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FEATURE ARTICLE

The Taliban and the Struggle for Afghanistan

SETH G. JONES

FEATURE COMMENTARY

Biosecurity in the Wake of COVID-19: The Urgent Action Needed

HAMISH DE BRETTON-GORDON

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FROM THE EDITOR

In this month's feature article, Seth Jones examines the evolving threat posed by the Taliban in Afghanistan. "The Taliban is in many ways a different organization from the one that governed Afghanistan in the 1990s. Yet most of their leaders are nevertheless committed to an extreme interpretation of Islam that is not shared by many Afghans, an autocratic political system that eschews democracy, and the persistence of relations with terrorist groups like al-Qa`ida. These realities cast serious doubt about the possibility of a lasting peace agreement with the Afghan government in the near future," he writes, adding that "without a peace deal, the further withdrawal of U.S. forces—as highlighted in the November 17, 2020, announcement to cut U.S. forces from 4,500 to 2,500 troops—will likely shift the balance of power in favor of the Taliban. With continuing support from Pakistan, Russia, Iran, and terrorist groups like al-Qa`ida, it is the view of the author that the Taliban would eventually overthrow the Afghan government in Kabul."

In a feature commentary, Hamish de Bretton-Gordon outlines the urgent action needed on biosecurity in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. He writes: "For years, the United States and many other countries have neglected biosecurity because policymakers have underestimated both the potential impact and likelihood of biological threats. COVID-19 has had a devastating effect on the planet and could be followed by outbreaks of even more dangerous viral diseases. Meanwhile, advances in synthetic biology are transforming the potential threat posed by engineered pathogens, creating growing concern over biological attacks and bioterror. Given the scale of the threat, biosecurity needs to be a top priority moving forward. Not only do efforts need to be stepped up to try to prevent the next pandemic (natural or engineered), but resilience needs to be built by developing early warning systems, the capacity to track outbreaks, and medical countermeasures, including 'next generation' vaccines." He stresses that "winning public acceptance for public health measures will be imperative to tackling biological emergencies in the future."

Jason Warner, Ryan O'Farrell, Héni Nsaibia, and Ryan Cummings assess the evolution of the Islamic State threat across Africa. They write that "the *annus horribilis* Islamic State Central suffered in 2019, during which the group lost the last stretch of its 'territorial caliphate' in Iraq and Syria and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed, does not appear to have had a discernible impact on the overall operational trajectory of the Islamic State threat in Africa" underscoring "that while connections were built up between Islamic State Central and its African affiliates—with the former providing, at times, some degree of strategic direction, coordination, and material assistance—the latter have historically evolved under their own steam and acted with a significant degree of autonomy."

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Cover: Afghan Taliban fighters and villagers attend a gathering in Laghman Province, Alingar district, Afghanistan, on March 2, 2020, as they celebrate the peace deal signed between the United States and Taliban. (Wali Sabawoon/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

Afghanistan's Future Emirate? The Taliban and the Struggle for Afghanistan

By Seth G. Jones

With the onset of inter-Afghan peace talks, it is important to take a close look at the Taliban—including their main objectives, ideological underpinnings, organizational structure, military strategies and tactics, and relationship with state and non-state actors. The Taliban is in many ways a different organization from the one that governed Afghanistan in the 1990s. Yet most of their leaders are nevertheless committed to an extreme interpretation of Islam that is not shared by many Afghans, an autocratic political system that eschews democracy, and the persistence of relations with terrorist groups like al-Qa`ida. These realities cast serious doubt about the possibility of a lasting peace agreement with the Afghan government in the near future.

On September 15, 2020, representatives from the Taliban and Afghan government gathered in Doha, Qatar, to begin face-to-face peace negotiations. Foreign leaders attending in person and by video conference lauded the start of peace talks as a historic moment.¹ But the Taliban's reaction was more subdued. The Taliban's senior negotiator, Mawlawi Abdul Hakim Haqqani, sat hunched in his chair in the grand ballroom, hardly looking at the video screen and refusing to put on a translation headset even though the speeches were in English (a language he does not speak).² Perhaps the Taliban had a point. The history of intrastate wars is littered with failed peace attempts.³ Since World War II, nearly three-quarters of insurgencies have ended because of a military victory by the government or insurgent side on the battlefield, and only a quarter have ended because of political negotiations or other factors.⁴ Afghanistan itself is a graveyard of failed peace talks.⁵

These challenges raise important questions. Among the most important—and the focus of this article—are the following: Who are the Taliban today? What are their main objectives, ideological underpinnings, organizational structure, military strategies and tactics, and relationships with state and non-state actors? Based on answers to these questions, what are the implications for peace negotiations?

An agreement with the Taliban that ends the war and decreases

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the possibility that Afghanistan will once again become a sanctuary for international terrorism would be a welcome development. It would end several decades of war that has killed over 157,000 people (including 43,000 civilians) in Afghanistan, created massive suffering among its population, and decimated its economy.⁶ It would also allow the United States and other countries to withdraw their military forces and reduce their military and other foreign assistance. After all, the United States has deployed combat forces to Afghanistan for nearly two decades (including a peak of over 100,000 U.S. troops), spent over \$800 billion in military expenditures and development assistance between 2001 and 2019, and suffered over 2,300 soldiers killed.⁷ Around the globe and at home, there are more pressing problems, from countering and recovering from COVID-19 to competing with major powers like China and Russia.

As this article argues, however, a close look at the Taliban today suggests that their leaders remain committed to an extreme religious ideology, an authoritarian political system, and the continuation of relations with militant groups that will not likely be acceptable to the current Afghan government, many Afghans, and many foreign governments. In addition, the United States announced on November 17, 2020, that it would reduce its force posture in Afghanistan from 4,500 to 2,500 troops.⁸ These realities make a lasting peace agreement with the Afghan government unlikely in the near future. In this author's view, a precipitous U.S. withdrawal without a peace agreement between the Taliban and Afghan government would be highly destabilizing and would ultimately undermine U.S. national security interests.

To examine the Taliban today, the rest of this article is divided into several sections. The first outlines the Taliban's ideology and objectives, including in historical context. The second section examines the Taliban's organizational structure. The third analyzes the Taliban's military strategy and tactics. The fourth section explores the Taliban's relationship with other militant groups, including al-Qa`ida. The fifth assesses the Taliban's links with the governments of other countries, such as Pakistan, Iran, and Russia. Finally, the sixth section outlines implications of this analysis for peace talks and the future of Afghanistan.

Ideology and Objectives

The Taliban's ideology is deeply rooted in Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence.⁹ While the ideology of the Taliban has been evolving since the movement's establishment in the 1990s, Taliban leaders today generally support the establishment of a government by sharia ('Islamic' law) and the creation of an "Islamic Emirate" in Afghanistan.¹⁰ The Taliban elevate the role of Islamic scholars (*ulema*) that issue legal rulings (*fatwas*) on all aspects of daily life. The *ulema* play a particularly important role in monitoring society's conformity with their view of the prescriptions of Islam and in conservatively interpreting religious doctrine.¹¹ The Taliban has also

been described as a “nationalist” movement in the sense that their leaders advocate for an “Islamic Emirate” in Afghanistan, rather than as part of a broader pan-‘Islamic’ caliphate.¹² One of the most useful documents to understand Taliban ideology is the *Layha*, or code of conduct, which has been updated several times.¹³ It outlines the rules of behavior for Taliban members based on the movements core ‘Islamic’ principles.

Armed jihad has been an integral means for the Taliban to establish an “Islamic Emirate,” along with education and preaching (or *da’wa*).¹⁴ For Taliban leaders, armed jihad is obligatory for all Muslims, particularly Afghans, and must be undertaken against all enemies of Islam. Taliban leaders have been particularly adamant about armed jihad to coerce the withdrawal of U.S. and other international forces.¹⁵ For example, Taliban propaganda celebrated the February 2020 deal with the United States as a major victory and urged supporters to continue armed jihad in publications on their website—appropriately called “Voice of Jihad”—even as Taliban leaders discussed the start of peace negotiations.¹⁶ In March 2020, a number of Taliban field commanders informed civilian populations that following the withdrawal of U.S. forces, they were confident of the “victory of the Islamic Emirate” and that the “Afghan government would be toppled within three months” through armed jihad.¹⁷

In addition, the Taliban’s ideology includes an important component of Pashtunwali, an evolving system of customary law, culture, and conflict resolution followed by many ethnic Pashtun tribes in Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁸ Pashtun tribal structure has undergone dramatic changes over the past several decades of war, and local versions of Pashtunwali (or *nirakh*) can differ significantly across areas.¹⁹ Local militia commanders have sometimes usurped the power of tribal leaders. Nevertheless, Taliban commanders have adopted some components of Pashtunwali. The Taliban strictly segregates the sexes, a practice known as *purdah*, and an Afghan man’s honor (or *nang*) is closely tied to how the women of his family are treated. The Taliban’s views are more popular in conservative, rural areas of Afghanistan, including Pashtun areas.²⁰ As one assessment concluded, the Taliban movement “is characterized by horizontal, network-like structures that reflect its strong roots in the segmented Pashtun tribal society.”²¹ But the Taliban has expanded its support in areas of the country with fewer Pashtuns, such as the north and west.²²

During the Taliban’s time in power from the mid-1990s to 2001, the movement enforced a stringent interpretation of the Islamic dress code for men and women.²³ The Taliban mandated that all men grow beards and refrain from wearing Western clothes. The Taliban closed cinemas and prohibited music.²⁴ The Taliban banned almost every conceivable kind of entertainment, such as television, videos, cards, kite-flying, and most sports—except, ironically, public executions in Kabul’s main soccer stadium. The Taliban also defaced and destroyed hundreds of cultural artifacts that it called polytheistic, including museums and private art collections. Perhaps the most outrageous was the Taliban’s destruction of the Buddha statues in the Afghan city of Bamiyan. In March 2001, Taliban fighters used dynamite to demolish the statues, which had stood for nearly 2,000 years. The Taliban’s first leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, defended such actions by saying they were orchestrated to protect the purity of Islam.²⁵

More recently, the Taliban has moderated its views on some issues, such as the education of girls and the use of modern technolo-

gy and digital platforms.²⁶ Taliban deputy leader Sirajuddin Haqqani wrote in February 2020 that the Taliban would “build an Islamic system in which all Afghans have equal rights, where the rights of women that are granted by Islam—from the right to education to the right to work—are protected.”²⁷ But the Taliban has a well-documented record of repression, intolerance, and human rights abuses against women, foreigners, ethnic minorities, and journalists.²⁸ The Taliban’s persecution of women is particularly concerning. Women who are victims of domestic violence have little recourse to justice in Taliban courts, and the Taliban discourages women from working, denies women access to modern healthcare, prohibits women from participating in politics, and supports such punishments against women as stoning and public lashing.²⁹

Since 2001, when the United States helped overthrow the Taliban regime, the Taliban’s objectives have generally been consistent: to coerce through military force or political negotiations the withdrawal of U.S. and other international forces from Afghanistan, overthrow the government in Kabul, and replace it with an “Islamic Emirate.”³⁰ In a March 2020 speech to Taliban military commanders in Pakistan, senior Taliban figure Mullah Fazl insisted that the movement was committed to establishing an “Islamic Emirate” based on the Taliban’s interpretation of sharia.³¹ While there are different views of what a future Taliban government might look like, a number of prominent Taliban leaders support the creation of an authoritarian high council of religious scholars and perhaps an unelected emir—somewhat akin to a Sunni version of the Islamic Republic of Iran.³² Taliban leaders have never accepted the post-2001 Afghan state, which they view as a “puppet” or “stooge” of the West that relies on foreign money and troops.³³ Most Taliban leaders also reject the 2004 Afghan constitution as illegitimate, in part because they argue it was not adequately grounded in sharia.³⁴ In addition, Taliban leaders generally disparage democracy as a corrupt invention of the West and dismiss as shams the elections held in Afghanistan since 2001. Their logic is that only Allah can appoint leaders—not humans, who they say tend to vote for corrupt and illegitimate figures. As one Taliban document summarized with a dash of sarcasm, “democracy will only bring an Islamic system if angels descend from the heavens and cast their votes in ballot boxes. People cast their votes in favor of oppressors and wild people.”³⁵

Taliban support appears to be notably weaker in urban areas, where the Afghan population is more progressive and disinclined to support the Taliban’s extremist views. Some public opinion polling suggests that the Taliban’s ideology is still too extreme for many Afghans—including urban Afghans—who adhere to a much less conservative form of Islam and thus take a more progressive approach to social media, music, television, political participation, and rights for women.³⁶ In addition, the ideological views of Taliban leaders are not shared by all Taliban members and sympathizers. Instead, they support the Taliban because of a variety of factors including Afghan police abuses and harassment, civilian casualties caused by foreign forces, money, unhappiness with the Afghan government, and the presence of foreign forces.³⁷

There have been divisions within the movement, as there are with virtually every insurgent group. First, there have been disagreements about the wisdom and specifics of peace negotiations. Some Taliban leaders have supported negotiations (such as Mullah Ghani Baradar), while others have been more skeptical (such as Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai). While the on-going peace negotiations have not caused major defections—at least not yet—some

disaffected Taliban established the Hizb-i Vilayat Islami (Islamic Governorate Party) in response.³⁸ Second, there is a long history of conflict between and among pro-Taliban tribes and sub-tribes in Afghanistan, such as some members of the Alizai and Noorzai tribes in southern Afghanistan.³⁹ Third, there has been discontent among some Taliban commanders who believe that Taliban leaders are out of touch with the hardships in Afghanistan, since they live comfortable lifestyles in Pakistan and Qatar.⁴⁰ Fourth, there has been notable dissent about the Taliban's relationship with various state and non-state actors, including Pakistan, Russia, and Iran. According to a Taliban member interviewed by two Western scholars, some Taliban oppose the group's relations with Russia since they consider Moscow a historical "murderer of the Afghan nation" and resent Shi'a Iran because "it will never be a friend of the Afghan people."⁴¹ Fifth, there have been ideological and other divisions within the Taliban over civilian casualties, the legitimacy of suicide bombing, corruption, poor leadership among some local commanders, and other issues.⁴²

Organizational Structure

To accomplish its main objectives, the Taliban has established a relatively centralized organizational structure.^a Since World War II, the vast majority of insurgent groups (91 percent) have set up centralized structures, largely because such structures are more effective in dealing with "principal-agent" problems.⁴³ A principal (an insurgent leader) needs to set in place a system of incentives and penalties so that an agent (a rank-and-file member of the group) will perform as the principal expects.⁴⁴ Principal-agent problems are particularly important to prevent such steps as "shirking" and defections, especially when lower-level operatives have different preferences and motivations from senior leaders. An insurgent engages in shirking behavior by acting in inefficient ways, such as idling with friends rather than burying an improvised explosive device before a government convoy drives through the area.⁴⁵ Centralization is also helpful for groups like the Taliban in governing territory, since it minimizes the likelihood that local cells can usurp power and resources for their own interests.⁴⁶

At the top of the Taliban's organizational structure is the Rahbari Shura, or leadership council, which is outlined in Figure 1. The body is often colloquially referred to as the Quetta Shura because some of its members and their families live in—and around—the Pakistan city of Quetta.⁴⁷ The Taliban also has regional shuras in Pakistan's Peshawar and Miranshah. Beginning around 2007, the Taliban established a shura in Mashhad, Iran, (the Mashhad Shura) to oversee operations in western Afghanistan, with the aid of the Iranian government's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF).⁴⁸ The Rahbari Shura does not exercise unfettered control over the regional shuras and rank-and-file members.

a Antonio Giustozzi terms the Taliban's organizational structure "polycentric," which indicates more than one center. While it is certainly true that there have been power struggles within the Taliban movement—including between the Rahbari Shura and several of the regional shuras—the Taliban's organizational structure is still relatively centralized compared to other insurgent groups. On the Taliban as a polycentric organization, see Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001-2018* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 4-5. On the Taliban's centralized structure, see, for example, Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, *Ready for Peace? The Afghan Taliban after a Decade of War* (London: Royal United Services Institute, January 2017).

There have been tensions between the Quetta Shura and those in Peshawar, for example, over command-and-control arrangements, funding, and personality clashes.⁴⁹

The Taliban is led by Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhonzada, who was appointed emir after the United States killed his predecessor, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, in a May 2016 drone strike. Akhonzada is a cleric with no serious military experience.⁵⁰ While Akhonzada is the organization's leader, the Taliban rules by consensus among members of its Rahbari Shura. The shura is primarily composed of Pashtuns from eastern and southern Afghanistan, though it does have some non-Pashtun figures including Uzbeks.⁵¹

| | |
|--|--|
| Taliban leader: Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhonzada | |
| First Deputy: Sirajuddin Jallalouline Haqqani | |
| Deputy: Mullah Muhammad Yaqub Omari | |
| Deputy: Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar Abdul Ahmad Turk | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mohammad Hassan Akhund • Mawlawi Mohammadullah Mati (aka Mullah Nanay) • Mohammad Hasan Rahmani • Noor Mohammad Saqib • Abdul Kabir Mohammad Jan • Abdul Qayyum Zakir • Mawlawi Sayyid Abdul Rahman • Abdul Qadeer Basir Abdul Baseer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mullah Shirin • Mullah Muhammad Rahmatullah • Amir Khan Motaqi • Abdul Razaq Akhund Lala Akhund • Gul Agha Ishakzai • Jabar Agha • Hafiz Majid • Mufti Abdul Rahman • Sadr Ibrahim |

Figure 1: Members of the Taliban's Pakistan-based Rahbari Shura (Leadership Council)⁵²

To help run the organization, the Taliban has several commissions (*komisiyuns*), as highlighted in Figure 2. These commissions, which are based in Pakistan, are critical to performing the key tasks of running an insurgency and governing territory. After all, insurgency is a process of alternative state building, where insurgents provide governance to the population in areas they control.⁵³ Leaders want to extract what they can from non-combatants to sustain their groups, such as information, food, housing, and supplies. Groups need to establish organizational structures that can secure funds through taxation and other means, organize policing, administer justice, and provide health benefits (including care to wounded fighters).⁵⁴ The Taliban's primary commissions allow them to perform these tasks, including overseeing military strategy (Military Commission), running an extensive propaganda enterprise (Media Commission), raising funds (Commission for Financial Affairs), and overseeing peace negotiations (Political Commission).

| | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military Commission • Political Commission • Intelligence Commission • Commission for Financial Affairs • Judicial Commission • Media Commission • Health Commission • Commission for Training, Learning, and Higher Education • Commission for Agriculture, Livestock, Ushr, and Zakat | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commission for Recruitment, Outreach, and Guidance • Prisoners' Commission • Commission for Non-Government Organizations • Commission for the Prevention of Civilian Casualties and Complaints • Antiquities Commission • Border Control Commission • Commission for Martyrs and Persons with Disabilities |
|---|--|

Figure 2: Taliban Commissions⁵⁵

At the operational and tactical levels, the Taliban has established shadow governors and military commanders at the provincial, district, and local levels in Afghanistan. In February 2020, Rahbari Shura members met to discuss new appointments in eastern, southern, and northern Afghanistan as the Taliban reorganized their

shadow government structure.⁵⁶ Taliban governance—including its courts—has sometimes been effective. Local Afghan police in provinces such as Helmand, for example, have handed over suspects to the Taliban to be tried at their “shadow” religious courts because they believe the outcome would be quicker and fairer than if they sent them to the district center.⁵⁷

The Taliban’s Commission for Financial Affairs plays an important role in securing funding for the group. The Taliban receives money from the cultivation, production, and trafficking of opium. The Taliban has allowed drug-smuggling syndicates, known as *tan-zeeems*, to operate in return for a portion of their profit.⁵⁸ In addition, the Taliban has profited from methamphetamine production and trafficking, and they reportedly control nearly two-thirds of the methamphetamine laboratories in Farah and Nimroz provinces in western Afghanistan.⁵⁹ Estimates of the Taliban’s overall revenues range from \$300 million to roughly \$1.5 billion per year.⁶⁰ One of the Rahbari Shura’s key sources of financing comes from outside states, such as Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and wealthy donors in the Gulf.⁶¹ The Taliban secure funding in a range of ways, such as road taxes, *ushr*, and *zakat*.^b In addition, they levy taxes on infrastructure, utilities, and agriculture under their influence or control. The Taliban have also secured funding through extortion against mobile telephone and electricity companies, as well as received money from the illegal extraction of onyx marble, tin, aragonite, gold, rare earth minerals, copper, and zinc.⁶²

Military Strategy and Tactics

To achieve their objectives, Taliban leaders have conducted a guerrilla campaign and emphasized the importance of armed jihad. A guerrilla strategy includes the utilization of ambushes, raids, and other hit-and-run attacks to weaken a government’s political will to fight.⁶³ The primary goal of a guerrilla strategy is to defeat the *will* of the government by mobilizing the civilian population, undermining government support, and raising the costs of continued fighting; it is not necessarily to defeat the capacity of its adversary to fight. A guerrilla strategy is often palatable to insurgent groups that are significantly weaker than their adversaries, which is why a guerrilla campaign is sometimes likened to a “war of the flea.”⁶⁴

Taliban leaders have generally eschewed a conventional military strategy. The goal of a conventional strategy is to win the war in a series of battles by destroying the adversary’s physical capacity to resist.⁶⁵ Unlike a guerrilla strategy, a conventional strategy focuses on defeating the security forces of the government and its international backers.⁶⁶ In 2006, the Taliban briefly attempted a conventional strategy in an effort to overrun Kandahar City by massing forces. As Omer Lavoie, the commander of Canada’s Task Force 3-06 Battle Group, explained, “for the last six months I trained my battle group to fight a counter-insurgency, and now find that we are facing something a lot more like conventional warfare.”⁶⁷ In response, U.S., Canadian, and other allied forces conducted Operation Medusa, which successfully prevented the Taliban from seizing and holding Kandahar City.⁶⁸ More recently, the Taliban have conducted some operations in larger formations against static Afghan forces, including in Kunar, Nuristan, Kunduz, Badakhshan, and Wardak provinces.⁶⁹ The threat of U.S. air support and U.S. special operations forces has generally deterred the Taliban from conducting a conventional

strategy. However, the Taliban would likely switch to a conventional strategy—at least in some areas—with the withdrawal of U.S. and other international military forces.

In waging guerrilla warfare, the Taliban’s military structure includes provincial and district military commanders, including those at the following levels: large front (*loy mahaz*), front (*mahaz*), group (*grup*), and team (*dilghay*).⁷⁰ Among the most effective and innovative Taliban units has been the Sare Qeta (Red Units), which are roughly equivalent to special operations forces trained to operate in small groups.⁷¹ Though their organizational structure is fairly centralized, the Taliban do allow local commanders to have some autonomy at the operational and tactical levels—including regarding military operations, financing, and recruitment.⁷² Overall, the number of full-time Taliban fighters ranges from low estimates of 55,000 to higher estimates of 85,000 fighters, though the number of Taliban facilitators and intelligence operatives likely brings the total estimate to over 100,000 personnel.⁷³ Despite U.S., Afghan, and other international targeting of Taliban fighters over the years, the group has nevertheless been successful in recruiting new members. As one Taliban recruiter remarked:

*It’s not easy being in the Taliban. It’s like wearing a jacket of fire. You have to leave your family and live with the knowledge that you can be killed at any time ... You can’t expect any quick medical treatment if you’re wounded. You don’t have any money. Yet when I tell new recruits what they are facing they still freely put on this jacket of fire.*⁷⁴

At the tactical level, the Taliban rely on ambushes, raids, assassinations, and bombings against the Afghan government and foreign forces. Taliban fighters utilize weapons ideal for guerrilla warfare, such as Kalashnikov assault rifles, DSchK heavy machine guns, RPG-7 rocket launchers, 107-mm field rocket launchers, 14.5-mm anti-aircraft machine guns, improvised explosive devices, heavy mortars, 122-mm rockets, and advanced anti-armor weaponry.⁷⁵ As Figure 3 highlights, in 2020 the Taliban conducted attacks—especially direct-fire attacks—throughout the country, highlighting the group’s ability to strike a wide range of urban and rural targets. Taliban units conducted bombings and assassinations in virtually every major Afghan city, such as Kabul, Kandahar, and Kunduz.⁷⁶ In addition, Taliban fighters conducted sustained violence against Afghan army and police fixed positions, set up checkpoints on some major roads, and seized some district centers such as in Yamgan District, Badakhshan Province, in March 2020.⁷⁷ The Taliban have also caused the majority of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, largely because of their utilization of pressure-plate improvised explosive devices.⁷⁸

To complement military operations, Taliban leaders have long recognized the importance of propaganda. As one Taliban media official acknowledged, “Wars today cannot be won without media ... If the media can defeat the heart, then the body is defeated too and the battle is won.”⁷⁹ The Taliban’s information campaign relies on traditional tools like *shabnamah* (night letters), *taranas* (chants), poems, *khutba* (Friday sermons), graffiti, printed materials, and other mediums. The Taliban also use radio broadcasts, text messages, social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, and websites to issue propaganda.⁸⁰

While the Taliban have succeeded in waging a sustained cam-

b *Ushr* is an Islamic tax levied on land. *Zakat* is an obligatory tax that Muslims are expected to donate to the poor, and it is one of the five pillars of Islam.

c Afghanistan is divided into 34 provinces, and each province is further subdivided into administrative units called “districts.”

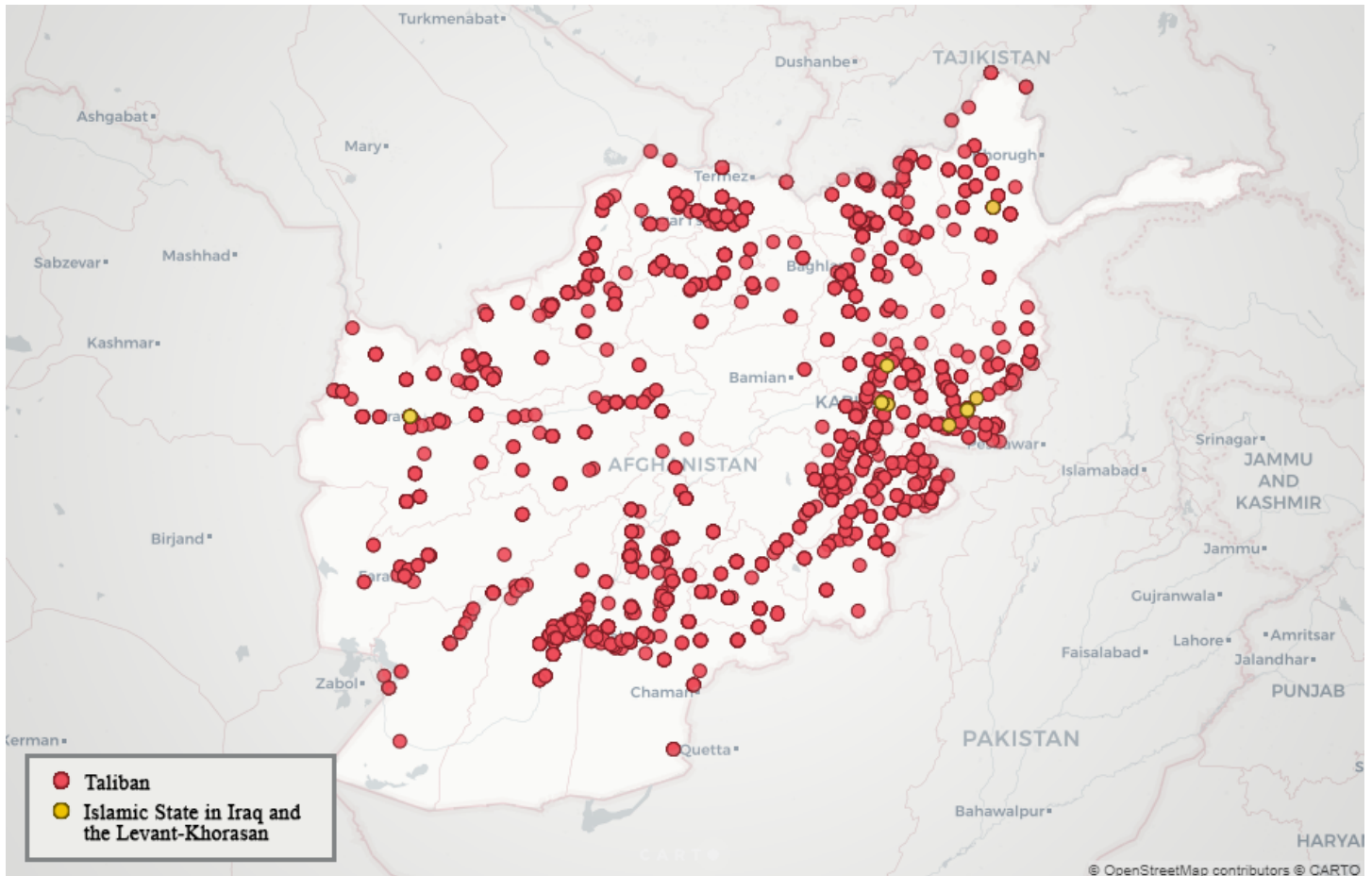


Figure 3: Taliban and Other Insurgent Attacks, January 1 to November 7, 2020⁸¹

campaign against the United States and its partners for nearly two decades, they have faced serious setbacks. They have failed to seize and hold any major cities in Afghanistan. The Taliban attempted to capture Kunduz City in 2015, but could not maintain control of the city. Taliban fighters also entered Farah City in February and May 2018, but again could not hold the city. This failure to hold urban terrain marks a notable difference from some other insurgent groups, including the Islamic State.⁸² In Syria and Iraq, for example, the Islamic State seized and held several cities for a significant length of time, such as Raqqa, Mosul, Fallujah, and Ramadi. Instead, the Afghan government's security forces maintain the majority of control of Kabul, provincial capitals, and most of the main roads, though the Taliban have threatened (and occasionally seized) some district centers.⁸³ In fact, the number of districts under Taliban control slightly decreased between 2019 and mid-2020.⁸⁴

U.S. and Afghan forces have killed numerous Taliban commanders, such as Mullah Abdul Bari, the shadow governor for Farah Province, in August 2019; Haji Lala, the shadow governor for Logar, in June 2019; and Wali Jan (aka Hamza), the shadow governor for Wardak, in April 2020.⁸⁵ In addition, the Taliban have struggled with corruption, criminal activity, and human rights abuses from some of their commanders, forcing them to establish a series of *Layha* (code of conduct) to govern the organization.⁸⁶

The Taliban's commitment to armed jihad has been consistent since the movement's establishment in the 1990s. Yet while the Taliban have sustained an insurgency against the Afghan government and been a formidable opponent, they have failed to control major

urban centers. This reality suggests that—at least at the moment—the Taliban are strong enough to fight the Afghan government and its international backers to a rough stalemate, but too weak to hold populated areas and overthrow the government.

Relationship with Non-State Actors

In the February 2020 agreement between the Taliban and the United States, the Taliban agreed to prevent al-Qa`ida and other terrorist groups from using Afghan territory to threaten the United States and its partners.⁸⁷ Yet the available evidence indicates that the Taliban retain close ties with al-Qa`ida and several other groups.

Relations between the Taliban and al-Qa`ida have lasted for nearly two and a half decades.⁸⁸ After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the Taliban refused to hand over Usama bin Ladin to the United States. Today, the Taliban retain close relations with al-Qa`ida, including its local affiliate, al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). As a 2020 U.S. Department of Defense assessment concluded, "Despite recent progress in the peace process, AQIS maintains close ties to the Taliban in Afghanistan, likely for protection and training."⁸⁹ Contacts between al-Qa`ida and the Haqqani Network—including the Taliban's deputy leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani—remain particularly close. They share long-standing personal relationships, intermarriage, a shared history of struggle, and sympathetic ideologies.⁹⁰ Still, the Taliban and al-Qa`ida have different ideologies, and Taliban leaders remain focused on establishing an "Islamic Emirate" in Afghanistan—not the creation of a pan-Islamic caliphate.⁹¹

The periodic meetings between Taliban and al-Qa`ida leaders are one example of a persistent relationship. In the spring of 2019, senior Taliban leaders reportedly met with al-Qa`ida's Hamza bin Ladin, the son of Usama bin Ladin, in the Sarwan Qal'ah District of Helmand Province to personally reassure him that the Taliban would never break links with al-Qa`ida—including as part of a peace deal. In addition, members of the Haqqani Network reportedly met with al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in February 2020 to discuss a range of issues, including implications of a possible peace agreement. According to U.N. estimates, senior al-Qa`ida leaders met with Taliban officials at least a half dozen times between May 2019 and May 2020.⁹²

This continuing relationship is not surprising. Al-Qa`ida leaders have pledged loyalty (*bay`a*) to every Taliban leader since the group's establishment, from Mullah Muhammad Omar to Mullah Akhtar Mansour and Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada. For example, Usama bin Ladin remarked that the Taliban "are fighting America and its agents under the leadership of the Commander of the Believers, Mullah Omar, may Allah protect him."⁹³ Bin Ladin may have pledged *bay`a* to ensure that Afghans saw the insurgency as being led by Afghan mujahideen and not by foreign Arabs. According to one account, around 2010, Taliban leader Tayeb Agha traveled from Quetta to deliver a personal message to Usama bin Ladin, which indicated that "if we—when we—return to power in Afghanistan," al-Qa`ida "will have to maintain a very low profile."⁹⁴ Following bin Ladin's death in 2011, the Taliban praised him as a martyr that had fought "with great honesty and bravery, shoulder to shoulder with the Afghans."⁹⁵

In August 2015, Ayman al-Zawahiri pledged *bay`a* to newly announced Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour. "I, as the Emir of [al-Qa`ida], present to you our pledge of allegiance, renewing the method of Sheikh Osama and his brothers the pure martyrs," al-Zawahiri said.⁹⁶ In June 2016, al-Zawahiri similarly pledged allegiance to Mansour's successor, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada: "We pledge allegiance to you on jihad to liberate every inch of the lands of the Muslims that are invaded and stolen—from Kashgar to al-Andalus, from the Caucasus to Somalia and Central Africa, from Kashmir to Jerusalem, from the Philippines to Kabul, and from Bukhara to Samarkand."^{97 d}

Overall, there are likely less than 1,000 al-Qa`ida operatives in Afghanistan, with some estimates between 400 and 600 militants.⁹⁸ Core al-Qa`ida leaders believed to be in Afghanistan—or in the vicinity of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border—included al-Zawahiri, Ahmad al-Qatari, Sheikh Abdul Rahman, and Abu Osman. U.S. and Afghan forces killed some al-Qa`ida leaders in Afghanistan. In October 2020, for example, Afghan special operations forces killed a senior al-Qa`ida official, Hossam Abdul Al-Raouf (who used the *nom de guerre* Abu Muhsin al-Masri), who had been sheltered by local Taliban commanders in Ghazni province.⁹⁹ While al-Qa`ida is not a major part of the insurgency, al-Qa`ida fighters have still engaged in military operations in support of the Taliban in at least a dozen Afghan provinces—including Badakhshan, Ghazni, Helmand, Khost, Kunar, Kunduz, Logar, Nangarhar, Nimruz, Nuristan, Paktiya, and Zabul.¹⁰⁰

On December 11, 2019, for example, al-Qa`ida allegedly con-

ducted an attack against U.S. and other forces at Bagram Airfield. Operatives detonated car bombs and then launched a multi-pronged attack, killing two people and wounding over 70 others.¹⁰¹ In May 2019, AQIS released a video claiming an attack against Afghan forces in Paktika Province in eastern Afghanistan.¹⁰² In September 2019, U.S. and Afghan forces targeted a Taliban and al-Qa`ida meeting in the Shabaroz area of Musa Qal'ah District, Helmand Province. They killed Asim Umar, AQIS's leader, as well as six others—including the group's courier to Ayman al-Zawahiri.¹⁰³ In March 2020, one of al-Qa`ida's media arms, Thabat, released summaries of its global operations, including hundreds of alleged attacks in Afghanistan that month.^{104 e}

In addition to al-Qa`ida, the Taliban has coordinated with other international and regional militant groups, such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Lashkar-e-Taiba.¹⁰⁵ Most of the fighters from these groups are located in eastern provinces like Kunar, Nangarhar, and Nuristan, where they cooperate with local Taliban commanders.¹⁰⁶ In addition, there are other militant groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region that cooperate with local Taliban commanders, such as some networks of the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and Lashkar-e-Islam.¹⁰⁷

One of the militant groups not aligned with the Taliban is the Islamic State's local branch, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K). There are roughly 2,000 ISIL-K fighters in Afghanistan, many of which are located in Kunar Province (especially Tsowkey District).¹⁰⁸ Islamic State publications have repeatedly criticized the Taliban's willingness to negotiate peace with the United States as heretical and portrayed their ideology as corrupt.¹⁰⁹ ISIL-K has conducted mass casualty attacks in Afghanistan, though it has suffered significant attrition and lost control of territory in such areas as Nangarhar Province.¹¹⁰ Afghan forces captured its leader, Aslam Farooqi, and several other commanders, such as Qari Zahid and Saifullah, in Kandahar province in March 2020.¹¹¹

While the Taliban has fought ISIL-K fighters in Afghanistan, the Taliban continues to cooperate with regional and international terrorist groups like al-Qa`ida, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Lashkar-e-Taiba. The Taliban's relationship with these groups has been deep and historical, making it unlikely that they will break ties. This reality has significant implications for the United States. It is conceivable—perhaps even likely—that Afghanistan could once again become a sanctuary for international terrorist groups if the United States pulled out all forces from Afghanistan without an inter-Afghan peace deal.

Outside State Support

One of the most important reasons the Taliban have persisted is their ability to secure outside assistance from states. The Taliban receive support from their primary state backer, Pakistan, as well as from Iran and Russia.

Pakistan—especially the country's most powerful spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate—has aided the Taliban since their rise in Afghanistan. Part of Pakistan's impetus is likely the continuing conflict with India and Islamabad's fear—as one Pakistan government official explained to the author—of a "double squeeze" by New Delhi from both India and Afghanistan.¹¹² India

d There has been some debate about the Taliban's apparent failure to formally accept al-Zawahiri's oath of loyalty to its current leader. Nevertheless, Akhundzada has not disavowed al-Zawahiri's pledge.

e The claimed number of attacks is highly implausible, based on the author's review of attack data from U.S., Afghan, NATO, U.N., and other sources.

remains a major ally of the government in Kabul. ISI's directorate that aids the Taliban has been led by a series of competent general officers, such as Major General Muhammad Waseem Ashraf.¹¹³ Over the past decade, the ISI and other Pakistan agencies have provided money, equipment, intelligence, strategic guidance, and—perhaps most importantly—sanctuary to the Taliban.¹¹⁴ As already noted, the Taliban's Rahbari Shura and several of their most important regional shuras—such as the Peshawar and Miranshah shuras—are located in Pakistan. Several leaders of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network—such as Mullah Akhtar Mansour and Badruddin Haqqani—were killed in Pakistan by U.S. strikes. In addition, much of the Taliban's propaganda production infrastructure has been located in Pakistan, including media production facilities like Alemarah and al Hijrat, the monthly pamphlet *Srak* (Beam of Light), and such magazines as *Al Somood* (Resistance), *In Fight*, *Shahamat* (Courage), *Elhan* (Inspiration), and *Murchal* (Trench).¹¹⁵

Yet Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban—including senior Taliban leaders—has sometimes been testy. In February 2010, for example, ISI arrested Mullah Ghani Baradar after he discussed the possibility of peace negotiations with Afghan President Hamid Karzai without consulting Islamabad. Baradar's actions had also infuriated other Taliban leaders, such as Abdul Qayum Zakir and Abdul Majid.¹¹⁶ More broadly, Pakistan support to the Taliban has caused some problems for the militant group, such as creating a perception among some Afghans that it is a stooge of the ISI.

In addition to Pakistan, Iran has aided the Taliban—particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), the paramilitary arm of the IRGC. Iran is likely motivated by a desire to remove the U.S. military presence from Afghanistan, develop relations with the Taliban as it plays a more important political role in the country, and weaken the Islamic State.¹¹⁷ Iran has established close relations with such Taliban leaders as Abdul Qayum Zakir, Mullah Ghani Baradar, and the deceased Mullah Akhtar Mansour.¹¹⁸ Iran has also provided sanctuary for some senior al-Qa`ida officials, such as Saif al-`Adl, in the years since 9/11.¹¹⁹

Iran has provided money, weapons (such as Kalashnikovs and long-range sniper rifles), materiel (such as explosives, remote-control technology for IEDs, and night vision goggles), logistics, and training to the Taliban—including at camps in Iran.¹²⁰ But Iranian aid has been limited, and it has not likely provided surface-to-air missiles or other advanced weapons to the Taliban or other Afghan groups. The IRGC-QF also helped the Taliban establish a shura in Mashhad to oversee operations in western Afghanistan, as well as offices in Zahidan and Sistan, Iran.¹²¹ These Taliban hubs in Iran allowed the organization to plan operations, train, and move weapons and materiel into Afghanistan—including such provinces as Nimruz, Farah, Herat, and Badghis—outside the reach of the U.S. and Afghan governments.¹²² The IRGC-QF and Hezbollah also worked with Afghan fighters in Syria, including Afghans who were part of the Fatemeyoun Division—a unit of mostly Shi`a Afghan fighters that conducted operations in Syria under Iranian command.¹²³

Russia has also provided some aid to the Taliban, though Moscow supports peace talks as well.¹²⁴ Moscow is likely motivated by a desire to expand Russian influence on its southern flank in Central and South Asia, secure the withdrawal of U.S. military forces, counter Islamic State operations, and cultivate influence within the Taliban in case they return to power.¹²⁵ Russian support to the Taliban is not new. Around 2016, Russia began to provide limited assistance to the Taliban, including small arms and money, accord-

ing to U.S. government assessments.¹²⁶

In addition, the Russian military allegedly encouraged and offered money to Taliban-linked militants in Afghanistan to target foreign forces, including possibly U.S. troops.¹²⁷ Russian actions were likely the handiwork of Unit 29155—a shadowy division of Russia's military intelligence agency known as the GRU, tasked with foreign assassinations and other covert activities. U.S. intelligence agencies had monitored financial transfers from a bank account controlled by the GRU, and then watched as it was dispersed through a complex *hawala* system—an informal way to transfer money—to Taliban militants. In early 2020, U.S. forces and Afghan operatives from the Afghan intelligence agency, the National Directorate for Security, had raided a Taliban compound in Afghanistan and recovered roughly \$500,000 in U.S. currency and other materiel that raised suspicion of Russian activity. Some of this information was summarized in a President's Daily Brief provided to U.S. President Donald Trump around February 27, 2020. In a July 2020 intelligence community memo, the CIA and National Counterterrorism Center assessed with medium confidence that GRU Unit 29155 had offered aid to Taliban operatives to possibly target U.S. and other international soldiers.¹²⁸

In sum, outside state support has been critical to the Taliban, as has financial support from some wealthy Gulf donors.¹²⁹ It has allowed the Taliban to retain neighboring sanctuaries—especially in Pakistan—and to maintain a relatively steady supply of money, weapons, and materiel.

Implications of a Peace Deal

A peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban that ends over four decades of near-constant war in Afghanistan would be a remarkable achievement. Negotiators from the Afghan government, Taliban, United States, Europe, Pakistan, and other countries need to continue to support peace talks. While this article does not provide a comprehensive assessment of the negotiations, including the bargaining positions of all sides, it does raise several issues regarding the Taliban that cast doubt about the likelihood of successful inter-Afghan talks in the near future.

First, the Taliban's goal of establishing an extreme version of sharia in Afghanistan under the rubric of an "Islamic Emirate" is incompatible with the views of the current Afghan government, many (though not all) Afghans, and Western governments. Despite promises to the contrary, the Taliban has perpetrated substantial human rights violations and oppression against women, ethnic minorities, journalists, international aid workers, and others. Second, most Taliban leaders eschew democracy as a corrupt foreign political system. Instead, many have advocated the establishment of an authoritarian high council of religious scholars and figures with sweeping authority and an unelected emir (or leader) in place of the current government in Kabul—somewhat akin to a Sunni version of Iran. Third, the Taliban continue to cooperate with al-Qa`ida and other terrorist organizations. To help sustain operations, the Taliban are aided by sanctuary in Pakistan; support from Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and other state and non-state actors; and profits from a range of illicit activity, including opium. These activities will allow the Taliban—who remain optimistic about their prospects for winning the war—to continue fighting for the foreseeable future.¹³⁰ It is possible that the Taliban could moderate some of their positions in the future—such as backing off their insistence on an "Islamic Emirate" or supporting a system of government that includes dem-

ocratic characteristics—as part of peace talks. But they have not meaningfully done so yet with regard to these issues.

The possibility of failed negotiations raises serious questions for the United States and other international partners. Should the United States still withdraw military forces without a veritable peace deal between the Afghan government and the Taliban? Or should the United States and other countries keep some forces in Afghanistan, along with some intelligence personnel, diplomats, and development experts? The United States still has interests in Afghanistan, though they are not what they were following the September 11th terrorist attacks. The United States needs to focus on global competition with countries like China, Russia, and Iran, as well as the financial implications of COVID-19. Still, U.S. interests in Afghanistan include preventing the country from becoming a launching pad for international terrorism; precluding U.S. adversaries, such as China, Russia, and Iran, from using Afghan soil to undermine U.S. national security; and minimizing the likelihood of a humanitarian crisis. Several international terrorist groups continue to operate in Afghanistan today, including al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State, and other organizations that have conducted attacks in the region like Lashkar-e-Taiba.

If an agreement is not reached, there are strong arguments for the United States to maintain soldiers in Afghanistan to conduct counterterrorism operations and provide limited training, equipment, and other assistance to Afghan forces. Afghan national security forces are leading the military campaign against the Tali-

ban and other insurgent groups, and they have done a reasonable job—in part because the Taliban have weaknesses. The Taliban have failed to seize and hold any major cities, their extremist ideology is not supported by many Afghans, their involvement in the drug trade indicates that the group is deeply corrupt, and they do not have a strong track record of competent national governance. But without a peace deal, the further withdrawal of U.S. forces—as highlighted in the November 17, 2020, announcement to cut U.S. forces from 4,500 to 2,500 troops—will likely shift the balance of power in favor of the Taliban. With continuing support from Pakistan, Russia, Iran, and terrorist groups like al-Qa`ida, it is the view of the author that the Taliban would eventually overthrow the Afghan government in Kabul.

In a September 2020 interview, former Trump National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster remarked that it was wishful thinking to expect the Taliban to renounce ties to al-Qa`ida and that negotiations are unlikely to be fruitful.¹³¹ He also asked what power-sharing might look like with the Taliban. “Does it look like bulldozing every other girl’s school? Does it look like mass executions in the soccer stadium every other Saturday?”¹³² Based on the Taliban’s current objectives, ideological underpinnings, organizational structure, military strategies and tactics, and relationship with state and non-state actors, it is unlikely that a Taliban military or political victory would be in the United States’s interests without significant Taliban concessions. It is too early to tell whether the Taliban will be willing to compromise. If not, however, the war may be far from over. **CTC**

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Biosecurity in the Wake of COVID-19: The Urgent Action Needed

By Hamish de Bretton-Gordon

For years, the United States and many other countries have neglected biosecurity because policymakers have underestimated both the potential impact and likelihood of biological threats. COVID-19 has had a devastating effect on the planet and could be followed by outbreaks of even more dangerous viral diseases. Meanwhile, advances in synthetic biology are transforming the potential threat posed by engineered pathogens, creating growing concern over biological attacks and bioterror. Given the scale of the threat, biosecurity needs to be a top priority moving forward. Not only do efforts need to be stepped up to try to prevent the next pandemic (natural or engineered), but resilience needs to be built by developing early warning systems, the capacity to track outbreaks, and medical countermeasures, including “next generation” vaccines. Ideally, efforts need to be globally coordinated, but if this is not possible, a ‘coalition of the willing’ led by the United States needs to step up. Given the current pandemic has resulted in an epidemic of mis- and dis-information and given public behavior is key in controlling the spread of viruses, winning public acceptance for public health measures will be imperative to tackling biological emergencies in the future.

With a quarter of a million dead in the United States and more than a million globally, a massive economic toll,^a and a second wave in full swing in the northern hemisphere, the United States and other countries are paying a price for years of neglecting biosecurity^b as a top-tier national secu-

a The economic effects have been very serious. For example, the U.K. economy is expected to shrink by 11 percent in 2020, while in the United States, the fallout from COVID-19 is projected by the Congressional Budget Office to reduce the size of the U.S. economy by about \$8 trillion over the next decade. The impact in the developing world is likely highly underreported and may end up being greater. Mark Thompson, “The UK economy is heading back into recession,” CNN, November 5, 2020; Jeff Stein, “Coronavirus fallout will haunt U.S. economy for years, costing it \$8 trillion through 2030, CBO says,” *Washington Post*, June 1, 2020; Judy Woodruff, Courtney Vinopal, and Courtney Norris, “Bill Gates on where the COVID-19 pandemic will hurt the most,” PBS News Hour, April 7, 2020.

b Biosecurity, as originally conceptualized, was a set of preventive measures designed to reduce the risk of transmission of infectious diseases in crops and livestock, quarantined pests, and living modified organisms. In response to growing concern over the threat of biological terrorism, biosecurity started including the prevention of the theft of biological materials from research laboratories and attempts to stop bad actors from using synthetic biology for nefarious purposes.

rity priority. For years, biosecurity has been the poor relation of the ‘other’ securities for one simple reason: policymakers and analysts failed to grasp just how devastating a highly transmissible new virus in a highly interconnected world could be, and viewed a devastating global pandemic or catastrophic bioterror attack as very unlikely.

This article first describes how the COVID-19 pandemic has upended such assumptions, requiring policymakers to rethink both the *potential impact* and *likelihood* of the most concerning biological threats (bio threats). Based on this author’s decades of experience confronting CBRN threats,^c it then makes a series of observations on the approach now needed to counter biological threats.

Some have seen this crisis as a one-in-a-100-year event. But, as this article will outline, this is both naïve and risks creating complacency. Unless countries around the world develop a comprehensive biosecurity strategy and coordinate their efforts, pandemics (either natural or engineered) could devastate the planet every decade.

The New Bio Threat Horizon

The Need to Rethink Potential Impact

Policymakers around the world did not grasp just how large the impact of a bio threat could be. Beyond the enormous human and economic impact, the current pandemic has exposed the weakness, lack of preparedness, and poor responsiveness of healthcare systems of even highly developed countries like the United States and the United Kingdom. And the virus has inflicted carnage, even though SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) is not espe-

c Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear threats

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cially virulent. The world may be confronted with other viruses in the future whose combination of virulence (the harm a pathogen does to its host), transmissibility, and other characteristics pose much greater danger.

While overwhelming evidence points to SARS-CoV-2 spontaneously spreading to humans, the advances in synthetic biology and the growth in the number of Level 3 and 4 biocontainment facilities around the world storing deadly viruses¹ mean there is also the very real possibility that in the future, bad actors will try to engineer or steal/obtain a highly transmissible and highly virulent virus and unleash it onto the world. Another risk is accidental releases from such biocontainment facilities.

COVID-19, a highly transmissible but not very virulent pathogen, has had a devastating global impact, a fact that will not have gone unnoticed by rogue states and terror organizations. Advances in synthetic biology have created tools that could be put to malevolent use. In the last two decades, scientists synthesized the poliovirus from its genetic sequence,² recreated the 1918 Spanish flu virus,³ and succeeded in modifying the H5N1 avian flu virus so that it resulted (in a research laboratory) in airborne transmission among mammals.⁴ In the future, we should think of weaponized biology as no less of an existential threat to the planet than weaponized atomic science. It should also be noted that the fear and panic that even a medium-scale bioterror attack could create could have dangerous implications that may rival or even surpass the immediate loss of life.

The Need to Rethink Likelihood

Given the fact that in late 2019 when, as far as is known, COVID-19 cases first started emerging in China, it had been more than a century since the previous catastrophic outbreak (the 1918-1919 “Spanish flu” pandemic),^d it was unsurprising that many thought of such pandemics as a one-in-a-100-year event. Such assumptions should no longer hold. The encroachment of human settlements into areas that had previously been sanctuaries for wildlife^e and the popularity in some parts of the world of markets where people and wild animals are brought into proximity have made it more likely viruses will make the species leap to human beings.^e And when they do, as the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated, the interconnectedness of

d During the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic, it is estimated that one-third of the world’s population (around 500 million people) were infected and had clinically apparent illnesses. Total deaths were estimated at around 50 million and “were arguably as high as 100 million.” Jeffery K. Taubenberger and David M. Morens, “1918 Influenza: the Mother of All Pandemics,” *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 12:1 (2006).

e In the attempt to pinpoint the origin of the COVID-19 outbreak there has been much focus on the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan which National Geographic reported contained “a wild animal section where live and slaughtered species were for sale.” The publication noted that “buying, selling, and slaughtering wild animals for food is one way an animal-borne disease may infect people. Viruses can spread more easily if animals in markets are sick or kept in dirty, cramped conditions, such as in stacked cages. When animals are under duress, viral pathogens can intermingle, swap bits of their genetic code, and perhaps mutate in ways that make them more transmissible between species.” A study published in *Lancet* in January 2020 has challenged the notion that the Huanan market was the source of the outbreak. Dina Fine Maron, “Wet markets’ likely launched the coronavirus. Here’s what you need to know,” *National Geographic*, April 15, 2020; Jon Cohen, “Wuhan seafood market may not be source of novel virus spreading globally,” *Science*, January 26, 2020.

“In the future, we should think of weaponized biology as no less of an existential threat to the planet than weaponized atomic science.”

a world in which millions of people fly each day⁶ means they can spread very rapidly.

There is also growing concern about engineered viruses. Not only have advances in synthetic biology (SynBio) created growing capacity for extremely dangerous viruses to be engineered in a laboratory, but the number of people with access to potentially dangerous ‘dual use’ technology has greatly expanded and continues to expand, making malevolent use of such technology ever more likely.

In the August 2020 issue of this publication, scientists at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point warned that:

The wide availability of the protocols, procedures, and techniques necessary to produce and modify living organisms combined with an exponential increase in the availability of genetic data is leading to a revolution in science affecting the threat landscape that can be rivaled only by the development of the atomic bomb. As the technology improves, the level of education and skills necessary to engineer biological agents decreases. Whereas only state actors historically had the resources to develop and employ biological weapons, SynBio is changing the threat paradigm.

The cost threshold of engineering viruses is also lowering, with the West Point scientists warning that synthetic biology has “placed the ability to recreate some of the deadliest infectious diseases known well within the grasp of the state-sponsored terrorist and the talented non-state actor.”^f

As already noted, another source of vulnerability is that deadly viruses could be stolen from or escape from a research laboratory. There are now around 50 Biosafety Level 4^f facilities around the world, where the deadliest pathogens are stored and worked on,

f The four biosafety levels are BSL-1, BSL-2, BSL-3, and BSL-4, with BSL-4 being the highest level of containment. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “BSL-3 laboratories are used to study infectious agents or toxins that may be transmitted through the air and cause potentially lethal infection through inhalation exposure,” whereas “BSL-4 laboratories are used to study infectious agents or toxins that pose a high risk of aerosol-transmitted laboratory infections and life-threatening disease for which no vaccine or therapy is available.” “Biosafety Levels,” Science Safety Security, Public Health Emergency, last reviewed November 13, 2015.



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and this figure is set to increase in the next few years.⁸ This is a large increase over the last 30 years, creating bigger risk of a breach. Of equal, if not greater concern are the thousands of Biosafety Level 3 labs globally,⁸ which handle deadly pathogens like COVID-19.⁹

Given what has been outlined above, the risk of a future destructive biological attack or another devastating global pandemic should no longer be seen as low. From this point forward, there should no higher priority for the international community than biosecurity.

Improving Biosecurity

The United States and the international community need to prepare for the next pandemic or a potential large-scale bioterror event to ensure physical, psychological, and economic resilience. This will

“The risk of a future destructive biological attack or another global pandemic should no longer be seen as low.”

be no easy task. As noted by one writer, “the emerging nature of biosecurity threats means that small-scale risks can blow up rapidly” making it challenging to create effective policies to anticipate them because “there are limitations on time and resources available for analyzing threats, and estimating the likelihood of their occurrence.”¹⁰ Another challenge, which has complicated the response to COVID-19, is the likely deluge of mis- and dis-information¹¹ in future biological emergencies, making it more difficult to win public approval for the necessary public health response. The global scale of the threat is another challenge. In an interconnected world where a virus can spread from one side of the planet to the other in less than 24 hours, a coordinated approach is vital.

What follows is a series of observations on what I believe are the precepts that need to guide the United States and other countries’ biosecurity strategies moving forward.

Prevention

Given how difficult it is to stop the spread of certain infectious diseases, everything needs to be done to prevent future pandemics from occurring and bad actors from weaponizing viruses. The former needs to be the highest global health priority. The latter needs to be the highest national security priority. There needs to be a conversation about whether there should be more control over potentially dangerous biological materials and background checks or stricter vetting for scientists working in research facilities handling dangerous pathogens. As one scholar has noted, “Each person working in an HCBL [high-containment biological laboratory] is an independent variable whose actions cannot be guaranteed by even the most stringent and redundant biosecurity measures. More scientists mean that there is a greater probability that one of them could have malicious intent, or be psychologically unstable. Background checks, psychological tests and certification may reduce these risks.”¹²

The research community itself will also need to maintain vigilance and maintain channels of communication with authorities.¹³ But given how many people around the world now have access to the materials, technology, and know-how to potentially make biological weapons, prevention will not be easy. The international community has managed to control and stop the development of chemical weapons through the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), policed by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and it appears likely that a similar approach is a good starting point for biosecurity and the control of biological weapons.

Although it may be possible for a U.N. body similar to the OPCW to actively police the Biosafety Level 4 laboratories, it is most unlikely it could give equal scrutiny to the Level 3 facilities because of their much larger number.

In preventing natural pandemics, one measure could make a significant impact. “Wet markets,” which sell wild animals and their

^g A 2018 World Health Organization report noted that “BSL-4 laboratories represent the highest level of biological containment, offering unparalleled protection for the user, sample and environment. At present, more than 50 maximum- and high-containment facilities around the globe handle some of the world’s most hazardous pathogens to human and animal health for research and diagnostic purposes. BSL4 laboratories are located in all WHO regions. While most are in North America or western Europe, a number have been built in Asia, and construction projects are underway in China, Japan and sub-Saharan Africa.” *Report of the WHO Consultative Meeting on High/Maximum Containment (Biosafety Level 4) Laboratories Networking, Lyon, France, 13–15 December 2017* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2018).

meat,^h need to be either shut down or made subject to strict environmental and health controls.

The difficulty in preventing future pandemics or a future biological attack means that it is essential to create resilience by building capacity to quickly detect and respond to an outbreak.

Early Warning

Early warning is the cornerstone to provide resilience against all biological threats. In the future, we need a global approach to identifying pathogens that have the possibility to turn into pandemics and seal them at source. This will not be easy, especially as those responsible at the origin of the virus may not want to accept responsibility or liability. It is clear that some countries are happier to suppress bad news rather than share it for the common good. Measures need to be developed to enforce global reporting of troubling viral outbreaks. An early warning system should be led by the World Health Organization (on the assumption that the incoming U.S. administration reverses the Trump administration's withdrawal from the WHO to give it the necessary teeth) and given enough punch to require countries to inform the global health system as soon as a potential pandemic virus is identified. This WHO-run early warning system could be based on a network of bio sensors and all-source intelligence to detect viral outbreaks. This should include monitoring of local medical facilities and social media, which should show an uptick in virus infections or new diseases as they occur. It should also include monitoring around Level 3 and 4 labs, which should highlight leaks, thefts, and accidents. As necessary, this early warning system should quickly trigger lockdowns to contain outbreaks.

Contact Tracing and Data

Rapid contact tracing is key to limiting the spread of a pandemic¹⁴ (natural or otherwise), especially to vulnerable groups. Contact tracing apps on smart phones could help contain the spread of viruses by speeding up the process of contact tracing, but are only effective if a significant proportion of the population trusts and uses them. Many in the United States and elsewhere feel uncomfortable about downloading such technologies, and compelling their use may not be feasible in democracies.ⁱ Given there are important questions about state surveillance, data privacy, and data security,¹⁵ there needs to be a whole-of-society conversation about these technologies and necessary safeguards. Lessons need to be learned from democracies such as Taiwan and South Korea in which digital contact tracing significantly slowed the spread of COVID-19.¹⁶ Contact tracing apps could make a big difference but will only be effective if there is widespread opt-in from the public.

Strengthening Medical Capabilities and Countermeasures

All countries need to bolster their biosecurity capabilities, to in-

h The term "wet market" and "wildlife market" is often conflated. As one publication noted, "wet markets are typically large collections of open-air stalls selling fresh seafood, meat, fruits, and vegetables. Some wet markets sell and slaughter live animals on site, including chickens, fish, and shellfish. In China, they're a staple of daily life for many. More rarely, wet markets also sell wild animals and their meat." Maron.

i It was suggested in one survey that a majority of Americans would not download a contact-tracing app because of privacy concerns. Chandra Steele, "Most Americans Reject COVID-19 Contact-Tracing Apps," *PC Mag*, June 17, 2020.

"In creating resilience, medical countermeasures are as close as it gets to the silver bullet."

clude medical equipment, the training of personnel, and medical countermeasures (MCMs). In creating resilience, medical countermeasures are as close as it gets to the silver bullet. At the time of publication, 54 vaccines for COVID-19 are undergoing human clinical trials,¹⁷ and there is hope several will prove effective, holding out the potential to greatly reduce the danger posed by the virus and even ultimately eradicate COVID-19 as vaccines have done for smallpox and other viruses. There were grounds for optimism when on November 9, 2020, Pfizer announced that according to early data from human trials of an mRNA vaccine^j it developed with the German drug maker BioNTech, its vaccine was, so far, over 90 percent effective in preventing COVID-19 among trial volunteers. There was more good news on November 16, 2020, when Moderna announced that, according to early data, its mRNA coronavirus vaccine was almost 95 percent effective. Two days later, Pfizer stated that according to an updated analysis, its vaccine was 95 percent effective.¹⁸ Historically, this is about as good as it gets for the efficacy of vaccines, and will likely be seen as a major milestone in the fight against the virus.

MCMs are products such as biologics (including vaccines) and pharmaceutical drugs that can protect against or treat the effects of a pandemic or biological attack.^k Countries such as China, which implemented effective lockdowns, social distancing, mask mandates, and contact tracing, have succeeded to some degree in containing the spread of the virus,¹⁹ but medical countermeasures are the only way to really subdue the virus. In the future, it is likely to be more cost effective to pay the pharmaceutical industry ahead of time to produce treatments and vaccines, anticipating future biological threats rather than waiting for the pandemic to develop and then throwing huge sums at the problem after the fact. It is highly likely that money spent in advance on stockpiling MCMs, especially vaccines for known and COVID-type viruses will, in the long run, yield huge savings and lead to a more effective biosecurity strategy.

j The PHG Foundation of the University of Cambridge provides this useful explainer on RNA vaccines: "Conventional vaccines usually contain inactivated disease-causing organisms or proteins made by the pathogen (antigens), which work by mimicking the infectious agent. They stimulate the body's immune response, so it is primed to respond more rapidly and effectively if exposed to the infectious agent in the future. RNA vaccines use a different approach that takes advantage of the process that cells use to make proteins: cells use DNA as the template to make messenger RNA (mRNA) molecules, which are then translated to build proteins. An RNA vaccine consists of an mRNA strand that codes for a disease-specific antigen. Once the mRNA strand in the vaccine is inside the body's cells, the cells use the genetic information to produce the antigen. This antigen is then displayed on the cell surface, where it is recognised by the immune system." See "RNA vaccines: an introduction," University of Cambridge, PHG Foundation.

k According to the FDA, "MCMs can include: Biologic products, such as vaccines, blood products and antibodies[;] Drugs, such as antimicrobial or antiviral drugs[;] Devices, including diagnostic tests to identify threat agents, and personal protective equipment (PPE), such as gloves, respirators (face masks), and ventilators." For more on MCMs, see "What are Medical Countermeasures?" [fda.gov](https://www.fda.gov), accessed November 11, 2020.

In time, new technologies may also revolutionize our ability to deploy medical countermeasures. As the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) has noted, gene-based nucleic acid vaccine platforms, though not approved by U.S. regulators for human use to date, hold great promise because of their “stimulation of broad long-term immune responses, excellent vaccine stability and relative ease of large-scale vaccine manufacture.”²⁰ ^l These “next-generation”²¹ vaccines include mRNA vaccines such as the one developed by Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna, and recombinant vector vaccines such as the one developed by the University of Oxford and AstraZeneca.²² ^m According to a Johns Hopkins study, “an mRNA-based vaccine platform technique appears particularly promising in terms of ease of manufacture, adaptability to various targets, and biological delivery.”²³ Drew Weissman, an mRNA vaccine researcher, has stated that it may eventually be possible to produce a universal mRNA coronavirus vaccine “ready to be shipped out and used very quickly to prevent the pandemic from taking over.”²⁴

Stanford University Associate Chair of Bioengineering Drew Endy recently highlighted that it is conceivable that the medical community will one day be able to create vaccines “on demand” quickly enough to snuff out the danger posed by new viruses before

they have a chance to spread.ⁿ There needs to be massive funding of research and development for the next generation of vaccine platforms. Paradoxically, when COVID-19 eventually recedes as a public health emergency, securing the level of funding required to build and transform our arsenal of medical countermeasures will likely not be straightforward.

A much greater degree of domestic manufacturing and supply of MCMs, including personal protective equipment (PPE), and medical equipment such as ventilators is essential, as are pre-arranged agreements between the United States and its allies to supply each other with such equipment as necessary. Having some allies focus on manufacturing certain products and other allies on other products may be the most efficient and cost-effective way forward. Given growing geopolitical tensions, the United States and other Western democracies should in the future avoid any reliance on China in this regard. For many frontline responders, the abiding memory of COVID-19 will be the lack of PPE. In the future, the United States and other countries need to keep PPE manufacturers on retainers to ensure supply for the next pandemic.

The United States and other countries need to promote and invest in research that could greatly improve the ability of healthcare professionals to inoculate against and treat deadly diseases. The rapid advance of biotechnology is not only a potential threat; it is also a huge public health and counter-bioterror opportunity. Endy noted in the October 2020 issue of this publication that “operational mastery of cells” is for the first time plausible and could eventually help take “infectious diseases off the table.”²⁵

Attribution

The responsibility for any future biological attacks or accidental releases of pathogens that result in pandemics must be established. Full establishment of responsibility might come later, but investigation must begin immediately. It is likely that many countries do not have the organizations, structures, or expertise in this area at the moment, and they must now address this as a priority. As with chemical attacks, an international body such as the United Nations is best placed to lead this work.

Global Legal Framework

The Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC), ratified

^l As explained in one medical journal, “Current antiviral vaccine designs can be described as falling into 2 camps: protein based or gene based. Protein-based vaccines deliver the immune system-stimulating antigen to the body. This category includes whole-inactivated (killed) vaccines, as in the polio and flu shots, and subunit vaccines and virus-like particles, like in the hepatitis B and human papillomavirus vaccines. Gene-based vaccines take a different tack. They carry the genetic instructions for the host’s cells to make the antigen, which more closely mimics a natural infection. In the case of coronaviruses, the antigen of interest is the surface spike protein the virus uses to bind and fuse with human cells.” Jennifer Abbasi, “COVID-19 and mRNA Vaccines—First Large Test for a New Approach,” *JAMA* 324:12 (2020).

^m According to the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), “rather than delivering DNA or mRNA directly to cells, some vaccines use a harmless virus or bacterium as a vector, or carrier, to introduce genetic material into cells. Several such recombinant vector vaccines are approved to protect animals from infectious diseases, including rabies and distemper ... Today, NIAID-supported scientists are developing and evaluating recombinant vectored vaccines to protect humans from viruses such as HIV, Zika virus and Ebola virus.” “Vaccine Types,” National Institutes of Health, NIAID. For more, see Susanne Rauch, Edith Jasny, Kim E. Schmidt, and Benjamin Petsch, “New Vaccine Technologies to Combat Outbreak Situations,” *Frontiers in Immunology* 9:1,963 (2018).

ⁿ In the October 2020 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, Drew Endy stated: “I thought Craig Venter did a nice job in giving people the vision of a technology-enabled public health system in response to a pandemic, be it natural or intentional, which would detect where things were happening at the time they were happening, upload that information on the web, transmit that information at the speed of light, and people could be compiling prophylactics and vaccine candidates faster than the planes were landing with infected people. So you can have a speed of light public health bio defense system; it would require the equivalent of a hurricane satellite warning system. Imagine a bio weather map. This century we’ll have enough sequencing capacity to sequence the DNA of every organism on the planet. Like literally every base on earth, we’ll sequence. So now let’s just imagine a bio surveillance system. We have a bio weather map. We can see when things are happening. We can transmit that information over the network. We can instantly develop, using computer algorithms, attenuated vaccine candidates. We have enough experience with trialing against scaffolds for vaccine vectors that we just integrate the new sequence specific to the novel pathogen such that we have a vaccine on demand.” Stephen Hummel, Paul Cruickshank, and Don Rassler, “A View from the CT Foxhole: Drew Endy, Associate Chair, Bioengineering, Stanford University,” *CTC Sentinel* 13:10 (2020).

“We cannot afford to get this wrong a second time.”

in 1975, is designed to prevent the development and proliferation of biological weapons. However, it is a poor cousin to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and does not have a body like the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to police it. Such a body policing the biological sphere would ideally facilitate multilateral sharing of data and investigate transgressions. But creating such an organization would require complete buy-in from the United Nations Security Council, especially the permanent members. It is likely that China and Russia would block the formation of such an organization as well as veto proposals to broaden the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention and other controlling protocols. The only way around this may be a ‘coalition of the willing’ to form an effective body, perhaps absent Russia and China. If this is the case, it would have to be strongly led by the United States, European Union, United Kingdom, the additional Five Eyes,^o and other leading economies to give it any chance of success.

National Legal Frameworks

Many democratic countries have had to act in haste to implement some very restrictive policies and laws to try to slow down the spread of the virus. With a backlash growing in some countries almost a year into the pandemic,²⁶ governments need to better articulate the need for such measures. They now need to think more carefully about the balance between public health, economic well-being, and civil liberties in developing and reaching a national consensus on a legal and policy framework to respond to the evolving public health emergency and the ones to follow. Without broad-based public support, the risk is that lockdowns and travel restrictions and mask mandates will be ignored, and this has manifested itself in a number of developed countries.

Public Communication

The transmission of information to the public is central to effective outcomes. And winning public trust is key. Authorities can mandate or encourage masks and social distancing, but public buy-in is crucial to these practices being adopted. There is a certain ‘qual-

^o The Five Eyes is an intelligence alliance of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

ity in quantity.’ If the quantity of mis- and dis-information being consumed vastly outweighs the real information, it is likely to win out. This is a difficult proposition for politicians to grasp, who seem to agonize over their narrative in the hope of not getting anything wrong whereas others monopolize the ‘airways’ and gain traction, not caring what collateral damage they cause on the way. The growing attachment to conspiracy theories in the United States and other countries means disinformation spread by our adversaries over COVID-19, and other biological threats in the future will be especially challenging to counter.²⁷

Conclusion

For years, the United States and many other countries have neglected biosecurity because policymakers have underestimated both the potential impact and likelihood of biological threats. A potentially devastating global pandemic was overdue. During this COVID-19 pandemic, the world has suffered severe impacts from a highly transmissible but not very virulent pathogen. Countries were not prepared to spend money up front to provide resilience. This has been the greatest global shock since World War II, and to avoid this experience being repeated or catastrophic loss of life from an attack with a weaponized virus, the international community must invest in biosecurity and pandemic strategies to try to prevent the next pandemic (natural or engineered) and ensure mitigation for resilience by developing the capacity to track outbreaks, and medical countermeasures including next-generation vaccines. International cooperation is vital. The United States must again be the leading light in the WHO in order to support an early warning system that can ‘throttle’ any new potential pandemic at source.

The necessary measures will take money, political will, time, leadership, and public trust. Ideally, this will be led by the United Nations, but if this is not possible, the United States, the European Union, and the United Kingdom, supported by others, must step up to the plate. COVID-19 has had a devastating effect on the planet and could in the near future be followed by outbreaks of even more dangerous viral diseases. Advances in synthetic biology are transforming the potential threat posed by engineered pathogens, creating growing concern over biological attacks and bioterror.

There must be effective oversight and policing of bioterror threats, and it is high time the BTWC gets our full support and the resources necessary to prevent the Armageddon of a highly virulent, highly transmissible pathogen in the hands of bad actors.

Given how poorly many countries have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, improving biosecurity in the face of what could be significantly worse biological threats in the future is imperative. We cannot afford to get this wrong a second time. **CTC**

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Outlasting the Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State Threat in Africa

By Jason Warner, Ryan O'Farrell, Héli Nsaibia, and Ryan Cummings

The *annus horribilis* Islamic State Central suffered in 2019, during which the group lost the last stretch of its “territorial caliphate” in Iraq and Syria and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed, does not appear to have had a discernible impact on the overall operational trajectory of the Islamic State threat in Africa. Post-2019, the Islamic State’s West Africa Province sustained around the same high level of violence while Islamic State provinces in Libya, Sinai, and Somalia remained pernicious, though generally contained, threats. In some parts of Africa, the group grew as a threat. Both wings of the Islamic State’s new Central Africa Province as well as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara wing of the Islamic State’s West Africa Province escalated their violent campaigns post-2019. The Islamic State’s province in Algeria remains effectively defunct, and though the Islamic State affiliate in Tunisia failed to conduct major attacks, it remained active. As the authors stress in this article and an upcoming book, the overall resilience of the Islamic State in Africa should not be a surprise; it underscores that while connections were built up between Islamic State Central and its African affiliates—with the former providing, at times, some degree of strategic direction, coordination, and material assistance—the latter have historically evolved under their own steam and acted with a significant degree of autonomy.

Beginning in 2014, individual jihadis and groups of jihadis around the African continent have pledged allegiance to Islamic State Central. By the end of 2014, the Islamic State had already declared five official provinces—or *wilayat*—in Africa: three in Libya and one each in Algeria and the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. By the end of 2015, it had added one more in the Lake Chad Basin, where the group previously known as Boko Haram became the Islamic State’s West Africa Province (ISWAP). By mid-2018, the Islamic State had begun to consistently describe militants in Somalia as members of a new Islamic State province, and by early 2019, it had declared yet another province in Africa, the Islamic State’s Central Africa Province (ISCAP), which had “wings”^a in both the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique. Throughout this time, other sympathetic and robust cells—which would never themselves be elevated

to “province” status like those mentioned above—would emerge around the continent as well, most notably in its “Greater Sahara” branch (which would eventually become a part of ISWAP), and the “soldiers of the caliphate” in Tunisia. Elsewhere in places such as Morocco and Kenya, and other countries, individuals inspired by Islamic State Central would undertake violence in its name.

Yet even as the Islamic State’s presence grew throughout the African continent between 2014 and 2019, well before the end of this period, its central command’s positions in Iraq and Syria began to deteriorate. In March 2019, Islamic State Central lost the last remaining territory of its Middle Eastern caliphate, in Baghouz, Syria. Islamic State Central’s misfortunes worsened when its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was killed by U.S. special forces in northwestern Syria in October 2019. Given that this one-two punch significantly weakened Islamic State Central both practically and reputationally, it would not have been surprising if these developments had been accompanied by a decline in enthusiasm among the Islamic State’s African provinces and non-province affiliates for the Islamic State enterprise, and also a decreased operational tempo. But Islamic State Central’s misfortunes did little to lessen, at least outwardly, its African provinces’ and non-province affiliates’ commitment to its

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Collectively, the authors of this article have written the forthcoming book, The Islamic State in Africa: Emergence, Evolution, and Future of the Next Jihadist Battlefront (Hurst 2021).

^a Jacob Zenn introduced this terminology in his review of the Islamic state’s activities in Africa in May 2020. Jacob Zenn, “ISIS in Africa: The Caliphate’s Next Frontier,” Center for Global Policy, May 26, 2020.



Islamic State media release showing Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) fighters pledging allegiance to new Islamic State leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi following the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, published November 7, 2019.

project. By November 15, 2019, almost every African Islamic State province and non-province affiliate except for Algeria^b had quickly pledged allegiance^c to the Islamic State's new leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, who the U.S. government has identified as Amir Muhammad Sa'id 'Abd-al-Rahman al-Mawla.¹

This article examines how Islamic State Central's *annus horribilis* of 2019, which cemented its decline, impacted—or not—the activities and overall strength of its African provinces and non-province affiliates. In the main, the authors show how and why Islamic State Central's 2019 decline had seemingly little impact on the threat trajectory of its African provinces and non-province

affiliates.^d As the authors argue in a soon-to-be-published book,² the Islamic State's African provinces have always acted with substantial degrees of autonomy from Islamic State Central, and thus, their parent group's decline did little to alter their trajectories. Indeed, post-2019, the Islamic State's West Africa Province remained deadly as ever while its provinces in Libya, Sinai, and Somalia continued their pre-2019 trajectories as pernicious, though generally contained, threats. Notably, the Islamic State's Central Africa Province and the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) group (which would be subsumed into the West Africa Province), increased their violence post-2019. Elsewhere, Islamic State provinces (like Algeria) and non-province affiliates, which had historically been quiet, suffered no discernible declines.

Before discussing the overall "state of the Islamic State" in Africa as 2020 comes to a close, this article provides brief histories of the evolution of each of the six official Islamic State provinces in Africa as well as the largest non-province Islamic State affiliate group in Africa, in Tunisia. In each case, the authors assess the impact (or lack thereof) of Islamic State Central's 2019 *annus horribilis*. The authors drew on a wide variety of sources, including open-source reporting in various international media, interviews with observers on the ground, and analysis of open-source propaganda by the groups themselves.

Libyan Provinces

Once the exemplar of success of Islamic State Central's extra-Middle Eastern provinces between late 2014 and late 2016, the Islamic State's presence in Libya has since declined precipitously, though it

^b Conspicuous in its absence was the Islamic State's Algeria Province, which did not, to the authors' knowledge, re-pledge.

^c To that end, the Islamic State's Sinai Province was first (November 2, 2019), followed by re-pledges from its Somalia Province (November 3, 2019), members of "Jund al-Khilafa" in Tunisia (November 6, 2019), its West Africa Province and Central Africa Province (November 7, 2019), members of the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (now known as the ISWAP in Mali and Burkina Faso) (November 9, 2019), followed—after a lag—by the Libya Province (November 15, 2019). For Sinai, see Oded Berkowitz, "#Egypt-Wilayat #Sinai became the first Wilaya to pledge allegiance to ...," Twitter, November 3, 2019. For Somalia, see FJ, "NEW: ISIS militants in Somalia pledge allegiance to new ISIS emir," Twitter, November 3, 2019. For Tunisia, see Mick, "#ISIS fighters #Tunisia pledge alliance to the new caliph ...," Twitter, November 6, 2019. For ISWAP, see Laith Alkhouri, "More: Pledge of allegiance from #ISIS branch in #WestAfrica ...," Twitter, November 7, 2019. For ISCAP, see Robert Postings, "ISIS's Al Naba magazine featured pictures of pledges of allegiance ...," Twitter, November 7, 2019. For ISGS, see Mick, "#ISWA #ISIS fighters in #Mali and #BurkinaFaso pledge allegiance to the new Caliph," Twitter, November 9, 2019. For Libya, see Oded Berkowitz, "#Libya- nearly 3 weeks after al-Baghdadi was killed & almost 2 week after the start ...," Twitter, November 15, 2019.

^d The Islamic State's own attack metrics for Africa also support this conclusion. See Figure 6 in Tomasz Rolbiecki, Pieter Van Ostaeyen, and Charlie Winter, "The Islamic State's Strategic Trajectory in Africa: Key Takeaways from its Attack Claims," *CTC Sentinel* 13:8 (2020).

looks to be on a slight upward trajectory since al-Baghdadi's death in October 2019. After the fall of Qaddafi in 2011, thousands of Libyans began traveling to participate alongside the anti-Assad rebels in Syria as early as late 2011,³ where rather than affiliating with the primary al-Qa`ida presence there, Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN), they formed their own distinct fighting force, the Katibat al-Battar al-Libi, or the Battar Brigade.⁴ This force would ultimately align with the Islamic State when the Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State split occurred in April 2013.⁵ Eventually, many of these Islamic State-aligned fighters returned to Libya—some with battle fatigue⁶ but others remaining under the direction of the subsequently formed Islamic State Central⁷—and in Derna, merged with members of the pre-existing jihadi group Ansar al-Sharia (Libya)⁸ to form a new group, the Islamic Youth Shura Council (or Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam, or MSSI).⁹

The MSSI began to offer statements of support to the Islamic State—even before it had been fully announced—in June 2014, and pledged *bay`a* by November of that year.¹⁰ By the end of 2014, three Islamic State provinces had arisen in Libya—Cyrenaica, Fezzan, and Tripolitania—with Libya-based Islamic State soldiers (mostly local but many foreign) occupying entire portions of the major Libyan towns of Derna (late 2014 to mid-2015) and Sirte (February 2015 to December 2016).¹¹ Between late 2015 and late 2016, the Islamic State in Libya was consistently estimated to have between 2,000 and 6,500 fighters¹² with estimates varying widely within that range. In these efforts, its members undertook widespread governance efforts of varying efficacy, many of which were marked by brutal human rights abuses for citizens who resisted its rule.¹³ Despite these occupations, the Islamic State was driven from its major territorial when targeted by a joint U.S.-Libyan militia offensive that ended in December 2016.

From December 2016 until al-Baghdadi's death in October 2019, the Islamic State in Libya was sporadically active, despite being profoundly weakened from its 2014-2016 apogee. By the end of 2016, most surviving Islamic State members had fled to Libya's more remote, southern Fezzan desert, though the group only occasionally launched larger-scale attacks in cities, including a May 2018 attack on the High National Elections Commission of Libya in Tripoli in which at least 12 were killed by dual suicide bombers¹⁴ and a September 2018 operation in which Islamic State militants attacked the National Oil Corporation in Tripoli, killing two and injuring 10.¹⁵ The Islamic State's most active month during 2019 was April, when it conducted, according to tracking by Aaron Zelin, at least 11 attacks, in Sabha, Tmassah, al-Fuqaha, Ghadduwah, Zillah, Darnah, Samnu, Haruj, “and Checkpoint 400 between Sabha and Jufrah.”¹⁶ In May 2019, members of the Islamic State in Libya allied with Chadian fighters to attack a Haftar-LNA training base in Sebha, killing eight,¹⁷ and launched another two attacks in Derna in June 2019, which injured 18.¹⁸ In response, in September 2019, the United States launched four airstrikes¹⁹ against Islamic State militants in southern Libya^c (killing an estimated 43 militants, or one-third, of all of the Islamic State's Libyan fighters).²⁰

Media production by the Islamic State in Libya also declined

e According to reporting from *The New York Times*, a presumed target of some of the strikes was Malik Khazmi, a facilitator and recruiter for the group hailing from Bani Walid. Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Drone Strikes Stymie ISIS in Southern Libya,” *New York Times*, November 18, 2019.

after 2016. According to Zelin, Libyan Islamic State groups produced only four videos between 2017 and 2019,^f despite the various provinces having produced nearly 50 media products between 2015 and 2016.²¹

However, the disastrous decline-cementing 2019 for Islamic State Central does not appear to have further weakened the Islamic State in Libya. The group's Libyan Province is essentially as strong/weak as it was at the end of 2018. With only an estimated 100 to 200 fighters in southern Libya according to a U.N. report published in January 2020,²² and with the one-time emir of its Barqah province, Malik al-Khazmi, believed to have been killed in 2019,²³ the Islamic State in Libya still retains its bases in the southern deserts (its former “Fezzan province”)²⁴ as well as assumed sleeper cells in neighborhoods in Sirte.²⁵ King Abdullah of Jordan, in a warning on the Islamic State threat, stated in January 2020 that “several thousand fighters have left Idlib (Syria) through the northern border and have ended up in Libya,”²⁶ an assessment that was seconded by Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov.²⁷ Indeed, the United Nations' ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee listed the Islamic State in Libya on March 4, 2020.²⁸ And, as the United Nations notes, the Islamic State in Libya's reduced number of fighters may have the upside for the group of making it less “financially burdened,” as an anecdotal corollary, U.N. member states also offered evidence of the group's members buying weapons on the black market and investing in “projects” in coastal areas of the country.²⁹ As of September 2020, small cells still exist mostly in some cities, though mostly in the southern desert: a U.N. report published in early 2020 estimated only between 100 to 200 Islamic State fighters remained in southern Libya.³⁰ In sum, though the Islamic State in Libya has been profoundly degraded from its 2014 to 2016 heyday—given it has potentially been bolstered by a new injection of the fighting in Syria and given it can still take advantage of the chaos of the enduring civil war in the country—the Islamic State in Libya remains a moderate threat.

Algerian Province

The Islamic State's province in Algeria, one of its earliest in Africa, emerged soon after the announcement of the caliphate but was effectively destroyed long before Islamic State Central's tumultuous decline-cementing 2019. In a July 2014 audiotape,³¹ an al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) unit of several dozen fighters calling itself Jund al-Khilafah, or “Soldiers of the Caliphate,” and led by Abdelmalik Gouri,^g pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi. They then repeated the pledge in a September 2014 video³² that included

f According to Aaron Zelin, these four video messages were released in September 2017, July 2018, July 2019, and December 2019. Aaron Zelin, “The Islamic State in Libya Has Yet to Recover,” Washington Institute, December 6, 2019.

g Abdelmalek Gouri had joined the AQIM's predecessor organization, the GSPC, and rose through the ranks to become the deputy of Abdelmalik Droukdel, who was recently killed by the French military in a targeted operation in Mali. Gouri's “battalion,” Katibat al-Huddah, used the name “Jund al-Khilafah” when it pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Ignacio Cembrero, “Jurar lealtad al califa del terror,” *Mundo*, October 2, 2014; Benjamin Roger and Farid Alilat, “How AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel was killed in Mali,” Africa Report, June 8, 2020; Andrew Lebovich, “Soldiers of the Caliphate in the Land of Algeria: A New Organization Declares itself and Pledges Allegiance to Baghdad,” *Islamist Movements*, September 16, 2014.

the group's videotaped beheading of a kidnapped French hiking instructor, Hervé Gourdel,³³ leading to a harsh crackdown by Algerian security forces. Islamic State Central officially recognized Gouri's group as "Wilayat Jazair," or its "Algerian Province," in November 2014.³⁴ Despite that recognition, the Algerian crackdown killed Gouri in December 2014,³⁵ and in May 2015, his successor, Abdallah Othman al-Asimi, was also killed along with most of the group's fighters and commanders.³⁶ Disparate AQIM units in Algeria subsequently pledged to the Islamic State^h but likewise were dismantled by Algerian security forces in relatively quick succession. So unable was the group to overcome the crackdown by security forces that the most recent attack claimed by the Islamic State in northern Algeria was an August 31, 2017, suicide bombing in Tiarret.³⁷ Further, to the authors' knowledge, there has not been a serious incident involving Islamic State-affiliated militants in northern Algeria since an ambush by Algerian National Police on an individual purportedly affiliated with the Islamic State in February 2018.³⁸

In the post al-Baghdadi era, there were Islamic State media claims of a November 2019 clash³⁹ and February 2020 suicide bombing⁴⁰ near the border with Mali under the "Wilayat Jazair" name. However, rather than attacks carried out by a newly regrouped Islamic State Algeria province, these claimed attacks appear to be opportunistic labelings—intended to help feign the group's capacity—of activity by cells affiliated with ISGS, to the south,ⁱ rather than a resurrection of the Islamic State-affiliated insurgency begun by Gouri in northern Algeria in 2014. While militant activity and security force actions have continued in northern Algeria—meaning that a future resurgence of Islamic State-affiliated militancy is not impossible—Wilayat Jazair as an organized entity in northern Algeria appears to remain defunct.

Sinai Province

The Islamic State formally announced its presence in Egypt when the North Sinai-based and al-Qa`ida-aligned Ansar Beit al-Maqdis Islamist extremist movement pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on November 10, 2014,⁴¹ thus becoming the Islamic State's "Wilayat Sinai." Within 12 months of its inception, the group marked its preeminence in Egypt's jihadi landscape by claiming to have downed the Russian-operated Metrojet Flight 9268 as it departed the Red Sea resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh on October 31, 2015.⁴² Simultaneously, Wilayat Sinai also aimed to seize and govern territory. To that end, more than 100 of the group's fighters attempted to seize the Sinai town of Sheikh Zuweid on July 1, 2015.⁴³ Although this attempted occupation of Sheikh Zuweid lasted less than 24 hours—with an Egyptian air and ground offensive neutralizing most militants who occupied the town⁴⁴—the attack highlight-

ed both the intent and operational capacity of Wilayat Sinai. This threat was further highlighted in December 2017 when Egyptian Interior Minister Magdy Abdel-Ghaffar narrowly escaped a brazen assassination attempt by Wilayat Sinai at al-Arish airport.⁴⁵ The attack came a month after the militant group killed in excess of 300 worshippers at the al-Rawda mosque in the town of Bir al-Abed in Egypt's North Sinai Governorate, which was predominantly frequented by members of the Sufi-dominated and pro-government Sawarka tribe.⁴⁶

Despite the often-spectacular acts of violence by Wilayat Sinai—which also extended to Egypt's Nile Delta and Western Desert regions⁴⁷—the group's operational capacity was significantly downgraded by the time of al-Baghdadi's death in October 2019, largely due to the broad-based counterterrorism campaign against the group by the Egyptian state, dubbed Comprehensive Operation–Sinai 2018.⁴⁸ Since its initiation in February 2018, the initiative has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Wilayat Sinai militants, in addition to dismantling some of the group's logistical networks and preventing it from controlling territory.⁴⁹ Despite its successes, however, Comprehensive Operation–Sinai 2018 has failed in its mandate of completely defeating Wilayat Sinai, and the campaign has also been widely criticized for human right abuses.⁵⁰

In 2020, Wilayat Sinai continued to wage a low-level insurgency in the North Sinai governorate as highlighted by a series of attacks against Egyptian military positions and pro-government tribesmen across the region since June 1, 2020.⁵¹ The severe setbacks suffered by Islamic State Central do not appear to have had a discernible impact on the trajectory of the Islamic State in the Sinai region. Indeed, according to analysis in this publication of the Islamic State's attack claims in Africa, Wilayat Sinai was only second to ISWAP in terms of the total number of acts of violence committed over the course of 2019.⁵² Moreover, violence by Wilayat Sinai made Egypt the country with the most Islamic State-reported attacks during that year. In the summer of 2020, the Islamic State's Egyptian affiliate captured at least four rural settlements near the town of Bir al-Abd.⁵³

West Africa Province

The Islamic State's West Africa province, or Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya, comprises two groups that operate independently in the Lake Chad basin and Liptako-Gourma regions of West Africa. For the purposes of clarity, the authors will refer to the Lake Chad Basin-based movement as the Islamic State West Africa Province Core (ISWAP Core) and the Islamic State in Greater Sahara when speaking of its Liptako-Gourma-based counterpart.

ISWAP Core

Since its emergence in March 2015, ISWAP has been the Islamic State's largest, most deadly, and most governance-capable province on the African continent, a trend that continued after the death of al-Baghdadi. When Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad (colloquially known as "Boko Haram") leader Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on March 7, 2015⁵⁴—and Islamic State Central accepted the pledge six days later,⁵⁵ elevating the group to official provincial status—it marked the formal

h Former AQIM units that pledged allegiance to the Islamic State included an unnamed unit in Skikda in May 2015, Ghuraba Brigade in July 2015, Ansar Brigade in September 2015, Humat al-Da'wah al-Salafiyah in September 2015, and Katibat al-Fateh in May 2017. Nathaniel Barr, "If at First You Don't Succeed, Try Deception: The Islamic State's Expansion Efforts in Algeria," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, November 13, 2015; Djallil Lounnas, "Jihadist Groups in North Africa and the Sahel, Between Disintegration, Reconfiguration and Resilience," *Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture, Working Papers No. 16*, October 2018, p. 6.

i The November 2019 clash resulted in the death of Aboubacar Ould Abidine (aka Abu Zoubeir), a lieutenant in the ISGS subunit Katibat Salaheddine. Héni Nsaibia, "#Algeria-#BREAKING: Aboubacar Ould Abidine (aka Abu Zoubeir), cousin ...," Twitter, November 21, 2019.

affiliation^j between two of the world's deadliest extremist organizations.⁵⁶

While in the years that followed counterterrorism pressure bore down on the newly branded "Islamic State West Africa Province" (ISWAP Core), internal ideological divisions to an equal degree threatened the group. Notably, it was announced in the August 2, 2016, edition of the Islamic State's *Al Naba* publication⁵⁷ that ISWAP Core had replaced Shekau with a new *wali*, or governor, identified as Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the son of slain Boko Haram founding leader, Muhammed Yusuf.⁵⁸ In a series of audio tapes and documents subsequently released by al-Barnawi, it was disclosed that Shekau had been expelled from ISWAP Core due to his disobedience in regard to the edicts of al-Baghdadi—specifically, his continued use of female suicide bombers and excommunication of his internal critics, his alleged embezzlement of ISWAP Core resources, and (from Islamic State Central's point of view) his overly broad *takfiri* interpretations justifying violence against Muslim civilians.⁵⁹

Following the August 2016 fracturing of ISWAP Core between al-Barnawi and Shekau loyalists,⁶⁰ each faction has pursued its insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin via unique methodologies.^k For ISWAP, the group pursued the Islamic State's directives by projecting a self-image of its engagement with civilians through proselytizing and outreach activities,⁶¹ and by focusing its violence against hardened military targets (as highlighted by the group's overrunning of more than 20 military bases in northeastern Nigeria between 2018 and 2019⁶²) rather than civilians as had been the case broadly under Shekau's tenure.

While outwardly it may appear that since 2017 ISWAP Core has been adopting the ideological and political framework promulgated by Islamic State Central, internally, the reality has seen ISWAP in a state of ideological flux. On August 21, 2018, ISWAP Core experienced a mutiny that led to the death of a key commander, Mamaan Nur,⁶³ and the replacement of al-Barnawi as leader⁶⁴ with Abu Abdulla Idriss⁶⁵ (commonly referred to as "Ba Idrissa"). While ISWAP Core did not reveal the reason for these two developments, Nigerian government reports assessed that the group's rank-and-file had grown frustrated with al-Barnawi and Nur's "moderate" ideological leadership.⁶⁶ Indeed, although it repledged allegiance to the Islamic State's new overall leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Quarayshi, on November 8, 2019, ISWAP Core appears to be veering away from the Islamic State's ideological framework. Under the leadership of Ba Idrissa,⁶⁷ ISWAP Core has continued its acts of violence against civilians, counter to Islamic State Central's requests,⁶⁸ as highlighted when suspected ISWAP Core combatants massacred as many

as 81 villagers in the town of Gubio on June 9, 2020.⁶⁹ This act of violence, largely indistinguishable from the *modus operandi* of the Islamic State Central-disavowed Shekau faction, highlights the possibility that, as of June 2020, more extreme members of ISWAP Core may be gaining the ascendancy over their moderate counterparts within the movement.

Despite these ideological divisions, the frequency of ISWAP's Core's violence have been largely unaffected by al-Baghdadi's death. This was reflected in recent analysis featured in this publication, which assessed violence committed by Islamic State-affiliated groups on the African continent. As per the cited analysis, ISWAP Core claimed some 177 attacks in 2019, which were distributed quite evenly across the year.⁷⁰

The decline-cementing calamities suffered by Islamic State Central in 2019 do not therefore appear to have affected the trajectory of the Islamic State jihad in northeastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. The group's ability to maintain (and indeed, increase, if its claims are taken at face value) its operational tempo, combined with a newfound willingness to include civilians in its target profile, could see the worsening of what is already a catastrophic humanitarian crisis in northeastern Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad region.

The Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS)

Though never its own official stand-alone *wilaya*, the group known colloquially as the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) has progressed from a recognized though unofficial (and generally ignored) Islamic State affiliate for much of its existence, to an increasingly important and—as of March 2019—distinct "wing" of the Islamic State's West Africa Province.

The first seeds of what would become the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara were planted during the holy month of Ramadan in the summer of 2014, when Hamada Ould al-Khairy—a senior Mauritanian commander of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (more commonly known by its French acronym "MUJAO")^l—penned a letter in support of the Islamic State's then-proclaimed proto-state.⁷¹ Almost a year later on May 13, 2015, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, also previously a MUJAO leader from Western Sahara, issued an audio statement in which he pledged *bay`a* to the Islamic State. In doing so, he splintered away from the al-Qa`ida-affiliated al-Mourabitoun, to which he belonged at the time, and subsequently, along with a few dozen of defected fighters, formed ISGS. It would not be until the fall of 2016 that his men—as part of the new outfit—would conduct their first series of armed attacks, which included assaults on a customs station in Markoye,⁷² and an army camp in Intangom,⁷³ both in Burkina Faso, as well as an external attempted prison break against the high-security prison of Koutoukale north of Niger's capital Niamey.⁷⁴ Despite initially ignoring the pledges from al-Sahraoui's group, these late 2016 armed assaults led to recognition from Islamic State Central. A video released by the Islamic State media agency Amaq on October 30, 2016, showed al-Sahraoui and his men pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi, but despite acknowledgment of its presence from Islamic State Central, ISGS was not elevated to the status of *wilaya*.

j At its core, "Boko Haram" seems to have pledged allegiance to mitigate the troubles it faced as its own fortunes were in decline. Indeed, the 'Islamic' region (*dawla*) that Shekau had declared prior to the pledge in northeastern Nigeria on August 24, 2014, was, at the time of the pledge, being dismantled by the Nigerian military and those of neighboring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, to which the Boko Haram contagion had also spread. Jacob Zenn, "Making Sense of Boko Haram's Different Factions: Who, How and Why?" *African Arguments*, September 20, 2016; Dionne Searcey and Marc Santora, "Boko Haram Attacks Persist, but Nigerian Officials Say Group Is Losing Ground," *New York Times*, November 15, 2015; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Boko Haram Did Not Declare A Caliphate," *Foundation for the Defense of Democracies*, September 4, 2014.

k For its part, Shekau's faction continued the employment of suicide bombers and enacting violence against civilian communities. Omar Mahmood and Ndubuisi Ani, *Factional Dynamics within Boko Haram* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2018), p. 11.

l MUJAO emerged as a local splinter from al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2011 with a vision to spread jihad across West Africa. The core were Sahelian Arabs from Western Sahara, Mali, and Mauritania who came to prominence in 2012 when jihadi groups seized territory in northern Mali.



Screen capture showing the launch of an attack against a Nigerien army base on December 10, 2019, in the town of In-Ates, featured in the first official, full-length, high-quality video by the Islamic State dedicated to ISGS, entitled “Then It Will Be for Them A [Source Of] Regret,” released on January 10, 2020.

From being a small group—greatly underestimated and relatively shrouded in secrecy compared to its al-Qa`ida-aligned counterparts in the Sahel—there was a discernible change in ISGS’s capabilities in 2017. In that year, the group grew as it managed to mobilize a large number of fighters against the backdrop of intercommunal violence in the Mali-Niger borderlands,⁷⁵ and also received militants defecting from its Sahelian al-Qa`ida-affiliated counterpart, Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), a Sahelian jihadi conglomerate that served as a uniting umbrella group for five other factions.⁷⁶ Operationally, ISGS went from undertaking small hit-and-run attacks to much larger-scale,⁷⁷ coordinated attacks against military outposts across Niger’s northern Tillaberi region, including a particularly deadly ambush in Tirzawane in February 2017 that killed 16 soldiers,⁷⁸ spurring Nigerien authorities to request the deployment of French troops.⁷⁹ An ISGS ambush in the village of Tongo Tongo, Niger, in October 2017 targeting a joint U.S.-Nigerien force—which killed four U.S. Green Berets and five Nigerien counterparts—served to definitively thrust ISGS from relative regional obscurity to the headlines.⁸⁰

Even though ISGS until 2019 remained publicly disconnected from the Islamic State network—with Islamic State Central not releasing any messages in regard to the group beyond recognizing its

existence back in October 2016,ⁿ and the group never being elevated to the status of a full standalone province—ISGS’s fidelity to its parent organization did not erode. Rather, it increasingly portrayed itself as a hardcore alternative to its local al-Qa`ida counterpart by carrying out mass atrocities against civilian populations and showing beheadings and other brutal violence in its self-produced media products.⁸¹ On March 22, 2019, the two-and-a-half-years-long silence by Islamic State Central regarding its Sahelian affiliate ended when Islamic State Central published a single-photo report about it labeled as pertaining to the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), showcasing Islamic State fighters in Burkina Faso,⁸² and serving as a first sign that ISGS was on its way to becoming incorporated into ISWAP. This photo report was followed by a two-page report dedicated to the “Greater Sahara” in the 175th edition of the *Al Naba* newsletter in which Islamic State Central claimed responsibility for a number of attacks,⁸³ most notably two suicide attacks against French forces in Mali⁸⁴ and the abduction and subsequent murder of Canadian geologist Kirk Woodman in Burkina Faso.⁸⁵ In late April 2019, al-Baghdadi made a rare audio-visual appearance, accepting pledges of fealty emanating from Mali and Burkina Faso. He also took the opportunity to credit ISGS founder Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui as a subregional interlocutor, by explicitly mentioning and praising him, and called on Sahelian militants to

m JNIM is composed of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb’s Sahara Emirate, Ansar Dine, Katiba Macina, al-Mourabitoun, and a majority of the Burkinabe militant group Ansarul Islam.

n During this approximate two-and-a-half years hiatus between October 2016 and March 2019 in official Islamic State media releases related to its Sahelian affiliate, ISGS was only mentioned as news items in the terrorist organization’s weekly *Al Naba* newsletter.

intensify operations against France and its allies in the region.⁸⁶ ISGS militants heeded Baghdadi's call. In May 2019, they launched a string of attacks across Tillaberi, including a complex mass-casualty ambush not far from Tongo Tongo.⁸⁷

If previous years had seen step-changes in ISGS growth and capabilities, the second half of 2019 witnessed a quantum leap in the frequency⁸⁸ and lethality⁸⁹ of the group's activities, with ISGS becoming a sort of flagship affiliate of the Islamic State, even if it was technically a subgroup within ISWAP. This was evidenced by the large increase in attention designated to ISGS in the Islamic State's media productions including lengthy coverage in the *Al Naba* bulletin and videos by Amaq Agency and the ISWAP media office.⁹⁰ For instance, *Al Naba* dedicated nine out of 20 of its front pages to ISGS between November 2019 and March 2020.⁹¹ In August 2019, ISGS and JNIM simultaneously launched a militant campaign in the tri-state border area between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.⁹² During the offensive, ISGS pulled off several of the deadliest attacks ever recorded in these countries to date, overrunning half a dozen military outposts, leaving nearly 300 government troops dead,⁹³ and prompting France to designate the group as the "the number one enemy in the Sahel,"⁹⁴ an announcement that largely neglected the likely longer-term threat posed by JNIM.

The series of misfortunes suffered by the Islamic State in 2019 culminating in al-Baghdadi's demise in 2019 did little to diminish ISGS enthusiasm. To the contrary, its operations remained robust. In February 2020, in order to counter the advance of jihadi groups in the borderlands between central Mali, northern Burkina Faso, and western Niger, France announced the deployment of 600 supplemental troops, underlining the threat that ISGS had become.⁹⁴ Subsequently, in March 2020, France announced the launch of operation 'Takuba,' a task force mainly composed of European Special Operations Forces aimed at shoring up the French Operation Barkhane mission in the fight against jihadi groups.⁹⁵

ISGS has sustained its violence in the Sahel. During a one-year period between May 2019 and May 2020, it undertook 18 attacks that left more than 400 soldiers dead in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.⁹⁶ One factor that may in the future reduce its operational tempo is the deterioration in its relationship with al-Qa`ida groups under the umbrella of JNIM. Despite what for a period of time was an amicable live-and-let live relationship between ISGS and JNIM—often described as the "Sahelian exception" for the lack of violence between the groups—ISGS's recent ascendance has led it to challenge JNIM's hegemony.⁹⁷ Since the summer of 2019, there has been open conflict between the two groups in parts of the Sahel, demonstrated by 65 reported clashes between the two groups between July 2019 and August 2020, resulting in (by low estimates) at least 490 jihadis killed on both sides.⁹⁸ Thus, while ISGS has only grown stronger since the death of al-Baghdadi, it may become a victim of its own success in now having to fight a multi-front war under intense and sustained pressure from both counterterrorism forces as well as al-Qa`ida-aligned jihadis in the Sahel.

Somalia Province

While never one of the largest or most deadly African provinces of

the Islamic State and piling in comparison in nearly all aspects to its local al-Qa`ida analogue al-Shabaab,⁹⁹ the Islamic State's Somalia province has been a consistent, low-level threat inside Somalia, even though, as will be discussed, there was a slight slowdown in its operational tempo from late 2019 to mid-2020.

The Islamic State's province in Somalia emerged in its pre-province form in October 2015.¹⁰⁰ In that month, Abdul Qadir Mumin, a British-born al-Shabaab ideologue¹⁰¹ based in northern Somalia, pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi, effectively breaking away from his northern al-Shabaab unit and bringing approximately 20 al-Shabaab fighters stationed in the Puntland region of Somalia with him.¹⁰² Roughly one year after the pledge, Mumin and his fighters overran the Puntland town of Qandala and occupied it for slightly less than two months between October and December 2016, prior to being dislodged by Somali and international forces.¹⁰³ Thereafter, the Islamic State in Somalia began primarily attacking police and military targets, first in Puntland, and then increasingly moving farther south into Mogadishu and Afgoyee. This invited a response from the United States, which began targeting the group with airstrikes in October 2017.¹⁰⁴ Islamic State-Somalia's violence reached the pinnacle of its operational tempo in 2018 with a total of 66 operations, according to data collected by FDD's Long War Journal.¹⁰⁵ Not coincidentally, from August 2018, after years of acknowledgment that stopped short of recognizing it as a province, Islamic State Central officially and consistently began referring to its fighters in Somalia as members of its official Islamic State *wilaya*.¹⁰⁶ Before al-Baghdadi's death, the Islamic State in Somalia had been tasked by Islamic State Central to serve as its oversight body of broader Islamic State activities in East Africa.¹⁰⁷

Since al-Baghdadi's death, the Islamic State in Somalia has decreased its operational tempo slightly,¹⁰⁸ and though the group is not particularly deadly, it has remained a threat. Throughout 2020, the Islamic State in Somalia, also according to the Long War Journal, has launched no more than four attacks per month, though even many of these cannot be verified.¹⁰⁹ One likely reason for the decline is significant personnel losses during 2020. These include the January 2020 killing of an Islamic State-Somalia leader by Puntland Security Forces (PSF)¹¹⁰ and other raids undertaken by a combination of either PSF or Somali intelligence agencies that captured Islamic State-Somalia members and its southern leader in March and April 2020, respectively.¹¹¹ A raid in May 2020 also captured various members of Islamic State-Somalia including Mumin's driver, members of its internal police service, as well as raids targeting the storehouses of its weapons.¹¹² Beyond formal counterterrorism pressure, the group has also been weakened by attacks by members of al-Qa`ida-affiliated al-Shabaab, with whom it has been clashing since its emergence in 2015.¹¹³ In short, though the Islamic State in Somalia has decreased its operational tempo, the decline is too small to represent a change in trajectory caused by Islamic State Central's misfortunes and is most likely a function of increased targeting by local security forces and the antagonistic jihadi group al-Shabaab.¹¹⁴

Central Africa Province (ISCAP)

The Islamic State's newest official *wilaya*—both on the African continent and globally—is its "Central Africa Province" (ISCAP), composed of two separate, geographically distinct insurgencies—one in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and one in northern Mozambique—that have nominally merged into one singular *wilaya*. Particularly unique is that amongst the group's African affiliates, the

o These occurred in Koutougou in Burkina Faso; In-Delimane and Tabonkort in Mali; and In-Ates (twice) and Chinagodrar in Niger. "Burkina : après la mort de 24 militaires dans une attaque, l'opposition demande la démission du gouvernement," *Jeune Afrique*, August 20, 2019.

first official use of the province's name in April 2019¹¹⁵ did not take place until *after* the March 2019 fall of Baghouz.

The Origins of the Congolese Wing of ISCAP

The first of ISCAP's two wings is the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an Islamist rebel group that originated in Uganda in the early 1990s. Following a failed rebellion in western Uganda in 1995, its members were forced to flee to eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where they embedded themselves within local conflict dynamics as violence spiraled into two regional wars and enduring instability.¹¹⁶ A 2014 military offensive by the Congolese military severely degraded the group¹¹⁷ and forced its longtime leader, Jamil Mukulu, to flee to Tanzania, where he was later arrested and extradited back to Uganda.¹¹⁸ His successor, Musa Baluku, rebuilt much of the group's strength in eastern DRC and embarked on a campaign of retaliatory massacres that killed almost 3,000 Congolese civilians between October 2014 and October 2019,¹¹⁹ while pivoting the ADF's rhetoric and identity away from its focus on Uganda and toward that of the broader transnational jihadi movement.¹²⁰

The Origins of the Mozambican Wing of ISCAP

The second of ISCAP's two wings derives from an ongoing insurgency in northern Mozambique, which emerged in October 2017 as a salafi splinter movement, which began a sustained insurgent campaign against the government after several years of escalating confrontations. Tensions between the radical youth movement—locally and colloquially referred to as “al-Shabaab”^p—and government-backed clerics escalated as the sect demanded ‘Islamic’ governance and denounced the secular ruling FRELIMO party.¹²¹ Following arrests of “Al Shabaab” members in Mocimboa da Praia at the behest of government-affiliated clerics, the group attacked police throughout the town on October 5, 2017.¹²² While these initial attacks were largely unsuccessful, they began a steadily escalating rural insurgency, feeding off a sense of marginalization within Muslim communities along the coast that had developed from feelings of ethnic discrimination at the hands of FRELIMO against the largely Muslim Mwani and religiously mixed Macua of the coast in favor of the largely Christian Makonde of Cabo Delgado's interior.¹²³ This was compounded by dashed expectations of rapid economic development following the discovery of the third-largest gas reserves in Africa in 2009,¹²⁴ as residents were promised jobs and infrastructure but instead faced displacement from their coastal villages with very limited compensation.¹²⁵

While there had been indications since at least July 2018 of ties

developing between Islamic State Central and the ADF in the DRC,^q the official announcement of the “Central Africa Province” in April 2019 was the first announcement of a new *wilaya* following the fall of Baghouz in March 2019, and was no doubt designed to send a message that the Islamic State could still “remain and expand” despite the loss of the territorial core that had been so crucial to its global image. The new province's violence was soon visible. An attack by the ADF wing was claimed by Islamic State Central's media apparatus on April 18, 2019,¹²⁶ while an attack by ISCAP's “Al Shabaab” wing in Mozambique was officially claimed on June 4, 2019.¹²⁷ Indeed, between the first attack claims in April 2019 and the end of the year, Islamic State media claimed 23 attacks in the DRC and 14 attacks in Mozambique under the Central Africa Province moniker.¹²⁸

Divergent Trajectories Between the Two ISCAP Wings

In early November 2019, however—not long after al-Baghdadi's death—the trajectories of ISCAP's ADF and “Al Shabaab” branches began to diverge sharply. Even prior to the first official claim of an attack in the DRC, Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi visited Washington in April 2019 seeking assistance for fighting the ADF, framing it as a fight against the Islamic State, two and a half months after he had assumed office.¹²⁹ Following months of escalating rhetoric by the Congolese government, the Congolese military (FARDC) launched a large-scale offensive on October 30, 2019, driving the ADF from most of its main base areas in Beni territory within a month. The ADF responded with vicious reprisal attacks on civilians as it tried to divert the FARDC from the frontlines,^{130r} and appears to have relocated most of its fighters to new areas in Beni and neighboring Irumu territories,¹³¹ as well as reestablished recruitment and finance networks in Uganda. A brief lull in massacres perpetrated by the terrorists was followed by a rapid escalation beginning in March 2020 as the ADF attempted to clear civilians from its new areas of operation.¹³² By mid-September 2020, more than 800 civilians had been killed in around 200 retaliatory ADF attacks in Beni and Ituri.^s While individual ADF attacks remained for the most part relatively small-scale—occasionally killing dozens but on average resulting in five fatalities^t—the extremely high fre-

q An Islamic State-affiliated financier named Ahmed Zein was arrested in Nairobi in July 2018 for allegedly transferring more than \$150,000 USD to Islamic State fighters in Syria, Libya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Beth Nyaga: “Police arrest duo involved in terrorism facilitation for ISIS,” Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, July 5, 2018. Al-Baghdadi passingly referred to “Central Africa” in a list of Islamic State provinces in an August 2018 speech. Wassim Nasr, “#RDC #EI dans son discours, en appelant au combat et au jihad ...,” Twitter, April 19, 2019.

r ADF fighters killed 107 civilians from May 1 to June 3, 2020, north of Eringeti, where local civil society warns they have established new bases. “Ituri: Un Bastion ADF Installe au Village Kamambou,” Infocongo, May 31, 2020.

s Congolese NGO Le Centre d'Etudes pour la Promotion de la Paix, la Démocratie et le Droit de l'Homme (Study Center for the Promotion of Peace, Democracy and Human Rights CEPADHO) maintains a record of attacks by the ADF in Beni and Ituri, and has recorded the killing of 888 civilians by the ADF since October 30, 2019. Barak Munyampfura Héritier, “RDC : 134 civils tués par les ADF en Ituri et au Nord-Kivu, le CEPADHO parle d'un mouvement terroriste,” MNCTV Congo, September 12, 2020.

t Between May and August 2020, there were 90 attacks and raids against civilians and Congolese military personnel by small units of ADF combatants, which on average killed five civilians and/or soldiers per attack, according to the ADF attacks dataset maintained by Ryan O'Farrell.

p “Al Shabaab,” meaning “The Youth” in Arabic, has been used colloquially to refer to jihadi militants along the Swahili coast, but does not necessarily denote connections to al-Shabaab in Somalia. In ASWJ's case, there is no evidence of ties between the groups, and ties would be extremely unlikely given ASWJ's allegiance to the Islamic State. It is important to note, however, that an official al-Qa`ida media outlet claimed an attack in Mozambique in May 2020, though there is no further evidence the group has a presence there. Caleb Weiss, “This is quite interesting. Al Qaeda's Al Thabat news agency is reporting an attack ...,” Twitter, May 22, 2020.

quency of its attacks on Congolese civilians and military personnel has meant that although the FARDC has seized back territory, it has still struggled to contain ISCAP-ADF's violence.

For its part, the trajectory of ISCAP's "Al Shabaab" branch in northern Mozambique since the first attack claims in June 2019 has been far different, facing no such large-scale offensive by Mozambican security forces. While the group had been able to coordinate attacks by multiple units across long distances, unit sizes and objectives often remained small^u until the beginning of 2020, when "Al Shabaab" began staging large-scale raids, notably on district capitals, in quick succession. In the first of these large scale raids on March 23, 2020, as many as 100 insurgents briefly seized parts of Mocimboa da Praia, the birthplace of the movement.¹³³ Two days later on March 25, 2020, "Al Shabaab" briefly took Quissanga, 120 kilometers south of Mocimboa da Praia.¹³⁴ On April 7, 2020, insurgents staged an even larger assault on Muidumbe district, 65 kilometers southwest of Mocimboa da Praia, seizing the eponymous district capital and five other towns before retreating.¹³⁵ On May 29, 2020, more than 90 fighters blocked most roads into Macomia, 100 kilometers southwest of Mocimboa da Praia, and seized the town before retreating from a counterattack by security forces.¹³⁶ Furthermore, "Al Shabaab" attempted public outreach in its raids on major urban centers: fighters infamous for indiscriminate attacks on civilians instead began to distribute food and money, and gave speeches denouncing the FRELIMO government for its purported abandonment of the poor and advocating sharia as an alternative to the secularism of the Mozambican state.^v

Both wings of ISCAP have proven their resilience, deadliness, and capacity. By August 2020, ISCAP's ADF wing had not only relocated to new base areas and reestablished its support and recruitment networks,^w but was again mounting attacks in the areas it was expelled from in the November 2019 government offensive.¹³⁷ The "Al Shabaab" wing in Mozambique has dramatically demonstrated its growing capabilities, and the Mozambican government and its

allies have struggled to cope.^x With Russian Wagner mercenaries withdrawing from the country after suffering unexpected casualties in ambushes by "Al Shabaab"^y and South African mercenaries failing to reverse the tide of the insurgency despite their provision of attack helicopters in support of Mozambican security forces,¹³⁸ "Al Shabaab" launched another assault on Mocimboa da Praia in early August 2020. Entering the town on August 5, 2020, it managed to seize it entirely by August 11.¹³⁹ Still holding the town three months later, the seizure not only represents "Al Shabaab's" most significant action thus far, but the most notable territorial conquest of any Islamic State affiliate since the fall of Baghouz 16 months prior.

The fall of 2020 saw significant escalation by both the ADF in Congo and "Al Shabaab" in Mozambique. On October 14, Mozambican militants crossed the Rovuma River, which divides northern Mozambique from southern Tanzania, attacking the town of Kitaya. Killing more than a dozen, looting stores and pharmacies, they ambushed a military patrol sent to counter them, destroying a Chinese-made armored personnel carrier.¹⁴⁰ On October 19 in Congo, the ADF mounted a morning raid on the Kangbaya prison on the outskirts of Beni city,¹⁴¹ attacking two military posts and freeing 1,333 prisoners, including 236 ADF members.¹⁴² On October 31, Mozambican militants again crossed into Tanzania, attacking three towns near the border just days after the presidential election.¹⁴³ All three attacks were quickly claimed in Islamic State propaganda channels—within hours in the case of the Kangbaya prison break¹⁴⁴—indicating deepening coordination in media output. In November 2020, "Al Shabaab" in Mozambique launched another coordinated assault on Muidumbe district, assaulting nine towns simultaneously,¹⁴⁵ displacing tens of thousands,¹⁴⁶ and beheading over 50 people on a soccer pitch, according to state media.¹⁴⁷

It is important to recognize that despite reported attempts at consolidation, ISCAP does not represent a united horizontal structure between its two "wings." While ADF-affiliated Ugandans have been arrested in Mozambique¹⁴⁸ and Islamic State Central designated its Somali branch as a "command center" for both ISCAP affiliates,¹⁴⁹ tangible, material ties between the two groups that could affect either wings' trajectory are limited and speculative. Both the ADF in eastern Congo and "Al Shabaab" in northern Mozambique remain functionally separate organizations, largely insulated from the fortunes of each other just as they are both insulated from the fortunes of Islamic State Central. From what can be deduced from open-source information, both wings' vertical relations with Islamic State Central seemingly remain far more important than horizontal ties between them, and even then, Islamic State Central's severe setbacks in 2019 do not appear to have changed the trajectory of the Islamic State threat in Central Africa.

Having evaluated the state of the official, formal provinces of the Islamic State in Africa, this article now turns to another jihadi

u A 2018 report stated, "It is estimated that the movement now has between about 350 and 1,500 members who are organized in tens of small cells along the coast of Northern Mozambique." "Mozambique's own version of Boko Haram is tightening its deadly grip," Conversation, June 11, 2018.

v "At a public meeting [following the April 7, 2020, seizure of Ntchinga], and speaking in the local language, kimwani, ["Al Shabaab" fighters] said [to local civilians]: 'We are occupying this village to show that the government of the day is unfair. It humiliates the poor to the advantage of bosses. Those who are detained are those of the lower class, so this is not fair. Like it or not, we are defending Islam. We want an Islamist government, not a government of unbelievers.'" Peter Fabricius, "'SA private military contractors' and Mozambican airforce conduct major air attacks on Islamist extremists," Daily Maverick, April 9, 2020.

w According to a U.N. report, "Four ex-combatants said that Baluku Abdurrahman, identified as part of the Ugandan ADF leadership, had returned to Uganda in early November 2019 to organize recruitment and establish a materiel supply network from there in coordination with Amigo. Between November 2019 and January 2020, two of those ex-combatants respectively brought 20 and 30 new recruits from Abdurrahman to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and had been paid \$30 per recruit." "Letter dated 2 June 2020 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council," United Nations Security Council, June 2, 2020.

x "Analyst Emilia Columbo says that Mozambican security forces are not trained in counter-extremist operations and lack the discipline, equipment, and military intelligence to combat the insurgency. And without a more comprehensive approach to dealing with economic and social problems in northern Mozambique, she believes the insurgency will become an entrenched and long-term security problem." Tim Lister, "Jihadi Insurgency in Mozambique Grows in Sophistication and Reach," *CTC Sentinel* 13:10 (2020).

y Wagner mercenaries had deployed to Mozambique in September 2019, but faced mounting casualties by October. Geoffrey York, "Russian mercenaries regroup after setback in Mozambique," *Globe and Mail*, November 29, 2019.

group on the continent that has officially affiliated with the Islamic State Central, but which, to date, has not to date been granted “provincial” status.

“Jund al-Khilafah” in Tunisia

The Islamic State cadre in Tunisia has only ever existed as a formally recognized non-province affiliate of the Islamic State. Despite intermittent attacks by the members of the Tunisian Islamic State group, its visibility on the continent has been in decline, even before the fall of Baghouz and the death of al-Baghdadi, and those misfortunes for Islamic State Central have not therefore altered the trajectory of the group’s fortunes in Tunisia.

In the year that followed the Tunisian 2010-2011 revolution, activists set out on a militant project by procuring weapons and establishing logistics infrastructure, laying the foundations of a protracted low-level insurgency in mountainous regions bordering Algeria¹⁵⁰ and a subsequent terror campaign in urban areas. Cooperation between Ansar al-Sharia (Tunisia) and AQIM resulted in the creation of the Uqba Bin Nafaa Brigade (or KUBN), which became AQIM’s Tunisian branch.¹⁵¹ Increasingly emboldened, violent, and challenging to the state, in 2013, the Islamist-led “Troika”-government ultimately outlawed Ansar al-Sharia¹⁵² and cracked down on the movement, causing many members to go clandestine or become foreign fighters in countries including Iraq, Libya, and Syria.¹⁵³ Though the Ansar al-Sharia (Tunisia) movement was soon rendered quasi-defunct, some members remained within the al-Qa`ida orbit as part of KUBN, albeit underground, with a larger segment finding resonance in the Islamic State’s message. The Ifriqiya lil-Ilam (“Africa Media”) website, which was a Tunisian jihadi online media outlet, publicly announced support for the Islamic State in September 2014,¹⁵⁴ and the pro-Islamic State tendency that had emerged within the otherwise al-Qa`ida-aligned KUBN, eventually evolved into an Islamic State-affiliated offshoot, “Jund Al-Khilafah” (Tunisia) (JAK-T), meaning “Soldiers of the Caliphate.”¹⁵⁵ Though recognized by Islamic State Central, JAK-T has yet to be elevated to provincial status.

In 2015, a series of high-profile terror attacks carried out by Islamic State operatives targeted tourist sites and security personnel: at the Bardo Museum in Tunis; at the tourist resort of Port El Kantaoui, near Sousse;¹⁵⁶ and a suicide bombing on a Presidential Guard bus in downtown Tunis,¹⁵⁷ all targeting Tunisia’s vital tourism industry.¹⁵⁸ Across the border, in the Libyan town of Sabratha, Tunisian Islamic State fighters established an extraterritorial satellite. In Sabratha, they planned and staged the aforementioned 2015 high-profile attacks against tourist sites in Bardo and Sousse, and a 2016 raid in an attempt to seize the Tunisian border town of Ben Guerdane.¹⁵⁹ The multipronged raid on Ben Guerdane aimed at establishing an “emirate” spanning the Tunisia-Libya border. If the assault had succeeded, it would have represented Tunisian Islamic State militants’ “Breaking the Borders” moment, replicating the accomplishment of their brethren on the border between Iraq

and Syria back in June 2014.^z The well-organized venture to stand up a *wilaya* ultimately failed due to the Tunisian security forces counter-attack and lack of local support.^{160aa}

The years 2015-2016 would turn out to be the high-water mark for the Islamic State in Tunisia. Despite its early efforts to stand up a viable Islamic State *wilaya*, Tunisian counterterrorism efforts since 2015—with growing experience and improved counterinsurgency and counterterrorism capabilities and international support for capacity building, including training, equipment, military advisors, and ISR, especially from the United States^{ab}—weakened the Islamic State network threatening Tunisia. This was evidenced by the rise in militant casualties and a downward trend in government forces casualties.¹⁶¹ Nevertheless, Tunisian forces have not completely dislodged JAK-T and its al-Qa`ida counterpart KUBN. While there have been no large-scale Islamic State attacks in Tunisia since the aforementioned 2015-2016 events, the group has diversified its *modi operandi*. Since 2018, its attacks have included an arson attack on a mausoleum,¹⁶² the blowing up of a gas pipeline,¹⁶³ a motorbike-borne raid,¹⁶⁴ assassination,¹⁶⁵ and bank robberies,¹⁶⁶ in addition to armed engagements and the use of IEDs.

Despite its own decline, Islamic State Central has taken note of its fighters’ presence in Tunisia: militants from JAK-T have been featured in Islamic State Central’s media campaign, including a first-ever photo report showing the daily lives of Tunisian Islamic State militants¹⁶⁷ and a beheading video by the semi-official al-Furat Media Foundation.¹⁶⁸ This publicizing was indicative of Islam-

z “Breaking the borders” refers to the symbolic moment when Islamic State commanders Abu Muhammad al-Adnani and Umar al-Shishani, in the month of Ramadan 2014, bulldozed the sand wall in Tell Safouk that marked the border between Iraq and Syria. For more details, see Aaron Y. Zelin, *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia’s Missionaries of Jihad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), pp. 204-205, 233-234; “Al-I’tisam Media presents a new video message from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham: ‘Breaking Of the Border,’” *Jihadology*, June 29, 2014; “New video message from The Islamic State: ‘One Nation – Wilayat al-Furat,’” *Jihadology*, June 2, 2017.

aa Simultaneously, a significant logistics network had been established by Islamic State militants as early as 2014 in southeastern Tunisia, littered with arms caches including advanced and heavy weapons, large amounts of explosives, and ammunition. The militants had reportedly designated an organizational structure to administrate the area. “[Manitah, emir of the organization, loud confessions by the terrorist elements in Ben Guerdane],” *Tuniscope*, March 10, 2016; Akher Khabar, printed issue 189, April 19, 2016.

ab Tunisia’s primary strategic partner in the domain of counterterrorism is the United States, which has sought to sustain Tunisia’s shaky democratic transition by bolstering Tunisia’s military through a multifaceted partnership. This has had a profound impact on Tunisian counterterrorism doctrine, including the development of Tunisia’s drone program, the extensive use of close air support, and the equipment utilized by Tunisian special forces.

A more controversial aspect of this relationship is the presence of “American boots on the ground.” On August 15, 2018, United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), in response to a Freedom of Information Act request by the online news publication Task & Purpose, confirmed that two members of Marine Special Operations Command received valor awards for their heroism during a gun battle with al-Qa`ida militants at an undisclosed location in Northern Africa. Paul Szoldra, “Exclusive: 2 Marines Received Valor Awards For Secret Gunfight Against Al Qaeda In North Africa,” *Task & Purpose*, August 15, 2018. Further research and analysis by author Héni Nsaibia of the Task & Purpose report found that the fierce battle took place at Mount Semmama, in Kasserine, Tunisia, and represented the first documented direct U.S. military engagement and recorded casualty in Tunisia since World War II. Héni Nsaibia, “America Is Quietly Expanding Its War in Tunisia,” *National Interest*, September 18, 2018.

ic State Central's broader media shift since the fall of Baghouz in March 2019 to highlight the activities of some of its affiliates on the African continent to distract from its territorial defeat in Syria.

Conveniently for Islamic State Central, a month prior to the fall of Baghouz, Islamic State militants in Tunisia had stepped up their activities, manifested by a series of IED attacks,¹⁶⁹ and beheadings.¹⁷⁰ The focal point for these attacks, around Mount Orbat in Tunisia's southern Gafsa Governorate, a region that in recent years only had witnessed sporadic militant activities, suggested that Tunisian Islamic State militants were attempting to either expand in or relocate their operations to Tunisia's western mountains. The spate of attacks, albeit sporadic, continued throughout 2019 and 2020. In June 2019, there was a twin-suicide bombing in Tunis targeting security forces,¹⁷¹ another suicide bombing during a security operation took place in July 2019, also in the capital.¹⁷² Most notably, in March 2020, two suicide bombers targeted a police patrol by blowing up their explosives-laden motorcycle in Berges du Lac, near the U.S. embassy in Tunis.¹⁷³ In addition, assailants seemingly inspired by the Islamic State have conducted stabbing attacks targeting security force members,¹⁷⁴ with one such stabbing attack that occurred in July 2020 in Sousse claimed by the Islamic State while the others were attributed either to Islamic State-linked cells or radical Islamists.¹⁷⁵

Despite these recurring attacks, Tunisian state forces have over the years accumulated significant experience and developed capabilities and a more comprehensive approach to degrade the Islamic State network and its al-Qa`ida counterpart.¹⁷⁶ Nevertheless, underwritten by the world's highest proportion of foreign fighters per capita, a large domestic supporter base, and an overcrowded prison system providing a radical breeding ground, these phenomena, in addition to the diverse and dynamic network the Islamic State has developed, will likely serve to replenish militant ranks with the potential to continue to fragilize Tunisia's security.¹⁷⁷ In that vein, Tunisia's "Jund al-Khilafah" remains a moderate threat.

Assessing the Overall State of the Islamic State in Africa

What then has been the overall trajectory of the Islamic State's various official provinces and non-province affiliate groups in Africa from late 2019 to late 2020? In general, the Islamic State's African provinces and non-province affiliates have had heterogeneous fortunes since October 2019, though none appears to have been significantly impacted by the decline-cementing *annus horribilis* that Islamic State Central experienced in 2019. Some Islamic State provinces in Africa remain strong. Notably, ISWAP's Lake Chad wing sustained its attack tempo, while in Islamic State *wilayat* in Libya, Sinai, and Somalia and the Islamic State non-province affiliate in Tunisia, patterns of violence have remained generally intact since the setbacks for Islamic State Central in 2019; the groups remain active but contained. Elsewhere, both the Mozambican and Congolese wings of ISCAP have increased the tempo of their attacks—with the Mozambican wing's August 2020 capture of a major port town constituting the Islamic State's most significant military victory since the loss of its territorial caliphate—while ISWAP's relatively newly-incorporated ISGS wing has increased its lethality and frequency of its attacks. For its part, the Islamic State's Algerian province remains essentially defunct, as had been the case for years. In sum then, Islamic State Central's loss of its last territorial holding and its leader in 2019 appears to have had little

negative effect on the vitality of its African branches, none of which have seen appreciable declines in activity, and a few of which have actually seen increased activity.

Just what explains this phenomenon? In the main—and as the authors argue in their forthcoming book, *The Islamic State in Africa: Emergence, Evolution, and Future of the Next Jihadist Battlefield*—the Islamic State's African provinces and non-province affiliate groups, while showing evidence of interaction with it and occasional assistance from it, developed mostly autonomously from the Islamic State Central. Thus, upon the latter's substantial losses in 2019—and Islamic State Core's broader, more gradual decline in the years prior—the affiliates' own trajectories were little impacted. Nevertheless, the authors seek to emphasize that despite the limited known ties between the Islamic State Central and its African affiliates, these groups' status as affiliates has nevertheless had implications for their evolution.

For one, despite the fact that Islamic State Central was rarely profoundly involved in its African provinces' affairs, in several instances, affiliates received assistance and direction from Islamic State Central. For instance, in relation to Libya in 2014, Islamic State Central commanders directed Libyans in Iraq and Syria to return home,¹⁷⁸ sent envoys to Libya,¹⁷⁹ and publicized its Libyan provinces' actions (including its atrocities) widely via its media outlets.¹⁸⁰ In Somalia, Puntland security officials report that Islamic State Central has provided members of its branch there with weapons, funding, uniforms, and trainers.¹⁸¹ Islamic State Central is believed to have helped stand up then-"Boko Haram's" media wing,¹⁸² *al-Urwah al-Wuthqa* (or the "Indissoluble Link"^{ac}) in 2015; approved the ISWAP leadership transition from Shekau to al-Barnawi in 2016;¹⁸³ communicated directly with members of ISWAP in 2018;¹⁸⁴ and served to fold ISGS into ISWAP (at least on paper) in 2019.¹⁸⁵ When it comes to advising ISWAP on how it should interact with others in its areas of operation, a report from the International Crisis Group suggests that Islamic State Central has worked to push for reconciliation between ISWAP and Shekau's JAS,¹⁸⁶ while according to some analysts Islamic State Central has seemingly encouraged the ISGS wing of ISWAP into conflict with local al-Qa`ida groups.¹⁸⁷

Islamic State Central's impact on its affiliates is felt in other ways. As concerns media, it not only requires the centralization of media releases by its African media production¹⁸⁸ and dissemination,¹⁸⁹ but its influence has been seen in the actual production of media of African Islamic State affiliates, to include significantly improved production values compared to pre-Islamic State pledge days, the inclusion of new iconography,¹⁹⁰ and the inclusion of subtitled translations into other regional languages.^{ad} Furthermore, Islamic State Central makes decisions around if and when insurgent groups do and do not attain provincial status at all (for example, it excluded Tunisia from *wilaya* status^{ae} and delayed significantly the

ac A noted Islamic scholar, Yusuf Ali, called it "the most trusted handhold." Another calls it the "firmest handle," "the most trustworthy hand-hold," "the most firm handhold." Author communication, Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, December 2019.

ad Boko Haram began to include subtitles in early 2015, around the same time it began to interact with the Islamic State. "Is Islamic State Shaping Boko Haram Media?" BBC, March 4, 2015.

ae As of publication of this article in November 2020, Islamic State Central has yet to elevate its Tunisian fighters to provincial status.

rise of the provincial status of Somalia^{af}); determining the structures of its provinces (by creating mergers of varying groups as it has done in Libya,^{ag} with regard to ISWAP, and with regard to ISCAP); and determining patterns of authority of its provinces (for instance, placing support networks in East Africa under the authority of its Somali affiliate^{ai}). In sum, these interactions between the central node and the affiliates, sparse though they may be, had a meaningful impact, which should not be overlooked.

Second, even though most Islamic State provinces in Africa have not shown evidence of profound direct material support from Islamic State Central, their mere affiliation with the group—serving as Islamic State-branded entities—has tangible impacts on the way in which these groups ‘move about in the world.’ As an identity marker (however potentially hollow in its practical connective forms), to be an “Islamic State” province in Africa informs patterns of groups’ local fighter recruitment;^{ah} foreign fighter recruitment;^{ai} training;^{aj} fundraising;^{aj} tactics;^{ak} and attempts at governance.^{aj} In addition to these impacts on the internal composition and tactics of the groups, the Islamic State brand impacts patterns of local ethnic relations;^{aj} international relations;^{aj} counterterrorism pressure against the groups,^{aj} and potential rivalries and alliances with other jihadi groups in the area of operation.^{aj} While holding onto the Islamic State brand has brought few known material benefits from Islamic State Central itself, as a marker of identity, it has had an impact on how groups have evolved after fusing their identity with the Islamic State, as is further discussed in the authors’ forthcoming book.

Third, being an Islamic State province or non-province affiliate in Africa means that these entities are part of a wider network of *other* African provinces and non-province affiliates, which can—

af Despite evidence of interaction between Islamic State Somalia and Islamic State Central since 2015, the elevation to Islamic State province only occurred three years later.

ag Beginning in December 2018, Islamic State Central began referring to simply one “Wilayah Libya.” Al-Naba #147, released December 13, 2018.

ah For instance, as the Islamic State’s global brand began to rise, the incipient Islamic State in Libya was able to attract members away from Ansar al-Sharia in Libya; in Algeria, members defected from AQIM; in Egypt, members defected from ABM; in Tunisia, members defected from KUBN, and in Somalia, members defected from al-Shabaab.

ai In Libya, the emergence of the Islamic State coincided with an influx of foreign fighters from around Africa and beyond. See Aaron Zelin, “The Others: Foreign Fighters in Libya,” *Washington Institute Policy Notes* 45, January 2018.

aj For example, the Islamic State Central is believed to have sent training assistance to Somalia in 2016. Harun Maruf, “Intelligence Official: Islamic State Growing in Somalia,” *Voice of America*, May 5, 2016.

ak For example, it was only in early 2015, during its initial interactions with the Islamic State Central, that ISWAP began to show evidence of its use of beheading, a tactic that also came to be used by Islamic State in Somalia, Islamic State in Libya, and Islamic State Central Africa Province. Moreover, ISWAP’s use of up-armored suicide vehicle borne IEDS in 2017, also used by Islamic State Central, is also suggestive of such tactical knowledge transfer. Jacob Zenn, “The Islamic State’s Provinces on the Peripheries: Juxtaposing the Pledges from Boko Haram in Nigeria and Abu Sayyaf and Maute Group in the Philippines,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13:1 (2019).

and have—offered assistance in various forms to one another, especially after Islamic State Central’s decline. For instance, as early as May 2016, U.S. officials warned that ISWAP personnel under Shekau had journeyed to Libya to learn skills and receive logistical and material from Islamic State members there.^{aj} Likewise, in January 2020, U.N. member states told U.N. monitors that the Islamic State’s Somalia province had been “designated the command center” for establishing a “triad” organization in eastern, central, and southern Africa, facilitating financial transfers and “consolidating decision-making and operational command centres.”^{aj}

Fourth, these groups’ existence as official Islamic State entities has the potential to show other individual militants and militant groups the benefits (and pitfalls) of affiliation with the Islamic State. Since its global emergence, a universe of unofficial Islamic State individual sympathizers and unofficial ‘cells’ around the continent have been inspired to undertake attacks in the name of the Islamic State, though not directed by it. Notable Islamic State-inspired attacks and plots over the past five years on the continent include two Islamic State-inspired attacks in Kenya in 2016, an Islamic State-inspired attack in Morocco in 2018,^{aj} and a plot in South Africa in 2016,^{aj} while attempts by the Islamic State to build some level of popularity in Ethiopia through Amharic-language propaganda^{aj} were followed by arrests of Islamic State sympathizers who had entered the country from Somalia.^{aj}

Notwithstanding the above points, the authors caution vigorously against the notion that African Islamic State affiliates should be understood *exclusively*, or even *primarily*, through the lens of their affiliations with Islamic State Central. Indeed, as the authors further explore and emphasize in their upcoming book, these violent groups—despite their sparse but still meaningful connections with Islamic State Central—are all primarily influenced by their local environments: all have parochial, specific, non-generalizable goals and ideologies, all of which require actors seeking to combat their violence to generate group-specific strategies that do not simply look at their Islamic State affiliation as their only meaningful attribute. Nor, as Barak Mendelsohn has cautioned, do the authors suggest that simply because of their affiliation as entities of the Islamic State, that they are necessarily more capable or dangerous than non-affiliated entities.^{aj}

In sum, precisely because the decline of the Islamic State Central in 2019 has had little impact on each of these African entities’ individual operational trajectories, their abilities to perpetrate violence against the citizens and states in which they operate—ranging in severity depending on location—appears likely to remain unabated for the time being. While not existentially threatening to the states in which they exist, nor a profound threat to the United States, its allies, and the international community more broadly, the Islamic State’s African provinces’ threats relate to their proven capabilities to destabilize the communities in which they exist, exacerbating the physical and economic insecurity of citizens and posing new, costly, and often insurmountable challenges to partner governments fighting them. To the extent that the Islamic State’s African provinces continue to present these enduring challenges, they are now, more than ever, left to do so of their own devices. **CTC**

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