he conducted surveillance of the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi in 1993 and that in 1994 he had reviewed files about possible terrorist attacks against the same location as well as the USAID facility in Nairobi and Israeli, British, and French targets in Nairobi. After his October 2013 capture, al-Libi pleaded not guilty to terrorism charges. See Jamie Doward, Ian Cobain, Chris Stephen, and Ben Quinn, "How Manchester bomber Salman Abedi was radicalised by his links to Libya," *Guardian*, May 28, 2017; "Profile: Anas al-Libi," BBC, January 3, 2015; Paul Cruickshank, "A View from the CT Foxhole: Bernard Kleinman, Defense Attorney," *CTC Sentinel* 10:4 (2017): pp. 10-11; Assaf Moghadam, "Marriage of Convenience: The Evolution of Iran and al-Qa`ida's Tactical Cooperation," *CTC Sentinel* 10:4 (2017): pp. 14-15; Tim Lister and Paul Cruickshank, "Senior al Qaeda figure 'living in Libyan capital,'" CNN, September 27, 2012; United States of America v Usama Bin Laden et al., S(9) 98 Cr. 1023 (LBS).

d On January 2, 2015, al-Libi died in a New York hospital following a deterioration in an underlying health condition. His trial was due to start on January 12, 2015. Jomana Karadsheh, "Alleged al Qaeda operative Abu Anas al Libi dies in U.S. hospital, family says," CNN, January 3, 2015; "Profile: Anas al-Liby."

e The U.S. State Department described Azzouz as follows: "Abd al-Baset Azzouz has had a presence in Afghanistan, the United Kingdom, and Libya. He was sent to Libya in 2011 by al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri to build a fighting force there, and mobilized approximately 200 fighters. He is considered a key operative capable of training al-Qa`ida recruits in a variety of skills, such as IED construction." See "Designations of Foreign Terrorist Fighters," U.S. State Department, September 24, 2014. After leaving the United Kingdom in 2009, Azzouz first traveled to Pakistan and became a lieutenant of al-Qa`ida's leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri who, in May 2011, appointed him head of the group's operations in Libya. Azzouz was suspected of involvement in the 2012 attack on the U.S. State Department Special Mission Compound in Benghazi and was reportedly arrested in Turkey in 2014. He was reportedly sent to Jordan before his expected deportation to the United States to face charges, but no public information on his current whereabouts and status appears to be available. "Designations of Foreign Terrorist Fighters," U.S. State Department, September 24, 2014; "Turkish security forces capture Benghazi attack suspect," *Daily Sabah*, December 4, 2014; Robert Mendick, "Freed UK prisoner is al-Qaeda ringleader," *Telegraph*, September 27, 2014.

(Muslim Brotherhood) affiliation, but it is also reported that many of the attendees of the congregation were, like the Abedi family, followers of the salafi branch of Islam.[69]

Neither of these is an indication that the mosque or its congregants supported terrorism, and there is no suggestion of any connection between the mosque and the Arena attack. Indeed, two days after the Arena bombing, mosque leaders issued a statement condemning the attack and calling it a "horrific atrocity."[70] In a separate statement, the mosque reiterated this point and categorically denied any connection to the attack:

> Dealing specifically with Salman Abed, there is no nexus between [Salman Abedi's] criminal conduct or anything said or done at Didsbury Mosque. The Mosque unconditionally condemns Salman Abedi's barbaric criminal conduct as being offensive to all civilised norms and the spirit and letter of Islam.[71]

Nevertheless, Didsbury mosque came under immense media scrutiny afterward. Salman Abedi had attended the mosque regularly until 2015, when, according to one of its imams, Salman objected to a sermon the imam gave criticizing the Islamic State and the salafi militia Ansar al-Sharia in Libya.[72] It also emerged that Salman's friend from Manchester, Mohammed Abdallah, had attended Didsbury mosque and that Mohammed Abdallah himself claimed to have known a man named Raphael Hostey through there, too.[73] Mohammed Abdallah and Hostey were part of a local network of Islamic State supporters and fighters, as will be described later in the section on peer networks.[74]

In August 2018, the BBC revealed a recording of a sermon given at the mosque in December 2016 in which one of its imams, Mustafa Graf, a dual Libyan-British national, appeared to call for the support of armed jihadi fighters in Syria.[75] The sermon had been given at a time when the Syrian city of Aleppo was being bombed. Graf denied that his sermon called for armed jihad, although two Muslim scholars consulted by the BBC assessed that the sermon referred to "military jihad."[76] The mosque's trustees issued a statement insisting that the sermon was highlighting the plight of Syrians and clarifying that jihad "was used in its wider meaning 'to strive and struggle.'"[77] The mosque said that the sermon had been referring to the need to provide "aid to those being oppressed" and was not "a call for any military action."[78] The United Kingdom's North West Counter Terrorism Unit later determined that no offense had been committed.[79] In any event, the BBC reported that there was no evidence to suggest that either Salman or any other Abedi family member were present during the sermon.[80]

Germany Connections: Information Gaps
Since the attack, reports have emerged about Salman and Hashem's travels to, and through, Germany. The extent to which this was relevant to their plot, however, remains unclear. Four days before the bombing, Salman transited through Düsseldorf airport on his way home from Libya to Manchester, via Istanbul.[81] German security services were attempting to establish what contacts he may have had there, but he reportedly had remained inside a secure zone.[82]

In the summer of 2016, Hashem Abedi had moved from Manchester to Weissenfels, a German city home to a Libyan community of over 500.[83] Initial reports claimed that he met Libyan real estate agents, which security agencies later accused of being money launderers. Deutsche Welle also reported that "agencies believe Hashem's journeys in Germany could point to a terrorist financing cell in

the country,"[84] but no evidence of this was put forward at his trial. While in Germany, Hashem worked at a property business owned by Mohammed Benhammedi, an individual who had been listed as a member of the LIFG in 2006 (by the U.S. Treasury Department) and in 2008 (by the European Union) but whom the United Nations Security Council de-listed in 2011.[85] [f]

During Hashem Abedi's trial, the prosecution noted that Hashem had booked a flight in October 2016 from Manchester to Germany for travel on January 6, 2017, though he never took the flight.[86] Later, on January 17, 2017, the day before he and Salman started to acquire chemicals for their IED, Hashem wired a small sum of money to an unidentified man in Germany.[87] And later the same month, he was in contact with another man in Germany about why he had decided against returning to the country, explaining to him that due to having "some problems," he was unable to leave Manchester.[88] Nevertheless, little more was revealed during the trial about how significant (if at all) the two brothers' links in Germany were to their plot.

Jihadi Connections in Libya
Among the starkest pieces of evidence of Salman and Hashem's connections to, and affinity for, jihadis in Libya is their use of the email address bedab7jeana@gmail.com.[89] Created on March 20, 2017, two months before the attack, they used it to purchase hydrogen peroxide for the manufacture of the TATP explosive used in Salman's IED.[90] As the prosecutor explained in court during Hashem's trial, the email represents an English transliteration of an Arabic phrase meaning "we have come to slaughter" or "to slaughter we have come."[91] The jury also heard that the phrase had become a widely used slogan in certain jihadi circles as a threat to potential opponents. Significantly, the Katibat al-Battar al-Libi (KBL), a core Islamic State unit linked to the 2015-2016 attacks in France and Belgium, chose these words as its slogan when it formed in 2012.[92] Salman Abedi, as discussed below, had reported links to KBL.

The path back to Libya, however, began at the start of the 2011 civil war, when Ramadan, Salman, Hashem, and elder brother Ismail Abedi traveled to Tunisia where Ramadan reportedly "worked on logistics for the rebels in western Libya."[93] Later in 2011, Ramadan relocated to Libya. He and others from Manchester's Libyan community reportedly joined the Manchester Fighters, a unit of the 17 February Martyrs Brigade that fought against the Qaddafi regime; however, as stated previously, Ramadan has denied being linked to any militant groups.[94]

In September 2012, Ramadan posted a Facebook image of Hashem, then aged 15, posing with a semi-automatic weapon under the caption, "Hashem the lion ... in training."[95] Ramadan's Facebook page is known to have contained images of Islamist fighters

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f   In February 2006, Benhammedi was among five U.K.-based individuals and four U.K.-based entities that the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated for their alleged role in financing LIFG. In 2008, an E.U. regulation described Benhammedi as being a member of LIFG, though this lapsed following the United Nations Security Council's de-listing. However, note that at least one of the individuals designated in both the Treasury and E.U. lists, Tahir Nasuf, denied that he was a member of or had links to the LIFG. See "Treasury Designates UK-Based Individuals, Entities Financing Al Qaida-Affiliated LIFG," U.S. Department of the Treasury, JS-4016, February 8, 2006; Commission Regulation (EC) No 1330/2008, Legisilation.gov. uk; Rosie Cowan, "Man denies terror link after assets freeze," *Guardian*, February 9, 2006.

and a posting in which he praised the al-Qa`ida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra.[96] After Qaddafi's overthrow, Ramadan remained in Libya and became an administrative manager of Tripoli's Central Security Force, which was responsible for policing in the city.[97] Reports are unclear as to whether Salman (then aged 16) and Hashem (then aged 15) also fought alongside their father.[98] Salman and Hashem, meanwhile, traveled back and forth between Tripoli and Manchester.[99] After fighting erupted among rival Libyan factions and militias in 2014, Salman reportedly returned to the country and was injured in 2014 while fighting in Ajdabiya alongside a jihadi faction.[100]

Salman Abedi was also reportedly involved in the Qudwati youth movement, which was "accused [*sic*] being a covert conduit providing IS with fighters."[101] One of Qudwati's founding members is Abdul-Baset Ghwela (Egwilla), a Canadian-Libyan salafi preacher with whom Ramadan Abedi reportedly used to associate during Friday prayers at a mosque in Tripoli.[102] U.S. officials claimed that Ghwela, who is believed to have returned to Libya after the fall of Qaddafi in 2011, recruited men to wage jihad in Benghazi. In March 2016, Ghwela's 20-year-old son, Awais, was killed while fighting with the Omar Mukhtar Brigade in Libya.[103] He too was a member of the Qudwati.[104]

In a previous issue of *CTC Sentinel*, Johannes Saal offered important insight into the Islamic State's Libyan operations, highlighting the Libyan nexus to Islamic State-aligned individuals in the United Kingdom and Germany.[105] Evidence points to the connectivity of Salman within these networks. During periods Salman spent in Libya, at some stage he met members of the KBL, according to *The New York Times*. The newspaper reported that after returning to Manchester, Salman remained in communication with KBL, at times via an intermediary who was living either in Germany or Belgium, according to an anonymous former "European intelligence chief."[106]

In October 2015, MI5 classified Salman as a Subject of Interest (SOI) for the second time due to his contact with an unidentified Islamic State figure in Libya, according to an independent assessment of the terrorist attacks in the United Kingdom in 2017. However, his file was closed on the same day it was opened "when it transpired that any contact was not direct."[107] [g] Following the 2017 Manchester attack, it was reported that around 65 previously U.K.-based KBL jihadis may have returned home to the United Kingdom from Libya over a period of time.[108]

In the days following the attack, *The Daily Telegraph* interviewed an unnamed Libyan security source who claimed that Salman made five calls to Libya from his cell phone before detonating his IED on May 22, 2017. The first two calls were reportedly to each of his parents, after which he called Hashem. Finally, according to this reporting, Salman called two cell phone numbers reportedly linked to Libyan men suspected of being members of KBL.[109] The Libyan source claimed that "the suspicion is that these guys were also part of the plot and either knew about it beforehand or were

actively encouraging Abedi to carry out the attack."[110]

During Hashem Abedi's trial, the prosecution explained that Salman had made a series of calls to Libya in the days and hours before the attack.[111] The prosecution's opening statement stated that Salman was in contact with a Libyan telephone number earlier in the day on May 22 and that he had arranged for a transfer of funds to his family in Libya.[112] At 8:23 PM, while en route to the Manchester Arena and just over two hours before the bombing, he again phoned the Libyan number connected to his family in Libya.[113] No further information emerged at trial on whether or not Salman called other individuals just before the attack as *The Daily Telegraph* reported. There is no suggestion that members of his family, other than Hashem, had any knowledge of his planned attack beforehand.

Manchester-Libya-Syria Jihadi Nexus: Peer Networks and Friendships

Peer networks and personal friendships constituted a significant component of Salman and Hashem Abedi's links to jihadis in Manchester, Libya, and Syria. This includes a local cohort who were part of the Manchester network of Islamic State supporters and fighters. Most of these individuals were either jailed in the United Kingdom or killed on jihadi battlegrounds prior to Salman carrying out the Manchester Arena attack.[114] In particular, a pair of brothers, Mohammed and Abdalraouf Abdallah, were close friends of Salman and Hashem. Abdalraouf would go onto become one of the Islamic State's most prolific recruiters in the United Kingdom.

The Abdallahs, just like the Abedis, are British-Libyans from the same area of Manchester. The Abdallah family arrived in the United Kingdom as refugees from Libya in 1993.[115] In 2011, Mohammed Abdallah traveled to Libya with friends of his father after the start of the anti-Qaddafi uprising.[116] Mohammed told jurors during his trial that he joined the Tripoli Brigade, which was known to be an Islamist militia associated with the LIFG.[117] Abdalraouf traveled there the same year and joined the 17 February Martyrs Brigade—the same unit that Ramadan Abedi reportedly joined.[118]

Sometime in 2011, Abdalraouf was shot in the spine during fighting, rendering him paraplegic and wheelchair bound. While receiving treatment in hospital in Tripoli, an Abedi family member reportedly spent time at Abdalraouf's bedside.[119] Ramadan Abedi asked friends on Facebook to pray for Abdalraouf.[120] Later that year, Abdalraouf returned to Britain for treatment and lived with his family in the Manchester suburb of Moss Side.[121] After Salman himself returned to Manchester following Qaddafi's overthrow, he was seen regularly pushing Abdalraouf in his wheelchair to and from Friday prayers at a mosque close to the Abdallah family's home.[122]

Back in the United Kingdom, Abdalraouf eventually became a key figure among Islamic State supporters and fighters from Manchester. With his injury preventing him from fighting for the Islamic State, Abdalraouf's fanatical support for the organization led to him becoming a recruiter for it. In July 2014, he used the family home as a hub to facilitate travels to join the Islamic State in Syria. According to the prosecution at his trial, Abdalraouf was "directing operations on a daily basis" using contacts in Brussels, Jordan, and Syria.[123] Specifically, the Crown Prosecution Service demonstrated that he assisted his older brother, Mohammed, who had returned to the United Kingdom from Libya in 2012, and three others from Manchester (Nezar Khalifa (also of Libyan descent), Raymond Matimba, and Stephan Gray) to travel to Syria and join the Islamic State.[124] Indeed, that same month, Mohammed traveled to Syria,

g　MI5 classified Salman Abedi as a SOI for the first time in January 2014, following an investigation in which he was believed to have been in contact with another (unidentified) SOI. His file was closed, however, in July 2014 after Abedi "was classed as a closed SOI of low residual risk, given his limited engagement with persons of national security concern." See David Anderson Q.C., "Attacks in London and Manchester March-June 2017: Independent Assessment of MI5 and Police Internal Reviews – Unclassified," December 2017, pp. 15-16.

via Turkey, with Khalifa.[h] The pair planned to join the Islamic State with Gray[i] and Matimba,[j] both converts to Islam from the Moss Side area of Manchester.[125]

Before Mohammed Abdallah had crossed the Turkish border into Syria, Abdalraouf Abdallah arranged for him to receive £2,000 and an assault rifle. The cash, which British police believe was for the purchase of guns, was wired to him at a hotel in Istanbul by their father in Manchester.[126] There is no suggestion that their father knew of his sons' involvement or that he knew for what purpose the money was intended. Although Gray was turned back at the Turkish border and returned to Manchester, Mohammed Abdallah, Khalifa, and Matimba entered Syria and were met by Islamic State fighters who took them to a training camp.[127]

At some point in July 2014, Mohammed Abdallah filled out an official Islamic State application form and was permitted to leave Syria for Libya less than a month later.[128] Interestingly, only trusted Islamic State fighters were ever permitted to do this.[129] Having reached Libya again, Mohammed joined a government militia and remained in the country until 2016.[130]

In March 2016, Sky News received files from an Islamic State defector that included Mohammed Abdallah's completed registration form.[131] He had listed himself as being a specialist sniper with fighting experience in Libya. At the time, volunteer fighters could only join the Islamic State by providing the name of a referee already known to commanders. Mohammed Abdallah provided two names: Raphael Hostey (aka Abu Qa'qa al-Britani) and Salem Musa Youssef Elkhafaifi (aka Abu Othman al-Libi), both of whom had previously lived in Manchester.[132]

Mohammed Abdallah and Hostey, as mentioned, knew each other through Didsbury mosque in Manchester.[133] After leaving Manchester for Syria in 2013, Hostey became one of the Islamic State's most important Syria-based British recruiters; he was killed in an airstrike in Syria in 2016.[134] Furthermore, Mohammed Abdallah described Elkhafaifi on the application form as a "family friend."[135] Like Mohammed Abdallah, Elkhafaifi had left Manchester in 2011 to fight in the Libyan conflict. From there, he joined the Islamic State in Syria and featured in a 2014 propaganda video released when the organization claimed to have formed a new state.[136] According to one report, Elkhafaifi was killed in a coalition airstrike in Syria in October 2015.[137]

Eventually, in September 2016, Mohammed Abdallah voluntarily returned to the United Kingdom, where he was arrested and

charged with membership of the Islamic State, possessing an AK-47 assault rifle and receiving £2,000 for the purposes of terrorism. He stood trial in November 2017 and, the following month, was found guilty on all charges.[138] Meanwhile, his younger brother Abdalraouf[k] and their mutual friend Stephan Gray had been arrested two years earlier in Manchester and, in May 2016, were convicted for a number of terrorism offenses.[139]

Salman Abedi featured prominently in these circles. He was an associate of Manchester extremists turned Islamic State fighters Raphael Hostey and Raymond Matimba (aka Abu Qaqa al-Britani al-Afro).[140] All three men are reported to have visited the same (unidentified) Manchester mosque, in addition to Hostey and Mohammed Abdallah having known each other from Didsbury mosque, as noted earlier.[141] [l]

In Raqqa, Syria, Matimba had joined an Islamic State cell that included numerous British jihadis. He reportedly remained in contact with Salman Abedi up to May 2017.[142] In September 2017, *The Daily Telegraph* obtained exclusive footage, which was filmed in November 2014, showing British members of the cell in conversation in a Syrian café. According to the newspaper's source, a Syrian man who smuggled the footage out of the country, Matimba hated his home city of Manchester and wanted the cell to plot a bomb attack against it.[143] Note, as well, that Reyaad Khan from Cardiff, Wales, was another member of the same Islamic State cell.[144] In June 2014, a Facebook user named Afzul Ali posted the image of a frontpage newspaper report regarding Khan's appearance in an Islamic State recruitment video. In a Facebook reply to the posting, Hashem Abedi appeared to praise Khan and appeared to suggest to Ali that they both join him in Syria.[145]

Additionally, Salman Abedi visited Abdalraouf Abdallah in jail while Abdalraouf was being held on remand awaiting trial, as well as after he was convicted.[146] In fact, Abdalraouf maintained contact with Salman using a cell phone that he was holding illegally in jail.[147] During Hashem Abedi's trial, it emerged that Salman and two associates visited Abdalraouf in prison on January 18, 2017.[148] This coincided with the same date that Salman and Hashem arranged their first purchase of some of the chemicals needed for their planned attack,[149] though no evidence implicates Abdalraouf or anyone else for taking part in their plot.

Conclusion

Salman and Hashem Abedi are responsible for murdering 22 innocent people, physically injuring over 200, and psychologically traumatizing over 600 victims in the Manchester Arena. They planned and organized the bombing together. No one else has been charged in connection to the plot. But there have been networks of British-Libyan Islamists in Manchester and Libya, some of whom had connections to global jihadi groups, over two generations. This

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h   Nezar Khalifa's current status and whereabouts are unknown. At some stage, he and Mohammed Abdallah were thrown out of Syria but later returned to the country. See Dominic Casciani, "Mohammed Abdallah: Leaked IS document helps convict Manchester man," BBC, December 7, 2017.

i   In July 2016, Stephan Gray was jailed, having been sentenced to an extended determinate term of nine years: five years in custody and four years "on licence" (supervision under parole). He had pleaded guilty to committing acts of terrorism, being engaged in preparation of these acts, assisting acts of terrorism, and funding terrorism. See "Press statement," Greater Manchester Police, Facebook, July 15, 2016; "Regina v Mohammed Abdallah, Sentencing Remarks of Mrs Justice McGowan," Judiciary of England and Wales, December 8, 2017, p. 3.

j   Raymond Matimba's fate and whereabouts remain unconfirmed, but he is believed to have been killed while fighting for the Islamic State. See Andy Hughes, "The IS Files: Unmasking Britain's terrorists," Sky News, December 7, 2017.

k   In July 2016, Abdalraouf was jailed, having been sentenced to an extended determinate sentence of 9.5 years: 5.5 years in custody and four years on an extended "licence" (supervision under parole) period. See "Press statement," Greater Manchester Police, Facebook, July 15, 2016; "Regina v Mohammed Abdallah, Sentencing Remarks of Mrs Justice McGowan," Judiciary of England and Wales, December 8, 2017, p. 3.

l   Hashem Abedi's Facebook account, moreover, showed that he had been in regular contact with Hostey's younger brother. See Josie Ensor, "Manchester bomber's brother was 'plotting attack on UN envoy in Libya,'" *Telegraph*, May 27, 2017.

context may have indirectly contributed to a culture in which the two brothers devised their plan.

The post-attack investigation was on a vast scale. Police took thousands of witness statements, analyzed thousands of hours of CCTV footage, sifted through at least 16 terabytes of data from hundreds of devices and collected extensive forensic evidence at the scene of the attack and across the locations in Manchester that Salman and Hashem Abedi used to prepare for the bombing.[150] In 2018, the United Kingdom's then independent reviewer of terrorism legislation (IRTL) praised the police operation, stating that "[f]ew terrorist investigations reach the scale of Operation Manteline" and noting that it constituted "a good example of interoperability on the part of CT Policing."[151]

The same year, the U.K. government also commissioned David Anderson QC, himself a former IRTL, to write an independent assessment of police and MI5 internal reviews into the 2017 terrorist attacks in the United Kingdom, including at the Manchester Arena. Although Salman Abedi's intelligence file was closed and thus not under active investigation at the time of his attack, the review noted that MI5 had intelligence in the months beforehand, "which, had its true significance been properly understood, would have caused an investigation into him to be opened."[152]

MI5 assessed that this would not have led to "Abedi's plans to be pre-empted and thwarted"[153] and that the intelligence decision not to reopen his case was "finely-balanced."[154] In fact, an MI5 "data-washing exercise" identified Salman Abedi as one of a small number of individuals—within a pool of more than 20,000 closed subjects of interest—who warranted closer scrutiny.[155] And a meeting to discuss his case, which was scheduled before the attack, was arranged for May 31, 2017—tragically, nine days after the attack took place.[156]

Anderson's assessment stated that, although Salman Abedi was a closed SOI, "an opportunity was missed by MI5 to place Salman Abedi on ports action following his travel to Libya in April 2017."[157] Such a step would have acted as an alert when Salman flew back to the United Kingdom on May 18, 2017—four days before his attack. Additionally, the forthcoming coroner's inquest into the May 22 bombing is expected to include more evidence from authorities about the Abedis, though this has been postponed until September 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

What is not in doubt is Salman and Hashem's extremist mindset and the premediated steps they took to plan and execute a deadly attack. Speaking after Hashem's conviction, Detective Chief Superintendent Simon Barraclough, the case's senior investigating officer, best encapsulated the pair's culpability:

> If you look at these two brothers, they are not kids caught in the headlights of something they don't understand. ... These two men are the real deal, these are proper jihadis - you do not walk into a space like the Manchester Arena and kill yourself with an enormous bomb like that, taking 22 innocent lives with you, if you are not a proper jihadist.[158]   **CTC**

Appendix: Approximate Timeline of Salman and Hashem Abedi's Travels and Activities, 2010-2020

2010	• In December, Salman Abedi first came to the attention of MI5 due to associations with an unnamed person who was the subject of a low-priority investigation. However, no further action was taken due to an absence of any intelligence indicating national security concerns.[159]
2011	• Ramadan Abedi and his sons Ismail, Salman, and Hashem travel to Tunisia at the start of the Libyan revolution.[160] • In August, Ramadan, Salman, and Hashem travel to Tripoli to deliver aid and medical supplies to anti-Qaddafi rebels.[161] • After Qaddafi's overthrow, Ramadan remained in Libya, while Salman, Hashem, and the rest of the family began to travel back and forth between Tripoli and Manchester.[162]
2012-2013	• Salman attended Manchester College where he assaulted a female for wearing a short skirt.[163] He left the college in 2013.
2014	• In January, MI5 actively investigated Salman Abedi for the first time, but his file was closed in July. He was classed as a "closed SOI of low residual risk."[164] • According to Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC), while Salman was under investigation and afterward, "MI5 and CTP received information informing them of SALMAN's ***, frequent travel to Libya ***. However, he was not, at any point, subject to any form of travel monitoring or travel disruption."[165] *(Note: The asterisks denote sections of redacted text in the ISC report.)* • At some point, Salman and Hashem were in Libya when fighting broke out among rival militias in the country. According to some reports, Salman was injured during fighting in Ajdabiya.[166] • In August, Salman and Hashem were among over 100 British nationals whom the Royal Navy evacuated out of Libya.[167] • In September, Salman began a business management course at the University of Salford in Greater Manchester but dropped out after two years.[168]

2015-2016	• At some point, Salman Abedi returned to Libya, where he reportedly developed links to Canadian-Libyan salafi preacher Abdul-Baset Ghwela; Salman was reportedly a member of Ghwela's Qudwati youth movement.[169] • Hashem Abedi took a one-year IT course at Northenden College in Manchester.[170] • In September 2015, Salman Abedi attended a demonstration outside the UAE Embassy in London organized by the Libyan 17 February Forum, a U.K.-based movement opposing the leadership of the head of the Libyan National Army Khalifa Haftar.[171] • In October 2015, MI5 classified Salman as a SOI for the second time due to his supposed contact with an unnamed Islamic State figure in Libya. His case was closed on the same day because the contact was indirect.[172] • Between late April and mid-May 2016, Salman's close friend Abdalraouf Abdallah was jailed for terrorism offenses; Raphael Hostey, an associate of both Salman and Abdalraouf, was killed in a drone strike while fighting for the Islamic State in Syria; and a childhood friend of Salman was killed in a gang murder in Manchester.[173] • In May 2016, Salman opened a bank account that remained unused until shortly before the Manchester Arena bombing, when he used it to purchase items for the construction of his device.[174] • In the summer of 2016, Hashem traveled to Weissenfels, Germany, where he worked for a property business owned by a Libyan businessman.[175]
2017	• On January 18, the brothers arranged the first order for precursor chemicals necessary for making the TATP explosive.[176] • On April 15, Salman and Hashem traveled from Manchester to Libya reportedly for a wedding.[177] • On the morning of May 18, Salman arrived back in Manchester from Libya via Düsseldorf, Germany.[178] Hashem remained in Libya. • On May 18, in the early evening, Salman undertook a hostile reconnaissance visit at the Manchester Arena.[179] • On May 21, in the early evening, Salman undertook his second hostile reconnaissance visit at the Manchester Arena.[180] • On May 22, again in the early evening, Salman visited the Manchester Arena City Room for a very short time, returning to Victoria Station and the Arena at 8:30 PM. Salman wandered around the complex for two hours before detonating his explosive device at 10:31 PM during the exit phase of the concert.[181]
2019	• On July 7, Hashem Abedi was extradited from Libya to the United Kingdom.[182]
2020	• On February 4, Hashem Abedi's trial commenced. • On March 17, Hashem was found guilty of 22 counts of murder, one of attempted murder in relation to those who survived, and one of conspiracy to cause an explosion.[183]

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Reviewing Iran's Proxies by Region: A Look Toward the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa

By Nakissa Jahanbani

In a period of ongoing tensions between the United States and Iran, several practitioners have forecasted Iranian retaliation via proxy group. This article offers a high-level analysis of attack trends from 2008 to 2019 of Iranian proxies in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, using several open-source datasets. This study separates trends for Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) from other Iranian proxies given LH's unique partnership and organizational strength relative to other proxies. In a limited capacity, this study also compares and contrasts attacks and fatalities between LH, the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and other non-LH proxies in Iraq and Syria for a handful of years, 2013 to 2019. First, the analysis highlights that LH, other Iranian proxies, and the IRGC entered and exited the Iraqi and Syrian conflict theaters at different times from 2013 to 2019: in Syria, LH-linked attacks preceded those attributed to the IRGC; meanwhile, other proxies focused attacks on the conflict in Iraq more so than in Syria. Second, when looking at the Middle East writ large, LH's annual attack and fatalities counts at times exceeded all other proxies' combined, in some years more than four-fold, while proxies and the IRGC had the top annual count twice. Finally, by way of comparison, there are fewer non-LH proxies and attacks in South Asia and Africa, regions where Iranian involvement is less tactical and more strategic, and seemingly managed through LH, formal politics, or other legitimate means, such as religious, educational, or cultural programs.

The January 2020 strike against the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF) commander Major General Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi official Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy chief of the Popular Mobilization Commission and Kata'ib Hezbollah commander, immediately raised questions about the implications for Iran's relationships with its proxies in the region and around the globe. With the subsequent escalation after the strike, it is important to get a better sense of groups that Iran could leverage to retaliate against the United States. Toward that end, having a bet-

ter sense of past attack trends is useful as they can indicate groups' capabilities and resiliency and how Tehran may leverage them.

While there are dozens of rich case studies on Iran's relationships with prominent proxies or their involvement in notable countries, what broad trends are known about their relationships writ large, and how does that inform an understanding of possible paths forward? Particularly, given the new IRGC-QF commander Brigadier General Esmail Qaani's previous experience in Afghanistan,[a] a closer look at proxies in that country and other select South Asian countries[b] could highlight potential avenues for the IRGC's paths forward. Against that, this article asks: over the last decade, what were some trends in Iranian proxies' attacks across different regions, and, where possible to evaluate, how do those compare with the IRGC's?[c]

In an attempt to answer these questions, this article looks at recent historical trends in Iranian proxies' attacks[d] and fatalities

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a   Qaani is also said to have had considerable engagement in Afghanistan and previous experience in Pakistan and some of Central Asia. For more information, see Ali Alfoneh, "Esmail Qaani: the next Revolutionary Guards Quds Force commander?" American Enterprise Institute, January 11, 2012; Ali Alfoneh, "Who Is Esmail Qaani, the New Chief Commander of Iran's Qods Force?" Washington Institute, January 7, 2020.

b   For the purposes of this study, Afghanistan is considered part of South Asia.

c   Data about the IRGC was only available in the ACLED and Janes datasets from 2016-2019. (See subsequent footnotes for datasets' specifics.) Due to the limitations of available quantitative data about the IRGC's activities, it was challenging to parse out IRGC-QF attacks from those in other branches of the Revolutionary Guards. Sometimes data sources would not distinguish between which IRGC forces were involved in the attacks. Some of the data used in this article concerns IRGC-QF attacks, but it includes those from other IRGC armed forces as well. Therefore, for accuracy, this data in this piece concerns IRGC forces broadly, which can include the IRGC-QF, IRGC military, or, in very limited instances, the IRGC's Basij militia. This does not, however, include forces from the Iranian military (artesh) that are also found in Syria. For more information, see "Chapter One: Tehran's Strategic Intent," in "Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East," International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019.

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across different regions from 2008 to 2019.[e] Each section has a short description of past Iranian involvement in that specific region coupled with a short discussion of overarching attack trends. A look at this relatively recent time period provides contextualization for proxies' activities and group capabilities and possible paths forward. For a more nuanced understanding of Iranian proxy trends, this study parses out Lebanese Hezbollah from other Iranian proxies[f] given LH's long-term partnership and considerable capabilities relative to other proxies. This article focuses on proxies in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa[g] for a couple of reasons. In Iraq and Syria, Iranian proxies were involved in the fight against the Islamic State for the last several years. With the arrival of Qaani and the drawdown of U.S. troops, there is speculation in the policy community that Iran will turn its gaze to Afghanistan and the broader South Asian region.[1] Additionally, policymakers identified Africa as a potential theater for Iran threat network retaliation after the Soleimani strike and scrutinized Iran's history of involvement on the African continent.[2]

Before proceeding further, it is pertinent to note this article's and the datasets' inclusion criteria and limitations for the attacks and fatalities[h] discussed here. First, data about groups' attacks was collected, coded, and analyzed from three databases: the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), and Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Centre's events database.[3][i]

Due to strict inclusion criteria,[j] attacks coded in various datasets are underrepresented due to accessibility to certain areas for journalists during ongoing conflict and violence.[4] The author compiled data from multiple datasets in an effort to compensate for this underreporting. Despite this, the numbers presented in this article are

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e   For the purposes of this article, proxies are groups that receive operational, tangible support from any aspect of the Iranian government. Inclusion criteria for Iranian proxies in this article comes from several sources. First, inclusion is based on the author's ongoing project at the Combating Terrorism Center regarding Iranian proxies in Iraq and Syria. Second, it includes Iran's sponsorship relationships delineated in the Big Allied and Dangerous (BAAD) Project. See the following versions for more information: Victor Asal, R. Karl Rethemeyer, and Eric W. Schoon, "Crime, Conflict, and Legitimacy Trade-Off: Explaining Variation in Insurgents' Participation in Crime," *Journal of Politics* 81:2 (2019); Victor H. Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer, "Big Allied and Dangerous Dataset Version 2," START, 2015. Additional proxies were included on a case-by-case basis with information collected from open sources. In evaluating proxies' attacks patterns, it is important to evaluate which groups are proxies versus non-state partners. For the purposes of this study, proxies are groups that have some level of dependence on Iranian support or direction. It could be argued that some groups commonly referred to as Iranian proxies would be better described as partners based on the extent and nature of their relationship with Iran and the groups' relative autonomy and strength. For this reason, groups like the Taliban and al-Qa`ida are not included in this study. First, Iran's relationship with the Taliban is strategically leveraged at certain times and not consistent across the time period. For more information on the nature of Iran's relationship with the Taliban during this time period, see Scott Worden, "Iran and Afghanistan's Long, Complicated History," United States Institute of Peace, June 14, 2018; Alireza Nader, Ali G. Scotten, Ahmad Idrees Rahmani, Robert Stewart, and Leila Mahnad, "Iran's Influence in Afghanistan," RAND, 2014; "Chapter 3: State Sponsors of Terrorism," Country Reports on Terrorism, U.S. Department of State, 2012. Second, Iran's relationship with al-Qa`ida is similarly inconsistent across the time period and ranges from tactical to operational support. For more information on Iran's relationship with al-Qa`ida, see Assaf Moghadam, "Marriage of Convenience: The Evolution of Iran and al-Qa`ida's Tactical Cooperation," *CTC Sentinel* 10:4 (2017); Nelly Lahoud, "Al-Qa`ida's Contested Relationship with Iran: A View from Abbottabad," New America, September 7, 2018.

The data was compiled from 2008 to 2019 for a couple of reasons. When this research project started in February 2020, and there was concern about incomplete attack data for the last quarter of 2019. As the project sought to review an entire decade, 2008 to 2018 was selected as a time period. Later, as datasets were updated, data on attacks in last quarter of 2019 were collected in April 2020 and subsequently included in this study.

f   The non-LH proxies included in this study are: Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Al-Shabaab al-Mu'minin, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Badr Brigades, Brigade of al-Mukhtar al-Thaqafi, Fatemiyoun Brigade, Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement), Harakat al-Nujaba, Harakat-e Islami, Hezbi Islami, Hezbollah, Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami, Islamic Court Union, Islamic Movement in Nigeria, Kata'ib al-Imam Ali, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Kata'ib Jund al-Imam, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Mahdi Army, Mukhtar Army, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Polisario Front, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Gen Cmd (PFLP-GC),Saraya al-Ashtar Saraya al-Mukhtar, Saraya Al-Muqawama al-Shabeea, Saraya Waad Allah, Sipah-I-Mohammed, and Waad Allah Brigade.

g   It is important to delineate regional categories of the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa for this study. Below is a list of the countries in each region. This is not an exhaustive list of countries in each of these regions: for succinctness, only those countries that have at least one attack in the dataset are listed here. The Middle East consists of Bahrain, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and Gaza Strip, and Yemen; South Asia consists of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India; Africa consists of Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, and Somalia.

h   Fatalities counts are compiled from the three data sources mentioned in this study. They include the total number of reported fatalities in each attack, whether civilian, security forces, or perpetrator.

i   Data for this article was only gathered from the aforementioned datasets. Additional open-source research and coding was not completed to verify what was collected from the three datasets. This likely contributes to underreporting attacks as well. Attacks information was gathered from 2008-2018 (and, where available, 2019) for groups that received Iranian sponsorship at any point for any duration during that time period, with two exceptions: Taliban and al-Qa`ida (discussed in footnote E). Data from the GTD is from 2008-2018, and data from ACLED and Janes is collected from the year available until 2019. Data on the specific entities was first pulled from the GTD and ACLED. Months in which there was a gap in data in those sources were then searched in Janes. Data from ACLED and Janes was then coded according to GTD's attack coding scheme. (See the GTD Codebook for specifics.) After compiling from different datasets, observations were reviewed to ensure duplicate events across databases were not included.

j   All three datasets collect from secondary sources. There is a potential selection effect in the data compiled for this study since these datasets have already denoted the attacks' importance. Attacks coded in the GTD must meet two sets of criteria. First, attacks must (a) be perpetrated by sub-state actors, (b) demonstrate intentionality on part of the group, and (c) have a level of violence or immediate threat of it. Second, two of three of the following criteria should be met for inclusion: (a) the goal of the event is for political, economic, religious, or social reasons, (b) the event must have evidence of signaling a message, coercion, or intimidation of a larger audience, or (c) the event must be outside the realm of legitimate warfare activities. See "GTD Codebook," p. 10. ACLED collects data from media; research and investigative reports; local partners; and specific social media accounts and channels. For more information, see "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) Codebook," ACLED, 2019. Examples of violent event types included from ACLED are: battles, armed clashes, use of force against civilians, and abductions. Attacks from Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Centre's Events dataset are coded from open sources. For more information, see "Terrorism and insurgency" on the Janes website.

likely underestimated, and yet they provide a baseline trend and initial analysis of underlying patterns in attacks.[k] Relatedly, a second caveat is that the data on the IRGC's attacks in Iraq and Syria is limited to observed battlefield operations. This does not accurately capture the various dimensions of the IRGC's involvement, which also operates in an advisory capacity for proxies and therefore may be indirectly involved in some attacks. To provide adequate context, there is discussion of indirect forms of IRGC activities in the background, including establishing, recruiting for, and advising proxies. Third, this study had to reckon with proxies that commit attacks in the context of a governmental security structure. For instance, some of the composite militias in the Hashd al-Shaabi, or the Popular Mobilization Forces that are part of the Iraqi government's security structure, are Iranian-backed. Attacks from these militias were included in this study if data sources explicitly described them as being perpetrated by the militia outside of its governmental role. Attacks were not included in this study when sources described them as being perpetrated by a "Hashd militia" or with some other reference to their governmental role. For example, the description of a July 10, 2017, attack in Janes dataset states, "In Imam Gharbi, Ninawa province, the 50th Brigade al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Kataib Babylon) killed two Islamic State militants in fighting." This attack was not included in this study as it was discussed in the context of the group's official role in the Hashd. It is reasonable to think that the group's activities in this instance were conducted as part of its role in the Iraqi government. While an artificial difference, this procedure provides consistency for data and hopefully protects from most conflation between group and governmental attacks.

This article proceeds as follows: in the first section, it looks at LH's, other proxies', and the IRGC's attack trends in the Middle East. Next, it extends a view to proxies' attack patterns in select countries in both South Asia, and the African continent, providing some context for Iran's relationships with proxies in those regions and potential paths forward.

Regional Analysis of Trends
Middle East: Lebanese Hezbollah, Other Proxies, and the IRGC[l]
Tehran's Middle East foreign policy touts long-standing proxy relationships and other activity in Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Iraq, and Syria, all which date back to the 1980s.[5]

Iran has a long history of supporting militant groups in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. In Lebanon, Iran established Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) in 1985 and cultivated it into a popular political party and militant organization over time with substantive domestic reach. Supporting LH has provided Tehran with two-fold benefits: (1) an avenue to expand Iran's regional reach and help build a land and air bridge from Tehran to the Mediterranean;[m] and (2) a buffer against Israel, a long-time target of its proxy and military strategy. Presently, LH has considerable political and social clout, including seats in the parliament, but the group is seemingly losing popularity.[6] As in Lebanon, in the Palestinian territories, Iran also has a history of supporting various militant organizations for the purposes of targeting Israel. These include but are not limited to groups such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade.[7] While it could be argued that many of the Palestinian groups operate more as partners than proxies, they are included in this study of proxies due to the extent and long-term nature of support that Iran provided to the groups during the years of this study. For example, Iran was a primary source of weapons and funding for Hamas for most of the years in this study, as well as the main funder of its military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades.[8] Similarly, Iran was the main source of funding and training for the PIJ.[9]

In Iraq, after the 2003 U.S. invasion, Iran's strategy focused on backing Iraqi politicians and militias as a buffer against a potentially hostile government in Baghdad, U.S. forces on its borders, and Saudi Arabia.[10] In addition to politicians, Iran supported Shi`a militias in Iraq, a policy dating back to the Iran-Iraq war, and, over time, added more groups to its roster. Presently, Iran supports some of the most influential militia groups in the Hashd al-Shaabi, or the

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k Events from ACLED and Janes also covered "clashes" or "battles" that were ongoing. For multi-day clashes, the author coded a new attack for each day of the clash if the attacks took place in different locations (at the city level). For these types of events, the lowest fatalities count found was coded.

Data was extracted for the groups' names from ACLED's "actor1" category and GTD's "gname." From Janes, the primary targeting force was coded from attack descriptions. These categories reflect that the group in question was the primary targeting force. For standardization purposes, co-operational attacks were coded under the primary targeting group. While this may also contribute to some underreporting, this standardization hopefully protects from most data conflation issues.

l The Houthis, or Ansar Allah, are not included in this study. Given their focus and position in Yemen, the Houthis have considerable strength and autonomy. Iran and the Houthis coordinate an overall tactical and target strategy with the Houthis, per Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield), p. 28. With this, it may be more appropriate to consider the group an Iranian non-state partner as opposed to a proxy. As the Houthis are not included in this study, Iranian involvement in Yemen is also not discussed. This is not to dismiss the importance of Iran's policies and involvement in Yemen. For more information about this relationship and history, see Michael Knights, "The Houthi War Machine," *CTC Sentinel* 11:8 (2018); Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Gerald M. Feierstein, "Iran's Role in Yemen and Prospects for Peace," Middle East Institute, December 6, 2018.

m The land and air bridge generally refers to various routes potentially connecting Tehran to the Mediterranean, which run through various points in Iraq, Syria, and, in some routes, Lebanon. Through these routes, Iran can equip proxies throughout Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and exert other forms of influence, such as various soft-power initiatives in Syria's Deir ez-Zor province. For an excellent background and analysis about the land and air bridge, see David Adesnik and Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Burning Bridge: The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean," Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, June 2019. For more information about Iranian soft power influence in the Syrian Deir ez-Zor province, see Oula A. Alrifai, "What Is Iran Up To in Deir al-Zour?" Washington Institute, October 10, 2019.
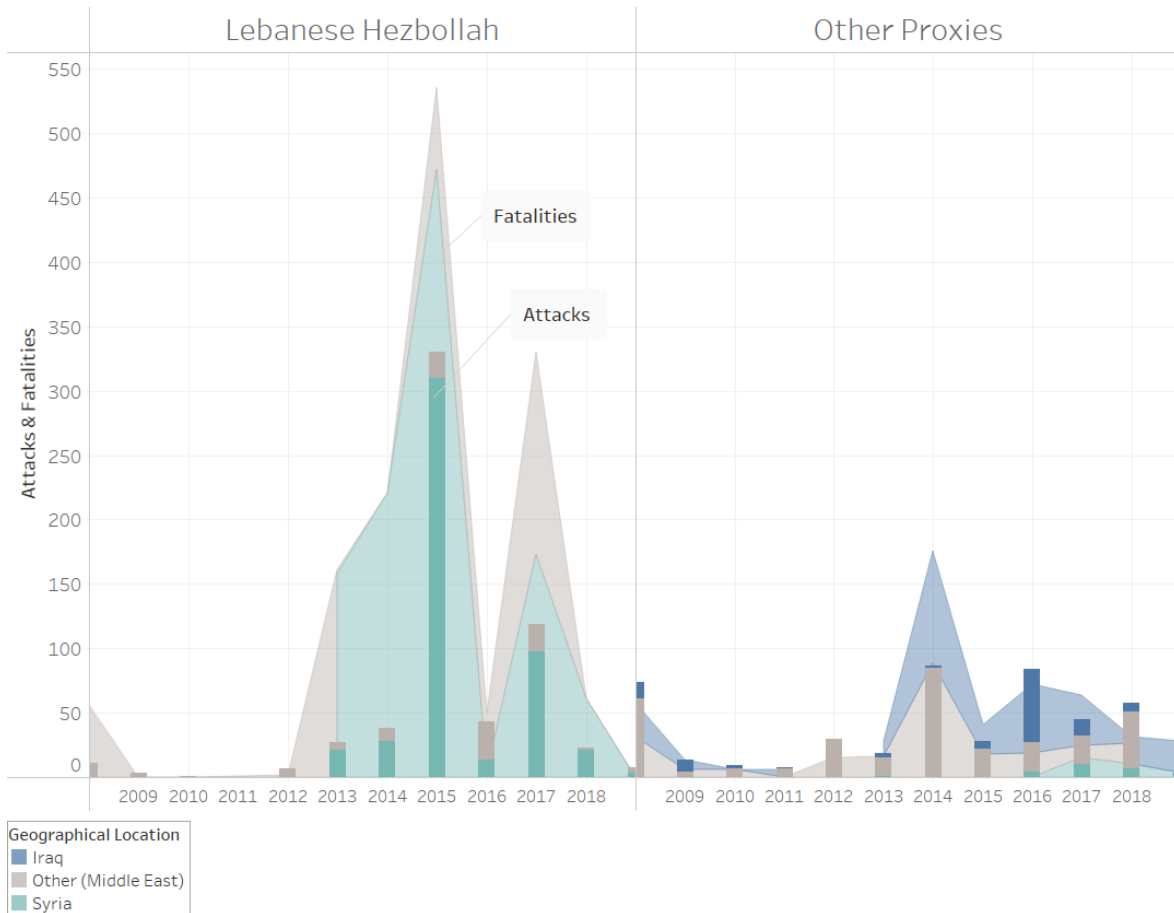
Figure 1: Attacks and Fatalities for Lebanese Hezbollah and Other Iranian Proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Other Countries in the Middle East, 2008-2019

Popular Mobilization Forces, which are part of the Iraqi government's security structure.[11] As Michael Knights has noted in this publication, Iran's proxies in Iraq reached "unprecedented size and influence" in late 2019.[12] Iranian dominance in Baghdad was contested domestically in October 2019, and the Iran-backed militias' repressive crackdown further eroded their support.[13]

Turning to Syria, Iran's proxy network extended into the country prior to the civil war.[14] Just before the conflict's outbreak, Tehran launched a multi-pronged foreign policy to assist the Assad regime,[15] such as sending in IRGC and Iranian army forces in an advisory capacity to train the Syrian military and transport supplies from Tehran.[16] Another pillar included raising new and bolstering existing militias and other non-state violent organizations in the country. Toward the latter, Ariane Tabatabai wrote in this publication that the Fatemiyoun Brigade,[n] for example, was established under the guidance of the IRGC-QF in 2012 and was intended to serve as an affordable means of Iranian support to the Assad regime: "fighters would be paid a few hundred dollars per month and promised residency rights to essentially serve as cannon fodder for Iran's efforts in Syria."[17]

In Syria, in addition to raising militias, Iran also directed LH's

and proxies' fighters from Lebanon and Iraq, respectively. In 2012, both LH and Iraqi proxies began moving forces into Syria.[18] Those from Iraq included Iranian-backed militias within the Hashd al-Shaabi, such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq[19] and Harakat al-Nujaba.[20] In addition to forming militias, Iran also worked with existing militias in Syria, such as Al-Ghaliboun, among several others.[21] LH was also pivotal in training pro-regime militias[22] and establishing several Iranian-supported militias in Syria, for example Quwat al-Ridha,[23] one of the groups that is now part of the Syrian Hezbollah groups.[24] The salary incentives and recruitment strategies used for the Fatemiyoun Brigade were also employed for other proxies operating in Syria, such as the Zeinabiyoun Brigade[25][o] and Kata'ib Aimmah al-Baqiyah (a Syrian Shi`a Iranian-backed militia).[26] The IRGC-QF also incentivized recruitment for other Syrian proxies, paying directly from its coffers or through Iraqi proxy intermediaries.[27]

Figure 1 depicts LH's and other proxies' attacks in various Middle Eastern countries, as observed by the datasets used in this study. The countries are grouped into three categories: Iraq, Syria, and

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n   The Fatemiyoun Brigade recruits from and is largely populated by an Afghan Shi`a minority, the Hazara. For more information about this group and its history, see Tobias Schneider, "The Fatemiyoun Division: Afghan Fighters in the Syrian Civil War," Middle East Institute, October 2018.

o   The Zeinabiyoun Brigade is a Pakistani Shi`a militant organization operating in Syria. The IRGC supports the group in recruitment and training in Pakistan and Iran and subsequent transportation to Syria. For more information, see Antonio Giustozzi, "The resurgence of Shia Muslim militancy in Pakistan," Janes Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor, October 27, 2016.
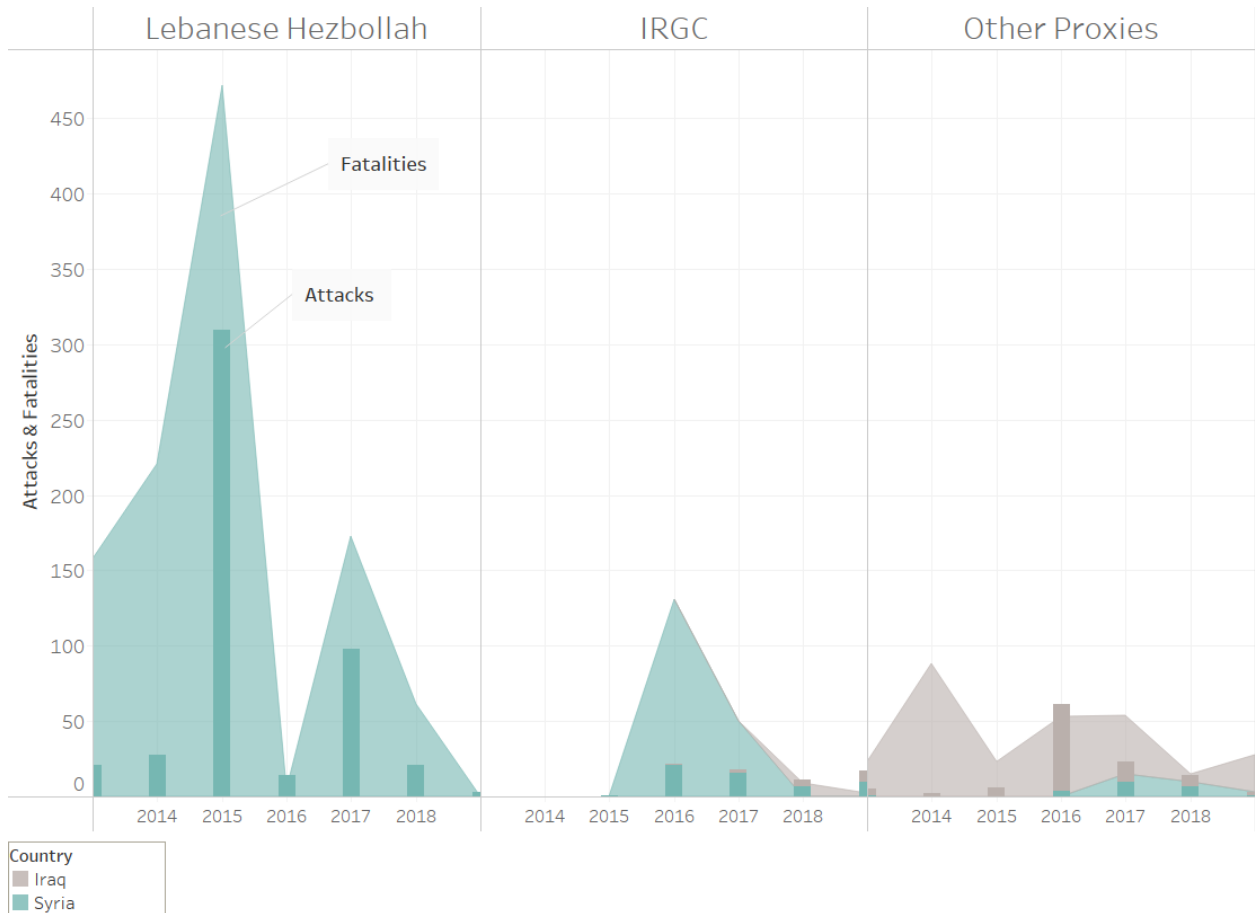
Figure 2: Attacks and Fatalities for Lebanese Hezbollah, IRGC, and Proxies in Iraq and Syria, 2013-2019

other Middle Eastern states, including Bahrain, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and Gaza Strip, and Yemen.[p] The bars reflect total attacks per year, parceled by different geographical category. (For example, in 2015, there were roughly 300 LH-linked attacks in Syria and about 20 in other Middle Eastern countries.) The shaded portions behind the bars are the total fatalities per year, categorized by geographical location. (For example, in 2015, of the approximately 525 LH-linked fatalities, about 450 were in Syria and the rest in other Middle Eastern countries).

An initial review of attacks and fatalities for LH and other Iranian proxies in the Middle East provides a not altogether surprising observation: there is a stark difference between LH's and other proxies' attacks patterns. A couple temporal trends are notable. After the civil war started, LH continued attacks outside of the Syrian theater, but to a lesser extent. Over the same period, proxies' attacks are seemingly split between Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries, with some attacks in Syria at the end of the time period. The year 2014 is notable, as much of other proxies' activity outside Iraq reflected the events of the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict and a series of Saraya al-Ashtar and Saraya al-Mukhtar bombings in Bahrain.[28]

The extent to which LH's operational capacity outdoes the other proxies is consequential: in 2015 and 2017, LH-inflicted fatalities were more than quadruple that of the proxies in the same years. Relatedly, in 2013 and 2014, when LH had fewer attacks than the

other proxies, it still was responsible for a considerable number of fatalities. Put differently, LH seems substantially more active than the proxies in some years, based on the volume of attacks, and relatively lethal in the years when it had fewer attacks. A similar trend holds when narrowing the scope to attacks and fatalities in only Iraq and Syria for 2013-2019.

Figure 2 juxtaposes annual attacks and fatalities for LH, the IRGC, and other proxies from 2013 to 2019 in Syria and Iraq, and Table 1 provides specific counts for these measures as well as one for overall annual lethality, calculated by the total number of fatalities divided by the total number of attacks.

From this data, it is apparent how entities differ in operational activities. The timing and location of operations for each entity is noteworthy. First, both Lebanese Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies had identifiable attacks ahead of the IRGC in Syria and Iraq, respectively. Turning first to Syria, given what is known about the IRGC's involvement in the country prior to the civil war, it seems likely that the Revolutionary Guards were operational before 2015, the first year it had an observed attack. Furthermore, over the entire period, LH and the IRGC's identified attack activity seem constrained to Syria almost exclusively. IRGC attacks' lethality in Syria peaked in 2016, as Iran committed more personnel to the conflict and transitioned from a training role to a tactical one.[29] Non-LH proxies began launching attacks in Syria from 2016 onward. Conversely, in Iraq, non-LH proxies were active since 2013 and overlapped with IRGC from 2016 onward. The proxies' attack counts often surpassed the IRGC's, except in 2019 when the Revolutionary

p   Data on Houthi attacks is not included in this figure. Please refer to footnote L for a description of why the Houthis were excluded in this study.

Group		2013 Iraq	2013 Syria	2014 Iraq	2014 Syria	2015 Iraq	2015 Syria	2016 Iraq	2016 Syria	2017 Iraq	2017 Syria	2018 Iraq	2018 Syria	2019 Iraq	2019 Syria
IRGC	Attacks						1	1	21	2	16	4	7	7	10
	Fatalities						0	0	131	0	50	9	0	2	0
	Lethality						0.00	0.00	6.24	0.00	3.13	2.25	0.00	0.29	0.00
Lebanese Hezbollah	Attacks		21		28		310		14		98		21		3
	Fatalities		158		221		472		5		173		61		0
	Lethality		7.52		7.89		1.52		0.36		1.77		2.90		0.00
Other Proxies	Attacks	4	1	2		6		57	4	13	10	7	7	2	1
	Fatalities	12	11	88		23		53	0	39	15	5	10	25	3
	Lethality	3.00	11.00	44.00		3.83		0.93	0.00	3.00	1.50	0.71	1.43	12.50	3.00

Table 1: LH, Proxies, and IRGC Attacks, Fatalities, and Lethality Levels in Iraq and Syria, 2013-2019

Guards had the top count. The first IRGC attack in the dataset is registered in 2016, but IRGC forces were operational in Iraq since 2014, in response to the Islamic State threat.[30]

LH and the other proxies were operational in different contexts when looking at Iraq and Syria more closely. From 2014 to 2016, LH almost exclusively focused on Syria while other Iranian-backed proxies did so in Iraq. While it may be that the two entities were acting accordingly due to their primary locations of operations, some Iranian direction is likely given Soleimani's role in cultivating the proxy network and hands-on approach in conflict theaters in Iraq and Syria, among other Middle Eastern countries.[31]

Each entity had points of heightened lethality but at somewhat diverging time periods and locations. In 2013 and 2014, both LH and the other proxies had a spike in the fatalities they inflicted in Syria and Iraq, respectively. (See Figure 2 and Table 1.) From 2017 onward in Syria, Lebanese Hezbollah and the other proxies, to a lesser extent, resumed predominance in attacks. LH's operations also levied substantial fatalities in 2017 but had a downturn in 2018.[32]

When LH-inflicted fatalities dipped in 2016 in Syria, IRGC forces peaked in fatalities for a relatively low number of attacks. There may be a couple potential explanations for the surge of IRGC-linked fatalities in 2016. The IRGC participated in various campaigns in the Aleppo governorate and the Battle of Aleppo alongside LH, Harakat al-Nujaba (an Iraqi Iranian-backed militia), and other pro-Assad forces to retake the city.[33] Relatedly, IRGC forces shifted tactics the previous year, the effects of which may have been felt in 2016. In part informed by Russian military campaigns, starting in late 2015, IRGC ground forces and Quds Force fighters "began launching simultaneous and successive operations against opposition-held districts in and around Aleppo."[34] The uptick in the number of campaigns could entail higher casualties for both the Revolutionary Guard forces and those targeted, and both indicators are included in the fatalities counts for this study.[35]

From 2016 to 2019, all three entities—LH, the IRGC, and the non-LH proxies—overlapped operations in Syria. IRGC forces often fought alongside Iranian-sponsored proxies in Iraq and Syria. There were a series of co-operational attacks leading up to the Battle for Aleppo.[36] Relatedly, there are several instances of joint operational bases shared by the IRGC and proxies' forces. According to the data collected for this study, between 2016 and 2019, there were approximately 20 cases, or observations, of such joint base of operations between the IRGC, LH, and the Fatemiyoun Brigade.[q]

The data trends fit with open-source reporting. Iranian involvement in Syria—through the IRGC, Quds Force, and the Iranian army—was primarily in an advisory capacity, which correlates with the relatively low-level number of attacks and fatalities inflicted by the IRGC in Syria throughout the time period.[37] Similarly, IRGC forces were active in a training and advisory capacity with Iraqi proxies,[38] which is consistent with the Revolutionary Guards' identifiable attacks only gathering pace from around that point. (See Table 1.) The data suggests the IRGC had an operational shift in Syria between 2015 and 2016: it went from one attack in 2015 to about 20 attacks and over 100 fatalities in the next year.[r] The trends in Table 1 match with open-source reports about the IRGC moving forces from various branches, including some from the domestic-facing Basij, into Syria between 2014 and 2015 to fight alongside LH and other proxies.[39] Consequently, Revolutionary Guard forces faced devastating losses in May 2016 in Syria and afterwards seemingly reduced troop deployments to Damascus.[40] Despite these reductions, there continued to be rising IRGC-related attacks and fatalities in both Syria and Iraq.

These trends have some implications for those concerned by Iran's threat network. First, it may be that Iran continues to leverage LH's operational strength in Syria in the future. Particularly with the drawdown of the Syrian civil war and the Islamic State's contraction, Iran may shift away from active operational support and once again inhabit a strictly advisory role with the Assad government, much like it did at the onset of the conflict, maintaining forces at Syrian bases for training and logistics. On many occasions, LH has acted as a broker for Tehran in Syria: it established proxies, provided them with various forms of tactical support, and recruited with and for them.[41] In the post-Soleimani era, as far as has been reported in open-source research, it seems IRGC-QF Commander Brigadier General Esmail Qaani travels abroad to meet with operational partners to a lesser extent than his predecessor, with, as far as is known from open source reporting, the most recent travel to

q   The data on joint bases of operation was collected from the ACLED dataset primarily and is coded from its "strategic developments" category. This data was also supplemented from the Janes dataset used in this study.

r   IRGC attacks were first captured in the database in 2016. Per footnote J, attacks can include armed clashes, violence against civilians, and abductions.

Iraq and Syria in March 2020.[s] While it may be too soon to tell, this could signal a change in operational security for the Quds Force. If so, LH would be a natural intermediary in Syria or Iraq.[42]

Yet, this possibility comes with some drawbacks. LH may at times be disinclined to be considered Iran's lackey. The group continues to face growing public discontent in Lebanon, tensions that have been somewhat exacerbated by Hezbollah's public services shortcomings during the COVID-19 pandemic.[43] Additionally, Iran's economic hardships because of the pandemic could also have implications for Hezbollah's budget,[44] though there is not yet evidence to suggest this is the case. Yet, put together, these factors may contribute to contention between LH and Tehran.

In Iraq, Iran may continue to lean on its partners. Lebanese Hezbollah advised and organized Iranian-backed Iraqi militias in the aftermath of Soleimani's death.[45] Alternatively, Iran may turn to a local partner to run point in Iraq, instead of LH. In the days after Qaani's appointment, Iraqi militia leaders from Harakat al-Nujaba, Kata'ib al-Imam Ali, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, among others, traveled to Iran to visit with the new IRGC-QF commander.[46] Some note Harakat al-Nujaba leader Akram al-Kaabi's central role in planning the visit. It may be that Iran turns to al-Kaabi in the future in an intermediary capacity.

Proxies in South Asia

Having reviewed overarching trends in Hezbollah's and other proxies' activities in the preceding section, there are some similarities and differences with Iran's proxy policy and proxies' operations in select South Asian countries, namely Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Much of Iran's involvement in the region is directed toward and in Afghanistan.

Iran's involvement in South Asia is of importance given its shared border with Afghanistan. It may have an opportunity to strengthen its position in Afghanistan because of several factors. First, the initial drawdown of U.S. troops to 8,600 in Afghanistan[47] and the peace process with the Taliban create an opportunity upon which Iran can capitalize. Second, Soleimani's replacement, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani, has about two decades of experience overseeing the IRGC-QF's operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia more broadly.[48] Additionally, Qaani's second-in-command, Brigadier General Seyyed Mohammad Hejazi, has decades of experience in several IRGC organizations: directing the forces in Lebanon, research and development of weapons, and commander of the IRGC's domestic-facing organization, the Basij.[49] Taken together, Qaani's network coupled with Hejazi's versatility creates opportunities for Iran to expand its influence in Afghanistan and its neighboring countries.

Presently, as in Iraq and Syria, Tehran's involvement in Afghanistan is multidimensional: (1) it did and continues to support local organizations to compete with foreign influence in its eastern

neighbor, whether Soviet/Russian, Saudi, or American; and (2) it recruited fighters from Afghanistan and the region for operations elsewhere.[50] With regard to the first dimension, like in Iraq, the Islamic Republic's involvement in Afghanistan dates to the 1980s.[51] At the time, Iran cultivated and supported a contingent of mostly Hazara, a marginalized Shi`a minority, political-militant organizations, commonly referred to as the "Tehran Eight."[52] It continues to support some of those groups, like Hezb-e Wahdat to the present, but not all Hazara politicians are eager to work with Iran.[53] Additionally, much like its motivations in working with Palestinian organizations, Iran leveraged overlapping goals with Sunni-Islamist militant organizations in Afghanistan. It supported al-Qa`ida and the Taliban intermittently after 2008.[54]

With regard to the second dimension, in addition to working with local organizations, Iran has also used Afghanistan as a recruitment ground for various militant organizations. In the early days of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran recruited Afghan Hazara fighters, to the Abuzar Brigade, to fight on the side of the Iranians.[t] More recently, Iran recruits Afghan fighters to the Fatemiyoun Brigade and other Syrian-based militias out of centers in Herat and Kabul, as well as through IRGC-Basij offices in Iran, offering a salary and Iranian citizenship in exchange for several months of fighting in Syria.[55] Overall, Iran seemingly tends toward more operational partners in Afghanistan than in Pakistan. Iranian proxy attacks in South Asia have almost exclusively been in Afghanistan, with a handful in Pakistan. (See Table 2.) The data implies that Iranian proxies in Afghanistan are steadily active when it comes to launching attacks in the last decade. In some years, these groups were as active as proxies in Iraq. (See Tables 1 and 2.)

In contrast to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, Iran's involvement in Pakistan is abstruse but governed by two pillars: one part focuses on soft-power involvement in the Shi`a religious establishment in Pakistan while a second part focuses on recruitment to the Zeinabiyoun Brigade. Toward the first part, Tehran set up religious schools for Shi`a in the country after the Iranian Revolution to garner support among sectarian kin.[56] Pakistan has one of the largest Shi`a populations outside Iran.[57] Regarding the second part, the IRGC used recruitment programs in Urdu to enlist fighters in the Zeinabiyoun Brigade.[58] It also solicited the support of Pakistani Shi`a clerics to legitimize its activities,[59] and offered recruits a substantial salary in exchange for several months of commitment to fighting on Iran's behalf.[60]

Like in Pakistan, Iran's involvement with proxies in India is equally obscure. Iran has worked with partners on the ground in India, but does not have proxies, such as in the sense of the Fatemiyoun Brigade. Through Anjuman-e Haidari in New Delhi, thousands of India Shi`a have signed up to fight against the Islamic State and in defense of Shi`a holy sites,[61] though is not clear how many went on to fight.[62] Separately, Iranian propaganda lines some streets of Central Kashmir, including billboards of Ayatollah Khomeini and martyred IRGC officers.[63] Some attest that Iranian propaganda is

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s   Qaani met with Iraqi militia group leaders and Hamas leadership in the days after Soleimani's death in Iran. Adam Rasgon, "Hamas chief meets slain Iranian general's successor in Tehran," *Times of Israel*, January 6, 2020; Crispin Smith, "After Soleimani Killing, Iran and Its Proxies Recalibrate in Iraq," Just Security, February 27, 2020. In March 2020, Qaani traveled to Baghdad. For more information, see Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Samya Kullab, "Iran general visits Baghdad, tries to forge political unity," Associated Press, April 1, 2020; Sina Farhadi, "Qaani visits Syria frontlines as Iran-backed militias continue to lose fighters," Al-Mashareq, March 27, 2020.

t   Former fighters of this group went on to compose the leadership of the present-day Fatemiyoun Brigade. See the following sources for more information: Ariane Tabatabai, "After Soleimani: What's Next for Iran's Quds Force?" *CTC Sentinel* 13:1 (2020); Farzin Nadimi, "Iran's Afghan and Pakistan Proxies: In Syria and Beyond?" Washington Institute, August 22, 2016; Mahtab Divsalar, "Fatemiyoun's Future Home: Syria, Iran or Afghanistan?" Radio Zamaneh, April 20, 2019.

Region	Country	Group	Year	Attacks	Fatalities	Lethality
South Asia	Afghanistan	Other	2008	6	5	0.83
			2009	4	0	0.00
			2010	2	0	0.00
			2012	7	15	2.14
			2013	5	22	4.40
			2014	2	11	5.50
			2015	1	2	2.00
			2016	2	2	1.00
			2017	5	6	1.20
			2018	1	2	2.00
		Total		35	65	1.86
	Pakistan	Other	2013	1	0	0.00
			2014	3	4	1.33
		Total		4	4	1.00
	Total			39	69	1.77
North Africa & Sub-Saharan Africa	Egypt	Other	2015	1	0	0.00
		Total		1	0	0.00
	Morocco	Other	2018	2	0	0.00
		Total		2	0	0.00
	Nigeria	Other	2015	1	7	7.00
		Total		1	7	7.00
	Somalia	Other	2009	3	11	3.67
		Total		3	11	3.67
	Total			7	18	2.57

Table 2: Attacks, Fatalities, and Lethality of Proxies in Multiple Regions

geared toward pushing Shi`a in Kashmir to be pro-separation to leverage pressure on New Delhi.[64] While the IRGC's direct involvement in India is seemingly limited, there have been allegations of the Revolutionary Guards' culpability in attacks in the country. In February 2012, a motorcyclist placed a magnetic "sticky bomb" on the side of an Israeli diplomatic vehicle in New Delhi, and the explosion severely injured the car's occupants, including the Israeli defense attaché's wife.[65] The subsequent investigation of this 2012 attack revealed potential connections to the IRGC, which Tehran denied.[66]

Proxies in Africa

Policymakers and researchers have also considered an Iranian retaliation on the African continent.[67] Iran's proxy activity in Africa is difficult to track as much of it is completed covertly through Hezbollah or the IRGC-QF. The Quds Force has directorates on the continent,[68] and like in India, many Iranian-linked activities in Africa have been navigated through Hezbollah. Its influence is notable in Nigeria, Morocco, and the Central African Republic but visible in other countries as well.

Iran has a storied involvement with Shi`a in Nigeria, dating back to the Iranian Revolution.[69] More recently, Iran developed a relationship with the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN).[70] Like LH, in addition to launching attacks, IMN also had a number of educational and communications outreach programs.[71] Both the IRGC and Hezbollah are involved in activities in Nigeria, of varying overtness and legality.[72] Hezbollah operatives have been suspected of money laundering, drug trafficking, and weapons smuggling in Nigeria through corporations and car dealerships.[73] More recent-

ly, Iran directed Hezbollah to train more Nigerians in the hope of eventually utilizing Nigeria as a base to launch attacks against Western and Israeli targets.[74]

Iran's involvement on the African continent extends beyond Nigeria. There are several reports of Hezbollah and the IRGC smuggling weapons and drugs across the African continent into nearby regions, like Europe.[75] The IRGC's alleged funding, training, and weapons support for the Polisario Front[76] in Morocco through the Iranian embassy in Algeria resulted in Rabat severing ties with Tehran.[77 u] Many instances of Iranian support in Africa are clandestine. Last year, the Quds Force supported the establishment of Saraya Zahara in the Central African Republic to attack U.S. interests in Chad, Sudan, and Eritrea.[78] Conversely, toward more legitimate activities, Iran also has cultural centers in some African countries, such as Sierra Leone and Tanzania.[79]

When reviewing Table 2, Iranian proxies' attacks in Africa are few and far between in terms of location and volume. In this region, while attacks can serve as a useful metric, they provide a limited view of Iranian proxy activity in Africa. The low number of proxy attacks on the continent does not necessarily equate with little Iranian-linked activity. As demonstrated in other theaters, such as Syria, Iran has worked with local partners, such as non-profits and businesses, toward soft power initiatives, a pattern that holds some credence in Africa.[80] Together, these factors indicate a need

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u   According to some sources, Hezbollah may also be providing support to the Polisario Front. For more information, see "Iran denies supporting Polisario after Morocco severs ties," Associated Press, May 2, 2018.

to potentially adjust the metrics used to study Tehran's involvement on the continent, which will be discussed further in the concluding remarks.

Conclusion

This piece is an exploratory endeavor in studying high-level trends in Iranian proxies' and Lebanese Hezbollah's attacks over the last decade. Using several open-source dataset sources, this article reviews attack and fatalities patterns for Iranian proxies and Lebanese Hezbollah from 2008 to 2019 in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. This study also compiles data related to IRGC attacks to compare trends against LH and other non-LH proxies in Iraq and Syria for several years (2013 to 2019). While the potential for underreporting is prevalent for open-source datasets, there are a few trends that are notable. First, LH, Iranian proxies, and the IRGC conducted attacks in the Iraqi and Syrian conflict theaters at different points between 2013 to 2019: LH attacks preceding the IRGC's observed attacks in Syria while proxies focused on the conflict in Iraq more so than in Syria. Second, when looking at the Middle East overall, Hezbollah's annual attack and fatalities counts often exceeded all other proxies' combined—in a couple years, more than four-fold. Finally, Iranian involvement is seemingly managed through Hezbollah and the IRGC, or through legitimate means such as formal politics or cultural programs in parts of South Asia and the African continent, regions with fewer overall proxies.

Looking beyond the trends noted in this article, there is a need to consider potential consequences of the shifting conflict with the Islamic State. It is important to consider the future of the forces Iran propped up in Syria, namely the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun. Some analysts warn of the potential for the Fatemiyoun to be deployed to Afghanistan to secure Iranian interests, potentially from adversaries such as the Islamic State Khorasan affiliate, which operates in Afghanistan and Pakistan.[81] In the past few years, many former Fatemiyoun fighters have resettled in Herat province, but Kabul has asked Tehran to keep former fighters from the group in Iran.[82] Yet, as previously discussed in this study, the drawdown of U.S. troops coupled with Qaani's previous experience in the country could potentially create an opportunity for Iran to utilize the Fatemiyoun in Afghanistan. It does not seem likely that the Zeinabiyoun will be employed in a similar way in Pakistan. Differences in foreign policy history may account for this: while Iran has a long-standing policy of direct involvement in Afghanistan, its involvement in Pakistan is less clear.[83]

While the trends outlined in this piece are interesting, they have limitations, and there are several avenues for improvement and further exploration. First, there are some data limitations in understanding Iranian proxies' operations in different regions. This is rooted in fundamental differences in Iranian proxy policy across regions. In addition to open-source datasets, Iranian proxy trends in parts of South Asia and on the African continent should be studied using different metrics. One avenue would be to track proxies', LH's, and the IRGC's plots, arrests, and possibly open criminal investigations (e.g., through court cases and documents) to provide a more nuanced understanding of Iranian involvement in different regions, and it would provide a baseline to understand upsets in the Iranian threat network. In a similar vein, tracking proxies' non-violent activities, such as construction projects, schools, and social service provisions, among others, could provide a better understanding of Iranian soft power in the South Asian and African regions reviewed in this study. A separate but related approach could be to expand the understanding of what constitutes an Iranian "proxy" to include local businesses, non-profits, and other legitimate entities that cooperate with various elements of the Iranian state. Each of these indicators can be studied through open-source research, though may be prone to under- or over-reporting based on newsworthiness and/or observability. Relatedly, these metrics could similarly be applied to understand LH's activities in other regions. During the time period of this study, the group launched an attack in Bulgaria and attempted one in Thailand, among other countries, some of which also had potential IRGC involvement.[84]

Relatedly, this article does not study South America or Central Asia, two regions with a nebulous history of Iranian involvement. Toward the former, in parts of the South American region, Tehran's influence is often outsourced through Lebanese Hezbollah, fueled by the narcotics trade, and propped up by local governments, such as Venezuela.[85] More specifically, in the tri-border area, between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, some scholarship has demonstrated clear indications of operational activity through IRGC and LH as well as violent and non-violent non-state entities.[86] By extending the study to Hezbollah-related plots or arrests or to non-violent proxies, it would provide a gradation of understanding Iranian influence in both South America and Central Asia. Toward the latter, the IRGC-QF also has a directorate dedicated to the region.[87] Tehran has some economic and cultural ties to Central Asia, more recently around the Chabahar transit corridor.[88] **CTC**

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