



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

# CTCSENTINEL

OBJECTIVE · RELEVANT · RIGOROUS | FEBRUARY 2021 · VOLUME 14, ISSUE 2



FEATURE ARTICLE

## Al-Qa`ida's Soon-To-Be Leader?

A profile of Saif al-`Adl

ALI SOUFAN

FEATURE ANALYSIS

## The Boogaloo Movement

MATTHEW KRINER AND JON LEWIS

# Contents

---

## FEATURE ARTICLE

---

- 1 Al-Qa`ida's Soon-To-Be Third Emir? A Profile of Saif al-`Adl**  
ALI SOUFAN
- 

## FEATURE ANALYSIS

---

- 22 The Evolution of the Boogaloo Movement**  
MATTHEW KRINER AND JON LEWIS
- 

## ANALYSIS

---

- 33 The Network of the November 2020 Vienna Attacker and the Jihadi Threat to Austria**  
JOHANNES SAAL AND FELIX LIPPE
- 
- 44 Extremism and Terrorism Trends in Pakistan: Changing Dynamics and New Challenges**  
HASSAN ABBAS
- 

### FROM THE EDITOR

In this month's feature article, Ali Soufan provides a comprehensive profile of Saif al-`Adl, an Egyptian charter al-Qa`ida member who could soon become the group's third emir. Soufan writes that "with the confirmed deaths of Hamza bin Ladin and Abu Muhammad al-Masri, as well as the reported (but as yet unconfirmed) demise of al-Qa`ida's second emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the likely next in line to inherit the leadership is ... Saif al-`Adl. Like the late Abu Muhammad, Saif lives in Iran and is apparently restricted from leaving the country. Little is known about his current movements or activities. Nevertheless, Saif's revered status within the movement, as well as his deep experience as a military, intelligence, and security leader and a terrorist planner, make him a potentially dangerous emir."

In this month's feature analysis, Matthew Kriner and Jon Lewis assess that the Boogaloo movement "has quickly evolved into a significant domestic violent extremist threat" with "an accelerationist faction within Boogaloo" seeking to "instigate decentralized insurrectionary violence." They write that the movement "is best conceptualized as a decentralized, anti-authority movement composed of a diverse range of actors," including white supremacists, neo-Nazis, militia movement members, accelerationists, and ultra-libertarians, who are mobilized in part by the "belief that they are following in the footsteps of the United States' founders and participating in a revolution against tyranny."

Johannes Saal and Felix Lippe provide a case study of the November 2020 Vienna terrorist attack. They write that "the Vienna attacker, Kujtim Fejzulaj, grew up in the city he attacked and had longstanding connections within the jihadi extremist milieu in Austria as well as jihadi contacts in other European countries and further afield. His two failed attempts to join the Islamic State overseas and the failure of efforts to deradicalize him after he was convicted for seeking to join the group underline the threat that can be posed by failed jihadi travelers and terrorist convicts after their release, as well as the difficulties in rehabilitating jihadi prisoners."

Hassan Abbas writes that "even as Pakistan has made progress in reducing the threat from terrorist sanctuaries in the Pakistan-Afghanistan tribal areas, an increased crime-terror nexus in urban centers and a new terrorist recruitment drive by Islamic State Khorasan province, or ISK, in Baluchistan has raised alarms. Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is trying to stage a comeback, and sectarianism is also rising, creating a congenial environment for terrorist and extremist organizations, including some Kashmir-focused groups that have evaded counterterrorism scrutiny."

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

---

## CTCSENTINEL

*Editor in Chief*

Paul Cruickshank

*Managing Editor*

Kristina Hummel

---

### EDITORIAL BOARD

Colonel Suzanne Nielsen, Ph.D.

*Department Head*

*Dept. of Social Sciences (West Point)*

Lieutenant Colonel Sean Morrow

*Director, CTC*

Brian Dodwell

*Executive Director, CTC*

Don Rassler

*Director of Strategic Initiatives, CTC*

---

### CONTACT

Combating Terrorism Center

U.S. Military Academy

607 Cullum Road, Lincoln Hall

West Point, NY 10996

Phone: (845) 938-8495

Email: [sentinel@westpoint.edu](mailto:sentinel@westpoint.edu)

Web: [www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/)

---

### SUBMISSIONS

The CTC *Sentinel* welcomes submissions.

Contact us at [sentinel@westpoint.edu](mailto:sentinel@westpoint.edu).

---

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

*Cover: Saif al-`Adl in Afghanistan before 9/11. (Source: screen capture from a video exhibit available on the website of the Department of Defense's Office of Military Commissions)*

# Al-Qa`ida's Soon-To-Be Third Emir? A Profile of Saif al-`Adl

By Ali Soufan

---

**With the confirmed deaths of Hamza bin Ladin and Abu Muhammad al-Masri, as well as the reported (but as yet unconfirmed) demise of al-Qa`ida's second emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the likely next in line to inherit the leadership is an Egyptian who goes by the *nom de guerre* Saif al-`Adl. Like the late Abu Muhammad, Saif lives in Iran and is apparently restricted from leaving the country. Little is known about his current movements or activities. Nevertheless, Saif's revered status within the movement, as well as his deep experience as a military, intelligence, and security leader and a terrorist planner, make him a potentially dangerous emir.**

---

**B**y the time he died in May 2011, Usama bin Ladin had already identified his successor. Under the terms of his organization's 2001 merger with Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), the former leader of EIJ Ayman al-Zawahiri was to be the next emir of al-Qa`ida. But before al-Zawahiri could formally take office, he needed pledges of allegiance (*bayat*) from the members of its governing council. Al-Zawahiri did not collect those pledges himself; to finish the job, the organization needed someone whose credentials and loyalty were unimpeachable. It turned to a man who had been there since the very beginning, and who had been a leading figure almost as long: the Egyptian former commando named Saif al-`Adl.<sup>1</sup>

Since 2002 or 2003, Saif had been based in Iran. While there, his status shifted periodically. Sometimes he was detained in prison, sometimes under varying forms of house arrest.<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of 2010, he had been allowed to travel back to Waziristan in northern Pakistan, where al-Qa`ida then had its hub.<sup>3</sup> In May 2011, Saif enjoyed enough liberty to act as interim leader of al-Qa`ida, the

---

*Ali Soufan is the chief executive officer of the Soufan Group. As an FBI special agent, he served on the frontline against al-Qa`ida and became known as a top counterterrorism operative and interrogator. His most recent book, Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State, was published in 2017. He is the author of several feature articles for CTC Sentinel, including the authoritative profile of deceased IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. Twitter: @Ali\_H\_Soufan*

*Editor's note: This article is adapted from Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State. Copyright (c) 2017 by Ali Soufan. Used with permission of the publisher, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. All rights reserved.*

© 2021 Ali Soufan

organization to which he had given the past 22 years of his life.<sup>4</sup>

Many in al-Qa`ida probably wished his appointment could be made permanent; for while Saif and al-Zawahiri were both Egyptians, al-Qa`ida's membership saw them in very different lights. As this article will show, Saif was a loyal member, a military and intelligence leader who had helped transform al-Qa`ida from a loose band of former anti-Soviet militiamen into the world's most deadly terrorist organization. Al-Zawahiri, by contrast, was an interloper, the failed leader of a group that, by the time it merged with al-Qa`ida, had only around 10 members left.<sup>5</sup> At the time, Saif himself had opposed the merger. But he knew bin Ladin's wishes as to the succession, and after bin Ladin's death, he carried them out with the same efficiency and single-mindedness that characterized everything he did. Within six weeks, he had secured pledges of *bay`a* from all but one of the members of al-Qa`ida's governing Shura council.<sup>6</sup> (Intriguingly, the sole holdout was Saif's former private secretary Harun Fazul—then the leader of al-Qa`ida in East Africa—who had often derided al-Zawahiri in the past.<sup>7</sup> Harun was killed around the same time al-Zawahiri became emir, and some reports suggested that he was lured to his death by al-Qa`ida's Somali affiliate, al-Shabaab—possibly in retaliation for his failure to give *bay`a* to the new leader.<sup>8</sup>) His job done, Saif al-`Adl again faded into the background. Indeed, by the fall of 2011, Saif had apparently returned to captivity in Iran.<sup>9</sup>

Saif's relatively brief moment in the spotlight reveals much about his character. Even after bin Ladin's death—and on a subject on which he vehemently disagreed with the al-Qa`ida leader when he was alive—Saif showed unswerving loyalty to bin Ladin. When he acts, he does so with ruthless efficiency. Above all, he is a pragmatist—a man who would have known that despite the hateful necessity of living under a Shi`a government anathema to Sunni al-Qa`ida, his best chance of survival, and therefore of continued effectiveness in the jihad, lay in a return to Iran.

With the death in Tehran of the senior al-Qa`ida commander Abu Muhammad al-Masri<sup>10</sup> and the possible death in Pakistan last fall of the group's overall emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri,<sup>11</sup> al-Qa`ida's bench of leaders whose involvement goes back to its founding is looking somewhat threadbare. But one big name remains. When U.S. forces took Kandahar in late 2001, they captured thousands of documents detailing the history, structure, and membership of al-Qa`ida, including a list of the organization's 170 charter members. On that list, Usama bin Ladin is number one. Saif al-`Adl is number eight.<sup>12</sup>

As this profile will show, Saif disagreed with bin Ladin on more than one occasion, and was usually unafraid to let his feelings be known. Nevertheless, Saif's loyalty to his master was unswerving. Unlike many of the other high-ranking Egyptians in the organization—including al-Zawahiri—Saif never owed allegiance to any other group. For years, as al-Qa`ida moved from Afghanistan to East Africa and back, he was a watchman at bin Ladin's side,

## “In an organization infamous for its pitiless wholesale destruction of human lives, Saif stands out for his lack of remorse.”

constantly looking out for trouble, and frequently finding it.<sup>13</sup> He was a trusted emissary to the rogue states and armed groups al-Qa`ida courted, as well as to the places where it sought to expand its operations, from Yemen to Somalia to Iran. Bin Ladin, who for much of his adult life was pursued by assassins of many lands and allegiances, trusted Saif more than almost anyone else. By the eve of September 11, 2001, Saif was effectively fourth in command, behind only bin Ladin, al-Zawahiri, and the formidable military chieftain Abu Hafis al-Masri. Later, bin Ladin seems to have revised the order of precedence, inserting Abu Muhammad al-Masri and Abu al-Khair al-Masri (henceforth in this article referred to as Abu Khair, one of al-Zawahiri's ELJ shura council members) ahead of Saif.<sup>14</sup> But either way, the only two on the list left alive are al-Zawahiri and Saif; and al-Zawahiri may already have died.

Saif is one of the most experienced professional soldiers in the worldwide jihadi movement, and his body bears the scars of battle: a wound under his right eye from a bursting illumination shell; a scar on his right hand; an arm injury from his time fighting the United States and its allies in Somalia.<sup>15</sup> But he is no simple-minded thug. On the contrary, he is said to be “highly educated [with] good English.”<sup>16</sup> Former colleagues describe him as a “shrewd diplomat” with a poker face.<sup>17</sup> Yet his temper, too, has become notorious. Possessed of a “caustic tongue,” he is apt to threaten violence against anyone who displeases him, and is known to meet disloyalty with swift and ruthless force.<sup>18</sup> Toward underlings he can be contemptuous, even brutal, in the heat of the moment.<sup>19</sup> But he has also been known as a font of avuncular advice.<sup>20</sup> In happier times, he showed a talent for soccer and a penchant for practical jokes.<sup>21</sup>

Saif's crimes, however, are deadly serious. The United States has placed a \$5 million bounty on his head (later increased to \$10 million) for his role in the murder of 224 people in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in the East Africa embassy bombings of August 1998.<sup>22</sup> In an organization infamous for its pitiless wholesale destruction of human lives, Saif stands out for his lack of remorse, even at times when other high-ranking terrorists have expressed doubt about the rightness of their deeds.<sup>23</sup> One operative said that Saif was difficult to work with because he does not trust anyone.<sup>24</sup>

Little is known for certain about him. Like the callow youth Pasha in Boris Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago*, who uses the chaos of revolution to reimagine himself as the cruel Soviet commissar Strelnikov, Saif al-`Adl has taken extraordinary steps to obfuscate the particulars of his apparently rather ordinary life before al-Qa`ida. Like Strelnikov—which translates loosely as “The Gunman”—Saif al-`Adl is not his real name but a melodramatic *nom de guerre*: “Sword of Justice.” As seen in the next section, there is evidence that Saif faked his own death while still in his 20s, and he may have stolen the identity of an entirely different man.

What follows is an attempt to trace his most likely path and, in so doing, cast new light on the origins of al-Qa`ida and its possible

future (or even present) emir. As the remainder of this article will show, Saif's life story reads like a jihadi picaresque. Having faked his own death at a young age, for years he successfully obfuscated the details of his early life, convincing even Western intelligence agencies that he was a completely different man. In the 1980s, he joined the fight against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and became a charter member of al-Qa`ida. He went on to play a central role in audacious attacks from the “Black Hawk Down” incident in Somalia to the bombings of U.S. embassies in East Africa and the suicide attack on the destroyer the USS Cole. He mentored the Jordanian terrorist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, later the founder of the organization that became the Islamic State. After 9/11, Saif went into hiding in Iran and, despite capture and long periods of imprisonment by the Iranian authorities, continues to play a leading role in al-Qa`ida today.

### Mistaken Identity

For years, some analysts believed that Saif al-`Adl was an Egyptian former special forces colonel named Mohammed Ibrahim Makkawi; indeed, the FBI still lists that name as one of Saif's aliases.<sup>25</sup> The facts seemed to fit this hypothesis. Like Saif, Makkawi hails from Egypt's Nile Delta. Both men served in their country's armed forces, both went on to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan in the late 1980s, and both espoused salafi-jihadi views. But they are not the same person.

On February 29, 2012, Colonel Mohammed Makkawi set foot on Egyptian soil for the first time in a quarter century.<sup>26</sup> For most, if not all, of that time, in light of the suspicions of terrorism swirling around him, Makkawi had been *persona non grata* in his native country. But the fall of Mubarak and the impending rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood, a worldwide Islamist movement founded in Egypt, seemed to open the door for the return of men like Makkawi, whom the Mubarak regime had previously proscribed for their extreme religious opinions. Shortly after his arrival at Cairo International Airport, however, Egyptian security forces pounced. State media reported that the authorities had, at last, apprehended the infamous al-Qa`ida terrorist Saif al-`Adl.<sup>27</sup>

Within hours, however, they had retracted the story. Indeed, anyone who has met both men, or even compared their pictures, would know this instantly. While Makkawi is stocky and dark-skinned, the known images of Saif show him to be slim and of light complexion. There is, moreover, an age difference between the two men of around a decade, meaning that Makkawi and Saif come from two different generations of jihadis.

Makkawi was born in the early 1950s. He served in the Egyptian military during the 1973 Yom Kippur War with Israel, became a member of a specialist anti-terrorism unit within the Egyptian armed forces, and eventually rose to the rank of colonel. In 1987, Makkawi was briefly detained by the Egyptian regime, which suspected him of involvement in a plot to assassinate a government minister and a newspaper editor initiated by an underground group calling itself (in Arabic) “Salvation from Hell.” Upon his release, disgusted at his treatment by the Egyptian government, Makkawi departed for Afghanistan to fight the Russians as one of thousands of “Arab Afghans” who began pouring into the country following the Soviet invasion in late 1979. Leaving his old life behind, Makkawi adopted a *nom de guerre*—not Saif al-`Adl but Abu al-Munther.

As a seasoned military officer, however, Makkawi had little respect for the ragtag freshman fighters around him, regarding



*Saif al-`Adl (FBI)*

them as reckless, incompetent, a “generation of amateurs” fighting the “war of the goats,” hot not for victory but for slaughter. Noman Benotman, a former senior figure in the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, who has met both Makkawi and Saif, puts it succinctly: “Makkawi hates al-Qaeda.”<sup>28</sup> Many of the organization’s operatives reciprocate his dislike, describing Makkawi as uppity, arrogant, “short fused,” “unpredictable,” even “dangerously unbalanced.”<sup>29</sup> (Few in al-Qa`ida would dare say such things about the legendary Saif al-`Adl.) After the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan, Makkawi took refuge in Islamabad, Pakistan, where he attempted to lead a normal life, despite having attracted both the enmity of al-Qa`ida and the suspicion of domestic and foreign intelligence. Saif al-`Adl, by contrast, drawn to a life of permanent jihad, went on looking for Goliaths to slay.

Of the real Saif al-`Adl, only three images are known to exist. They show a slender-faced man with hooded almond eyes and a proud, unblinking stare—his gaze sparkling, as his future father-in-law was to write, with intelligence and cunning.<sup>30</sup> His real name is Mohammed Salahuddin Zeidan.<sup>31</sup> He was born in Shibin al-Kawm, a town about 40 miles northwest of downtown Cairo, in the early 1960s. At that time, Egyptian premier Gamal Abdel Nasser was one of the most respected leaders in the Arab world, pressing ahead with his pan-Arab socialist agenda of nationalizing Western-dominated industries, backing major construction projects from the Helwan Steelworks in the north to the Aswan Dam in the south, and, for a brief time, pursuing political and economic union with Syria and North Yemen. But Nasser’s utopian schemes were doomed to come crashing down in the humiliation of the 1967 Six-Day War, in which Israel annihilated the bulk of Nasser’s air force before Egypt

could fire a shot. All over the country, terrorist cells began gaining strength, including one that had formed around a teenaged jihadi and future medical student, Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>32</sup> Soon, a number of these cells, including the one led by al-Zawahiri, would coalesce to form a new organization called Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ).

But Saif al-`Adl would not join EIJ. The sheikh of the Farjul Islam mosque, where the young Mohammed Zeidan attended prayers and lectures, recalls a quiet, studious, rather introverted young man.<sup>33</sup> According to his older brother Hassan, Saif enjoyed good relations with all his neighbors, including even Coptic Christians, a minority who periodically became a favorite target of hardline Islamists.<sup>34</sup> After graduating from high school, he earned a bachelor’s degree in business from a local university, then enlisted with the Egyptian army reserve, where he specialized in parachuting and (judging by the expertise he was to show later in al-Qa`ida’s training camps) learned a fair amount about explosives and intelligence.<sup>35</sup>

In the roiling political climate of Egypt in the 1970s and 1980s, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to avoid at least some exposure to hardline propaganda—especially on campus and in the armed forces, two institutions heavily infiltrated by Islamists.<sup>36</sup> During Saif’s formative years, moreover, events were taking place that inflamed outrage across the Arab world. He was in his teens when Nasser’s successor, President Anwar Sadat, signed the Camp David accords with Israel, and not much older when Sadat was assassinated by an offshoot of EIJ. And yet, while still in his home country, Saif had no known connections with any extremist groups. As an Egyptian intelligence operative was to put it, he “was never part of any jihad organization ... until he moved to Afghanistan and found his calling.”<sup>37</sup>

Saif had always told his family that he intended to leave Egypt once his military service was over. Like many young Egyptians of his generation, faced with dim economic prospects at home, he planned to start a new life across the Red Sea in the booming Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In 1987, his brother drove him to Cairo airport to board a flight to Mecca, where Saif intended to complete a minor pilgrimage (i.e., one of lesser importance than the full Hajj) before looking for work. It would be the last time any member of his family would see him. A year later, a stranger arrived on his brother’s doorstep, carrying a jacket that Hassan recognized as having belonged to Saif. The stranger told Hassan that Saif had indeed found work in Saudi Arabia, as a salesman, but had been killed in a car crash. His distraught family petitioned the Saudi authorities to learn more details of how Saif had died, but to no avail. Consumed by grief, his mother’s health declined, and she suffered a stroke from which she eventually died. In the absence of any contact, the Family Court of Shibin al-Kawm declared Saif legally dead.<sup>38</sup>

In a way, it was true. The person Mohammed Salahuddin Zeidan had been—the studious youth, the loyal soldier, the decent citizen in a land increasingly gripped by violence—had indeed passed away. But Saif al-`Adl was very much alive.

### Joining the Jihad

Saif al-`Adl’s first encounter with bin Ladin may have taken place during one of the sheikh’s frequent recruiting trips back to Saudi Arabia; but it is equally possible that Saif never intended to stay in Saudi Arabia at all, for it was widely known across the Arab world that the Kingdom was offering subsidized flights to Afghanistan for young men willing to participate in the jihad against the Soviets.

Either way, Saif was soon ensconced in the Afghan jihad, making effective use of his military background. Desperate to inflict on the Soviet Union a defeat comparable to that suffered by the United States in Vietnam a decade before, America had recently begun supplying the mujahideen with hundreds of shoulder-mounted FIM-92 Stinger missiles, and one of Saif's first jobs in Afghanistan was to instruct his fellow fighters in the use of these weapons to bring down Russian Hind helicopter gunships.<sup>39</sup> Years later, and thousands of miles away, he would train other fighters to use widely available conventional weapons against American Black Hawks in Mogadishu, Somalia, but that was in a future barely conceivable through the fevered late-Cold War fog of the mid-1980s.

In 1988, facing a brutal war of attrition with no end in sight, the Soviets signed peace accords and began to withdraw from Afghanistan, and the minds of the Arab mujahideen turned to what they would do after the war was over. Some would return home to their families, but for others, this was unthinkable. Almost all the Egyptians fell into this category; they could not go home, even if they wanted to, because they would be arrested on sight by the Mubarak regime. For these men, jihad became not a single project but a way of life. They poured disdain on those who, in their eyes, came to the war merely for adventure or recreation—"tourism jihad," as they scornfully called it.<sup>40</sup>

By the late summer of 1988, this hard core of jihadis had coalesced to form a new grouping called al-Qa`ida al-Askaria—the Military Base. They described themselves as "an organized Islamic faction" dedicated to "lift[ing] the word of God, to make His religion victorious."<sup>41</sup> Tourist jihadis would not be welcome in this new organization; only those whose presence in the theater of war was permanent would be eligible for membership.<sup>42</sup>

Al-Qa`ida's first major battle would not go well. After the last Soviet soldier left Afghanistan in February 1989, bin Ladin and his fellow Arab commanders, lifted high on a wave of inflated morale, led the mujahideen in a massed assault on the city of Jalalabad.<sup>43</sup> There, they took on the forces of the Marxist Najibullah regime, still backed by Russian military planning and scud missiles. Saif was among those who fought, and he was already carefully shunning the limelight; unlike many of his more publicity-hungry comrades, he refused to let himself be photographed by journalists on the scene.<sup>44</sup> The Battle of Jalalabad was an unmitigated disaster for the mujahideen. Three thousand fighters died—fully one-fifth of the force that had attacked the city. Following this ignominious episode, bin Ladin slunk off back home to Saudi Arabia, where he would remain for almost two years.

While bin Ladin licked his wounds in his home city of Jeddah, Saif progressed up the hierarchy. His intelligence, military background, and authoritative bearing impressed his superiors, and he quickly rose to be emir of the Faruq training camp in Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup> At Faruq and its sister facilities—where the extensive course offerings included instruction in assassination and kidnapping—Saif supervised training in explosives, intelligence gathering, and counterintelligence.<sup>46</sup>

Saif's students in this period included Ramzi Yousef, who would go on to bomb the World Trade Center in 1993;<sup>47</sup> Harun Fazul, later a leader of the cell that would kill scores of people at the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam;<sup>48</sup> and L'Houssaine Kertchou, who would turn state's witness in the embassy bombings trial.<sup>49</sup> With his sharp military mind, Saif helped transform the quality of training in the camps<sup>50</sup> and establish standard operating

**“One of Saif’s first jobs in Afghanistan was to instruct his fellow fighters in the use of ... weapons to bring down Russian Hind helicopter gunships. Years later, and thousands of miles away, he would train other fighters to use widely available conventional weapons against American Black Hawks in Mogadishu, Somalia.”**

procedures on everything from battle tactics to archiving.<sup>51</sup> By 1991, he had risen into al-Qa`ida's "second tier" leadership, a group subordinate only to bin Ladin and his three closest associates.<sup>52</sup> Soon, he would join them at the very top.

On graduation day in August 1990, Saif and his students planned to test their skills with explosives by staging a mock ambush.<sup>53</sup> They singled out a truck pulling into the Khaldan camp and stealthily surrounded it, exploding a bomb to bring a tree down in front of the vehicle and firing their weapons as they attacked. Two Afghans who had been riding on the flatbed took shelter underneath the chassis. But the front passenger, a distinguished-looking Egyptian in his mid-40s, stepped calmly out of the vehicle and surveyed the scene. The fighters recognized him at once as Mustafa Hamid, a legendary figure among the Arab Afghans also known by his *kunya*, Abu Walid al-Masri. Hamid had been one of the first Arabs to travel to Afghanistan, and he had become their principal ideologue and chronicler. Saif al-`Adl approached Hamid, laughing heartily at the merry hell he and his men had succeeded in raising and gloating over the discomfiture of the two Afghans, who emerged from under the vehicle shaken and dripping with mud. Hamid, seeing Saif for the first time, noted his "narrow Asian eyes showing intelligence and cunning" and his "skinny strong body ... full of energy." Over tea, Hamid and Saif discussed the news from Saudi Arabia, where U.S. forces had just arrived to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. It was the start of an enduring friendship. A year and a half later, Saif would become Hamid's son-in-law when he married his then 15-year-old daughter, Asma. With that, his place at the heart of the jihadi movement was assured.

### Africa

"The war in Afghanistan is winding down," Saif told a Palestinian jihadi around the end of 1992. "We are going to move the jihad to other parts of the world."<sup>54</sup> In fact, the war in Afghanistan was not coming to an end but morphing from a struggle against communist rule into a civil war between rival armed factions. There was little upside for al-Qa`ida in battling fellow mujahideen. Moreover, the crushing defeat at Jalalabad, and bin Ladin's subsequent retreat to Saudi Arabia, had severely damaged al-Qa`ida's morale and the effectiveness of its recruitment efforts.<sup>55</sup> In any event, most observers had already given up hope that Afghanistan could emerge from the chaos into which it was quickly descending as anything resembling al-Qa`ida's idea of the ideal Islamic state.<sup>56</sup> But there was another regime in the world that did approach that standard: the Sudanese

National Islamic Front (NIF). Almost since the moment it came to power in a 1989 coup d'état, the NIF had been trying to persuade bin Ladin to move his organization to Sudan.<sup>57</sup> Bin Ladin sent his own emissaries to Sudan. They told him al-Qa`ida and the NIF shared common goals. "What you are trying to do," these envoys assured bin Ladin, "it is Sudan!"<sup>58</sup>

During the winter of 1991-1992, bin Ladin took the Sudanese up on their offer. Saif helped him pack up al-Qa`ida's operations and move them to Khartoum. There, Saif reestablished the training camps and continued to instruct recruits in the use of explosives.<sup>59</sup> Saif's own career in al-Qa`ida continued to blossom; even while he was still in Afghanistan, colleagues were describing him as "an important al-Qaeda leader."<sup>60</sup> Before long, he had become a member of the organization's central military committee.<sup>61</sup>

Soon, Saif would be honing his deadly skills in an unlikely place: a Hezbollah training camp in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. The sectarian divide between Sunni al-Qa`ida and Shi`a Hezbollah was a very real one for both sides; but it was one that al-Qa`ida's leadership was willing to overlook in the name of battling their common enemy, the United States of America. At least since the start of the Gulf War, bin Ladin had been spoiling for a fight with the "Great Satan." Behind closed doors, he had even begun to suggest that al-Qa`ida should make common cause not only with a non-state Shi`a group like Hezbollah but even with their political masters in the government of Iran itself.<sup>62</sup> The Islamic Republic shared this pragmatic calculus; its enemy's enemy could be considered, at least for the time being, its friend.<sup>63</sup>

In Khartoum, bin Ladin sat down with a high representative of the Iranian regime who had access to the topmost branches of power in Tehran.<sup>64</sup> The Saudi made his demand clear: He wanted al-Qa`ida operatives trained to use explosives to destroy buildings, something Hezbollah had done repeatedly since its founding in 1982. Iran agreed that al-Qa`ida personnel would go to Lebanon to be trained by Imad Mugnyiah, one of Hezbollah's most dangerous operatives, responsible for the deaths of more Americans than any other terrorist prior to 9/11. As one of al-Qa`ida's top military experts, Saif al-`Adl was a natural candidate for this training; and indeed, the lessons from Mugnyiah provided a terrible vision of things to come. Not long after his return from Lebanon, Saif would begin putting together the cell that would go on to kill hundreds at the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, using methods of explosive demolition bearing striking similarities to those of Hezbollah.

Hezbollah, despite being a Shi`a group associated with the most hardline Shi`a government in the world, had shown itself able to work with Sunni militants like those of Hamas and Egyptian Islamic Jihad. But al-Qa`ida was different. While commanders like bin Ladin and Saif al-`Adl were pragmatic and prepared to put aside their sectarian differences, the al-Qa`ida rank and file were not. To many of them, brainwashed as they were by radical sectarian prejudice, it would almost be easier to work with the Israelis than with the Shi`a. So the budding relationship between al-Qa`ida and Hezbollah would prove short-lived. But the contact did produce yet another vital role for Saif al-`Adl: He was put in charge of managing the organization's nascent ties with elements of the Iranian regime.<sup>65</sup>

From its base in Sudan, al-Qa`ida extended its tentacles throughout East Africa. One of its first targets for expansion was Somalia, a fractious Muslim country in the Horn of Africa. Even

## **"Not long after his return from Lebanon, Saif would begin putting together the cell that would go on to kill hundreds at the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, using methods of explosive demolition bearing striking similarities to those of Hezbollah."**

before the move to Khartoum, al-Qa`ida had been training militants from Somalia, and some of these alumni had since returned home to found their own radical Islamist group.<sup>66</sup> By the beginning of 1992, Somalia's Marxist government—along with the country's whole system of governance—had irrevocably collapsed. Much of the weaponry of its Soviet-equipped military had bled out into the hands of armed non-state groups, and a vicious civil war had broken out. All this seemed to make Somalia ripe for jihad.

Bin Ladin sent Saif al-`Adl to explore the possibility of expanding operations in Somalia.<sup>67</sup> Initially, the outlook seemed gloomy. A shattered kaleidoscope of tribal alliances and enmities made working with any one clan impossible without alienating another. Moreover, the battle-hardened leaders among the Somali Islamists did not appreciate foreign commanders bossing them around. And these leaders faced problems of their own in the shape of insubordination in the ranks and a chronic lack of public support for their activities. But these prospects were set to change, courtesy of the United States. Shortly after Saif's arrival, during the final weeks of the George H. W. Bush presidency, the United Nations authorized a humanitarian intervention in Somalia. Operation Restore Hope commenced in December 1992 with the deployment of 1,800 U.S. Marines to the Somali capital, Mogadishu.<sup>68</sup> Suddenly, al-Qa`ida, the Somali Islamists, and the clans had a common enemy. Mustafa Hamid wrote to Saif, urging him to seize the day:

*When you entered Somalia, the Somali arena was barren and futile. The situation changed, however, after the intervention by America and the Knights of the Cross. You most resembled a hunter aiming his rifle at the dead branch of a tree, with no leaves or birds on it. Suddenly, a bald eagle lands on the branch of the tree, directly in line with the rifle. Shouldn't the hunter pull the trigger to kill the eagle or at least bloody it? Fire at the bald eagle. Kill the Knights of the Cross. God is with you.... Kill them where you catch them; expand urban terror; plant mines on the roads; use all the covert weapons of war from rumor to strangulation, poisons, explosions, lightning attacks on small targets, and sniping.<sup>69</sup>*

Saif traveled to the south of the country to establish a camp at Kaambooni, on the Kenyan border.<sup>70</sup> This soon became the base for attacks against U.S.-allied international forces deployed under the U.N. peacekeeping mandate. On one occasion, Saif's fighters ambushed a Belgian patrol, surrounded it, and shot three Belgian soldiers. "A lot of bullets were used and there was a lot of bloodshed," Saif told his masters in Khartoum. Soon afterward, Belgian forces withdrew. "Thank God," Saif wrote, "we drove the Belgian contingent out of Somalia."<sup>71</sup> The United Nations replaced

the Belgians in the south with an Indian force.<sup>72</sup> Saif targeted the Indians in the same way he had their predecessors. His men set traps around the Indian base at Bilis Qooqaani and attacked the camp with grenades and rocket launchers, killing at least four of its defenders.<sup>73</sup> The al-Qa`ida commander reported that raids such as these were a great tool for recruiting local youths to the jihadi cause<sup>74</sup> and suggested a concerted hearts-and-minds campaign to win further support.<sup>75</sup> In his optimism, Saif even adopted a new *nom de guerre*—Omar al-Somali, “Omar the Somalian.”<sup>76</sup>

The biggest prize, however, would be a successful attack on U.S. troops, and the best place for that would be close to their main base of operations in Mogadishu. Saif took a small al-Qa`ida team to the city, including Abu Muhammad al-Masri.<sup>77</sup> As he had done in Afghanistan, he proceeded to train fighters to shoot missiles at helicopters.<sup>78</sup> In an inversion of his earlier experience, however, now the weapons were Russian and the targets American. On the afternoon of October 3, 1993, two MH-60 Black Hawks participating in an anti-terror operation in central Mogadishu were brought down within a few blocks of each other using Soviet-made rocket launchers.<sup>79</sup> It has been reported that one of the rockets was fired by a Tunisian member of Saif’s al-Qa`ida squad.<sup>80</sup> In the ensuing ground battle, 18 U.S. personnel died and 84 were wounded. One Black Hawk crew member was taken prisoner, and the bodies of several others were dragged through the streets and pummeled by an angry mob. Saif and his men may have participated directly in the fighting on the ground;<sup>81</sup> at the very least, the downing of the Black Hawks would likely not have been possible without Saif’s military training.

Three days after the Battle of Mogadishu, with one of the Black Hawk pilots still held hostage, President Clinton announced the staged withdrawal of U.S. forces from Somalia.<sup>82</sup> To many in al-Qa`ida, including its leader, the lesson was clear: Strike the United States, create some lurid images, and the serpent would soon withdraw. Mustafa Hamid again wrote to Saif and his “Africa Corps” to congratulate them on what he called their “splendid victory”:

*The Somali experience confirmed the spurious nature of American power and that it has not recovered from the Vietnam complex. It fears getting bogged down in a real war that would reveal its psychological collapse at the level of personnel and leadership. Since Vietnam America has been seeking easy battles that are completely guaranteed.*<sup>83</sup>

If al-Qa`ida could preserve and nurture the military expertise gained in Somalia, Hamid argued, it would prove “a successful Islamic arsenal in the severe confrontation with the pagan tyranny of the Jewish West.”<sup>84</sup> Moreover, Somalia itself could be a promising base for future jihad. “Plant firm pillars there,” Hamid urged, “and go on working in an adjacent or nearby geographical field in preparation for a battle in which you will wrest away from the adversary additional retreats on the flanks.”<sup>85</sup>

This advice went unheeded. As in Afghanistan a few years before, the invading superpower would not be the only force to cut and run. In 1995, the year after the United States left, bin Ladin ordered the withdrawal of almost all remaining al-Qa`ida forces in Somalia. Mustafa Hamid was furious, describing this emerging pattern of deployment and retreat as “stupid.”<sup>86</sup> But Saif al-`Adl had helped inflict on the United States its first major blow of the post-Cold War era. In the process, he had cleared the way for the eventual rise of the al-Qa`ida-aligned al-Shabaab militia.

## Yemen

For now, however, bin Ladin’s attention had turned north, across the Gulf of Aden to Yemen. There, in the defeat of the socialist faction in the 1994 civil war, bin Ladin saw “clear evidence for a rejection of all secular and atheist regimes across the region,” and perhaps even “a new beginning in the implementation of the Prophet’s will of expelling all unbelievers from the Arabian Peninsula.”<sup>87</sup> Al-Qa`ida had, in fact, been funding and training Yemeni operatives for combat against the socialists since the late 1980s,<sup>88</sup> and had begun shipping weapons across the straits from Somalia in the early 1990s.<sup>89</sup> In 1989, bin Ladin had proposed a partnership with the Saudi government to bring about regime change in its southern neighbor, but he had been rebuffed.<sup>90</sup>

Saif al-`Adl traveled to Yemen in 1995, the year of al-Qa`ida’s withdrawal from Somalia, and set about creating a Yemeni franchise for al-Qa`ida. As in Somalia, he found that things were not so simple.<sup>91</sup> Once again, the complex faultlines between the various tribes were enough to confound even the best-informed outsider. Moreover, with unification in 1990 and the end of Yemen’s civil war in 1994, many local militants had simply lost interest in carrying on their fight by violent means.<sup>92</sup> Meanwhile, the North Yemeni regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh, now in control of the entire country, was in the process of rounding up and deporting foreign fighters—as many as 14,000 of them in 1995 and 1996 alone.<sup>93</sup> But Saif did, in fact, succeed in laying the foundations for an al-Qa`ida presence in Yemen that, in the guise of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), endures to the present day.

Years later, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed would tell his U.S. captors at Guantánamo Bay that he had first linked up with Saif al-`Adl during the latter’s mid-1990s mission to Yemen.<sup>94</sup> These claims are, of course, difficult to verify; but whenever and wherever Saif and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed first met, their ideas would go on to shape the next phase of al-Qa`ida’s existence. The occasionally stormy relationship between these two powerful personalities—one a careful soldier, the other a wild-eyed killer—would expose veins of conflict that ran right to the heart of the organization.

## Return to Afghanistan

In 1996, Sudan reluctantly gave in to growing international pressure and expelled bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida. On May 18, he left the country in a Sudanese private jet in the company of a handful of his closest associates, including Saif al-`Adl; the others would follow later.<sup>95</sup> While al-Qa`ida had been away from Afghanistan, the Taliban movement had come to dominate much of the country. When bin Ladin arrived in Jalalabad, 80 miles east of Kabul, the city was not yet under Taliban control (it would fall a few months later, in September 1996), but for the time being, al-Qa`ida enjoyed the protection of the reigning local warlords—largely thanks to the foresight of Saif al-`Adl, who had dispatched his own personal secretary to strike up a relationship with them several years before.<sup>96</sup> These warlords now offered bin Ladin the use of a former royal palace, gave him a spacious tract of land on which to build a compound, and even, in an act of symbolic Pashtun hospitality, transferred title to his old hideout in the mountains of Tora Bora.<sup>97</sup> Characteristically, bin Ladin eschewed the more salubrious alternatives and chose the mountain. He ordered al-Qa`ida’s senior leadership and their families to move to a squalid base lacking electricity, running water, or even doors on many of the buildings. On their first visit to the dusty, trash-strewn site,





*Saif al-`Adl in Afghanistan before 9/11. (Source: screen capture from a video exhibit available on the website of the Department of Defense's Office of Military Commissions)*

the sheikh enthused about the rugged life in store for them at Tora Bora. As bin Ladin's teenaged son Omar surveyed the scene in disbelieving horror, Saif maintained the stony composure that had become his hallmark.<sup>98</sup>

Just three days after bin Ladin, Saif, and the rest of the leadership touched down in Jalalabad, Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri, al-Qa`ida's second-in-command, who was also the head of its operations in Africa, was killed in a ferry disaster on Lake Victoria.<sup>99</sup> Saif led an investigation into his death, dispatching his personal secretary and a future leader of al-Shabaab, Harun Fazul, to carry out the groundwork. The investigation concluded that al-Banshiri's death had indeed been an accident.<sup>100</sup> Al-Banshiri was well liked and deeply mourned; al-Qa`ida named a training camp in his honor, and to this day its leaders still quote poetry written about him. But al-Banshiri's death did mean another sudden promotion for Saif al-`Adl. Functionally, he was now al-Qa`ida's number three, behind bin Ladin and the military chief, Abu Hafis al-Masri.

On August 23, 1996, a mere 14 weeks after his return to Afghanistan, bin Ladin publicly declared jihad against the United States. His new message of global confrontation with the United States appealed to many jihadis but by no means all. In late 1996, a few months after bin Ladin's declaration of war, a band of around 40 fighters, mainly Gulf Arabs, veterans of the war in Bosnia, arrived in the north of Afghanistan to battle the Soviets in nearby Tajikistan.<sup>101</sup> When this plan failed to materialize, the fighters were taken to Kabul, where they met with Usama bin Ladin and other al-Qa`ida leaders, including Saif.

Bin Ladin laid out his case for jihad against the Americans, in terms redolent of his August declaration of war. When he was done,

around half of the fighters decided to stay and pledge *bay`a* to him, while the other half opted to depart. As one of their number later explained, "The Brothers from the Northern Group are fighters who fight the enemy face-to-face. They don't understand Bin Laden's war and the new jihad, so they went home." Of those who remained, some made their pledges of allegiance conditional; if another jihad with a clearer justification opened up elsewhere, they would be at liberty to depart and fight that war instead. But the presence of more Gulf Arabs in al-Qa`ida lent legitimacy to bin Ladin's claim that he was engaged in liberating the Arabian Peninsula from infidel occupation. Many of the Northern Group operatives who stayed with him would prove critical to future attacks against U.S. interests, including 9/11 itself.

Saif played an ever more central role as al-Qa`ida found its feet in the new Afghanistan and focused on the global jihad against the United States. At the ever-shifting war front between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, Saif coordinated al-Qa`ida fighters supporting the Islamists.<sup>102</sup> On the rare occasions when the sheikh insisted on venturing near to the fighting, Saif would oversee his security.<sup>103</sup> Training was still part of his portfolio, but increasingly only for the most advanced recruits; having been instructed by Saif al-`Adl was now a sign that a fighter was destined for special operations.<sup>104</sup> Saif handpicked students for courses covering target selection, information gathering, kidnapping, and assassination, favoring those exhibiting dedication, discipline, and high moral character.<sup>105</sup> His methods remained as brutal as ever; one practical exercise he assigned would involve kidnapping fellow trainees in the dead of night and, in the words of one al-`Adl alumnus, "beat[ing] them into submission."<sup>106</sup> Apparently, Saif considered this harsh

treatment of their colleagues justified in the name of giving his students the necessary experience.

Graduates of the Afghan camps in these days would go on to rule over al-Qa`ida franchises as far afield as Yemen, the Maghreb, and Syria.<sup>107</sup> For a select few, Saif also taught an “advanced commando course” at the Mes Aynak camp near Kabul, where promising recruits learned to maneuver in the dark, fight at close quarters, and shoot targets while riding a motorcycle.

Yet Saif’s most important role in al-Qa`ida in this period was to provide security for the organization and its emir. The Egyptian was now a permanent fixture of bin Ladin’s close entourage,<sup>108</sup> and he commanded, as well as trained, the sheikh’s corps of personal bodyguards—called the Black Guard for the scarves they wore that masked all but their eyes.<sup>109</sup> The need for such protection had never been more acute; the sheikh was in danger of his life more so than ever. Threats emanated from the Northern Alliance, from foreign intelligence agencies, and especially from the adversaries al-Qa`ida had always feared the most—rival jihadis, particularly those of the *takfiri* school, who laid heavy emphasis on declaring fellow Muslims “apostates.”<sup>110</sup> It is likely that Saif had trained bin Ladin’s guards to be hypervigilant in spotting such men, whom even al-Qa`ida operatives considered particularly dangerous. On one occasion, the head of bin Ladin’s security detail, a Saif al-`Adl protégé, burst into a meeting with a local *takfiri* and beat the man bloody because he had seen him through the keyhole gesticulating for emphasis as he made a point and thought the man was trying to lunge at bin Ladin.<sup>111</sup>

Within a year of bin Ladin’s arrival in Afghanistan, the Taliban had foiled yet another assassination attempt against him—but not until the assassins had come within earshot of the place where bin Ladin and his guards were sleeping. Taliban fighters killed a number of the attackers, and Saif personally interrogated the survivors, who claimed to have been sent by Saudi intelligence.<sup>112</sup> A few weeks later, in March 1997, with Jalalabad once again threatened by a Northern Alliance advance, al-Qa`ida moved to the firmly Taliban-controlled southwest. Saif coordinated and led the convoy.<sup>113</sup> They occupied Tarnak Farm, a disused agricultural cooperative near the decaying remains of a Soviet airbase.<sup>114</sup> The compound was large, with some 80 family homes, an office block, and its own mosque, wheat silo, water tank, general store, and medical clinic.<sup>115</sup> In an emergency, the buildings could be evacuated via underground tunnels, something that must have pleased the meticulous security chief, although Saif’s frugality seems to have precluded him from following the fashion on the base of installing a private bomb shelter at his own home.<sup>116</sup>

To protect al-Qa`ida’s communications, Saif used his cryptographic training to devise the ingenious “Salahuddin” code system, a grid with more than a quarter of a million possible combinations.<sup>117</sup> He drafted public service announcement flyers urging members to adopt basic counterintelligence precautions like keeping official business on a need-to-know basis, having their hair and beards cut before traveling, and moving their watches to the left wrist—rather than the right as was traditional for the mujahideen.<sup>118</sup> Saif instituted security screening for new recruits<sup>119</sup> and reserved the right to expel members based on little besides his own feelings of suspicion.<sup>120</sup>

Saif also established a cadre of intelligence operatives, some 50 in number.<sup>121</sup> This intelligence service claimed to have succeeded in unmasking a great many spies, including one who purportedly confessed to a plot to assassinate bin Ladin with so-called dirty

## “Saif convinced bin Ladin to give al-Zarqawi resources to set up a guesthouse and small training camp inside Afghanistan ... Al-Zarqawi’s organization would go on to become al-Qa`ida’s franchise in Iraq and eventually morph into the group known today as the Islamic State.”

bombs containing nuclear waste.<sup>122</sup> On another occasion, members noted that a certain Jordanian recruit possessed a suspiciously large amount of cash, seemed to know little about war-fighting, and had in his passport a valid Afghan visa—a formality on which few self-respecting mujahideen would waste their time. When this Jordanian was overheard talking in code to his handler in Jordan, the game was up. Abu Muhammad al-Masri, al-Qa`ida’s head of training, drove the Jordanian to a camp south of Kabul to bring him before bin Ladin.

Furious at this breach of security, Saif rounded up a posse of fighters and brought them to the camp, thirsting for vengeance. But Abu Muhammad appealed to Saif’s pragmatic side. It would be better, he said, to hand over the Jordanian to the Taliban authorities. Al-Qa`ida did not want a repeat of ugly incidents in the past when an accused spy had been beaten to death and another had been summarily executed. This was the Taliban’s country, and al-Qa`ida must live under their laws. “Al-Qaeda does not want to be accused of taking the law into its own hands,” al-Masri said. Saif agreed to hand over the spy but continued his own investigation into the breach. The Taliban allowed him to interrogate the Jordanian. Saif brought along bin Ladin’s chief bodyguard, Abu Jandal—“The Father of Death”—who repeatedly hit the prisoner. He also procured intelligence on the Jordanian from a well-known compatriot who had also recently arrived in Afghanistan, a petty criminal turned Islamist radical named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.<sup>123</sup>

### First Attacks on the United States

“Fix the car,” Saif told bin Ladin’s driver, Salim Ahmed Hamdan, one day in early August 1998.<sup>124</sup> Hamdan was taken aback. “The car’s fine,” he said. “Get it fixed anyway,” Saif replied, “and tune it up. We’ll be on the move soon.” A few days later, Saif ordered Tarnak Farm evacuated. Hamdan drove bin Ladin away, while Saif took his family to another compound in his own truck. Later, he returned and ordered defensive trenches dug around the perimeter, especially near the guard posts. “Preventative measures,” he told the fighters. “The Americans are going to bomb us soon.”

Hours later, on the morning of August 7, 1998, two massive truck bombs exploded outside the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, killing 224 people and wounding nearly 5,000. The die was cast. Al-Qa`ida was no longer simply sponsoring acts of terror carried out by others; it was committing them itself. The seeds Saif had planted during his time in East Africa had germinated and borne fruit. Harun Fazul, who had been Saif’s personal secretary before going on to lead the cell that carried out

the bombings, called his vicious handiwork “[t]he first act in the war against the Americans.”<sup>125</sup> Saif himself was evidently pleased with the carnage his protégés had wrought; according to those who saw him shortly after the bombings, he allowed a rare smile to creep across his face.<sup>126</sup>

Saif was prudent to evacuate Tarnak in anticipation of U.S. retaliation. On August 20, some al-Qa`ida compounds in Afghanistan were hit by Tomahawk cruise missiles fired from U.S. naval vessels in the Indian Ocean (although ultimately Tarnak itself was removed from the target list). Some 20 militants died in the onslaught. Saif, bin Ladin, and the other al-Qa`ida leaders survived unscathed.<sup>127</sup> Nevertheless, Saif bolstered bin Ladin’s security detail. The emir’s bodyguard was now composed almost entirely of Yemenis, whom Saif had chosen in part for what he saw as their ingrained “culture of revenge.”<sup>128</sup>

After the bombings and the retaliatory strikes, many leaders among the Taliban, and even within the Arab Afghan contingent itself, began to voice disquiet.<sup>129</sup> Why provoke the United States? Why risk everything they had built in Afghanistan? Factions began to develop within the Arab community and the Taliban leadership—those for and against bin Ladin—representing a severe problem for al-Qa`ida. It was easy to imagine ill-feeling developing into an existential danger to the group and a mortal risk to its sheikh. To placate his critics among the Taliban, bin Ladin pledged *bay`a* to Mullah Omar as Commander of the Faithful—a title traditionally held by the caliphs of old. Evidently, however, bin Ladin was aware that this was unlikely to prove popular among many in the al-Qa`ida rank and file, who were keen to maintain the organization’s independence. He kept the pledge secret from most members outside the top leadership, including Abu Jandal, the head of his security detail, for several months. After the attack on the USS Cole, the al-Qa`ida leader not only made his *bay`a* public, but further placated his host by doubling down on his pledge of loyalty; in a speech at the wedding of his son Mohammed, he explicitly referred to Mullah Omar as the caliph of the Muslims.<sup>130</sup>

Despite his extravagant flattery of Mullah Omar, it seems likely that bin Ladin pledged fealty to the Taliban not because he felt it was right but because he had to. For some traditionalists, however, such a utilitarian view of *bayat* ran counter to the sacred nature of the institution. Abu Jandal was distraught when he eventually found out about his master’s pledge to the Taliban, believing that it made al-Qa`ida little better than a wholly owned subsidiary of the Afghan regime.<sup>131</sup> He confided in Saif al-`Adl his fear that “al-Qaeda would be absorbed into the Taliban and that would be the end of [bin Ladin’s] independent jihad against the Americans.” Ever the pragmatist, Saif reassured Jandal that bin Ladin had merely been “constrained by circumstances.” This explanation did not satisfy the bodyguard. *Bay`a* was a matter of religion, he said, and religion cannot be changed. This perceived betrayal of principle became a major factor in Jandal’s decision to leave al-Qa`ida temporarily in 1999, and in his permanent break with the organization a year later.

### Mentoring al-Zarqawi

Despite the resultant political and security headaches, the embassy attacks had shown what external operations could achieve in this new, highly disciplined al-Qa`ida that Saif al-`Adl had done so much to create. When the Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi arrived in Afghanistan in the second half of 1999, Saif viewed it as essential to pull him into al-Qa`ida’s orbit. He argued

that al-Zarqawi could be just what al-Qa`ida needed to plant its flag in the Levant—and, more urgently at the time, to prevent him from falling in with a rival jihadi group run by Abu Musab al-Suri.<sup>132</sup>

Al-Zarqawi was a fiercely independent operator; for now, he had no intention of pledging allegiance to al-Qa`ida or allowing bin Ladin to control his activities.<sup>133</sup> But Saif convinced bin Ladin to give al-Zarqawi resources to set up a guesthouse and small training camp inside Afghanistan, near Herat in the far west of the country beside the Iranian border.<sup>134</sup> Al-Zarqawi’s organization would go on to become al-Qa`ida’s franchise in Iraq and eventually morph into the group known today as the Islamic State.<sup>a</sup>

### The USS Cole attack

Less than a week after the turn of the millennium, on Eid al-Fitr, the feast marking the end of Ramadan, Usama bin Ladin summoned dozens of senior al-Qa`ida members and other Arab Afghans to hear him preach a sermon at his compound of Tarnak Farm. The emir rallied the troops. “We are like mountains of stone against anti-Muslim aggression,” he told them, assuredly prophesying the imminent downfall and dismemberment of the United States, just as the Soviet Union had fallen and broken apart after the Afghan jihad.<sup>135</sup> A cameraman was on hand to record the proceedings, and among those in attendance, one can make out several of the men who would go on to plan and execute the 9/11 attacks. In the days after the summit, at the same compound, and on the same video tape, two of the eventual hijackers would record themselves reading their last wills.

The same video also gives a first brief glimpse in years of the security chief Saif al-`Adl. He grins as he playfully jostles the camera. His hooded almond eyes are bracketed now by a black beard and a white turban. After a few seconds of mugging for the camera, he is gone, a face in the crowd once more.<sup>136</sup>

Around the same time, Saif could be seen leafing through an encyclopedia of warships, and lingering over the pages dealing with American destroyers;<sup>137</sup> for those with eyes to see, this was an indication of al-Qa`ida’s next target. From the point of view of the inhabitants of Tarnak Farm, the organization’s attacks were by now falling into a familiar pattern: Bin Ladin and the military chief Abu Hafs al-Masri would develop the overall strategy and general target selection, while personnel, training, and execution were the responsibility of Saif al-`Adl and the head of training, Abu Muhammad al-Masri.<sup>138</sup> The Yemen cell struck on October 12, 2000, attacking the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer the USS Cole, which had docked to fill its fuel tanks. The suicide bomb tore a 40-foot gash in the ship’s hull, killing 17 crew members and wounding more than three dozen. Only the swift and sustained action of their comrades averted a fuel explosion that would almost certainly have sunk the vessel.<sup>139</sup>

Following the standard procedure established by Saif al-`Adl, bin

a In the first half of 2005, a biography of al-Zarqawi, purportedly written by Saif, appeared on jihadi internet forums (“Jihadist Biography of the Slaughtering Leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi,” 2005). Most Western analysts appear to believe that the document was indeed written by Saif. However, bin Ladin himself was skeptical that Saif al-`Adl was the real author. (See “Letter to Shaykh Mahmud 26 September 2010,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence.) On balance, the present author has chosen not to rely upon the document here. For a full discussion of the veracity of this source, see Brian Fishman, “Revising the History of al-Qa`ida’s Original Meeting with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi,” *CTC Sentinel* 9:10 (2016).

Ladin's security was tightened again, and the Afghan compounds were evacuated.<sup>140</sup> But this time, there would be no military retaliation, partly because the United States was then in the white heat of a bitterly fought and long drawn-out election campaign that was destined, within weeks, to wind up in the Supreme Court. The lack of a response did not please Usama bin Ladin. In the weeks following the attacks, he could be heard complaining bitterly, despite the boost to al-Qa`ida's fundraising and recruitment efforts the Cole attack provided. As the 9/11 Commission would later write, "Bin Laden wanted the United States to attack, and if it did not he would launch something bigger."<sup>141</sup>

Following the USS Cole attack, many in al-Qa`ida, including Saif al-`Adl, had expected, and prepared for, tougher reprisals;<sup>142</sup> but none came. By the time it became clear that bin Ladin had been behind the suicide bombing, the United States' attention was on the aftermath of the recent presidential election, which was limping toward resolution in the Supreme Court. Neither the outgoing Clinton administration nor its successor harbored much appetite for a retaliatory strike against al-Qa`ida at anything like the level of intensity that would be necessary to disrupt the organization.<sup>143</sup>

Al-Qa`ida could survive indefinitely this pattern of U.S. action—or, more frequently, inaction. In fact, in terms of propaganda, fundraising, and especially recruitment, the biggest attacks on the United States had so far raked in the biggest benefits.

In June 2001, after months, if not years, of deliberation, al-Qa`ida finally merged with Ayman al-Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad, forming a new organization officially called al-Qa`idat al-Jihad (The Base of Jihad).<sup>144</sup> This arrangement gave Egyptian Islamic Jihad personnel, at a stroke, three of the top spots in the al-Qa`ida leadership, including that of deputy emir, which, of course, went to al-Zawahiri. Although himself an Egyptian, Saif had strongly opposed the merger.<sup>145</sup> It was, as Saif was unafraid to point out, a woefully lopsided arrangement. Al-Qa`ida had around 400 pledged members, at least 250 of them in Afghanistan, of whom around 100 were actively engaged in fighting the Northern Alliance in the civil war still raging near Kabul. Al-Zawahiri's group had just 10 members, and these men did little more than create propaganda. In any case, only half of them, just five individuals, were willing to go along with the merger. Why allow such a minuscule group to hijack much of the leadership of al-Qa`ida? Bin Ladin would not be dissuaded. For him, the matter had a personal dimension: al-Zawahiri had long served, in effect, as bin Ladin's personal physician, treating him for his frequent bouts of fainting and kidney pain since his days fighting the Soviets in the 1980s.<sup>146</sup> Seeing that the decision had been made, Saif fell into line.<sup>147</sup> The merger was consummated, and Ayman al-Zawahiri became bin Ladin's deputy.

## The "Planes Operation"

Before leaving Egypt for the Soviet jihad in the late 1980s, Colonel Ibrahim Makkawi, the man so frequently mistaken for Saif al-`Adl, had mused to colleagues about the possibility of crashing aircraft into the Egyptian House of Representatives in Cairo—an idea that prompted many of Makkawi's jihadi colleagues from this period to dismiss him as a dangerous crackpot.<sup>148</sup> But the 9/11 attacks really began with the Pakistani terrorist facilitator Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM).

"It is not feasible," bin Ladin told KSM when he first raised the Planes Operation in the fall of 1996.<sup>149</sup> Nevertheless, he invited the Pakistani to join al-Qa`ida; the organization could make use of a

militant with his diabolical imagination. KSM politely declined, but between about 1996 and 1998, he continued to curry favor with the al-Qa`ida leadership, deploying his technical skills to help his old contact Saif al-`Adl with certain "computer and media projects" and other administrative tasks.<sup>150</sup> But as the latter half of the 1990s wore on, KSM's nightmare vision grew on bin Ladin. Ideologically, bin Ladin increasingly reasoned, it was right and proper to take any opportunity to strike the Great Satan; besides, these unprecedented atrocities would make al-Qa`ida unquestionably the premier militant Islamist group in the world.<sup>151</sup>

Bin Ladin was confident that the United States would never put an invasion force in Afghanistan.<sup>152</sup> The Americans, he thought, would do what they always did—fire a few cruise missiles at a few camps, maybe carry out a couple of airstrikes, then retreat. A handful of fighters might die, but they would perish as martyrs—the better to drum up fresh recruits seeking paths of glory. At the very most, bin Ladin thought, the United States might send a commando detachment to capture or kill him. If that happened, he had a plan to thwart the raid, and humiliate the United States, by luring the Americans to their deaths in the mountains of Tora Bora—just as he had done with Soviet special forces at Jaji more than a decade before.<sup>153</sup>

Saif viewed the matter differently. It was not that he cared deeply about civilian casualties; in fact, Abu Jandal was to note that, among all of al-Qa`ida's senior leaders, Saif was the one who "seemed least affected by the deaths of innocent civilians."<sup>154</sup> But Saif could see that KSM's proposed attacks would be qualitatively different from hitting an embassy in a foreign capital or a warship in a faraway harbor. A strike on the U.S. homeland on the scale of the Planes Operation would represent a provocation orders of magnitude greater than either of these strikes.

With his military experience and his pragmatic frame of mind, Saif was perhaps better placed than any of his colleagues in al-Qa`ida's upper echelons to foresee the disaster that would befall the organization if the Americans were indeed to put their full might into the response. As Saif's father-in-law, Mustafa Hamid, told bin Ladin, "The problem is not how to start the war but how to win the war."<sup>155</sup> If the Americans invaded, Saif must have realized, al-Qa`ida would face ruin, not just in Afghanistan but around the world. There was no viable plan for defending the "Islamic Emirate" against a concerted U.S. onslaught; and if the Taliban fell, what other government would step in to harbor the jihadis? Why risk destroying the entity al-Qa`ida regarded as the only true Islamic state on earth?

As for bin Ladin's plan to lure U.S. troops to destruction at his mountain lair, to Saif's mind this was sheer insanity.<sup>156</sup> Tora Bora was not Jaji. The United States was not the Soviet Union. Far from being a good place to spring a clever trap, any tactician worth his salt could see that the isolated cave complex of Tora Bora would be acutely vulnerable to heavy aerial bombardment and a protracted siege—a strategy that would massively favor the Americans, with their unbridgeable advantages in manpower, technology, and logistics. If the United States did not seal up the passes, sooner or later the winter snows would take care of that for them. Surely starvation in the mountains—or, for that matter, incineration from above—was not the kind of glorious martyrdom bin Ladin had in mind?

A majority of al-Qa`ida's shura council sided with Saif al-`Adl against the Planes Operation.<sup>157</sup> In fact, besides bin Ladin himself,

only al-Zawahiri and a handful of others, including the EIJ members who came with him, were in favor of the strikes.<sup>158</sup> Abu Hafis al-Mauritani, the religious head of al-Qa`ida, wrote bin Ladin a letter couching his opposition in Qur'anic terms.<sup>159</sup> Even Abu Hafis al-Masri, al-Qa`ida's military chief, came out in opposition.<sup>160</sup> But bin Ladin had convinced himself of the righteousness of KSM's wild plan, and that was all that mattered. "I will make it happen," the sheikh told his followers, "even if I do it by myself."<sup>161</sup>

Privately, bin Ladin's obstinacy in the face of sensible counsel frustrated Saif al-`Adl. "If someone opposes him," Saif later wrote, "he immediately puts forward another person to render an opinion in his support, clinging to his opinion and totally disregarding those around him, so there is no advice nor anything."<sup>162</sup> Once the decision was made, however, the doubters as usual fell into line. Saif, like the loyal soldier he was, now helped plan the very attacks he had opposed.<sup>163</sup> At the same time, anticipating the rain of fire that 9/11 would call down, Saif began scouting for locations in which to shelter al-Qa`ida's leaders in the aftermath. He soon concluded that their safest hiding place would be the Pakistani tribal stronghold of Waziristan.<sup>164</sup>

### The Defense of Kandahar

In the run-up to the 9/11 attacks, in August 2001, Saif was appointed to lead the defense of the al-Qa`ida and Taliban citadel of Kandahar, together with its nearby airport and training camps.<sup>165</sup> He began his preparations around two weeks before the attacks, with 75 fighters under his command—a number that would soon swell exponentially. Saif ordered trenches dug along a four-mile front around the airport and the Faruq camp<sup>166</sup> and set traps to ensnare approaching enemy vehicles and men.<sup>167</sup> He split the city into five sectors—one in the center and four around the outskirts. In addition, he created a rapid deployment force mounted on Toyota pickup trucks. The Toyotas, Saif found, were stealthy and highly maneuverable, whether in the mountains or on the flat plains. "If the Japanese had seen the vehicles in action," he said, "they would have used them for marketing advertisements."<sup>168</sup>

Not every item in al-Qa`ida's arsenal was as impressive, however. The bulk of the fighters' weaponry, like most of the matériel in Afghanistan, dated back to the Soviet era. Alongside the ubiquitous grenade belts and AK-47 assault rifles in various states of repair, Saif's men possessed shoulder-fired Strela-2 surface-to-air missiles, a tank nicknamed "The Elephant," and an ancient Chinese-made 12-tube BM rocket launcher.<sup>169</sup> In place of field radios or the useful but too-easily traceable satellite phones, Saif created lines of communication using human couriers mounted on motorcycles or on horseback.<sup>170</sup> When it came to zeal, his men wanted for nothing, and a commitment born of absolute faith goes a long way. Even so, Saif al-`Adl the military realist might not have liked his chances against U.S. air superiority and Special Forces prowess.

At the beginning of September, bin Ladin gathered all the residents of Tarnak Farm at the mosque. "An operation is about to happen," he told them. "We will be evacuating this compound." This much was, by now, familiar protocol. As with previous attacks, bin Ladin got into a car, this time heading north, accompanied by his son Uthman and a laptop bag full of U.S. dollars.<sup>171</sup> To minimize the very real threat of a decapitation strike, Saif al-`Adl had instructed bin Ladin's bodyguards to keep him on the move between safe houses in Kabul and Jalalabad.<sup>172</sup> Saif said farewell to his sheikh and got back to firming up the defenses for the coming war.

In order to appease Mullah Omar and the Taliban leadership in advance of the 9/11 attacks, Saif and others had hatched a plan to kill the Northern Alliance supreme commander Ahmed Shah Massoud. It was hoped that Massoud's death would disorient the enemy and pave the way for a final Taliban takeover of all territory still held by the alliance. The killers were to enter Massoud's camp posing as documentary filmmakers seeking to interview the commander. As part of their cover, the attackers would claim to be Belgians of Moroccan origin; in fact, they were Tunisians, but had spent some time in Molenbeek, the Brussels neighborhood that was home to many of the Islamic State terrorists who attacked Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016.<sup>173</sup> When they sat down for the interview, the assassins would explode a suicide belt and a booby-trapped battery pack.<sup>174</sup>

Saif arranged for the assassins to be trained for this mission by the man who had built the two East Africa truck bombs,<sup>175</sup> while bin Ladin's deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri had letters of introduction forged in clumsy French—a language Massoud knew from having been educated at an elite French-run school in Kabul—to get the phony journalists admitted to Massoud's presence.<sup>176</sup> Around the same time Saif al-`Adl began sinking trenches at the Kandahar airport, the assassins were entering the Northern Alliance camp 400 miles away to the northeast. Two weeks later, on September 9, they finally sat down with Massoud. One of the men told the translator his three opening questions, each of which concerned Massoud's assumed enmity for bin Ladin. Before the first question could be translated, the assassins exploded their devices with a burst of blue flame, piercing Massoud's heart with shards of metal. The blast blew one of the assassins apart; the other escaped, only to be captured and killed by Massoud's bodyguards. Within minutes, in the back of a car sent to speed him to the nearest field hospital, Massoud himself was dead.<sup>177</sup> Two days later, the "Planes Operation" was carried out.

Saif al-`Adl estimated that, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, more than 2,000 fighters rallied to Afghanistan from all over the world, equivalent to five times al-Qa`ida's total strength worldwide at that time.<sup>178</sup> These men did not necessarily become formal al-Qa`ida members, but they gathered under bin Ladin's standard nonetheless. Most of the new recruits probably came looking for yet another "tourist jihad." Like bin Ladin, they would have expected the United States, as in the past, to make a show of force with some missiles and then move on. The tourists would get to feel the heat of explosions, maybe take a few potshots at some planes, then return home to tell their war stories and bask in the adulation of their friends. Lists began circulating for volunteers to register their interest in al-Qa`ida's so-called martyrdom brigades, those to be sent to the frontlines in the event of an invasion. By the end of October 2001, 120 men had signed up, around the same number of fighters that al-Qa`ida had in total fighting the Northern Alliance before 9/11.<sup>179</sup>

But this was not going to be like previous attacks. Knowing only too well what lay over the horizon, Saif al-`Adl set about evacuating Kandahar. He ordered one of his fighters, an alumnus of the East African attacks, to take some Arab families across the border to safety in Iran, where Saif had arranged for their arrival and protection with his contacts among the Quds Force.<sup>180</sup> "Get in your truck right away and take the families," he told the man. The fighter was incredulous. "Why are you sending me?" he protested. In his hand, the man brandished a copy of *Time* magazine showing

his own face, beside those of Saif al-`Adl, Usama bin Ladin, and 19 others the United States had named on its first-ever public list of Most Wanted Terrorists. "I'm wanted by the Americans!" the man protested. "I have millions of dollars on my head because of the embassy bombings." He pleaded to be sent to safety in Pakistan instead. But Saif had no time for special pleading. "I am ordering you," he said. "Go."

On October 7, 2001, the first night of coalition aerial bombardment, explosions rocked al-Qa`ida camps near Kandahar and Kabul. Later, Saif drove to Tarnak Farm to survey the damage. Over the course of just a few hours of bombing, fully one-quarter of the 80 family homes had been reduced to rubble. Soon, the compound would be for practical purposes completely destroyed.<sup>181</sup> Raids on targets in and around Kandahar intensified still further after U.S. Marines seized a landing strip around 80 miles distant.<sup>182</sup> Saif watched as the skies above the city filled with fast jets, B-52 high-altitude bombers, Apache helicopter gunships, cruise missiles, and—perhaps most worryingly of all—C-130 Hercules heavy lifters, of the type used to mount airborne howitzer cannons and to deliver the U.S. military's heaviest ordnance. These war machines waged, in Saif's words, "a stormy campaign."<sup>183</sup>

Nor was there much encouragement to be gleaned out of news from elsewhere in Afghanistan. On November 9, U.S. precision bombs hit Taliban positions in the northern town of Mazar-i-Sharif. From out of the smoke of these explosions, there came galloping, almost incredibly, the first massed cavalry charge of the 21st century. Hundreds of Northern Alliance horsemen, riding alongside U.S. special operators, soon overran the city. Within a day, it had fallen to the coalition. Four days later, the Northern Alliance took the Afghan capital, Kabul. Herat, the city where Saif al-`Adl had helped create a camp for the Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, fell the same day,<sup>184</sup> forcing Saif's father-in-law, Mustafa Hamid, to flee over the border into Iran. Barely two months since the Planes Operation, al-Qa`ida and its Taliban allies had already lost functional control of the entire northern half of Afghanistan.

At this moment of crisis, Saif al-`Adl was suddenly thrust even further to the fore. On the night of November 15, 2001 coalition missiles hit the home of al-Qa`ida's military chief, Abu Hafs al-Masri, crumpling it into a pile of stones at the bottom of a deep crater. While most al-Qa`ida commanders had evacuated, Abu Hafs had been unable to do so because of a slipped disk in his back. He was crushed beneath the concrete of his own house.<sup>185</sup> Nearby lay the corpse of another erstwhile colleague of Saif al-`Adl's—the Tunisian who had shot down a Black Hawk helicopter over Mogadishu eight years before.<sup>186</sup>

With Abu Hafs gone, Saif al-`Adl was next in line to be al-Qa`ida's military leader. Once again, the unlooked-for death of a senior fighter had spelled advancement for the Egyptian. But this battlefield promotion had come in the worst possible circumstances. In Kandahar, which was facing a ground war within weeks, there was no time to grieve. Saif convened an emergency meeting of senior Arab Afghans and Taliban leaders to firm up the city's defenses. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed attended, as did Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, fresh from the destruction of his camp at Herat.<sup>187</sup> A number of senior figures from the other Arab groups operating out of Afghanistan also joined the gathering. Collectively, they appointed Saif al-`Adl commander over all the Arab fighters in Kandahar, and for this limited purpose, they all gave *bay`a* to al-Qa`ida. Ironically, by creating an emergency on an unprecedented

scale, 9/11 had, albeit indirectly, accomplished bin Ladin's dream of uniting all the Arab groups under his banner; but this state of affairs would prove short-lived, for Kandahar was almost lost.<sup>188</sup>

Around the first day of December 2001, halfway through Ramadan, one of Saif's men noticed a scout vehicle on a broken bridge near the airport. The man opened fire on the vehicle, and its occupants responded with a few volleys of their own before speeding away. It was then, as Saif would write later, that "hell broke out in the area."

*Airplanes came from every direction and in all kinds. C-130s attacked, jets attacked with missiles, helicopters attacked with missiles and guns. The area was transformed into a ball of fire for more than an hour. Gul Agha's [Northern Alliance] forces began to advance again, assured that there were no breathing souls left in the area other than their forces. As soon as they entered the killing field, bombs of the youngsters [al-Qa`ida fighters] rained on them from every direction, and they [Gul Agha's men] were gunned down with machine guns. Calls of "God is great" and "victory" were screamed aloud. The brothers killed many of them and captured two. The rest fled. It was a success by the will of God Almighty.<sup>189</sup>*

There followed five relentless days and nights of what Saif termed "wild combat," alternating between coalition airstrikes and Northern Alliance ground offensives. Saif commandeered the Kandahar Religious Institute and had it set up as a field kitchen for al-Qa`ida fighters, serving three meals a day.<sup>190</sup> The Egyptian commander could be seen speeding up and down the frontlines, barking orders at the Arabs under his command who surrounded the city. Saif's strategy emphasized the need to confound the airborne enemy with small targets, constantly in motion; he had therefore divided his forces into many tight-knit, mobile units.<sup>191</sup> These cells roamed the city and the airport in trucks with missile and rocket launchers bolted to their flatbeds.<sup>192</sup> B-52 bombers sailed overhead. Three days into the fighting, a guided bomb destroyed the Chinese BM rocket launcher. Then the tank called The Elephant took a direct hit from a missile. A number of militants were killed in a fierce, close-quarters battle on the roads around the airport, in which one al-Qa`ida commander could be seen, in Saif's words, "harvesting the souls of the enemy."<sup>193</sup> At times, however, Saif had difficulty controlling the fighters, who would get excited in the white heat of combat and abandon their assigned positions, or else waste scarce ammunition by shooting at aircraft wildly out of range of their weapons.<sup>194</sup>

Around the same time, speaking by satellite phone from his position with U.S. Special Forces north of Kandahar, Hamid Karzai addressed delegates at the Bonn Conference deciding the future of Afghanistan. On December 5, 2001, even as Karzai continued his advance on the city, the conference named him the interim president of his country. Buoyed by this vote of confidence, Karzai demanded the unconditional surrender of Kandahar. In the days that ensued, many Taliban leaders, including Mullah Omar himself, bowed to the inevitable and fled to avoid capture or death. Al-Qa`ida's senior leaders, too, began pouring out of the city; reportedly some two dozen of them left together one day in a single convoy.<sup>195</sup> On December 9, 2001 Northern Alliance troops finally took the city, scattering its defenders and their commanders. Like his comrades and underlings, Saif al-`Adl took to the hills.

## The Aftermath

On December 8, 2001 Saif had reached Zurmat, close to the border with Waziristan, the Pakistani tribal region he had recommended as a place to lie low.<sup>196</sup> A number of senior al-Qa`ida and Taliban leaders gathered in the town, including Abu Muhammad al-Masri, who would later be Saif's prison-mate in Iran. Over the next few days, Saif made his way through the mountains and over the border into Pakistan,<sup>197</sup> where he was to spend the next few months in hiding. After the mayhem of Kandahar in the days before its fall, Saif's stay in Pakistan must have come as a welcome respite. There, he enjoyed breathing space and even some time to relax. A fellow militant who visited him in this period remembers playing soccer with him one day before lunch. "He was a really good player," the man observed. "Sharp and fast."<sup>198</sup>

Saif had no illusions about the scale of the disaster that had befallen al-Qa`ida in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Abu Hafs al-Masri, its supreme military commander, lay dead. By Saif's own reckoning, more than 500 Arab Afghans, including many al-Qa`ida members, had either been killed or had fled.<sup>199</sup> Others had been captured, in Afghanistan or over the border in Pakistan; some of them now languished in U.S. custody at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. The surviving members of the shura council were scattered. Bin Ladin and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, had gone on the run. The immediate aftermath of the fall of the Taliban was, to a practical man like Saif al-`Adl, a time to regroup, assess the damage, and start rebuilding the organization from the ground up. Yet, to Saif's lasting horror and amazement, some operatives, even now, hastened to carry on the fight as if nothing had happened. Foremost among them was the man whose demented vision had spawned 9/11 in the first place—Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

In January 2002, Saif al-`Adl had received word that a British Islamist, Omar Sheikh, together with a crew of foot soldiers from various extremist groups, had kidnapped the *Wall Street Journal's* Islamabad bureau chief, Daniel Pearl, in Karachi. Saif called KSM, who was then hiding out in the city, and told him the news. "These people don't know what to do with him," Saif told KSM. "They want to know if we want him." Saif ordered KSM to take custody of Pearl on behalf of al-Qa`ida.<sup>200</sup> But he also instructed him that it would be a bad idea to kill the hostage.<sup>201</sup> KSM simply disregarded this order. Within days of the kidnapping, he had taken the journalist to an al-Qa`ida safe house, slit his throat, and beheaded him on camera<sup>202</sup> in the kind of snuff video that was shortly to become a fixture of the insurgency in Iraq, under the influence of another protégé of Saif al-`Adl's, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. So eager was KSM to be about his bloody business that he acted before the camera operator had put a tape into the machine; the video failed to capture the initial butchery, only the decapitation of Daniel Pearl's mutilated corpse.<sup>203</sup> After the killing, KSM dismembered Pearl's body, buried the pieces in a shallow grave, and had the tape delivered to Western media.<sup>204b</sup>

Saif al-`Adl was incandescent with rage. On June 13, 2002, he sent Khalid Sheikh Mohammed the second of two vituperative letters containing an extraordinary indictment, not just of KSM,

but of bin Ladin himself and the blind zealotry that had dragged al-Qa`ida to the brink of the abyss. He wrote:

*Today we are experiencing one setback after another and have gone from misfortune to disaster. There is a new hand that is managing affairs and that is driving forcefully; every time it falters, it gets up and rushes again, without understanding or awareness. It rushes to move without vision, and it is in a hurry to accomplish actions that now require patience because of the security activity throughout the whole world. This hand does not pay attention to what is happening, as if we will not be summoned to account before God for all these souls, this blood, and this money. The consequences that you see are nothing but an outcome of this onrush. Had I spoken before the disasters occurred—and speak I did—I would have been considered proud, but now that the matter has become a reality, I have absolved my conscience. You are the person solely responsible for all this because you undertook the mission, and in six months we have lost what took years to build.*<sup>205</sup>

Bin Ladin, Saif told the Pakistani, "pushes you relentlessly and without consideration, as if he has not heard the news and does not comprehend events." In light of the damage already done, al-Qa`ida "must completely halt all external actions until we sit down and consider the disaster we caused," lest the organization "become a joke for all the intelligence agencies in the world." Saif ordered KSM to "[s]top all foreign actions. Stop sending people to captivity. Stop devising new operations, regardless of whether orders come or do not come from Abu Abdullah."<sup>206</sup> Abu Abdullah, as KSM knew very well, meant Usama bin Ladin. Saif's letter was eventually made public, having been intercepted by U.S. forces. No doubt bin Ladin took umbrage at the letter's explicit call for insubordination; it may be for this reason that he later disparaged Saif, who had played a pivotal role in al-Qa`ida's history, as of secondary importance to Abu Muhammad al-Masri, who as head of training was below Saif in the hierarchy, and Abu Khair al-Masri, an al-Zawahiri loyalist who had only been promoted to the shura council when the merger with Egyptian Islamic Jihad was finalized.<sup>207</sup>

By any standard, the letter marks a singular moment for Saif al-`Adl. The steadfast Egyptian, who for so many years had played the loyal, sensible soldier struggling to corral al-Qa`ida's more hot-headed rank and file, had reached his breaking point. With this extraordinary letter, he had openly countermanded not just a superior officer but the commander in chief himself. It was an indication of just how seriously Saif took the unfolding emergency—and of just how deep was the abyss into which he felt al-Qa`ida had stumbled.

In public, however, al-Qa`ida's many 9/11 skeptics had all fallen into line with bin Ladin's exultant interpretation of events. Even Abu Hafs al-Mauritani, al-Qa`ida's religious chief, whose original objection had been based on no less a source than the Qur'an itself, changed his tune. At the end of November 2001, with the Taliban ousted from Kabul and the mountains set to quiver under Tora Bora, al-Mauritani told the TV station Al Jazeera that he could not contain his "joy" over the attacks, as a result of which he confidently foresaw "the beginning of the end" for the United States.<sup>208</sup>

Saif al-`Adl maintained a similar mask of defiance. Shortly before his arrest in Iran, he published two articles in which he lauded the 9/11 hijackers as "heroes" whose "blessed operation" had ignited a "spark in the hearts of the youth of the *umma*."<sup>209</sup> Saif

b In January 2021, a Pakistani court acquitted four men of involvement in the murder, although the country's Supreme Court later ordered one of them, Ahmed Omar Sheikh, to be held indefinitely in a government-run "safe house" under military guard. Kathy Gannon, "Pakistan orders man acquitted in Pearl murder off death row," Associated Press, February 2, 2021.

lionized the heroism of those killed in the Battle of Kandahar—so-called martyrs like “Hamza the Qatari ... I personally felt the wonderful scent that was covering him ... his face was wearing a beautiful smile, and what a smile that was ... as well as Samir the Najdi who seemed very gracious and beautiful in death despite the blood covering his body.”<sup>210</sup> Saif claimed victory in the ground battle for Kandahar, implicitly suggesting that the city would never have fallen were it not for the Taliban’s craven unwillingness to defend it. In describing his experience of warfare against the Americans in Afghanistan, he cited a verse from the Qur’an: “If they harm you, they can cause you but a slight hurt; and if they fight against you they will turn their backs and run away.”<sup>211</sup>

U.S. soldiers, Saif still insisted, were “not fit for combat.”<sup>212</sup> They were “phonies,” puffed up by “Hollywood promotions,”<sup>213</sup> able to take territory in Afghanistan only thanks to the Northern Alliance mercenaries in their pay.<sup>214</sup> “The American soldier is qualified to perform cinematic roles only,” Saif assured his audience.<sup>215</sup> “The mujahideen are still in the battlefield,” he went on, “and the fight continues, and will not end, God willing, until Afghanistan returns to Sharia and Islam once more.”<sup>216</sup> This narrative, of course, conveniently eschews all mention of al-Qa`ida and the Taliban’s ignominious abandonment of Kandahar in December 2001.

As he makes clear, Saif wrote principally to encourage those preparing to fight the same foe in an altogether different part of the Muslim world:

*We do not, by the will of God, doubt the final defeat of the American empire. What happened in Afghanistan is only one battle. The war is still going on and the victory is leaning towards the Army of Allah. This empire of Crusaders and Jews is walking to its destruction in the blessed region of the Gulf.*<sup>217</sup>

Pakistan would not remain a safe haven for long. Its military leader, Pervez Musharraf, had sided with the West after 9/11, and the United States was putting his government under unprecedented pressure to round up al-Qa`ida suspects seeking sanctuary on its soil. Over the course of 2002, the authorities began closing in, snatching al-Qa`ida members from the streets of Pakistan’s cities.<sup>218</sup> In March, Abu Zubaydah, a conspirator in the millennium plots who had worked alongside Saif al-`Adl at Kandahar, was arrested after a shootout in Faisalabad.<sup>219</sup> Six months later, and one year after 9/11, a key facilitator in the Planes Operation, Ramzi Bin al-Shibh, was captured following another gun battle in a house with “There Is No God but Allah” scrawled on the walls in blood.<sup>220</sup> The following March, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed himself was picked up in Rawalpindi after someone in the building texted authorities to tell them he was there.<sup>221</sup> It seemed to some in al-Qa`ida’s leadership that they would have to find a different haven.

## Iran

Before being taken into custody, KSM had reportedly established a relationship between al-Qa`ida and the gangs of smugglers who haunted his ancestral homeland of Baluchistan in southwestern Pakistan. In the wake of 9/11, these criminal groups had formed a pipeline to transport al-Qa`ida members through Baluchistan and into Iran. To begin with, the Iranian National Guard had turned a blind eye to the Arabs fleeing over the border to take up residence in the cities of Iran’s east. However, after an understandable outcry from the local population, Iranian intelligence had rounded up the first wave of fighters and their families and deported them, either back to Pakistan or onward to their home countries.<sup>222</sup>



*An image of Saif al-`Adl as presented by a jihadi media outlet. The caption reads “Sheikhs of the Ummah” “Sheikh Saif al-Adl.” The image was part of a poster series published by “al-Hijarah Media” called “Sheikhs of the Ummah” released in November 2020. The image appears to be a modified version of a passport photo of al-`Adl previously published by media outlets.*

Clearly, Iran was not going to be the safe haven some in al-Qa`ida had hoped. But the fighters still hiding in Pakistan were out of options. In the months that followed the first wave of mass deportations, a second group of al-Qa`ida members and families moved into Iran and spread out between a number of cities.<sup>223</sup> As part of this second wave, Saif hid out in Shiraz with his old jihadi brothers-in-arms, Abu Khair and Abu Muhammad al-Masri, under the protection of local al-Qa`ida sympathizers.<sup>224</sup> At first, Saif and his Arab colleagues were allowed to live in Iran, free but closely monitored;<sup>225</sup> the authorities even helped some of the new arrivals get settled in the country. But Mustafa Hamid, who had been in Iran himself since having been forced out of Afghanistan after the fall of Herat, correctly speculated that the Iranians were simply biding their time, using the hiatus to gather as much intelligence as possible about the Arabs newly arrived on their soil.<sup>226</sup> Sooner or later, the authorities would have to clamp down.

Around the close of 2002, operating out of his safe house in Shiraz, Saif received word that al-Qa`ida’s cell in Saudi Arabia was negotiating to buy three Russian nuclear weapons.<sup>227</sup> For the United States and its allies, this was the nightmare scenario; in terms of its capacity for destruction and horror, a nuclear atrocity might outdo even 9/11. For al-Qa`ida, however, this led on a clutch of “loose



nukes” represented an opportunity to prove its enduring strength following the Afghan debacle. “If you can obtain such a weapon,” Saif told the cell’s leadership, “no price is too high to pay.”<sup>228</sup> Still, he counseled caution; al-Qa`ida had been fooled by fakes before. Saif therefore advised his operatives in the kingdom to fly in a Pakistani nuclear scientist to check that the devices were genuine.<sup>229</sup> Western intelligence, eavesdropping on these communications, took the potential threat seriously enough to share it not only with their Saudi counterparts but also, exceptionally, with the Iranians themselves.<sup>230</sup>

Around the same time, the Saudi cell was preparing plans of a more traditional terrorist nature. In an encrypted phone call in early March 2003, around the time Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was being taken into U.S. custody in Rawalpindi and the U.S. invasion of Iraq was getting under way, Saif reportedly gave the cell’s leaders the order to proceed with a campaign of conventional bombings inside Saudi Arabia.<sup>231</sup> It has been reported that the Saudi authorities intercepted and decrypted Saif’s phone call and furiously demanded that Iran take action to stop the al-Qa`ida leadership now operating from Iranian territory.<sup>232</sup> Whatever steps were taken, they were not enough to prevent the deaths of around three dozen people on May 12, 2003 in suicide attacks on residential compounds in Riyadh used by foreign workers.

Finally, around April 2003, the al-Qa`ida members in Iran realized that they were being watched and began taking steps to evade Iranian monitoring. This discovery, at last, forced the authorities’ hand; fearing that al-Qa`ida might slip through their fingers, Iranian intelligence moved in.<sup>233</sup> According to Mustafa Hamid, the ensuing dragnet pulled in practically every al-Qa`ida operative in the country, together with their families.<sup>234</sup> Saif al-`Adl was arrested on April 23, 2003, along with the companions who were living with him in the Shiraz safe house, Abu Khair and Abu Muhammad.<sup>235</sup>

The protean status of Saif and the other al-Qa`ida grandees during their long Iranian captivity is in many ways a reflection of the paradoxical relationship that developed between Sunni al-Qa`ida and the world’s foremost Shi`a power. On an ideological level, the two sides despised each other, and for this reason, their attempts to work together never quite came to fruition, as Saif al-`Adl was painfully aware. Moreover, Tehran had long counted bin Ladin’s Afghan allies, the Taliban, among its more troublesome regional irritants.

On the other hand, Iran had at least two reasons to hold out the possibility of better conditions or even freedom. First, al-Qa`ida or its associated groups would from time to time get hold of Iranian diplomats as hostages, and Tehran would need bargaining chips to set them free. Secondly, Iran and al-Qa`ida shared common enemies in the shape of the ‘Great Satan,’ America, and its top Arab ally, Saudi Arabia.

It was therefore in Tehran’s interests to keep the al-Qa`ida leaders alive and reasonably well until such time as they proved useful, either as leverage or as attack dogs. Thus, while al-Qa`ida frequently bemoaned the imprisonment of its people in Iran in the same breath as that of their comrades more firmly incarcerated at Guantánamo Bay or black sites, the U.S. State Department simultaneously complained that “Iran remained unwilling to bring to justice senior al-Qa`ida members it continued to detain, and

refused to publicly identify those senior members in its custody.”<sup>236 c</sup>

Immediately following their arrest in Shiraz in April 2003, Saif, Abu Khair, and Abu Muhammad found themselves hauled off to Tehran and jailed for around 20 months in the dungeons of a building belonging to Iran’s fearsome intelligence apparatus.<sup>237</sup> They were held incommunicado and without charge; but nor were they mistreated or even formally interrogated.<sup>238</sup> Around the beginning of 2005, they were moved to a spacious military compound with an apartment complex, a soccer field, and a mosque, adjacent to a training camp for one of the many Shi`a militant groups on Tehran’s payroll.<sup>239</sup> Their families were allowed to join them, although at least one fellow detainee suspected that this was no more than a ruse to allow the Iranians to keep tabs on potentially troublesome family members.<sup>240</sup> A few months later, Saif, Abu Khair, and Abu Muhammad were moved again, to an apartment block in a different part of the same military base.<sup>241</sup> The Iranian authorities had split the al-Qa`ida detainees into four groups, one of which comprised most of the senior leaders as well as members of the bin Ladin family, including Usama bin Ladin’s son Hamza and his mother.<sup>242</sup> Their new apartments, however, proved cramped, dingy, and unsanitary, to the point where some residents began to show signs of mental and physical illness.<sup>243</sup> In mid-2008, the detainees staged a protest; the authorities broke up the demonstration and beat all the prisoners, including the women.<sup>244</sup> Nevertheless, about a year later, the detainees and their families were moved once again, to a third area on the base, a walled-off section containing neat, recently refurbished houses, each with its own yard.<sup>245</sup> But this was still a prison, after all. The houses stood surrounded by three layers of fences, of which the innermost was capped with razor wire and surveillance cameras.<sup>246</sup>

The prisoners remained restive. In fact, many seem to have considered this sedentary, secluded life even further beneath their dignity than the squalor of their previous accommodations; for these hardy mujahideen, the sense of suburban comfort only heightened their humiliation. One of them told his captors he would sooner be extradited to Israel than spend any more time in the gilded cage the Iranians had prepared for them.<sup>247</sup> In March 2010, the prisoners staged what one detainee later described as “a huge act of disturbance.” This time, masked, black-clad Iranian troops were ordered in to storm the compound. The soldiers beat the men and some of the children, and hauled the senior detainees off to solitary confinement for 101 days.<sup>248</sup>

The detainees’ ability to communicate with the outside world seems to have varied tremendously over time. At first, they were held, as one U.S. official put it, “under virtual house arrest, not able to do much of anything.”<sup>249</sup> Phone calls to family members were strictly limited.<sup>250</sup> But the strictures gradually loosened, just as the detainees’ living conditions slowly improved.<sup>251</sup> The Iranian authorities eventually set up a system whereby minders could send emails on behalf of their wards, and each week permitted one prisoner to browse the web, although full internet access was not allowed.<sup>252</sup> And there were other ways of communicating with the outside. Saif al-`Adl’s father-in-law, Mustafa Hamid, who was held in Iran under looser conditions, visited the main group of

c Author’s note: It should be noted, in this connection, that the United States has never publicly identified all the detainees held at Guantánamo Bay. Comprehensive lists of their names are based in part upon leaked documents. “The Guantánamo Docket,” *New York Times*.

## “With the exception of bin Ladin himself, it is difficult to think of anyone who played a more central role in all of al-Qa`ida’s formative events than Saif al-`Adl.”

detainees every few months.<sup>253</sup> With his greater liberty, Hamid was in a position to serve as courier; indeed, this may be how Saif was able to publish his column on security and intelligence in the AQAP house magazine *Muskar al-Battar*.<sup>254</sup> Other detainees managed to escape and bring manuscripts with them, like bin Ladin’s daughter Iman, who smuggled out the text of Sulayman Abu Ghayth’s *Twenty Guidelines on the Path of Jihad*—a book highly critical of al-Zarqawi’s violence against civilians in Iraq—and eventually had it published, with a foreword by another detainee, the former al-Qa`ida religious leader Abu Hafs al-Mauritani.<sup>255</sup>

Despite their restlessness, the detainees managed to create elements of their own miniature society behind bars. The men of the compound came together four times a day for prayers and conversation at the mosque.<sup>256</sup> Requests to allow the children to attend school apparently went unmet; but Hamza bin Ladin’s mother, who is herself well educated, urged her son to pursue learning as best he could, and a group of senior detainees, including Saif, took it upon themselves to educate him in Qur’anic study, Islamic jurisprudence, and the hadith.<sup>257</sup> In an audio message recorded years later, following his own release, Hamza praises his mentors in captivity—“my sheikhs through whose hands I was educated”—a short list that includes Saif.<sup>258</sup>

Al-Qa`ida lobbied hard for the release of its top men, and by 2010, the group had acquired a bargaining chip of its own. Two years previously, Pakistani tribal elements had kidnapped an Iranian diplomat and sold him as a hostage to al-Qa`ida. Through the Haqqani Network—one of the armed groups that protected al-Qa`ida’s hub in the Waziristan region of Pakistan—a form of prisoner swap was arranged.<sup>259</sup> Under the terms of this agreement, starting in the second half of 2010, Saif was allowed to travel to Pakistan.<sup>260</sup> In July of that year, bin Ladin’s factotum, Mahmud, wrote that Saif and others, though still in prison, would soon “come to help and to carry the burden ... At present, they are relatively close, and they consult incrementally in matters.”<sup>261</sup> As a result, he was free enough to act as interim leader upon bin Ladin’s death,<sup>262</sup> securing pledges of *bay`a* from shura council members to confirm al-Zawahiri as the next permanent emir.<sup>263</sup>

However, as will become apparent in the next paragraph, it seems Saif later returned to captivity in Iran. The reason is not clear. His family, detained with him from the start,<sup>264</sup> may have stayed behind, giving him a personal incentive to return (and perhaps affording the Iranians some leverage to coax him back); but it is also possible that al-Zawahiri sent him on a mission—to Syria, Iraq, or Yemen, for example—that required him to pass through the Islamic Republic on his way. Saif had served in the capacity of an emissary before and would do so again within a few years. Perhaps he was arrested in transit.

During the second half of 2011, the Iranian authorities offered Saif and other senior al-Qa`ida figures in custody a deal: they

could leave Iran, provided they returned to their native countries. The reason for this offer is unclear, and a matter on which the author speculated in a previous article in this publication.<sup>265</sup> In any event, some senior detainees took the deal, but the three senior Egyptians—Abu Muhammad, Saif al-`Adl, and Abu Khair—all refused.<sup>266</sup> This was prudent: Mubarak had been deposed, but Egypt was still governed by the armed forces. Egypt was not a safe place for marked men. At least in Iran they were allowed to live with their families; in Egypt they might very well face execution, as the Iranians were no doubt aware.

In July 2013, al-Qa`ida kidnapped another Iranian diplomat, Nour Ahmad Nikbakht, in Yemen, home of AQAP.<sup>267</sup> In 2015, another prisoner swap was agreed, and in September of that year, five al-Qa`ida leaders were released.<sup>268</sup> Three of them, Abu Khair, Sari Shihab, and Khalid al-Aruri, made their way to Syria. Abu Khair and Sari Shihab were killed there in 2017 and 2019, respectively, while al-Aruri was still active (until his death in 2020), as will be outlined below.<sup>269</sup>

Saif al-`Adl, together with the now-deceased Abu Muhammad, remained in Iran,<sup>270</sup> although Abu Muhammad reportedly traveled periodically to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria.<sup>271</sup> (It is not clear whether Saif was accorded the same privilege.) In a letter posted to a jihadi social media channel in 2017, al-Aruri addressed their status. After the prisoner exchange, he says, they “got out of prison. So the two are not detained as is understood and implied from this word, but they are prohibited from travelling until God can grant them an exit, for they move about and live their ordinary life except for permission to travel. [They are not] in prison or incommunicado or deprived of will or the like.”<sup>272</sup> Thus, Abu Muhammad al-Masri’s apparent assassination did not take place in captivity but out on the streets of the Iranian capital.<sup>273</sup>

### Current Involvement

How involved is Saif in the day-to-day running of al-Qa`ida?<sup>274</sup> In March 2013, the aforementioned Sulayman Abu Ghayth, an al-Qa`ida operative imprisoned with them in Iran and now serving a life sentence in the United States,<sup>275</sup> told the FBI that Saif and Abu Muhammad were “beaten men ... primarily concerned with the day-to-day activities [and] welfare of their families in Iran ... they have no larger intentions ... to continue the jihad if / when they are released.”<sup>276</sup> This assessment likely represented a smoke-screen, an attempt to direct attention away from these two revered figures. At any rate, whatever his precise status within Iran, it appears that Saif did not just “continue the jihad;” he positioned himself among its elder statesmen.

In keeping with his habitual *modus operandi*, Saif rarely addresses the public, or anyone outside al-Qa`ida, directly. In August 2015, around the same time as his “release,” he apparently posted a eulogy for a former protégé, Abu Khalid al-Suri, in which he recalled training recruits alongside al-Suri in the Jihad Wahl camp in Afghanistan.<sup>277</sup>

Evidence of Saif’s more practical influence came the following year in relation to a dispute between al-Qa`ida and its Syrian affiliate. As the author wrote in a previous article:

*In July 2016, the al-Nusra Front proposed a rebranding exercise to dissociate itself from al-Qa`ida Central, in the hopes of attracting support from secular and international elements opposed to the Assad regime. According to the letter uploaded by Khalid al-Aruri (the same one mentioned*

above), *al-Aruri and Abu al-Khair, al-Zawahiri's senior representatives in the Levant, tentatively authorized the rebranding but submitted it for approval "on the same night" to Saif and Abu Mohammed, both of whom were in Iran. The two Egyptians rejected the rebranding but transmitted it onward to al-Zawahiri for a final decision. Abu al-Khair and Khalid al-Aruri then called a halt [to the rebranding] while al-Zawahiri considered the matter. (He, too, would eventually reject the rebranding, on the basis that it would not fool anybody and would just confuse potential recruits.)*<sup>278</sup>

Although Zawahiri never did sign off, al-Nusra went ahead with the name-change regardless.<sup>279</sup>

Of this reported turn of events, several aspects are interesting:<sup>280</sup>

Firstly, the rebranding plan was reportedly submitted to the Egyptians "on the same night" it was decided upon, suggesting that al-Qa`ida commanders in Syria have been and likely continue to be in direct phone or online communication with their colleagues in Iran.

Secondly, opposition from Saif and Abu Muhammad was apparently enough to prompt al-Aruri and Abu Khair to suspend their own approval of the project. This indicates the standing that Saif still enjoys within the organization as a manager and decision-maker.

Thirdly, Saif and Abu Muhammad were able to transmit the rebranding plan (together, presumably, with an indication of their opposition to it) to al-Zawahiri, a detail that shows that, from Iran, they were in contact with the overall emir, possibly through a courier network similar to the one bin Ladin was using in the months before his death.

Fourthly, al-Aruri's letter claims that Saif and Abu Muhammad were the decision-makers not only for Syria but worldwide: "And the leadership reads, hears and tracks all the fields, not just the field of al-Sham [the Levant]."<sup>281</sup> Evidence of their part in decisions outside Syria is currently lacking, but given their influence within al-Qa`ida throughout its existence, al-Aruri's assessment could well be correct.

Finally, while it might be supposed that the Egyptians' presence in Iran would complicate their ability to make decisions for al-Qa`ida as a whole, that does not seem to have been the case, at least on this occasion. This suggests that Saif would not face significant obstacles in running the organization from Iran (provided, it may safely be presumed, that he does not move to attack Iranian interests directly).

That is not to say that the government of Iran would necessarily be content to allow the overall leader of al-Qa`ida to operate from Iranian soil. Such an arrangement might, indeed, also cause suspicion within the al-Qa`ida membership itself. Moreover, Iran has previously attempted to exert influence over al-Qa`ida's actions by holding family members of bin Ladin and other senior commanders based elsewhere. The more likely outcome, should Saif succeed to the leadership, is that he would depart from Iran, leaving family members behind as collateral. As seen above, the same arrangement likely pertained with respect to Saif's temporary departure from Iran in the months preceding bin Ladin's death.

In June 2018, the U.N. team responsible for monitoring sanctions seemed to confirm the essentials of al-Aruri's account in a report to the Security Council based on member state intelligence: *Al-Qaida leaders in the Islamic Republic of Iran have grown more prominent, working with Aiman al-Zawahiri*

*and projecting his authority more effectively than he could previously. They have influenced events in the Syrian Arab Republic, countering the authority of Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani [leader of the al-Nusra Front] and causing formations, breakaways and mergers of various Al-Qaida-aligned groups in Idlib ... Member States report that Aiman al-Zawahiri, partly through the agency of senior Al-Qaida leadership figures based in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Abu Muhammad Al-Masri and Sayf Al-Adl (QDi.OO1), has been able to exert influence on the situation in north-western Syrian Arab Republic.*<sup>282</sup>

Less than a month after the Security Council made the 2018 report public, the U.S. State Department doubled the bounty for information on Saif and Abu Muhammad from \$5 million to \$10 million.<sup>283</sup> The State Department did not offer an explanation for this decision, but one may safely conclude that the U.S. government still considers Saif a dangerous leader within al-Qa`ida. Indeed, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said as much in January 2021.<sup>284</sup>

In August 2019, Saif apparently published another statement on the conflict in Syria. This time, he criticized certain salafi-jihadi groups for their alleged reliance on assistance from Turkey. These groups, he said, "must once again change the military theory to one that fits the situation."<sup>285</sup> It was a reminder of al-Qa`ida's legendary ability to adapt—as well as of Saif's status as a military strategist.

Abu Muhammad al-Masri's death in August 2020, along with reports of Aiman al-Zawahiri's illness or possible death, can only have bolstered Saif's role within al-Qa`ida. As the U.N. monitoring team tracking the global jihadi terror threat reported to the Security Council in December 2020:

*One Member State has confirmed the death of Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah el Alfi, also known as Abu Mohamed al-Masri (QDi.O19), in August, who was the deputy of Aiman Muhammed Rabi al-Zawahiri (QDi.O06). There were also reports of the death of al-Zawahiri in October, although no Member State has been able to confirm such reports to the Monitoring Team. The importance of Mohammed Salahuddin Abd El Halim Zidane, also known as Sayf Al Adl (QDi.OO1), previously assessed to be the third most senior leader of Al-Qaida, has likely increased.*<sup>286</sup>

In January 2021, around one week before the inauguration of President Biden, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a speech that Saif was placing "a new emphasis on global operations and plotting attacks all across the world."<sup>287</sup> Given the timing, there may be reason to be skeptical about Pompeo's motivation: the speech was provocatively entitled "The Iran-al-Qa`ida Axis," and it is possible that the outgoing Trump administration intended in part to complicate any effort by its successor to rejoin the Iran nuclear accords.<sup>288</sup> But it is by no means difficult to imagine that Saif, who has been with al-Qa`ida from the beginning and helped plan many of its most spectacular attacks, might seek to steer the organization back toward global terrorism.

## Conclusion

With the exception of bin Ladin himself, it is difficult to think of anyone who played a more central role in all of al-Qa`ida's formative events than Saif al-`Adl. His history as a charter member of al-Qa`ida and loyal lieutenant to Usama bin Ladin would by itself be enough to accord him the respect of the group's membership.

Certainly, he is held in higher regard than al-Zawahiri, who almost 20 years on from the EIJ merger is still widely seen as an interloper.<sup>289</sup>

But inherited glory is by no means the only attribute that makes Saif dangerous. He is a seasoned military operative, with experience in both formal armed forces and militias. He has shown on multiple occasions, culminating in the 2001 defense of Kandahar, that he is a tenacious and inventive military commander. He has experience developing effective intelligence and security protocols. He was a leading planner in the East Africa and USS Cole bombings, al-Qa`ida's two biggest pre-9/11 attacks. He has worked to develop valuable, long-standing personal connections among powerful groups from the Levant to Afghanistan.

Of no less importance is his longstanding relationship with the deceased founder of al-Qa`ida in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. As detailed above, it was Saif who gave al-Zarqawi his start as a terrorist leader, by persuading bin Ladin to give him the resources he needed to set up a training camp in Herat in 1999. Eventually, al-Zarqawi's

organization morphed into the Islamic State group that still operates today. Al-Zarqawi himself was killed in 2006, but Islamic State adherents still lionize him as their founder. A hagiographic 2005 biography of al-Zarqawi, attributed to Saif, certainly does not hurt his standing among Islamic State members, despite bin Ladin's skepticism as to its authorship.<sup>290</sup> At any rate, Saif has never publicly criticized the Islamic State—unlike al-Zawahiri, who feuded openly with its late leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>291</sup> With both al-Baghdadi out of the way and so too possibly al-Zawahiri, Saif as emir would enjoy a rare opportunity to attract some former Islamic State members back into al-Qa`ida (although, to be fair, the group's anti-Shi`a hardliners might be repulsed by Saif's pragmatic attitude toward his Iranian hosts).

Saif's expertise will continue to prove invaluable to al-Qa`ida, whatever his position in the organization or status within Iran. "With someone like Saif al-Adel," the former jihadi Noman Benotman has warned, "You don't even need him to be active himself. What he has in his head is enough."<sup>292</sup> **CTC**

## Citations

- 1 Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda appoints Ayman al Zawahiri successor to bin Laden," FDD's Long War Journal, June 16, 2011.
- 2 "Letter dtd 13 Oct 2010," Office of the Director of National Intelligence; "Statement of Sulayman Abu Ghayth," Federal Bureau of Investigation, March 3, 2013.
- 3 Yassin Musharbash, "A Top Terrorist Returns to Al-Qaida Fold," Der Spiegel, October 25, 2010.
- 4 Roggio, "Al Qaeda appoints Ayman al Zawahiri successor to bin Laden."
- 5 Ali Soufan, *Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State* (New York: Norton, 2017), chapter 5.
- 6 Nelly Lahoud, "The Merger of Al-Shabab and Qa`idat al-Jihad," *CTC Sentinel* 5:2 (2012).
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 "Statement of Sulayman Abu Ghayth," p. 15.
- 10 Adam Goldman, Eric Schmitt, Farnaz Fassihi, and Ronen Bergman, "Al Qaeda's No. 2, Accused in U.S. Embassy Attacks, Was Killed in Iran," *New York Times*, November 13, 2020.
- 11 Hassan Hassan, "Ayman Zawahiri, al-Qaeda leader & Osama bin Laden successor, died a month ago of natural causes ...." Twitter, November 13, 2020.
- 12 "Names of Individuals," AFGP-2002-800648-001-0049 (introduced as an exhibit in *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, S(7) 98 Cr. 1023).
- 13 Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Jean Sasson, *Growing Up bin Laden: Osama's Wife and Son Take Us Inside Their Secret World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), p. 154.
- 14 Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Hurras al-Din reach a new accord," FDD's Long War Journal, February 15, 2019.
- 15 Nasser al-Bahri (aka Abu Jandal) with Georges Malbrunot, *Guarding Bin Laden: My Life in al-Qaeda* (London: Thin Man Press, 2013), chapter 11.
- 16 Mohammed Abdel Rahman, quoted in Mohamed Fadel Fahmy, "Egyptian Comrades Remember Reported Leader of al Qaeda," CNN, May 20, 2011.
- 17 Harun Fazul, quoted in Nelly Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators: Al-Qaida through the Lens of Its Confidential Secretary* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2012), p. 20, n. 45.
- 18 Author's interrogation of Abu Jandal (Nasser al-Bahri).
- 19 Al-Bahri, chapter 16.
- 20 Ibid., chapters. 7, 16.
- 21 Fahmy; Ari Weisfuse, "Negotiating Oblivion: Sayf al Adl: Al Qaeda's Top Operative," Senior Thesis, Brandeis University, 2014, p. 57.
- 22 "Sayf al-Adl," Rewards for Justice, U.S. Department of State.
- 23 Al-Bahri, chapter 20.
- 24 Mohammed Hassan Ghalam Rabbani, quoted in Weisfuse, p. 38.
- 25 "FBI Most Wanted: Saif al-Adel," FBI.
- 26 Except as otherwise noted, details about Makkawi's life are derived from "Will the Real Saif al-Adel Please Stand Up?" Asharq al-Awsat, March 1, 2012.
- 27 Soufan, *Anatomy of Terror*, chapter 2.
- 28 Noman Benotman, quoted in Paisley Dodds, "Mistaken ID in FBI Most-Wanted Profile?" NBC News, June 29, 2011.
- 29 Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), p. 128.
- 30 Mustafa Hamid, "A Mother's Deep Sorrow," The Airport 90, trans., Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, n.d., p. 19.
- 31 Except as otherwise noted, details of Saif's early life are drawn from Ali Zalat, "Al-Masri Al-Youm Visits the Home of the Acting al-Qaeda Leader in Shibin al-Kawm: Family Adamant about His Death; Denies Ties to al-Qaeda," trans. Ali H. Soufan, Al-Masri al-Youm, May 23, 2011.
- 32 Ali Soufan, *Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State* (New York: Norton, 2017), pp. 165-169.
- 33 Zalat, "Al-Masri Al-Youm Visits the Home of the Acting al-Qaeda Leader in Shibin al-Kawm."
- 34 Ali Zalat, "The 'Real' Saif al-Adel: Believed Dead by Brother, 'Held in Iran' by Brother-In-Law," trans. Ali H. Soufan, Al-Masri al-Youm, February 29, 2012.
- 35 Al-Bahri, chapter 9.
- 36 Weisfuse, pp. 14-15.
- 37 Saif's brother, quoted in Zalat, "Al-Masri Al-Youm Visits the Home of the Acting al-Qaeda Leader in Shibin al-Kawm;" Sheikh, quoted in Zalat, "The 'Real' Saif al-Adel;" Egyptian intelligence source, quoted in Fahmy.
- 38 Zalat, "Al-Masri Al-Youm Visits the Home of the Acting al-Qaeda Leader in Shibin al-Kawm."
- 39 Esam Deraz, quoted in Fahmy.
- 40 Author's FBI interrogations of terrorist suspects.
- 41 Minutes of a meeting of al-Qa`ida held in August or September 1988, in J. M. Berger ed., *Beatings & Bureaucracy: The Founding Memos of al-Qaeda* (Online: Intelwire Press, 2012).
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Mustafa Hamid and Leah Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2015), chapter 7.
- 44 Fahmy.
- 45 Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators*, p. 19 n. 45.
- 46 Weisfuse, pp. 30, 32.
- 47 9/11 Commission, p. 147.
- 48 Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators*, p. 10.

- 49 Clint Watts, Jacob Shapiro, and Vahid Brown, *Al-Qaida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007), p. 120.
- 50 Weisfuse, p. 32.
- 51 *Ibid.*, pp. 26-28.
- 52 Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators*, p. 67.
- 53 The account in this paragraph is based on Hamid, pp. 18-19.
- 54 *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, S(7) 98 Cr. 1023, transcript, day 12, p. 1,642.
- 55 Hamid and Farrall, pp. 160-162.
- 56 *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.
- 57 Ali H. Soufan with Daniel Freedman, *The Black Banners* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), p. 39.
- 58 Quoted in Wright, p. 163.
- 59 *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, S(7) 98 Cr. 1023, transcript, day 2, pp. 244-245.
- 60 *Ibid.*, transcript, day 12, p. 1,642.
- 61 Weisfuse, p. 38.
- 62 *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, S(7) 98 Cr. 1023, indictment, ct. 12(i).
- 63 Thomas Joscelyn, "Iran's Proxy War Against America." Claremont Institute, October 1, 2007.
- 64 Except as otherwise noted, details in this and the following paragraph are drawn from Joscelyn, "Iran's Proxy War Against America," pp. 31-33, 42-44.
- 65 Al-Bahri, chapter 20.
- 66 Hamid and Farrall, p. 188.
- 67 Watts, Shapiro, and Brown, pp. 37-45.
- 68 "Somalia: Timeline," ABC News, January 6, 2006.
- 69 "The Five Letters to the African Corps" (AFGP-2002-600053), trans., Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.
- 70 Omar al-Sumali, "Report on activities in Somalia" (AFGP-2002-600113), trans., Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, pp. 4-5.
- 71 *Ibid.*
- 72 *United States Forces, Somalia After Action Report and Historical Overview: The United States Army in Somalia, 1992-1994* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2003).
- 73 Al-Sumali, p. 5.
- 74 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 75 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 76 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 77 *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, trial transcript, day 12, p. 1,653 (testimony of Special Agent John Anticev).
- 78 Jack Cloonan, quoted in Brian Ross, "Top Al Qaeda Leader Detained in Iran," ABC News, January 7, 2006; Ali Soufan, "Next in Line to Lead al-Qa'ida: A Profile of Abu Muhammad al-Masri," *CTC Sentinel* 12:10 (2019).
- 79 Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (New York: Grove Press, 2010), chapter 10.
- 80 Soufan, *The Black Banners*, p. 345.
- 81 Bill Roggio, "Shabaab leader recounts al Qaeda's role in Somalia in the 1990s," FDD's Long War Journal, December 31, 2011.
- 82 *United States Forces, Somalia After Action Report and Historical Overview: The United States Army in Somalia, 1992-1994, Chronology of Key Events.*
- 83 "The Five Letters to the African Corps" (AFGP-2002-600053), p. 12.
- 84 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 85 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 86 Hamid and Farrall, pp. 190-191.
- 87 Gabriel Koehler-Derrick ed., *A False Foundation? AQAP, Tribes and Ungoverned Spaces in Yemen* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2011), p. 24.
- 88 *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.
- 89 Hamid and Farrall, p. 187.
- 90 Wright, p. 152.
- 91 Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators*, p. 78.
- 92 Koehler-Derrick, pp. 24-25.
- 93 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 94 9/11 Commission, Final Report, pp. 145, 489.
- 95 *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 469.
- 96 Kevin Bell, *Usama bin Ladin's "Father Sheikh": Yunus Khalis and the Return of al-Qa'ida's Leadership to Afghanistan* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2013).
- 97 Bin Laden, bin Laden, and Sasson, chapters. 15-16.
- 98 *Ibid.*, chapters. 15-16.
- 99 Soufan, *The Black Banners*, pp. 52ff.
- 100 *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, S(7) 98 Cr. 1023, transcript, day 9, p. 1,266.
- 101 Soufan, *The Black Banners*, pp. 62-66; Hamid and Farrall, pp. 222-225.
- 102 Fahmy.
- 103 Author's interrogation of Abu Jandal (Nasser al-Bahri); author's interrogation of Salim Ahmed Hamdan.
- 104 Soufan, *The Black Banners*, p. 462.
- 105 Author's interrogation of Abu Jandal (Nasser al-Bahri).
- 106 Al-Bahri, chapter 7.
- 107 "The Long Arc of an Al-Qaeda Terrorist," Soufan Center, March 10, 2015.
- 108 Author's interrogation of Abu Jandal (Nasser al-Bahri).
- 109 Soufan, *The Black Banners*, p. 324; Weisfuse, p. 39; Bill Roggio, "The Black Guard," FDD's Long War Journal, September 12, 2006.
- 110 Al-Bahri, chapter 11; Wright, p. 288.
- 111 Al-Bahri, p. 167.
- 112 *Ibid.*, p. 841.
- 113 *Ibid.*, p. 904.
- 114 Weisfuse, p. 49.
- 115 Author's interrogation of Salim Ahmad Hamdan; al-Bahri, chapter 9.
- 116 Weisfuse, p. 49; al-Bahri, chapter 9.
- 117 Weisfuse, pp. 79-80.
- 118 Author's interrogation of Abu Jandal (Nasser al-Bahri); al-Bahri, chapter 11.
- 119 *United States v. David Hicks*, indictment, para. 19(e); author's interrogation of Ali al-Bahlul.
- 120 Author's interrogation of Abu Jandal (Nasser al-Bahri).
- 121 Weisfuse, pp. 53-54; al-Bahri, chapter 11.
- 122 Al-Bahri, chapter 11.
- 123 *Ibid.*, chapter 11.
- 124 Author's interrogation of Abu Jandal (Nasser al-Bahri); al-Bahri, chapter 10.
- 125 Weisfuse, p. 51.
- 126 Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators*, p. 23.
- 127 9/11 Commission, Final Report, pp. 115-118.
- 128 Al-Bahri, chapter 9.
- 129 Vahid Brown, "The Façade of Allegiance: Bin Ladin's Dubious Pledge to Mullah Omar," *CTC Sentinel* 3:1 (2010).
- 130 Douglas Frantz and David Rohde, "A NATION CHALLENGED: THE BOND; How bin Laden and Taliban Forged Jihad Ties," *New York Times*, November 22, 2001; "Bin Laden Shown on TV Tape Smiling at His Son's Wedding," *New York Times*, January 11, 2001.
- 131 Author's interrogation of Abu Jandal (Nasser al-Bahri); al-Bahri, chapter 12.
- 132 Hamid and Farrall, pp. 257-259.
- 133 *Ibid.*, pp. 257-259.
- 134 *Ibid.*, pp. 257-259.
- 135 Reproduced in "Compilation of Usama Bin Laden Statements, 1994-January 2004," Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), pp. 135-136.
- 136 Weisfuse, p. 57.
- 137 Author's interrogation of Salim Ahmad Hamdan.
- 138 Al-Bahri, chapter 9.
- 139 Author's recollection from FBI investigation.
- 140 Wright, p. 330.
- 141 9/11 Commission, Final Report, p. 191.
- 142 "The Secret Diaries of Abu Zubaydah," Al Jazeera America, vol. 5, entry for November 15, 2000.
- 143 9/11 Commission, Final Report, pp. 193-206.
- 144 Wright, p. 336.
- 145 Hamid and Farrall, pp. 278-279.
- 146 Wright, p. 138; author's interrogation of Salim Ahmad Hamdan.
- 147 Hamid and Farrall, pp. 278-279.
- 148 Wright, p. 128.
- 149 Hamid and Farrall, p. 216.
- 150 9/11 Commission, Final Report, pp. 145-150.
- 151 Hamid and Farrall, p. 286.
- 152 Author's interrogation of Salim Ahmad Hamdan.
- 153 Hamid and Farrall, p. 283.
- 154 Al-Bahri, chapter 20.
- 155 Hamid and Farrall, p. 280.
- 156 *Ibid.*, p. 283.

- 157 Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, quoted in Vahid Brown, *Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in al-Qaida from 1989–2006* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007), p. 18.
- 158 Hamid and Leah, p. 281.
- 159 9/11 Commission, Final Report, p. 252.
- 160 Hamid and Farrall, p. 281.
- 161 Weisfuse, p. 59.
- 162 "Letter from Saif al-Adel to Khalid Sheikh Mohammed," June 13, 2002.
- 163 Weisfuse, pp. 59-60.
- 164 Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators*, p. 26.
- 165 Author's interrogation of Salim Ahmad Hamdan; Ben Venzke and Aimee Ibrahim eds., "Al-Qaeda's Advice for Mujahideen in Iraq: Lessons Learned in Afghanistan," IntelCenter, April 14, 2003, p. 21.
- 166 Venzke and Ibrahim, p. 21.
- 167 Ibid., p. 23.
- 168 Ibid., pp. 23-24.
- 169 Ibid., pp. 23, 30.
- 170 Ibid., p. 25.
- 171 Author's interrogation of Salim Ahmad Hamdan.
- 172 Soufan, *The Black Banners*, p. 344.
- 173 Chams Eddine Zagouei, "Molenbeek, Belgium's 'Jihad Central,'" *New York Times*, November 19, 2015.
- 174 Thomas Harding, "Blast survivor tells of Massoud assassination," *Daily Telegraph*, October 26, 2001.
- 175 Thomas Joscelyn, "Egypt requests release of al Qaeda explosives expert," FDD's Long War Journal, August 2, 2012.
- 176 Wright, p. 336.
- 177 Harding.
- 178 Venzke and Ibrahim, p. 22.
- 179 Hamid and Farrall, p. 279.
- 180 Weisfuse, pp. 68-69.
- 181 Venzke and Ibrahim, p. 17.
- 182 Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Air Power Against Terror: America's Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005).
- 183 Venzke and Ibrahim, p. 18-19.
- 184 "Fighting on Two Fronts: A Chronology," Frontline, PBS, n.d.
- 185 "The Secret Diaries of Abu Zubaydah," vol. 6, entry for Ramadan 2.
- 186 Soufan, *The Black Banners*, p. 345.
- 187 Hamid and Farrall, pp. 285-286.
- 188 Ibid., pp. 285-286.
- 189 Venzke and Ibrahim, pp. 28-29.
- 190 Ibid., p. 29.
- 191 Ibid., p. 23.
- 192 Weisfuse, pp. 67-68.
- 193 Venzke and Ibrahim, pp. 30-32.
- 194 Ibid., p. 32.
- 195 Hamid and Farrall, p. 288.
- 196 Venzke and Ibrahim, p. 26.
- 197 Soufan, *The Black Banners*, p. 347.
- 198 Mohammed Abdel Rahman, quoted in Fahmy.
- 199 Weisfuse, p. 65.
- 200 Asra Q. Nomani, *The Truth Left Behind: Inside the Kidnapping and Murder of Daniel Pearl* (Washington, DC: Center for Public Integrity, 2011).
- 201 Asra Q. Nomani, "Saif al-Adel and the death of Daniel Pearl," *Foreign Policy*, May 19, 2011.
- 202 Nomani, *The Truth Left Behind*, pp. 67.
- 203 Ibid., p. 67.
- 204 Ibid., p. 67.
- 205 "Letter from Saif al-Adel to Khalid Sheikh Mohammed."
- 206 Ibid. (Emphasis added)
- 207 "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud 26 September 2010," Office of the Director of National Intelligence, pp. 3-4.
- 208 "Terror in America (29) Al-Jazeera Interview With Top Al-Qa'ida Leader Abu Haf's 'The Mauritanian,'" Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), December 14, 2001.
- 209 Venzke and Ibrahim, p. 22.
- 210 Ibid., p. 32.
- 211 Weisfuse, p. 66 (the verse in question is 3:112).
- 212 Venzke and Ibrahim, p. 17.
- 213 Ibid., p. 17.
- 214 Ibid., p. 19.
- 215 Ibid., p. 27.
- 216 Ibid., p. 20.
- 217 Ibid., p. 34.
- 218 "Letter dtd 13 Oct 2010," Office of the Director of National Intelligence, p.2.
- 219 Soufan, *The Black Banners*, p. 547; Robert Windrem, "Al-Qaida finds safe haven in Iran," NBC News, June 24, 2005.
- 220 Jason Burke, "Brutal gun-battle that crushed 9/11 terrorists," *Guardian*, September 14, 2002.
- 221 Scott Shane, "Inside a 9/11 Mastermind's Interrogation," *New York Times*, June 22, 2008; Windrem.
- 222 "Statement of Sulayman Abu Ghayth," Federal Bureau of Investigation, March 3, 2013, p. 7; "Letter dtd 13 Oct 2010," p. 1.
- 223 "Letter dtd 13 Oct 2010," p. 2.
- 224 Ibid., p. 2; "Statement of Sulayman Abu Ghayth," p. 11.
- 225 "Letter dtd 13 Oct 2010," p. 2.
- 226 Leah Farrall, "Interview with a Taliban Insider: Iran's Game in Afghanistan," *Atlantic*, November 14, 2011.
- 227 George Tenet, *At The Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), chapter 14.
- 228 Ibid.
- 229 Ibid.
- 230 Ibid.
- 231 "Will the Real Saif al-Adel Please Stand Up?"
- 232 Windrem.
- 233 "Letter dtd 13 Oct 2010."
- 234 Farrall.
- 235 "Statement of Sulayman Abu Ghayth," p. 8.
- 236 "Country Reports on Terrorism 2014," U.S. Department of State.
- 237 "Statement of Sulayman Abu Ghayth," p. 8.
- 238 Ibid., pp. 8-9; "Letter dtd 13 Oct 2010," pp. 2-3.
- 239 "Statement of Sulayman Abu Ghayth," pp. 8-9; "Letter dtd 13 Oct 2010," p. 3.
- 240 "Letter dtd 13 Oct 2010," p. 2.
- 241 "Statement of Sulayman Abu Ghayth," p. 9.
- 242 Ibid., p. 9; "Letter dtd 13 Oct 2010," p. 2.
- 243 "Statement of Sulayman Abu Ghayth," p. 12.
- 244 Ibid., p. 12.
- 245 Ibid., p. 12.
- 246 "Letter dtd 13 Oct 2010," p. 4.
- 247 Ibid., p. 4.
- 248 Ibid., p. 4.
- 249 Windrem.
- 250 "Statement of Sulayman Abu Ghayth," p. 10.
- 251 Ibid., p. 13; Tenet, chapter 14.
- 252 "Statement of Sulayman Abu Ghayth," p. 13.
- 253 Ibid., p. 13.
- 254 Watts, Shapiro, and Brown, p. 125. (The idea that the column was couriered out by Hamid is the present author's speculation.)
- 255 "Statement of Sulayman Abu Ghayth," pp. 13-15.
- 256 Ibid., p. 20.
- 257 "Letter from Hamzah to father dtd July 2009," Director of National Intelligence, p. 3.
- 258 Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Osama bin Laden's son praises al Qaeda's branches in new message," FDD's Long War Journal, August 17, 2015. For more on Hamza bin Ladin, see Ali Soufan, "Hamza bin Ladin: From Steadfast Son to Al-Qa'ida's Leader in Waiting," *CTC Sentinel* 10:8 (2017).
- 259 Dina Temple-Raston, "Key Al-Qaida Leader Owes Rise To Unlikely Ally: Iran," NPR, June 1, 2011.
- 260 Musharbash; Dodds.
- 261 "Letter to Shaykh Abu Abdallah dtd 17 July 2010," Office of the Director of National Intelligence.
- 262 Jason Burke, "Al-Qaida in the midst of fierce succession battle," *Guardian*, May 18, 2011.
- 263 Roggio, "Al Qaeda appoints Ayman al Zawahiri successor to bin Laden."
- 264 "Statement of Sulayman Abu Ghayth," p. 12.
- 265 Soufan, "Next in Line to Lead al-Qa'ida."
- 266 "Statement of Sulayman Abu Ghayth," p. 15.
- 267 "Iranian 'operation' in Yemen frees kidnapped diplomat," BBC, March 5, 2015.
- 268 Rukmini Callimachi and Eric Schmitt, "Iran Released Top Members of Al Qaeda in a Trade," *New York Times*, September 17, 2015; "Country Reports

- on Terrorism 2015," U.S. Department of State, chapter 6.
- 269 The wording in this sentence was updated very shortly after publication to make clear that al-Aruri was killed in 2020. See Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Used Missile With Long Blades to Kill Qaeda Leader in Syria," *New York Times*, June 24, 2020. For the other details in the sentence, see Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda veteran reportedly killed in Idlib," FDD's Long War Journal, August 22, 2019.
- 270 Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: 2 wanted al Qaeda leaders operate in Iran," FDD's Long War Journal, August 13, 2018.
- 271 Goldman, Schmitt, Fassihi, and Bergman.
- 272 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (III)," Pundicity, December 10, 2017.
- 273 Goldman, Schmitt, Fassihi, and Bergman.
- 274 This section is adapted in large part from the author's recent profile of Abu Muhammad al-Masri, who was detained alongside Saif in Iran: Ali Soufan, "Next in Line to Lead al-Qa`ida: A Profile of Abu Muhammad al-Masri," *CTC Sentinel* 12:10 (2019).
- 275 Benjamin Weiser, "Abu Ghaith, a Bin Laden Adviser, Is Sentenced to Life in Prison," *New York Times*, September 23, 2014.
- 276 "Statement of Sulayman Abu Ghayth," p. 15.
- 277 Thomas Joscelyn, "Senior al Qaeda leaders reportedly released from custody in Iran," FDD's Long War Journal, September 18, 2015.
- 278 Soufan, "Next in Line to Lead al-Qa`ida."
- 279 Charles Lister, "How al-Qa`ida Lost Control of its Syrian Affiliate: The Inside Story," *CTC Sentinel* 11:2 (2018); Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Al Nusrah Front rebrands itself as Jabhat Fath Al Sham," FDD's Long War Journal, July 28, 2016.
- 280 This and the next six paragraphs are drawn from Soufan, "Next in Line to Lead al-Qa`ida," with some amendments.
- 281 Al-Tamimi.
- 282 "Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations Security Council, June 27, 2018, paragraphs 10, 18-19.
- 283 Rebecca Kheel, "US doubles reward for info on al Qaeda leaders in 1998 embassy attacks," Hill, August 8, 2018.
- 284 Michael R. Pompeo, "The Iran-al-Qa`ida Axis," speech at the National Press Club, January 12, 2021.
- 285 Thomas Joscelyn, "Wanted al Qaeda leader warns of Turkish influence on jihad in Syria," FDD's Long War Journal, August 15, 2019.
- 286 "Twenty-seventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations Security Council, December 31, 2020, paragraph 9.
- 287 Pompeo, "The Iran-al-Qa`ida Axis."
- 288 "Al-Qaeda: Pompeo says Iran is jihadist network's 'new home base,'" BBC, January 12, 2021.
- 289 Soufan, *Anatomy of Terror*, chapter 5.
- 290 "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud 26 September 2010," Office of the Director of National Intelligence.
- 291 Soufan, *Anatomy of Terror*, chapter 7.
- 292 Musharbash.

# The Evolution of the Boogaloo Movement

By Matthew Kriner and Jon Lewis

**The Boogaloo movement, which coalesced online in late 2019 and manifested offline in 2020, has quickly evolved into a significant domestic violent extremist threat. It has also proven to be deeply challenging for online monitoring and evaluation due to its adaptive use of memes and coded language that blurs the lines between irony and incitement. Offline, a disrupted violent plot in Nevada targeting a racial justice protest, acts of accelerationist-inspired violence in California, and attempts in Minnesota of material support to a foreign terrorist organization underscore the gravity of the diverse threat the Boogaloo movement poses—and the need to take it seriously. The Boogaloo movement has resonated within the United States’ domestic extremist landscape through appeals to the nation’s revolutionary origins. And an accelerationist faction within Boogaloo has sought to instigate decentralized insurrectionary violence. As a big-tent movement with the ability to quickly adapt its messaging, its presence, fractured or not, will likely continue in 2021 and beyond.**

January 2021 marked one year of overt, offline Boogaloo movement activity in the United States by the movement’s members, often referred to as the “Boogaloo Bois.”<sup>a</sup> The movement has gained national notoriety in that time, due as much to its eclectic aesthetic of colorful Hawaiian-themed apparel as its connection to disrupted violent plots—namely, the attempted kidnapping of a sitting U.S. governor.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, members of the movement were accused of plotting to use Molotov cocktails during a Black Lives Matter protest, conspiring to materially support Hamas, and murdering law enforcement personnel.<sup>2</sup>

a The Boogaloo name derives from a meme connected to the cult-classic ‘80s movie *Breakin’ 2: Electric Boogaloo*. Its current iteration grew from 4chan’s /k/ weapons board. See Alex Newhouse and Nate Gunesch, “The Boogaloo Movement Wants To Be Seen as Anti-Racist, But It Has a White Supremacist Fringe,” Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism, May 30, 2020.

*Matthew Kriner is an analyst of far-right extremism and radicalization. Twitter: @mattkriner*

*Jon Lewis is a Research Fellow at the Program on Extremism, where he studies violent extremist organizations in the United States. Twitter: @Jon\_Lewis27*

© 2021 Matt Kriner, Jonathan Lewis

The rapid evolution of the Boogaloo from niche internet forum meme to mainstream mobilization narrative in hardened violent extremist milieus suggests it presents a unique security challenge for both social media companies and U.S. law enforcement agencies going forward. The Boogaloo movement’s ambiguous, broad framing of American revolutionary ideals cloaks an inherent message of necessary violence against the U.S. government as a perceived authoritarian threat. This article will examine the history of how the Boogaloo movement arrived at its current state, detail the movement’s embrace of insurrectionary violence offline, provide a brief forecast of the movement, and suggest responses to the threat.

## The Appeal of the Boogaloo Movement

Boogaloo memes circulated online as early as 2012, before finding traction in 4chan’s<sup>b</sup> weapons and politics boards around the topic of a second American civil war.<sup>3</sup> By the fall of 2019, the memes’ use had spread with purpose across Facebook, Twitter, Discord, and Telegram messaging platforms, often seeded from established white supremacy, anti-government, and accelerationist spaces.<sup>c</sup> In 2020, offline Boogaloo mobilization, including acts of violence, markedly increased in response to a series of culturally divisive topics—gun control laws, social justice protests over law enforcement use of force, coronavirus public health lockdowns, and the 2020 presidential election.<sup>4</sup> Despite its modern eclectic styling, the Boogaloo’s aesthetic and narratives have struck a resonant chord with sections of American society looking for an alternative to hyper-partisan politics against a backdrop of heightened uncertainty and existential fears related to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup> It also draws on established extremist milieus, creating defined strains within the Boogaloo movement: white supremacists, neo-Nazis, militia movement members, accelerationists, and ultra-libertarians, among others.<sup>6</sup>

In this article, the authors suggest that the Boogaloo is best conceptualized as a decentralized, anti-authority movement composed of a diverse range of actors mobilized in part by adherents’ belief that they are following in the footsteps of the United States’

b 4chan is an anonymous image board that has gained popularity in some circles and is known for its lack of moderation. It has helped foster several extreme countercultural communities, including white supremacists, QAnon, and others. See Rob Arthur, “The Man Who Helped Turn 4chan Into the Internet’s Racist Engine,” VICE, November 2, 2020.

c Accelerationism is an ideologically agnostic doctrine of violent and non-violent actions taken to exploit contradictions intrinsic to a political system to “accelerate” its destruction through the friction caused by its features. See Jade Parker, “Accelerationism in America: Threat Perceptions,” GNET Insights, February 4, 2020, and Zack Beauchamp, “Accelerationism: the obscure idea inspiring white supremacist killers around the world,” Vox, November 18, 2019.



founders and participating in a revolution against tyranny.<sup>7</sup> Myth-driven violent and insurrectionary Boogaloo factions aim to usher in or respond to societal collapse, specifically through threats and targeted violence against law enforcement personnel and government figures.<sup>8</sup> For many anti-government organizations, as well as the Boogaloo Bois, law enforcement agencies such as the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) represent quintessential government abuse of natural rights. As states have expanded legal means to temporarily confiscate firearms of individuals who pose a threat to the public, that animus has shifted to state and local law enforcement agencies for their role in enforcing those laws.

Moreover, the consistent narrative focus on contention with the current political system and perceived institutional failures allows unlikely partnerships, coalitions, and conflicting ideologies to coincide in one movement. The movement's eclectic branding has broad appeal and can be quickly adapted to accommodate nearly any condition of perceived injustice stemming from government action or policy.<sup>9</sup> This includes local Boogaloo efforts to align with Black Lives Matter demonstrators angered at law enforcement. However, despite some elements of the Boogaloo milieu loudly proclaiming support for Black Lives Matter surrounding police shootings and seeking partnerships with local Black Lives Matter chapters, the authors' analysis showed these coalitional engagements to be limited in both scope and presence geographically, and frequently rejected by local Black Lives Matter chapters.<sup>4</sup>

The Boogaloo movement's broad appeal stems from a set of abstract virtues, or ideographs, that are deeply familiar to many Americans: liberty, rejection of government abuses, and disgust at authoritarianism.<sup>10</sup> Boogaloo's corrupted conceptualization of these ideographs is largely manifested through a crowdsourced myth-building in the form of memes, and derive political and moral legitimacy by tapping into (and distorting and hijacking) the United States' founding narrative of a struggle against tyranny.<sup>11</sup><sup>e</sup> Furthermore, the Boogaloo has rapidly incorporated current events into its mobilization efforts, drawing disparate interests into one

broad river targeting a perceived tyrannical system.<sup>f</sup> And despite varied paths to the Boogaloo milieu and the ideological differences within it, Boogaloo adherents largely maintain alignment over political grievances such as over gun control measures—particularly through the use of so-called red flag laws<sup>g</sup>—as well as “no-knock” raids and law enforcement use of force against unarmed citizens.<sup>12</sup> These shared grievances both feed off of and add to the existing Boogaloo mythos that firearms and violent revolution are the only remaining solution to combat perceived tyranny or accelerate societal collapse.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the mythos primes the targeted audience with the belief that insurrectionary violence or civil war are not only imminent, but inevitable and necessary.<sup>14</sup>

### The Role of Social Media

In each stage of the Boogaloo's evolution, social media has served as a means of narrative dispersion, a collective myth-building space, and an organizing point for networks dedicated to violent offline activity.<sup>15</sup> As online Boogaloo activity became increasingly linked to acts of offline violence, social media platforms first took action in May 2020 to limit Boogaloo search results, halt algorithm recommendations of Boogaloo groups, and ban “the use of Boogaloo and related terms when they accompany pictures of weapons and calls to action.”<sup>16</sup> Despite these efforts, Boogaloo activity proved to be particularly adaptable, and largely kept ahead of content moderation actions.<sup>17</sup> Under increased scrutiny, Boogaloo social media groups, pages, and accounts altered their names (such as “Big Igloo” from Boogaloo) and created back up presences and advertised alternative platform options (e.g., Telegram) in anticipation of bans. The authors' research found that Boogaloo members adjusted their own behaviors by cloaking calls to violence with inside jokes and memes and leaned on existing anti-government narratives to amplify their newly established vernacular. In doing so, the nascent Boogaloo movement displayed its adaptive nature.

Analysis by the authors has revealed that while some Boogaloo groups adapted and modulated positions on violence in anticipation of bans, others followed in the footsteps of their extremist contemporaries and migrated to Telegram,<sup>18</sup> where their activity

d The authors' research also showed that not every individual who identified with Boogaloo symbolism, its ideographs, or engaged with its memes online held an affinity for or endorsed the violent agenda of insurrectionary and accelerationist factions of the Boogaloo movement. A limited few even expressed seemingly genuine solidarity with Black Lives Matter protestors, both online and offline at demonstrations.

e Through invocations of familiar Revolutionary War themes, Boogaloo narratives blur the edges between constitutionally protected dissent and threatened insurrection. Phrases and symbols that evoke the morally sound actions of George Washington and the Continental Army against the egregious edicts of King George are applied wantonly to contemporary hot-button political issues.

f Boogaloo adherents dressed in the movement's conspicuous attire have appeared at moments of severe societal tension under the guise of protecting protestors or standing by for, as they describe it, the moment “sh\*t hits the fan” and a civil conflict kicks off. Boogaloo adherents speaking to the media have also described how sympathies with demonstrators perceived as sharing some of their grievances and frustrations with federal and local government overreach spurred their mobilization. From Arizona to Texas to Minneapolis and beyond, Boogaloo adherents featured heavily in the spring 2020 anti-lockdown protests and summer unrest in response to George Floyd's death. While most were ostensibly awaiting the start of societal collapse that they believed would be brought on by the unrest, some claimed to be protecting demonstrators from potential police brutality. See, for example, Robert Kuznia, Drew Griffin, and Curt Devine, “Gun-toting members of the Boogaloo movement are showing up at protests,” CNN, June 4, 2020, and “Boogaloo Supporters Animated By Lockdown Protests, Recent Incidents,” Anti-Defamation League, May 22, 2020.

g Red flag laws are state laws that provide law enforcement with a legal mechanism to temporarily restrict firearm access to individuals determined to be a public safety risk. See Timothy Williams, “What Are ‘Red Flag’ Gun Laws, and How Do They Work?” *New York Times*, August 6, 2019, and *Seattle Police Department v. Kaleb James Cole*, “Petition for Extreme Risk Protection Order,” King County Superior Court Clerk, September 26, 2019.



*A group tied to the Boogaloo Bois holds a rally as they carry firearms at the Michigan State Capitol in Lansing, Michigan, on October 17, 2020. (Jeff Kowalsky/AFP via Getty Images)*

increasingly overlapped with accelerationist, radical firearms communities<sup>h</sup> and survivalist-themed Telegram channels.<sup>19</sup> This further exacerbated the insurrectionary nature of Boogaloo narratives. On June 30, 2020, Facebook belatedly conducted a strategic network disruption against a specific network of Boogaloo accounts, pages, and groups under its Dangerous Individuals and Organizations policy.<sup>20</sup> In its announcement, Facebook noted that “this network uses the term boogaloo but is distinct from the broader and loosely-affiliated boogaloo movement because it actively seeks to commit violence.”<sup>21</sup> In total, Facebook removed “220 Facebook accounts, 95 Instagram accounts, 28 Pages and 106 Groups” and “400 additional groups and over 100 other Pages for violating our Dangerous Individuals and Organizations policy as they hosted similar content as the violent network.” At the same time, Facebook claimed to have removed 800 Boogaloo posts that violated its policy regarding Violence and Incitement.<sup>22</sup>

In June 2020, Discord also took considerable action, removing a Boogaloo server for “threatening and encouraging violence” and “deleted the accounts of all 2,258 members” of the server.<sup>23</sup> A fallback subreddit<sup>i</sup> for the Discord server was subsequently

removed by the messaging platform Reddit.<sup>24</sup> The authors found that fallbacks and carbon copies became a regular occurrence in the digital Boogaloo ecosystem, particularly as violent offline incidents with connection to the Boogaloo movement became more frequent and group members expected ‘censorship.’ Individuals interested in the Boogaloo used social media to meet like-minded individuals, find groups to join, and establish networks; those who wanted to discuss violence and/or engaging in violent acts gradually moved their revolutionary desires into private chats.<sup>25</sup>

At Boogaloo’s online apogee, hundreds of Boogaloo-branded groups, chats, and pages operated liberally, though diversely, across social media platforms with some larger groups and pages containing tens of thousands of followers.<sup>26</sup> Boogaloo memes, which resonate with more than just niche extremist audiences, found fertile ground on Facebook, Twitter, and encrypted communications platforms like Discord and Telegram.<sup>27</sup> Examples of popular Boogaloo-styled memes include anti-government, anti-law enforcement, and anti-ATF motifs, which draw on pre-existing narratives surrounding events such as Ruby Ridge, Waco, and other local efforts of resistance to federal government authority.<sup>28</sup>

With Facebook and Discord’s content moderation efforts, Boogaloo meme presence fell considerably on the platforms, though the authors’ research showed they can still be readily found on Twitter and Telegram. As the movement’s evolution progressed, debates over the future of the movement ignited, particularly over its portrayal by the media as racist, and focused around the role of violence, and potential coalitional partnerships with the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, some Facebook

h These communities, distinct from the vast majority of gun owners and enthusiasts, are characterized by a heavy focus on illicit firearms, firearm modifications, and a fervent opposition to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

i A subreddit is a user-created Reddit community organized around a specific theme.

groups and pages belonging to Boogaloo sympathizers explicitly sought to commercialize<sup>j</sup> the Boogaloo aesthetic, through the exploitation of specific ‘martyr’ figures such as Duncan Lemp<sup>k</sup> as well as the promotion of merchandise branded with Boogaloo imagery and memes. More concerningly, some Boogaloo movement members reportedly began purchasing illegal 3D-printed firearms components that were advertised on Boogaloo-themed Facebook pages.<sup>30</sup>

Identification with the Boogaloo movement and aesthetic is both a pathway into and an evolution away from traditional anti-government mobilization. Social media and contemporary internet forums such as 4chan have played a central role in that dynamic for the Boogaloo movement. Low entry barriers to Boogaloo ‘membership’ allow new demographics to latch onto what for them is a comfortable and relatable corner of Boogaloo culture, which enables established Boogaloo influencers to mold or leverage external groups’ narratives to their purpose and designs.<sup>31</sup> Unlike counterparts such as the Proud Boys, and based on what is known from court records and primary source review, Boogaloo ‘membership’ largely exists as an informal function of individual and clique-based organizing and is not a product of movement-wide initiation rituals. Additionally, the authors’ analysis revealed that leadership roles in the Boogaloo movement are often nebulous and limited to self-declared leadership of cliques and local organizing that frequently overlap with established militia and libertarian networks. While the Boogaloo ideology is not yet fully formed, the nascent movement’s memes, iconography, and ideographs resonate heavily with the more established militia movement and libertarian milieu.<sup>32</sup>

In recent months, the authors’ analysis found a growing presence of Instagram and YouTube Boogaloo “influencers” leaning into private security and gun manufacturing motifs and doing so with fewer explicit references to Boogaloo aesthetics (e.g., Boogaloo flags, Hawaiian shirts, co-opted patriotic and Revolutionary War symbols). In addition, the authors detected an increasing presence of Three Percenters and Oath Keepers branding alongside Boogaloo narratives, as well as a growing number of Boogaloo members with a fondness for Russian and Eastern European firearms manufacturers.<sup>33</sup> True to its adaptive nature, the Boogaloo

movement appears to be evolving both online and offline.

### Offline Mobilization and Violence

Offline Boogaloo mobilization surged in 2020, as its members mobilized ostentatiously, both peacefully and violently, largely in response to the death of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and COVID-19 lockdown measures.<sup>34</sup> During each mobilization, Facebook’s online spaces played a pivotal role in connecting disparate individuals with varying backgrounds and ideologies.<sup>35</sup> This nexus of online networking and offline mobilization breathed renewed vigor into this faction of the American anti-government, anti-authority movement.

The first prominent instance of organized offline mobilization by members of the Boogaloo movement came during Virginia’s January 2020 Lobby Day in Richmond, where thousands of Americans organized by Second Amendment groups gathered in opposition to potential state gun control legislation. Armed in defiance of Governor Northam’s emergency order, a hodgepodge of more than 22,000 individuals made their opposition to Northam’s proposed gun control legislation known.<sup>1</sup>

Among those gathered in Richmond were armed extreme far-right activists, militia members, as well as the now familiar sight of heavily armed, Hawaiian shirt clad individuals affiliated with the Boogaloo movement, at least some of whom believed the day might result in the opening scenes of a new American civil war.<sup>36</sup> While the unique wardrobe choice raised eyebrows, offline mobilization of individuals self-identifying with the insurrectionary strain of the Boogaloo movement would continue throughout 2020, often in situations of civil unrest and with the purported goal of inciting violence to accelerate societal collapse—though not always clad in the distinctive attire.<sup>37</sup>

The first and only lethal act of domestic terrorism attributed to members of the Boogaloo movement brought national attention to the fledgling offline group, and evidenced the capabilities and

j The financing and commercialization of domestic extremism remains an under-researched area of concern and an enduring indicator of the Boogaloo’s anti-institutional tendencies. The efforts of Boogaloo members to commercialize the aesthetic and conduct legal business aimed at attracting those affiliated with—and in furtherance of—Boogaloo ideological principles illustrate how the movement has almost become a lifestyle to some. Furthermore, the usage of peer-to-peer financial apps like PayPal and digital currencies like Bitcoin by violent and non-violent actors in the movement illustrates the monitoring challenges posed by decentralized extremist movements such as the Boogaloo. See, for example, Nick R. Martin, “Selling the boogaloo,” Informant, June 29, 2020.

k Duncan Lemp was a 21-year-old Maryland resident killed in March 2020 by state law enforcement during a “no-knock” raid related to an illicit firearms investigation. Lemp was subsequently lionized by many in the Boogaloo movement as a victim of state violence deployed to suppress his constitutional right to bear arms. For more, see Dan Morse, “Maryland SWAT officer cleared in fatal shooting of Duncan Lemp during no-knock raid,” *Washington Post*, December 31, 2020; Will Sommer, “Anti-Lockdown Protesters Now Have a 21-Year-Old Martyr,” *Daily Beast*, May 11, 2020; and Tess Owen, “Md. man killed by officer during raid had door booby-trapped to fire at anyone entering, police say,” *Washington Post*, March 17, 2020.

1 While the Lobby Day came and went without violence, law enforcement action appears to have disrupted a serious plot by a group of accelerationist neo-Nazis affiliated with The Base. On January 16, 2020, one day before Lobby Day in Richmond, Virginia, Brian Lemley, Jr., Patrik Mathews, and William Bilbrough were arrested while allegedly plotting to commit a domestic terror attack during the Lobby Day event. Testimony from JJ MacNab before the House Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism claimed that the group was planning to “shoot into the crowd to start a violent, chaotic melee.” Despite the evidence presented by the government with respect to the alleged plot, the three were charged with only firearms and alien-related violations (stemming from Mathews’ alleged illegal entry into the United States from Canada). William Bilbrough pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 60 months in prison in December 2020. Lemley, Jr., and Mathews have pleaded not guilty. See “Three Alleged Members of the Violent Extremist Group ‘The Base’ Facing Federal Firearms and Alien-Related Charges,” U.S. Department of Justice, January 16, 2020; *USA v. Brian Mark Lemley, Jr., Patrik Jordan Mathews, and William Garfield Bilbrough IV*, “Indictment,” District of Maryland, 2020; *USA v. Brian Mark Lemley, Jr., Patrik Jordan Mathews, and William Garfield Bilbrough IV*, “Motion for Detention Pending Trial,” District of Maryland, 2020; *USA v. William Garfield Bilbrough IV*, “Plea Agreement,” District of Maryland, 2020; *USA v. William Garfield Bilbrough IV*, “Judgment,” District of Maryland, 2020; Timothy Williams, Adam Goldman, and Neil MacFarquhar, “Virginia Capital on Edge as F.B.I. Arrests Suspected Neo-Nazis Before Gun Rally,” *New York Times*, January 16, 2020; and JJ MacNab, “Assessing the Threat from Accelerationists and Militia Extremists,” Testimony before the House Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism (House Committee on Homeland Security), July 16, 2020.

intent of accelerationist Boogaloo actors to commit acts of targeted violence in the homeland.<sup>38</sup> On the evening of May 29, 2020, a drive-by shooting targeted Federal Protective Service (FPS) officers outside the Ronald V. Dellums Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Oakland, California.<sup>39</sup> The alleged perpetrators, Steven Carrillo and Robert Justus, Jr., shot and killed one FPS officer and wounded a second.<sup>40</sup> The government alleges that Carrillo, then an active-duty member of the United States Air Force assigned to Travis Air Force Base,<sup>n</sup> met Justus in Boogaloo-themed Facebook groups.<sup>41</sup> The criminal complaint notes that in a Facebook exchange with Justus and another user on May 28, Carrillo posted, “It’s on our coast now, this needs to be nationwide. It’s a great opportunity to target the specialty soup bois. Keep that energy going.”<sup>42</sup>

Following his surrender to law enforcement, Justus is alleged to have made statements to federal law enforcement that suggest the pair arranged to meet on May 29 “for Carrillo to give Justus a ride to protests that were taking place in Oakland.”<sup>43</sup> Justus also allegedly indicated that he drove the white van used in the shooting, and that Carrillo had instructed him to remove the vehicle’s license plates prior to the attack.<sup>44</sup>

m In the wake of the shooting, then-Acting Deputy Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security Ken Cuccinelli claimed that “[w]hen someone targets a police officer or a police station with an intention to do harm and intimidate—that is an act of domestic terrorism.” Furthermore, Carrillo was charged with murder and attempted murder “of a person assisting an officer or employee of the United States government” in violation of 18 U.S. Code § 1114. Justus is charged with aiding and abetting Carrillo in these acts, which carry the same penalties. When an action in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 1114 is “calculated to influence or affect the conduct of government by intimidation or coercion, or to retaliate against government conduct,” it is considered to be a federal crime of terrorism within U.S. code. The actions of Carrillo and Justus, as alleged by the government, would appear to fall within the definition of a federal crime of terrorism. Daisy Nguyen, “Federal officer killed guarding courthouse near protest,” Associated Press, May 30, 2020; “Two Defendants Charged with Murder and Aiding and Abetting in Slaying of Federal Protective Service Officer at Oakland Courthouse Building,” U.S. Department of Justice, June 16, 2020; “Federal crime of terrorism,” Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law; Jon Lewis, “Rethinking Domestic Terrorism Law After Boogaloo Movement Attacks,” Lawfare, July 27, 2020.

n Public reporting further suggests that Carrillo was transferred to Travis AFB in 2018, where “he was a member of the 60th Security Force Squadron and team leader of the Phoenix Ravens, a specially-trained security force that protects aircraft from terrorist and ‘criminal threats.’” See Julia Sulek, “Santa Cruz deputy killing: Suspect was a Travis airman,” *Reporter*, June 9, 2020.

o The complaint notes that “‘soup bois’ may be a term that followers of the Boogaloo movement use to refer to federal law enforcement agents; I know that federal law enforcement agencies are sometimes referred colloquially to as ‘alphabet soup’ agencies. I believe that Justus’ response ‘let’s boogie’ is a statement of agreement and affirmation to engage in attacks on law enforcement personnel in accordance with Boogaloo ideology.” *USA v. Steven Carrillo*, “Criminal Complaint.”

p This statement was proffered by Robert Justus to FBI agents during a consensual interview. Justus traveled to the federal building in San Francisco on June 11, 2020, in order to “provide the FBI with information about the white van in Oakland.” While the FBI has not expressed doubt as to the veracity of the core of Justus’ claims, the affiant notes that “Based on my training, experience, and review of the evidence in this case, I do not believe Justus did not want to participate in the murder as he claimed during his statement to FBI agents ... Justus did not come forward to report his involvement with CARRILLO in the Oakland murder until after the murder of the SCSO deputy and arrest of CARRILLO. I therefore believe Justus’ statement to the FBI was a false exculpatory narrative carefully crafted to fit what Justus believed to be the state of the evidence.” *USA v. Steven Carrillo*, “Criminal Complaint.”

The government further alleges that in the aftermath of the shooting at the courthouse, Carrillo ambushed law enforcement officers at his home in Ben Lomond during their investigation into the white van used in the May 29 shooting.<sup>45</sup> Carrillo reportedly shot two sheriff’s deputies—one fatally—as they approached his residence, detonated a pipe bomb, and fled the property.<sup>46</sup> Wounded in the exchange with law enforcement, Carrillo reportedly carjacked a vehicle, which he drove for a short distance before abandoning it, running toward the highway, and attempting to carjack a second vehicle before being taken into custody.<sup>47</sup> Law enforcement examination of the carjacked vehicle discovered a series of phrases on the hood of the car, written in Carrillo’s own blood from his gunshot wound: “BOOG,” “I become unreasonable,”<sup>r</sup> and “stop the duopoly.”<sup>s</sup> Carrillo, charged federally with one count each of murder and attempted murder of a person assisting an officer or employee of the U.S. government, and Justus, charged with aiding and abetting these two offenses, have pleaded not guilty and are proceeding with mitigation factors for the Department of Justice’s Death Penalty Protocol.<sup>t</sup> Subsequent federal law enforcement investigations have uncovered an interconnected online network of Boogaloo movement supporters that coordinated efforts to further their violent offline goals in Minneapolis and elsewhere.

Michael Robert Solomon and Benjamin Ryan Teeter, who were charged in September 2020 in the District of Minnesota for their attempted provision of material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization, are accused of organizing their offline mobilization efforts on Facebook on May 26, 2020, in response to

q The complaint more extensively details the series of events leading to the arrival of law enforcement personnel at Carrillo’s Ben Lomond residence. A witness reported a white Ford van abandoned several miles from Carrillo’s property with what “appeared to be ammunition, firearms, and bomb-making equipment” inside. This van (a 1992 white Ford van) was later assessed to be the van used in the May 29 courthouse shooting. *USA v. Steven Carrillo*, “Criminal Complaint.”

r “I become unreasonable” is likely a reference to Marvin Heemeyer, who destroyed numerous buildings in the town of Granby, Colorado, with a modified, armored bulldozer in 2004. Heemeyer, who had a longstanding feud with town officials, left behind a note that included the line, “I was always willing to be reasonable until I had to be unreasonable.” Heemeyer, and this phrase in particular, became a popular meme in the more virulent “/k/” weapons board of 4chan and eventually spread to Boogaloo meme spaces. See Patrick Brower, “Brower: Meme inspired by Heemeyer becomes extremist rallying cry,” *Ski-Hi News*, June 26, 2020; “Man who bulldozed through Colo. town is dead,” *NBC News*, June 4, 2004; “‘I became unreasonable’: Bloody message scrawled on car at Ben Lomond ambush,” *Mercury News*, June 12, 2020; Brandy Zadrozny, Ben Collins, and Andrew Blankstein, “Man charged in deputy ambush scrawled extremist ‘Boogaloo’ phrases in blood,” *Yahoo News*, June 11, 2020.

s “Stop the duopoly” is a common refrain among anti-government extremists and accelerationists who perceive the United States’ two-party polity as emblematic of unending systemic corruption.

t Carrillo’s state trial was recently delayed until “early 2021” to allow his federal case to progress. See Melissa Hartman, “Steven Carrillo and Joseph Keeler preliminary hearings pushed to March,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, December 12, 2020. The federal case against both Carrillo and Justus, in turn, has been slowed by COVID-19 protocols, extensive discovery, and the Department of Justice’s Death Penalty Protocol. Nate Gartrell, “Biden has pledged to end federal death penalty, but lawyers for accused Boogaloo-affiliated cop killers say they’ll believe it when they see it,” *Mercury News*, February 1, 2021.

the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota.<sup>48 u</sup> Following their arrival in Minneapolis, Solomon and Teeter allegedly began meeting with a confidential human source (CHS) who they believed to be a member of Hamas. Court records indicate Solomon and Teeter “believed their anti-U.S. government views aligned with those of Hamas, a foreign terrorist organization, and actively developed plans to carry out violence in Minnesota and elsewhere.”<sup>v</sup> After a series of meetings with the purported Hamas members, the pair are alleged to have manufactured suppressors they believed were for Hamas in exchange for funds to “recruit members and for the purchase of land for a compound to train Boogaloo Bois.”<sup>49 w</sup>

Teeter, who has since pleaded guilty, admitted that they delivered five suppressors to what they believed were Hamas members, as well as a 3D-printed “drop in auto sear” (DIAS), a combination of parts designed to convert a legal, semi-automatic rifle to an illegal, fully automatic machine gun.<sup>50 x</sup> The government alleges that the DIAS Teeter provided to what he thought was Hamas was purchased from Timothy Watson, a Boogaloo movement member, who was charged in West Virginia in October 2020 with firearms charges stemming from his alleged illegal possession, manufacture, and transfer of machine gun conversion devices in the form of ‘drop in auto sears.’<sup>51</sup> Watson’s criminal complaint details that a cooperating defendant in the Hamas material support case positively identified the “drop in auto sear that he ordered from portablewallhanger.com” (Watson’s business).<sup>52 y</sup>

- u In sum, the government alleges that Solomon and Teeter offered their services to individuals they believed to be members of Hamas due primarily to the alignment of their anti-U.S. government sentiments and the potential for mutual gain. The primary motivations appear to be solely opportunistic and financially motivated, and the pair have not evidenced any known affiliation with the ideological goals of Hamas. “Two Self-Described ‘Boogaloo Bois’ Charged with Attempting to Provide Material Support to Hamas,” U.S. Department of Justice, September 4, 2020.
- v These alleged violent plots were frequently discussed by the pair during recorded conversations with the purported members of Hamas. The criminal complaint details a plot “to destroy a specific county courthouse located in Northern Minnesota.” In one such discussion, Solomon allegedly claimed that “I’m also a redneck, nobody notices a redneck. But basically like, we’ve, we’ve [sic] got the ideas, we’ve got you know, what we wanna do, we’ve got training and we’ve got knowledge...and we have a network.” *USA v. Michael Robert Solomon and Benjamin Ryan Teeter*, “Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint,” District of Minnesota, 2020; Seamus Hughes and Jon Lewis, “Why the FBI had to pretend Hamas wanted to plot with ‘boogaloo boys,’” *Washington Post*, September 9, 2020.
- w The complaint further notes that the pair “expressed a desire to employ themselves as ‘mercenaries’ for Hamas as a means to generate cash” for their movement, and stated that they would be particularly valuable to Hamas as homegrown extremists as “two American-born white boys.” The complaint details that “CHS informed TEETER in a recorded conversation that the suppressors would specifically be delivered to the militant wing of Hamas.” The complaint further describes the goals of Solomon and Teeter in entering into this business relationship: “SOLOMON and TEETER proposed creating a store front where they could build suppressors and rifles in the back while maintaining a legitimate-appearing maintenance business. In return for a loan from Hamas to start this business, SOLOMON and TEETER reiterated the idea of giving Hamas a discount on suppressors and rifles.” *USA v. Michael Robert Solomon and Benjamin Ryan Teeter*, “Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint,” District of Minnesota, 2020.
- x Following Teeter’s guilty plea, Solomon set a change of plea hearing set for March 7, 2021.
- y Given the timeline and case specifics, the authors assess that the unnamed cooperating defendant described in Watson’s complaint is likely Benjamin Ryan Teeter, who pleaded guilty in the material support to Hamas case in the District of Minnesota as detailed within the complaint.

Solomon and Teeter were not the only Boogaloo movement members who were alleged to have purchased an illegal DIAS: Watson’s PayPal transaction logs showed a January 2020 purchase of a DIAS by Steven Carrillo.<sup>53</sup> Carrillo purchased a ‘portable wall hanger’ from Watson’s business, which is alleged to have had 800 clients in 50 states.<sup>54 z</sup> Watson’s business purported to sell 3D-printed ‘Portable Wall Hangers,’ a simple plastic hook and tab on which one could hang car keys. However, according to the criminal complaint, these wall hangers were designed and sold for the true purpose of functioning as an illegal DIAS. These tools, the government alleges, were advertised on Boogaloo-themed Facebook pages, and Watson’s website even included a note that “10% of all Portable Wall Hanger proceeds for March 2020 will be donated directly to the Justice for Duncan Lemp GoFundMe fundraiser.”<sup>55 aa</sup>

Also alleged to be present in Minneapolis during the civil unrest in the wake of George Floyd’s death, and charged separately from Solomon and Teeter, was Ivan Harrison Hunter.<sup>56 ab</sup> According to the charging documents, Hunter communicated with Teeter through Facebook in preparation for his interstate travel from Texas to Minnesota.<sup>57 ac</sup> The government further alleges that while present at the Minneapolis Police Department’s Third Precinct building on the evening of May 28, 2020, Hunter fired 13 rounds from an AK-47 style semi-automatic rifle into the precinct building, in violation of the Anti-Riot Act (18 U.S.C § 2101).<sup>58 ad</sup> The complaint also indicates that Hunter was in contact with Steven Carrillo “before, during, and after the Minneapolis Third Precinct building shooting and the murders in California.”<sup>59</sup> Four hours after Carrillo’s alleged murder of FPS officer David Patrick Underwood, Hunter reportedly texted Carrillo: “Go for police buildings.” Carrillo responded: “I did better lol.”<sup>60</sup> On June 1, 2020, the government alleges, Hunter messaged Carrillo asking for money, explaining he was going to “be in the woods for a bit.” Carrillo then allegedly sent Hunter \$200 via a cash application, telling him he was “doing good sh[\*]t out there” and

- z The detention order also notes that “Defendant [Watson] was disgruntled with the IRS because he could not pay his taxes with cash during COVID. Special Agent McNeal testified that there were recordings on electronic devices seized during the investigation where the Defendant [Watson] states, ‘Those people need to [f\*\*\*ing] die.’ and ‘Before COVID-19 ends, the world might call me a crazed gun man.’ Additionally, Special Agent McNeal testified in relation to the IRS incident, that Defendant [Watson] told his girlfriend, that he was going to “kill ‘em”, “blow up the building”, and/or “deface federal property.” *USA v. Timothy John Watson*, “Detention Order,” Northern District of West Virginia, 2020.
- aa Watson has pleaded not guilty, and pretrial motions continue.
- ab Hunter has pleaded not guilty, and the most recent court docket indicated that discovery was in progress.
- ac The complaint notes that “beginning in the hours of Tuesday, May 26, 2020, Minneapolis and St. Paul experienced widespread arson, rioting, and looting. The unrest, and the associated damage and destruction, was, in part, a response to the death of George Floyd during an encounter with the Minneapolis Police Department and lasted for several days and continued until the early morning hours of May 30.” Members of the Boogaloo movement, including Teeter, Solomon, and Hunter, are alleged to have mobilized in response to these events, and a witness (identified only as W-1) reported to the FBI that Solomon claimed that his group “were willing to protect W-1 from the police, white supremacists, and looters during the on-going civil unrest. SOLOMON also told W-1 that his mission was to get police out of the city.” See *USA v. Michael Robert Solomon and Benjamin Ryan Teeter*, “Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint,” District of Minnesota, 2020.
- ad At the time of publication, Hunter has not been charged with any federal crimes of terrorism or violations of material support statutes.

to “stay safe.”<sup>61</sup>

The attempted and successful acts of violence alleged to have been committed by members of the Boogaloo movement has often stemmed from decentralized nodes of a broader milieu.<sup>62</sup> However, charges were announced against 13 individuals for their role in this conspiracy, with six charged federally.<sup>63</sup> <sup>ae</sup>

Eight of those charged also face state terrorism offenses for their membership in an anti-government militia known as the Wolverine Watchmen.<sup>64</sup> <sup>af</sup> The seven, the complaint alleges, “engaged in planning and training for an operation to attack the Capitol of Michigan, and kidnap Government officials including the Governor of Michigan.”<sup>65</sup> <sup>ag</sup> Members of the group engaged in numerous alleged overt acts in furtherance of the plot, including firearms training, the attempted procurement of explosives, and surveillance on Whitmer’s vacation home.<sup>66</sup> The goal of the operation, as described by one of the alleged co-conspirators, was to “Snatch and grab, man. Grab the f[\*\*\*\*\*] Governor...we do that, dude -- it’s over.”<sup>67</sup> Following the abduction, the complaint alleges, the group planned to move the Governor to a secure location in Wisconsin for a “trial.”<sup>68</sup>

While the investigations into the specific linkages between these cells and other individuals and ideologies are ongoing, open-source reporting has suggested that alleged participants in the conspiracy to kidnap the Michigan governor charged both federally and at the state level have connections to the Boogaloo ideology.<sup>69</sup> Prosecutors described Barry Croft as “probably the most committed violent extremist of the entire group,” and an FBI Special Agent noted during his bond hearing that Croft is a national leader of the anti-government Three Percenters.<sup>69</sup> While all but one member of the plot have pleaded not guilty and await trial, this complex set of criminal cases relating to the plot against the Michigan governor underscores the versatility of the Boogaloo movement to latch onto local issues and grievances in order to further their ideological

goals.<sup>ai</sup>

Despite a year of sustained, concerted anti-government mobilization by Boogaloo adherents and networks, a period of relative decline in offline Boogaloo activity followed the disrupted kidnapping plot. The typically visible Boogaloo movement was seemingly absent from the events at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.<sup>aj</sup> Only a handful of Boogaloo adherents appeared at state capitals on January 17, 2021, for the so-called ‘Million Militia March,’ an advertised event of note within anti-government communities online. One group of Boogaloo adherents present at the 2021 Lobby Day on January 18 in Richmond, the Last Sons of Liberty, claimed to have been at the U.S. Capitol as well. Reporting by ProPublica, FRONTLINE, and Reuters indicated that this Boogaloo-aligned group “posted a video to Parler purporting to document their role in the incident — a clip that shows members inside the Capitol.”<sup>ak</sup>

A limited overt Boogaloo presence at the U.S. Capitol on January 6 and in publicly organized events in the weeks since should not be taken as a sign of the movement’s decay: As with the alleged Proud Boys’ involvement in the vanguard efforts to break into the U.S. Capitol,<sup>70</sup> any potential Boogaloo-aligned presence was seemingly devoid of its typical colorful aesthetic markers, suggesting a desire to avoid scrutiny by law enforcement and the media of its role in instigating or engaging in violent actions.<sup>al</sup> Concerningly, it may also signal a more intentional shift in the movement from reactionary revolution narratives to insurrectionary revolution narratives, such as the “no political solution” mentality that is a hallmark of

<sup>ae</sup> A 14th individual, Brain Higgins, was arrested on October 15, 2020. Beth LeBlanc and Robert Snell, “Wisconsin man 14th person arrested in alleged Whitmer kidnapping plot,” *Detroit News*, October 16, 2020.

<sup>af</sup> Militia expert Amy Cooter described the Wolverine Watchmen as a relatively new group that likely started in 2020 as an offshoot of the Michigan Liberty Militia. Amy Cooter, “Lessons from embedding with the Michigan militia – 5 questions answered about the group allegedly plotting to kidnap a governor,” *Conversation*, October 9, 2020.

<sup>ag</sup> Factually similar affidavits were entered by the Michigan Attorney General against five other co-conspirators. See “Six Arrested on Federal Charge of Conspiracy to Kidnap the Governor of Michigan,” U.S. Department of Justice, October 8, 2020; “AG Nessel Charges 7 under Michigan’s Anti-Terrorism Act as Part of Massive Joint Law Enforcement Investigation,” Michigan Department of Attorney General, October 8, 2020.

<sup>ah</sup> Reporting from NBC News indicated that “A senior federal law enforcement official said federal agents found that the group of seven tied to the Wolverine Watchmen believes in the ‘boogaloo’ movement.” Ben Collins, Brandy Zadrozny, Tom Winter, and Corky Siemaszko, “Whitmer conspiracy allegations tied to ‘boogaloo’ movement,” *NBC News*, October 8, 2020.

<sup>ai</sup> One of the alleged Michigan governor kidnap plotters, Ty Garbin, has pleaded guilty. The remainder have pleaded not guilty. Several individuals involved in the alleged plot have been linked to the Boogaloo Movement. NBC News notes that videos posted by Brandon Caserta show him “wearing a Hawaiian shirt, which is typically associated with the boogaloo movement.” ProPublica and FRONTLINE reporting suggests that “Joseph Morrison, a Marine Corps reservist who was serving in the 4th Marine Logistics Group at the time of his arrest and arraignment ... went by the name Boogaloo Bunyan on social media. He also kept a sticker of the Boogaloo flag — it features a Hawaiian floral pattern and an igloo — on the rear window of his pickup truck.” Morrison is one of the eight charged at the state level for his alleged participation in the Wolverine Watchmen. A.C. Thompson, ProPublica, Lila Hassan, and Karim Hajji, “The Boogaloo Bois Have Guns, Criminal Records and Military Training. Now They Want to Overthrow the Government,” ProPublica and FRONTLINE, February 1, 2021; Collins, Zadrozny, Winter, and Siemaszko; Robert Snell and Kayla Ruble, “Accused Whitmer kidnap plotter pleads guilty, will ‘fully cooperate,’” *Detroit News*, January 27, 2021; *USA v. Ty Garbin*, “Plea Agreement,” Western District of Michigan, 2021.

<sup>aj</sup> To date, no individuals federally charged in relation to the events of January 6, 2021, at the U.S. Capitol have been reported to have a connection with the Boogaloo movement. See “Capitol Hill Siege,” George Washington University Program on Extremism.

<sup>ak</sup> ProPublica, FRONTLINE, and Reuters have been unable to independently confirm their involvement. Ted Hesson, Ned Parker, Kristina Cooke, and Julia Harte, “U.S. Capitol siege emboldens motley crew of extremists,” *Reuters*, January 8, 2021; A.C. Thompson and Ford Fischer, “Members of Several Well-Known Hate Groups Identified at Capitol Riot,” ProPublica-FRONTLINE, January 9, 2021.

<sup>al</sup> Open-source reporting in the aftermath of the events at the U.S. Capitol on January 6 remains fluid, and additional Boogaloo involvement may be revealed.

insurrectionary accelerationists.<sup>am</sup> As vocal Boogaloo organizer Mike Dunn stated to a reporter on January 18, 2021, “We’re looking for a revolution, not a civil war.” When asked about the Capitol riot, Dunn further stated that, “I think it was the right thing for the wrong reason.”<sup>71</sup>

In addition to the cases detailed above, Boogaloo movement members have been accused of using Facebook to livestream a search for a police officer to kill,<sup>72</sup> conducting tactical ‘kill house’ training,<sup>73</sup> constructing pipe bombs,<sup>74</sup> and plotting to use Molotov cocktails to incite violence at a Black Lives Matter protest.<sup>75</sup> While law enforcement intervention disrupted the majority of would-be violent plots, the alleged actions by members of the group in 2020 evidence a desire to commit acts of violence or domestic terrorism in furtherance of their ideological goals.

### Looking Forward: The Boogaloo Movement in 2021 and Beyond

The rapid ascendancy of the Boogaloo movement in 2020 further accentuates the growing domestic terrorism threat posed by a diverse range of insurrectionary actors in response and in opposition to domestic political conditions. While jihadi foreign terrorist organizations continue their efforts to direct and inspire actors within the United States, the terrorist threat of 2021 and beyond is undoubtedly a fractured one.<sup>76</sup> The continued prevalence of decentralized and disparate violent extremist movements within the United States evidences an evolving threat landscape—one defined by leaderless insurrection and new challenges like accelerationism that seeks total system collapse.<sup>77</sup> To date, the policy response to this threat has been concerningly muted, though early signs from the nascent Biden administration suggest that domestic terrorism will be a principal policy focus.<sup>78</sup>

Yet threats like the Boogaloo movement that draw from shared cultural myths and use forms of communication that blur the lines between humor and incitement create significant challenges for law enforcement and social media companies to identify and monitor credible threats.<sup>79</sup> Given the extensive role that social media has played in the formulation of Boogaloo networks and plots, and the dramatic actions taken by Facebook and Discord, the evergreen question of social media companies’ responses to extremist exploitation of their platforms is especially relevant.<sup>80</sup> With so much of Boogaloo iconography and narrative landscape mirroring mainstream references to American patriotic sentiment, the bar for content removal thus far appears set at explicit calls for violence.<sup>an</sup> Yet the almost necessary reliance on explicit calls to violence or

proven associations with coded phrases to offline actions to trigger content removal allows the insidious rhetoric to reach further afield than its targeted audiences.<sup>81</sup> Additionally, the movement’s adaptive nature as a meme-based culture will mean its adherents can likely adapt to and capitalize on emerging political flash points faster than automated content moderation efforts can intercede.<sup>82</sup>

The Boogaloo movement is merely one of the many domestic violent extremist movements that has risen to prominence in a counter-extremism environment that has long prioritized foreign threats. As such, it is incumbent that the response to the threat of domestic terrorism from the incoming Biden administration is proportional to the threat and rule-of-law-based.<sup>83</sup> Particularly in light of the actions of law enforcement at Ruby Ridge and Waco, it is essential that government actions do not unnecessarily feed into the grievances and narratives of anti-government extremist movements.

All levels of government should appropriately prioritize and allocate resources based on the threat. Transparency is central to the success of any government initiatives, supported by evidence-driven policies and public awareness and education campaigns that include a range of political and apolitical voices. Considered, comprehensive, and transparent approaches will be key in the federal government’s efforts to present itself as a credible actor in the prevention of domestic violent extremism.

Currently, the gap between the alleged actions of the Boogaloo movement’s members and the charges brought forth by the Department of Justice highlights the extent of the challenges facing law enforcement efforts to robustly counter domestic violent extremism. Experts have stressed the need for a reassessment of how the federal government counters the threats by these diverse and varied actors, including the enactment of a robust domestic terrorism statute inclusive of any crime of violence within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States.<sup>84 ao</sup> Any legislative changes to the federal terrorism statutes should be done in a way that protects civil rights and civil liberties and empowers marginalized communities often targeted by such acts of terror or extremism. Such measured proposals, crafted with input from a diverse range of stakeholders, are worthy of further consideration within a broad suite of policy changes aimed at combating white supremacist, neo-Nazi, and anti-government extremism.<sup>85</sup>

The recent arrests of Boogaloo movement members, specifically those that involved the use of undercover federal employees, will likely encourage more robust operational security measures by

am The “no political solution” narrative is an example of an insurrectionary narrative used by accelerationists to condition and move individuals into a belief that violence is necessary to collapse a system deemed irreparably corrupt and broken. This stands in contrast to reactionary revolution narratives common in American anti-government ideology, which rely on external, typically unconstitutional actions taken by the federal government to justify a violent response. See Cassie Miller, “‘There Is No Political Solution’: Accelerationism in the White Power Movement,” Southern Poverty Law Center, June 23, 2020.

an The authors’ research has revealed that some factions of the Boogaloo movement, particularly accelerationists, intentionally seek to exploit the grey area of platforms’ terms of service. In some instances, actors intentionally frame posts as likely to be banned and thus use that as a preemptive argument that their First Amendment rights are under siege by anti-conservative bias. See Maura Conway, “Why Deplatforming the Extreme Right is a Lot More Challenging than Deplatforming IS,” GNET, January 15, 2021.

ao Such a statute, as proposed, would be modeled after 18 U.S.C. § 2332b, “acts of terrorism transcending national boundaries,” and would criminalize only the “specific, enumerated crimes of violence” found within § 2332b when committed “with one of the intents included in the definitions of both international and domestic terrorism, regardless of the ideology behind it.” As argued by Mary McCord, former Acting Assistant Attorney General for National Security at the U.S. Department of Justice, the inclusion of this new statute to the enumerated federal crimes of terrorism would unlock material support prosecutions under 18 U.S.C. § 2339A. As McCord and others have articulated, this should not be confused with 18 U.S. Code § 2339B - Providing material support or resources to designated foreign terrorist organizations. The proposals put forth in support of domestic terrorism statute do not suggest the designation of *domestic* terrorist organizations, groups, or movements. Mary McCord, “Filling the Gaps in Our Terrorism Statutes,” George Washington University Program on Extremism, August 2019.

Boogaloo movement members.<sup>ap</sup> Simultaneously, it will likely generate greater antipathy toward law enforcement in an already stringent anti-law enforcement ideological space. Greater law enforcement attention on domestic extremism after the events of January 6 and as a feature of the Biden administration will likely further remove operational planning from the easily monitorable areas of the internet.<sup>aq</sup>

Consideration should also be given to potential splintering of the Boogaloo movement into a factionalized set of milieus where ideological precepts distinguish individual groups. Recent developments suggest that some factions within the Boogaloo movement may be already seeking to establish their respective franchise brand as the forebear or vanguard of the movement.<sup>ar</sup> Additionally, engagement and cooperation between Boogaloo movement members and a range of domestic violent extremist groups is also a possibility in 2021 and beyond.<sup>as</sup> The authors' analysis has shown that Boogaloo adherents frequently claim or display indicators of "double patching," or holding affiliations or membership in multiple organizations, a practice not uncommon in the far-right extremist landscape.<sup>at</sup> This suggests the Boogaloo movement's various strains may fracture into like-minded established spaces rather than remain its own independent movement.<sup>au</sup> Further, it is reasonable to anticipate that Boogaloo narratives and ideographs will continue to resonate within established insurrectionary militia spaces and organizations, such as the Three Percenters and Oath Keepers, following the leveling of conspiracy charges for their role in the events of January 6.<sup>av</sup>

ap The concern with operational security is evidenced in the criminal complaint against Steven Carrillo, in which the affiant describes the FBI's analysis of Carrillo's mobile phone records: "Carrillo powered off his phone or put it into airplane mode in order to avoid detection during the time that he committed the assault on the PSOs in Oakland before driving away. I further believe that Carrillo traveled south from Oakland and then up the peninsula in order to avoid crossing one of the bridges spanning the San Francisco bay, where images of his van would likely have been captured by a bridge surveillance camera." See *USA v. Steven Carrillo*, "Criminal Complaint."

aq For example, libertarian-oriented factions of the Boogaloo movement may choose moderated paths that retain positive outlooks on liberal democracy, while accelerationist and white supremacist-oriented factions may deepen their engagement with neo-Nazi groups and insurrectionist worldviews.

ar Despite intense anti-law enforcement sentiments in the Boogaloo movement, it has dovetailed well with Oath Keepers and Three Percenters mythos around obligations to uphold the Constitution and insurrectionist platitudes such as Thomas Jefferson's now infamous quote, "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure." For example, one of the purported leaders of the Whitmer kidnapping plot was described as a national leader of the Three Percenters, and law enforcement has alleged that Boogaloo martyr Duncan Lemp was an "active member of the Three Percenters." While Lemp's parents have "disputed characterizations of their son as a member of a radical movement or as a threat to police," state prosecutors have declined to file charges in Lemp's death. The official report of the shooting noted that Lemp's profile on the website 'mymilitia.com' stated "Hello all! My name is Duncan Lemp, I am an active 3%er and looking for local members and recruits." The report also notes that a "Boogaloo Boys" patch affixed to a body armor vest was one of the items recovered from the Lemp residence. The full text of the Howard County State Attorney's Office investigation into the shooting can be found at <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/SAO/Resources/Files/REPORTMarch2020Event.pdf>. See also Robert Snell, "Accused Whitmer kidnap plotter says God gave permission to kill," *Detroit News*, January 13, 2021; Michael Ruiz, "Maryland prosecutors rule out charges against cops in death of Boogaloo 'martyr' Duncan Lemp," Fox News, December 31, 2020.

## Conclusion

The Boogaloo movement is still well-positioned for carrying out acts of violence and has shown the desire to mobilize in response to political flashpoints, of which there undoubtedly will be more. And while much of the Boogaloo movement's rhetorical justification for violence is premised on a response to government-initiated civil conflict or in response to a social collapse, a subset of the movement is dedicated to proactively hastening, or facilitating, those conditions. The alleged actions of insurrectionist and accelerationist actors in the Boogaloo movement, such as Hunter and Carrillo, have shown not only a willingness but a capacity to capitalize on social upheavals to carry out targeted violence against law enforcement in furtherance of systemic collapse. Moving forward, those insurrectionary influences may serve as a catalyst toward additional violent actions against law enforcement, political figures, and even critical infrastructure. They may also hint at a potential coalescence of goals into a single framework that currently is lacking for the movement. As the Boogaloo movement contains multiple ideological strains, goals are often aligned within those pre-existing factions. Moving forward, researchers and analysts should focus on identifying and carefully considering any elucidation of long-term goals from the Boogaloo movement, whether that be at a macro level due to a consolidation of the movement or a meso level reflecting a fractal environment wherein Boogaloo factions splinter and latch onto established milieus and organizations like the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters.

The Boogaloo presents as an eclectic contemporary evolution from the militia movement of the 1990s, but to understand why Boogaloo violence occurs, it is crucial for policymakers, practitioners, and academics to recognize the Boogaloo movement's rhetorical synergy with its sociological predecessor.<sup>90</sup> Reporting in the wake of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing described a collective state of mind, which transformed "frustration and alienation into a black-and-white world in which the forces of one-world government are at the nation's doorstep and the Federal Government and the F.B.I. together are bitter enemies of true patriots ... a world of hate and fear, with a shared belief in the same sinister global forces binding disparate groups and individuals who have fallen under its sway."<sup>91</sup> While the alleged kidnapping plot of Governor Whitmer dominated the headlines in early October 2020, the little-covered killing early that same month of a Metro Detroit man during a shootout with FBI agents was quickly amplified by Boogaloo movement networks online; one Boogaloo movement member posted a video stating "Well, the feds have done it again, this time killing Eric Mark-Matthew Allport ... As far as I know, he was a Boogaloo Boy. He embodied our ideology, our beliefs. He lived with liberty on his mind and they killed him."<sup>92</sup>

Months later, a lone Boogaloo-sympathetic individual protested outside the Indianapolis Statehouse on January 17, 2021.<sup>93</sup> He had with him a sign that read "Justice for Breonna Taylor, Duncan Lemp and Eric Allport."<sup>94</sup> While the near- and long-term future of the Boogaloo movement remains uncertain, its ability to leverage anti-government narratives perpetuated by the broader milieu will likely continue to radicalize and inspire individuals to violence. **CTC**



## Citations

- 1 "Six Arrested on Federal Charge of Conspiracy to Kidnap the Governor of Michigan," U.S. Department of Justice, October 8, 2020; "AG Nessel Charges 7 under Michigan's Anti-Terrorism Act as Part of Massive Joint Law Enforcement Investigation," Michigan Department of Attorney General, October 8, 2020.
- 2 "Joint Terrorism Task Force Charges Three Men Who Allegedly Sought To Exploit Protests In Las Vegas And Incite Violence," U.S. Department of Justice, June 3, 2020; "Two Self-Described 'Boogaloo Bois' Charged with Attempting to Provide Material Support to Hamas," U.S. Department of Justice, September 4, 2020; "Two Defendants Charged with Murder and Aiding and Abetting in Slaying of Federal Protective Service Officer at Oakland Courthouse Building," U.S. Department of Justice, June 16, 2020.
- 3 Robert Evans and Jason Wilson, "The Boogaloo Movement Is Not What You Think," *Bellingcat*, May 27, 2020; "The Boogaloo: Extremists' New Slang Term for A Coming Civil War," *Anti-Defamation League*, November 26, 2019.
- 4 Emma Grey Ellis, "The Meme-Fueled Rise of a Dangerous, Far-Right Militia," *Wired*, June 10, 2020; Leah Sottile, "The Chaos Agents," *New York Times*, August 19, 2020; Michael Kunzelman, "Virus restrictions fuel anti-government 'boogaloo' movement," *Associated Press*, May 13, 2020; Craig Timberg, Elizabeth Dvoskin, and Souad Mekhennet, "Men wearing Hawaiian shirts and carrying guns add a volatile new element to protests," *Washington Post*, June 4, 2020.
- 5 Matthew Kriner and Colin Clarke, "Eclectic Boogaloo: The anti-government extremist movement's loose structure and adaptability is the key to its growth," *Slate*, August 19, 2020; "Boogaloo Movement Gains Traction Amid Civil Unrest," *New Jersey Office of Homeland Security*, June 18, 2020.
- 6 JJ McNab, "Assessing the Threat from Accelerationists and Militia Extremists," Testimony before the House Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism (House Committee on Homeland Security), July 16, 2020; Kelly Weill, "The Disturbing Appeal of Boogaloo Violence to Military Men," *Daily Beast*, June 8, 2020.
- 7 *Ibid.*; Sam Jackson, "A Schema of Right-Wing Extremism in the United States," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague*, October 2019.
- 8 See, for example, Emmanuel Felton, "A Self-Proclaimed 'Boogaloo Boy' Was Arrested After Allegedly Livestreaming His Hunt To Kill A Police Officer," *BuzzFeed News*, April 22, 2020.
- 9 Kriner and Clarke.
- 10 Sam Jackson, *Oath Keepers: Patriotism and the Edge of Violence in a Right-Wing Antigovernment Group* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Kriner and Clarke.
- 13 Stephen Montemayor, "Inside Minnesota's Boogaloo movement: Armed and eager for societal collapse," *Star Tribune*, July 18, 2020.
- 14 Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (Collier-Macmillan Canada Ltd., 1974).
- 15 Marc-André Argentino, "Digital Platforms and Extremism 2: Electric Boogaloo," *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, June 8, 2020; Tim Mak, "Facebook Becomes Key Place For Extremist Boogaloo Movement Organizers," *National Public Radio*, June 6, 2020.
- 16 Joseph Menn, "Facebook limits spread of 'Boogaloo' groups amid protests," *Reuters*, June 4, 2020.
- 17 Makena Kelly, "Facebook still hosts boogaloo extremist groups, report finds," *Verge*, August 12, 2020.
- 18 See, for example, Bennett Clifford and Helen Powell, "Encrypted Extremism: Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram," *George Washington University Program on Extremism*, June 2019, and Tess Owen, "How Telegram Became White Nationalists' Go-To Messaging Platform," *VICE News*, October 7, 2019.
- 19 Ryan Deveraux and Sam Biddle, "On Telegram, The Paramilitary Far Right Looks to Radicalize New Recruits Ahead of Inauguration Day," *Intercept*, January 12, 2021; David Neiwert, "The far right wants to make its shared 'Boogaloo' fantasy of violent civil war a reality," *Daily Kos*, April 28, 2020.
- 20 "Banning a Violent Network in the US," Facebook, June 2020; Rachel Lerman, "Facebook removes hundreds of boogaloo accounts for 'promoting violence' in coordinated takedown," *Washington Post*, June 30, 2020.
- 21 "Banning a Violent Network in the US;" Jon Lewis, "Facebook's Disruption of the Boogaloo Network," *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, August 5, 2020.
- 22 "Banning a Violent Network in the US."
- 23 Tess Owen, "Discord Just Shut Down the Biggest 'Boogaloo' Server for Inciting Violence," *VICE News*, June 25, 2020.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Tina Nguyen and Mark Scott, "Right-wing extremist chatter spreads on new platforms as threat of political violence ramps up," *Politico*, January 12, 2021.
- 26 Alex Goldenberg and Joel Finkelstein, "Cyber Swarming, Memetic Warfare and Viral Insurgency: How Domestic Militants Organize on Memes to Incite Violent Insurrection and Terror Against Government and Law Enforcement," *Network Contagion Research Institute*, February 7, 2020.
- 27 Evans and Wilson.
- 28 Colin Clarke, "Opinion: A New Era of Far-Right Violence," *New York Times*, January 22, 2021.
- 29 Alex Newhouse and Nate Gunesch, "Boogaloo Movement Update: Violence, Schisms, and Bans," *Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism*, June 22, 2020; Alex Newhouse and Nate Gunesch, "The Boogaloo Movement Wants To Be Seen as Anti-Racist, But It Has a White Supremacist Fringe," *Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism*, May 30, 2020.
- 30 Andy Greenberg, "The FBI Says 'Boogaloo' Extremists Bought 3D-Printed Machine Gun Parts," *Wired*, November 4, 2020.
- 31 Kriner and Clarke.
- 32 Evans and Wilson.
- 33 The authors are not citing examples in order to avoid amplifying extremist content.
- 34 Kriner and Clarke.
- 35 Based on the authors' analysis of Facebook Boogaloo networks and legal documents related to Boogaloo crimes. For more see, Evans and Wilson.
- 36 Jane Coaston, "The Virginia gun rights rally raising fears of violence, explained," *Vox*, January 17, 2020.
- 37 See, for example, Jacob Gallagher, "Why the Extremist 'Boogaloo Boys' Wear Hawaiian Shirts," *Wall Street Journal*, June 8, 2020; Scot Nakagawa, "How the Hawaiian shirt was hijacked by far-right American protestors," *GQ Magazine*, July 16, 2020.
- 38 "Two Defendants Charged with Murder and Aiding and Abetting in Slaying of Federal Protective Service Officer at Oakland Courthouse Building;" Neil MacFarquhar and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Air Force Sergeant With Ties to Extremist Group Charged in Federal Officer's Death," *New York Times*, June 16, 2020; Katie Shepherd, "An officer was gunned down. The killer was a 'boogaloo boy' using nearby peaceful protests as cover, feds say.," *Washington Post*, June 17, 2020; "DHS Press Briefing on Shooting of FPS Officers in California," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, May 30, 2020.
- 39 *USA v. Steven Carrillo*, "Criminal Complaint," Northern District of California, 2020.
- 40 Nate Gartrell and Fiona Kelliher, "Authorities charge alleged Santa Cruz deputy killer with assassinating federal cop in Oakland, link attacks to Boogaloo movement," *Mercury News*, June 16, 2020.
- 41 *USA v. Steven Carrillo*, "Criminal Complaint."
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 *Ibid.*
- 45 Martha Mendoza and Stefanie Dazio, "California sheriff: Gunman 'very intent' on killing police," *Associated Press*, June 9, 2020; Nate Gartrell, "Steven Carrillo, Boogaloo-associated suspect in killing of two CA officers, has first court appearance in federal death penalty case," *Mercury News*, June 23, 2020.
- 46 *USA v. Steven Carrillo*, "Criminal Complaint."
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 "Two Self-Described 'Boogaloo Bois' Charged with Attempting to Provide Material Support to Hamas."
- 49 *USA v. Michael Robert Solomon and Benjamin Ryan Teeter*, "Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint," District of Minnesota, 2020.
- 50 *USA v. Benjamin Ryan Teeter*, "Plea Agreement," District of Minnesota, 2020.
- 51 *USA v. Timothy John Watson*, "Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint," Northern District of West Virginia, 2020; Greenberg; Jon Lewis, "3D-Print-

- ed Guns, Untraceable Firearms, and Domestic Violent Extremist Actors," Global Network on Extremism and Technology, January 7, 2021.
- 52 *USA v. Timothy John Watson*, "Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint."
- 53 *Ibid.*
- 54 *USA v. Timothy John Watson*, "Detention Order," Northern District of West Virginia, 2020.
- 55 *USA v. Timothy John Watson*, "Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint."
- 56 *USA v. Ivan Harrison Hunter*, "Criminal Complaint," District of Minnesota, 2020; Andy Mannix, "Texas member of Boogaloo Bois charged with opening fire on Minneapolis police precinct during protests over George Floyd," *Star Tribune*, October 24, 2020.
- 57 *USA v. Ivan Harrison Hunter*, "Criminal Complaint."
- 58 *Ibid.*
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 *Ibid.*
- 61 *Ibid.*
- 62 Ben Collins, Brandy Zdrozny, Tom Winter, and Corky Siemaszko, "Whitmer conspiracy allegations tied to 'boogaloo' movement," NBC News, October 8, 2020; A.C. Thompson, ProPublica, Lila Hassan, and Karim Hajj, "The Boogaloo Bois Have Guns, Criminal Records and Military Training. Now They Want to Overthrow the Government," ProPublica and FRONTLINE, February 1, 2021.
- 63 "Six Arrested on Federal Charge of Conspiracy to Kidnap the Governor of Michigan;" *USA v. Adam Fox, Barry Croft, Ty Garbin, Kaleb Franks, Daniel Harris, and Brandon Caserta*, "Criminal Complaint," Western District of Michigan, 2020; *USA v. Target Facebook Account User*, "Application and Affidavit for Search Warrant," District of Delaware, 2020; Kelly Weill, "Sixteen 'Boogaloo' Followers Have Been Busted in 7 Days," Daily Beast, October 9, 2020.
- 64 "AG Nessel Charges 7 under Michigan's Anti-Terrorism Act as Part of Massive Joint Law Enforcement Investigation;" Collins, Zdrozny, Winter, and Siemaszko.
- 65 *State of Michigan v. Joseph Morrison and Pete Musico*, "Affidavit in Support of Complaint," State of Michigan, 2020.
- 66 *USA v. Adam Fox, Barry Croft, Ty Garbin, Kaleb Franks, Daniel Harris, and Brandon Caserta*, "Criminal Complaint;" Robert Snell, "Michigan militia members helped FBI crack alleged Whitmer kidnap plot," *Detroit News*, January 22, 2021.
- 67 *Ibid.*; Darcie Moran and Joe Guillen, "Whitmer kidnap plot: possible citizen's arrest mentioned in March, prosecutor says," *Detroit Free News*, October 23, 2020.
- 68 *Ibid.*
- 69 Robert Snell, "Accused Whitmer kidnap plotter says God gave permission to kill," *Detroit News*, January 13, 2021; Melissa Nann Burke, "Delaware man headed to Michigan to face charges in Whitmer kidnapping plot," *Detroit News*, October 13, 2020; Andrew Feather, "Alleged Whitmer plot ringleader, bomb maker to be held without bond," WWMT, January 13, 2021; John Tunison, "Judge denies bond for alleged leader in Whitmer kidnapping plot, described as 'violent extremist,'" Michigan Live, January 13, 2021.
- 70 *USA v. Dominic Pezzola and William Pepe*, "Indictment," District of Columbia, 2021; Jan Wolfe, "'Bomb-making manuals' found in home of Proud Boy who stormed U.S. Capitol," Reuters, January 29, 2021.
- 71 Charles Homans and Mark Peterson, "Out of the Barrel of a Gun," *New York Times*, January 26, 2020.
- 72 Felton.
- 73 *USA v. Christopher Ledbetter*, "Criminal Complaint," Western District of Oklahoma, 2020; *USA v. Christopher Ledbetter*, "Government Sentencing Memorandum Exhibit 3," Western District of Oklahoma, 2020.
- 74 *USA v. Bradley Bunn*, "Indictment," District of Colorado, 2020; Jeremy Jojola, "Pipe bomb suspect's family says he's too dangerous to be free," 9News, May 8, 2020.
- 75 *USA v. Stephen T. Parshall, Andrew Lynam, and William Loomis*, "Criminal Complaint," District of Nevada, 2020.
- 76 Seamus Hughes and Devorah Margolin, "The Fractured Terrorism Threat to America," *Lawfare*, November 10, 2019; Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism Challenges for the Biden Administration," *CTC Sentinel* 14:1 (2021); Seth Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington, "The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States," Center for Strategic & International Studies, June 17, 2020.
- 77 See, for example, J.M. Berger, "The Strategy of Violent White Supremacy Is Evolving," *Atlantic*, August 7, 2019; Bruce Hoffman and Colin Clarke, "The Growing Irrelevance of Organizational Structure for U.S. Domestic Terrorism;" CIPHER Brief, July 2, 2020; Milo Comerford, "Confronting the Challenge of 'Post-Organisational' Extremism," Observer Research Foundation, August 19, 2020.
- 78 Rachael Levy, "Biden Administration Urged to Take Fresh Look at Domestic Terrorism," *Wall Street Journal*, November 13, 2020; Laura Barrón-López and Natasha Bertrand, "Biden vowed to defeat domestic terrorism. The how is the hard part," Politico, January 20, 2021.
- 79 Chelsea Daymon, "LOL Extremism: Humour in Online Extremist Content," Global Network on Extremism & Technology, October 26, 2020.
- 80 Audrey Alexander and William Braniff, "Marginalizing Violent Extremism Online," *Lawfare*, January 21, 2018.
- 81 Misyrlena Egkolfopoulou and Alyza Sebenius, "Facebook Violence Curbs Thwarted by Groups Using Code Words," Bloomberg, May 12, 2020.
- 82 Kriner and Clarke.
- 83 Ken Thomas and Sabrina Siddiqui, "Biden Says Rioters Who Stormed Capitol Were Domestic Terrorists," *Wall Street Journal*, January 7, 2021.
- 84 Mary McCord and Jason Blazakis, "A Road Map for Congress to Address Domestic Terrorism," *Lawfare*, February 27, 2019; Amy Collins, "The Need for a Specific Law Against Domestic Terrorism," George Washington University Program on Extremism, September 2020.
- 85 "How Biden Administration May Address Domestic Extremism," National Public Radio, January 18, 2021; Matt Zapotosky and Shane Harris, "Capitol attack will spur broad crackdown on domestic extremists," *Washington Post*, January 23, 2021.
- 86 Olga Khazan, "The Far Right's Fear of 'Glowies,'" *Atlantic*, January 25, 2021.
- 87 Homans and Peterson.
- 88 Neil MacFarquhar, Jack Healy, Mike Baker, and Serge F. Kovaleski, "Capitol Attack Could Fuel Extremist Recruitment For Years, Experts Warn," *New York Times*, January 16, 2021; Emma Grey Ellis, "The DC Mobs Could Become a Mythologized Recruitment Tool," *Wired*, January 8, 2021; Deveraux and Biddle.
- 89 Jason Wilson, "The Base: Exporting Accelerationist Terror," Southern Poverty Law Center, August 12, 2020.
- 90 Jackson, *Oath Keepers*.
- 91 Timothy Egan, "MEN AT WAR; Inside the World Of the Paranoid," *New York Times*, April 30, 1995.
- 92 Robert Snell, "Ruby Ridge echoes in deadly Madison Heights FBI shootout," *Detroit News*, October 7, 2020.
- 93 Justin L. Mack, "After fears of unrest, Indianapolis remains quiet Sunday," *Indianapolis Star*, January 17, 2021.
- 94 *Ibid.*

# The Network of the November 2020 Vienna Attacker and the Jihadi Threat to Austria

By Johannes Saal and Felix Lippe

**On November 2, 2020, a gun attack by an Islamic State supporter killed four in the center of Vienna. Although Austria has seen very little jihadi terrorist violence since 9/11, jihadi networks have operated in the country for decades and have long posed a threat. The Vienna attacker, Kujtim Fejzulai, grew up in the city he attacked and had longstanding connections within the jihadi extremist milieu in Austria as well as jihadi contacts in other European countries and further afield. His two failed attempts to join the Islamic State overseas and the failure of efforts to deradicalize him after he was convicted for seeking to join the group underline the threat that can be posed by failed jihadi travelers and terrorist convicts after their release, as well as the difficulties in rehabilitating jihadi prisoners. With over 100 jihadi extremists known to reside in Austria and with jihadis like Fejzulai connected to like-minded jihadis across Europe, authorities need to redouble efforts to identify and track national and transnational jihadi networks.**

**W**hen a supporter of the Islamic State killed four and injured 22 on his shooting spree in Vienna's city center on November 2, 2020, even some analysts were astonished that a terrorist attack had taken place in the Austrian capital. Up until that point, the threat posed by jihadi extremism in Austria had received little scholarly attention despite the long history of jihadi activism in the country and despite it having one of the highest per capita number of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) in the European Union.<sup>1</sup> With the Vienna

attack coming days after jihadi terrorist attacks in France<sup>a</sup> and Germany,<sup>b</sup> there was much focus in the media on the threat posed by a "new generation" of jihadi radicals influenced by Islamic State propaganda, acting independently, and with at most loose ties to the terrorist organization.<sup>2</sup> The analysis in this article suggests that while no evidence has emerged so far that the Vienna attacker directly coordinated his attack with the Islamic State, he was a longstanding jihadi sympathizer and failed foreign fighter with ties to transnational jihadi networks that supplied foreign fighters to the Islamic State.

In this article, the authors argue that the Vienna attacker, Kujtim Fejzulai, is best understood as a member of a radical milieu in Austria, which originated in the 1990s, consolidated in the 2000s, and became an important recruitment hub during the heyday of the Islamic State. However, the strategy Fejzulai followed was propagated by the so-called Islamic State as soon as its dystopian project of a caliphate started to crumble. In a May 2016 audio message, Islamic State spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani called on followers to attack their homelands instead of traveling to the caliphate: "The smallest action you do in their heartland is better and more enduring to us than what you would if you were with us. If one of you hoped to reach the Islamic State, we wish we were in your place to punish the Crusaders day and night."<sup>3</sup> This strategic shift regarding Western members of the Islamic State could likewise be observed in German-speaking official and unofficial Islamic State propaganda channels on Telegram throughout the second half of 2016.<sup>4</sup> Despite the decline of FTF departures and sophisticated attacks in recent years, EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove warned in this publication in August 2020 that "we should remain vigilant about the threat of Daesh [Islamic State] attacks in Europe ... the threat does not come only from individuals who are inspired by terrorist propaganda online and act independently."<sup>5</sup>

This article draws on open-source information, court documents, the preliminary and final report of the expert enquiry committee set up in response to the Vienna attack, the authors' longstanding

*Dr. des. Johannes Saal is a sociologist of religion and political scientist. He currently works as a research assistant at the Center for Religion, Economy, and Politics, University of Lucerne, Switzerland. Twitter: @johannes\_saal*

*Felix Lippe is a psychologist and political scientist. He works as a scientific fellow for the Institute for the Sociology of Law and Criminology and as scientific coordinator for Turn, a civil society organization for the prevention of violence and extremism. Twitter: @Felix\_Natal*

© 2021 Johannes Saal, Felix Lippe

- a On September 25, 2020, an Islamist extremist injured two people in a stabbing attack outside the former headquarter of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. On October 16, 2020, an 18-year-old Chechen Islamist extremist murdered and decapitated a French teacher who showed cartoons published in *Charlie Hebdo* to his students. On October 29, 2020, a Tunisian Islamist extremist murdered three individuals in Notre-Dame of Nice. See Antony Paone, "For a teacher in France, a civics class was followed by a gruesome death," Reuters, October 17, 2020; Zoe Tidman and Lizzie Dearden, "Macron vows to deploy soldiers across France after attacks in Nice and Avignon," *Independent*, October 30, 2020.
- b On October 4, 2020, a 20-year-old Syrian jihadi extremist attacked a gay couple in Dresden, killing one and injuring another man. See Florian Flade, Georg Mascolo, and Ronen Steinke, "BND wurde vor Islamist gewarnt - und gab Warnung nicht weiter," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 29, 2020.

tracking of Austrian trials related to jihadi terrorism, and interviews with members of the local jihadi milieu. It first outlines what is known about the Vienna attack and its perpetrator. It then examines what has emerged so far about his web of connections to extremists inside Austria and his transnational contacts.

In these sections, the article examines the lessons learned from the Vienna attack, including from the ultimately failed effort to deradicalize Fejzulai and what appear to be dropped balls in investigating the threat he posed. The authors argue that there needs to be greater effort to map out and track jihadi networks. The continued presence of a significant number of jihadi extremists in Austria and their connectivity to others in Europe and further afield means that Austria, despite being spared from a major attack until last year, faces a danger of further attacks.

The analysis in this article has implications for several problem sets faced by counterterrorism officials. Several studies have stressed the significance of pre-existing social ties for radicalization<sup>6</sup> and the role of networks in spreading ideological concepts and mobilizing resources.<sup>7</sup> Fejzulai's case also underlines the threat posed by frustrated jihadi travelers and the difficulties that come along with rehabilitating/deradicalizing jihadis being released from prison. According to an assessment by Robin Simcox in this publication, individuals who attempted but did not manage to join the Islamic State or other groups in Syria and Iraq were responsible for at least 25 jihadi-inspired attacks and plots in Europe between January 2014 and June 2019.<sup>8</sup>

Closely connected to the issue of "frustrated travelers" is recent public outcry in Europe over terrorist recidivism. While there have been at least a dozen terrorist plots or attacks in Europe since the beginning of 2014 in which at least one of the alleged plotters/attackers had been convicted in Europe of a previous terrorism-related offense,<sup>9</sup> two recent studies in this publication suggest this threat needs to be put in context. Thomas Renard presented data from Belgium suggesting "the threat of terrorist recidivism and reengagement is limited."<sup>10</sup> Robin Simcox and Hannah Stuart's research supports Renard's assessment by finding that "terrorist recidivism among U.K. offenders who are convicted of multiple terrorism offenses on separate occasions is low."<sup>c</sup>

## The Vienna Attack and Its Perpetrator

At around 8:00 PM on November 2, 2020, a man equipped with a Zastava M70 assault rifle, pistol, machete, and fake suicide vest started to shoot at pedestrians in one of Vienna's central night-life districts. The attack that left four victims dead and another 22 heavily injured lasted nine minutes until the attacker was shot dead by special police forces (Wiener Einsatzgruppe Alarmabteilung, WEGA).

The first shots were fired at Desider-Friedmann-Platz, where a memorial plaque reminds passers-by that at that exact spot in 1981, members of the Austrian Jewish religious community were killed by a Palestinian terrorist.<sup>11</sup> After killing his first victim at the foot of the Jerusalemstiege, the attacker turned into the Judengasse,

where he shot indiscriminately at people standing in front of bars, killing one waitress.<sup>12</sup> He turned into the Seitenstettegasse where he shot a woman, who would later die in hospital.<sup>13</sup> The statement in the video of a resident of that street, who supposedly shouted "Get lost asshole!" toward the attacker, would later go viral. After killing a restaurant owner at Schwedenplatz, the perpetrator came into contact for the first time with police.<sup>14</sup> He shot one agent in the leg and rushed toward Morzinplatz. On the way there, he was shot dead by WEGA agents at Ruprechtsplatz. Fejzulai's corpse would remain lying on the ground for some time. The fake suicide vests he was wearing had prompted authorities to call the bomb disposal unit, and they waited for an all-clear before they approached him.<sup>15</sup> At this point in time, authorities still assumed that there were multiple attackers.<sup>16</sup> For hours, Vienna residents could not be sure whether the attacker had acted alone or had accomplices who had joined in the attack.

The perpetrator was quickly identified as Kujtim Fejzulai, a 20-year-old dual Austrian and North Macedonian national. His father and mother—a gardener and a saleswoman, respectively—are ethnic Albanians from the small Northern Macedonian town of Celopek who moved to Vienna in 1985 where Kujtim and his sister were born. Fejzulai grew up in the multicultural Viennese neighborhood of Ottakring. In primary school, he was described as a quiet and unproblematic student.<sup>17</sup> Later, he attended a polytechnical high school and played for the soccer team of an Albanian mosque. He met some of the friends with whom he later prayed, fasted, and went to the gym with, during his (short) time as an amateur footballer.<sup>18</sup> Religion played an important role in his life from a young age, but it was not before 2014 that Fejzulai—at the time, a young teenager influenced by salafis at local mosques—started to follow a strict interpretation of Islam.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time that his religious zeal increased, he experienced violence and dropped out of school.<sup>20</sup> Fejzulai also got into a serious conflict with his parents who threatened to kick him out of their home.<sup>21</sup> One of the reasons for the falling out with his parents was most probably his increasingly religious lifestyle. When his parents moved into a new expensive apartment in 2017, Fejzulai rejected what he viewed as their materialistic lifestyle. At the time, he was increasingly socializing with young jihadi sympathizers who frequently met in salafi mosques, parks, and gyms.<sup>22</sup>

By the beginning of 2018, Fejzulai, not even 18 years old, had become deeply influenced by Islamic State ideology<sup>23</sup> and for the first time came to the attention of the Austrian military intelligence (Heeresnachrichtendienst, HNA) as a supporter of the Islamic State.<sup>24</sup> Wishing to leave his family home, he got in touch online with Islamic State members in Syria and Iraq who encouraged him to join them to have a 'better' life.<sup>25</sup> In the summer of 2018, he and an Austrian-Turkish friend, Burak K., bought airplane tickets to Afghanistan but never implemented their plan to join the Islamic State there after they realized that they lacked the necessary visa.<sup>26</sup> Instead, Fejzulai boarded a flight on September 1, 2018, to Istanbul, where a contact brought him to a safe house near the town of Hatay in the vicinity of the Turkish-Syrian border.<sup>27</sup> Eventually, his quest to join the Islamic State failed. As a result of investigations by the Turkish General Directorate of Security, Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism, police arrested Fejzulai on September 18, 2018, and deported him to Austria on January 10, 2019.<sup>28</sup>

Fejzulai was one of at least 62 "frustrated jihadi travelers" who tried to leave Austria for Syria and Iraq. The Vienna attack

c Simcox and Stuart add that "if individuals who had a prior criminal record for criminal behavior interpreted as extremism-related but not terrorism-related are included, the rate of recidivism posed by jihadi prisoners/prison leavers—and subsequent scale of the threat—is appreciably higher." Robin Simcox and Hannah Stuart, "The Threat from Europe's Jihadi Prisoners and Prison Leavers," *CTC Sentinel* 13:7 (2020).

thus seems to tragically support Robin Simcox's assessment of an evolving threat posed by such frustrated jihad travelers.<sup>29</sup> In total, 326 Austrian jihadis were able to successfully join the Islamic State or other terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq.<sup>30</sup> According to the authors' own analysis, a significant number of departures took place in a relatively early phase of the Syrian War (2012 and 2013), illustrating that many Austrian foreign fighters became radicalized before the founding of the Islamic State's caliphate. This first wave was characterized by the predominance of Austrian foreign fighters of Chechen origin who, driven by the decades-long conflict in the North Caucasus region, tended to join the Chechen-led insurgent groups Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JAMWA) and Junud al-Sham (JAS) to fight the Assad regime, an ally of these groups' archenemy Russia.

With the founding of the Islamic State caliphate in the summer of 2014, the characteristics of the Austrian foreign fighter flow changed. Motivated to live in the newly founded caliphate, foreign fighters with a Balkan (especially Bosnians and to a lesser degree ethnic Albanians) and Turkish background thereafter made up a significant cohort of the jihadi travelers, with individuals of Chechen origin also continuing to travel in significant numbers. The observation of relevant court trials in Austria revealed that in some cases, sizable groups affiliated with single mosques set out for Syria and Iraq, with, for example, seven families with 16 children leaving from the Taqwa mosque in Graz.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, there was a decrease in the average age of foreign fighters departing from Austria with this new wave now including many individuals under the age of 20.<sup>32</sup>

Fejzulai's attempts to join the Islamic State in Afghanistan and Syria came after the number of foreign fighter departures from Austria had already declined sharply for various reasons such as the gradual disintegration of the caliphate and foreign fighters' disillusionment with the leadership of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq as well as the arrest of recruiters and the disruption of facilitation networks in Austria. However, the case of Fejzulai and his would-be travel companion to Afghanistan Burak K. shows that despite such setbacks, the Islamic State still held an attraction for jihadi extremists in Europe.

In June 2019, the Criminal Court of Vienna sentenced Kujtim Fejzulai and Burak K. to 22 months in prison for membership in a terrorist organization (§278b criminal code).<sup>33</sup> During his trial, Fejzulai appeared remorseful, stating that he had visited the wrong mosque, had the wrong friends, and that he never supported terrorist attacks and the killing of 'infidels' by the Islamic State.<sup>34</sup> In the sentence, the judge recommended the supervision of Fejzulai by a probation officer and members of Derad,<sup>35 d</sup> an NGO that was founded in December 2015 and has been tasked by the Ministry of Interior with preventing extremism among criminal offenders and inmates.<sup>36</sup> While in prison, Fejzulai began attending meetings with Neustart, another Austrian NGO specialized in the reintegration of criminal offenders and deradicalization.<sup>37</sup>

Fejzulai stopped wearing a beard and salafi clothes during his

prison stay.<sup>38</sup> In August 2019, he requested an early release for December 2019. Fejzulai wrote in a statement that he had reflected a lot about his crime, which he regretted, and that he wanted to learn a profession and move into his own apartment after release.<sup>39</sup> The prosecution opposed an early release, but the prison administration agreed on the condition that Fejzulai cooperate with Derad on his release. The prison authorities did not request further measures such as bans on contacting certain people or psychological care.<sup>40</sup>

Between his release at the end of 2019 and October 2020, Fejzulai attended 15 sessions with Derad and biweekly meetings with Neustart in which he discussed his financial situation, his daily structure, his offense, and his worldview with his counselors.<sup>41</sup> He continued to adhere to salafism after his release.<sup>42</sup> Fejzulai moved into his own apartment, attended workshops for vocational integration, wrote job applications, and worked for a security company.<sup>43</sup> Derad employees described Fejzulai as friendly, naïve, and reserved.<sup>44</sup> They considered him less radical than some of his circle as he began to show at least minimal tolerance toward democracy and the rule of law by voting in local elections.<sup>45</sup> He was upset by *Charlie Hebdo's* republication of Mohammad cartoons in France in September 2020 but told the Derad staff that the attacks in Paris in September 2020 and Nice in late October 2020 in response to it were wrong.<sup>46</sup>

Fejzulai's case illustrates how radicalization and deradicalization are not always linear processes and the degree of disengagement from and reengagement with radical networks can fluctuate over time. Despite Fejzulai's cooperation during and after his prison term, there were many warning signs indicating that he had reengaged with or even had never disengaged from jihadism. Derad employees were not naïve in their assessment. They recognized Fejzulai's simplified and strongly dualistic, although very rudimentary, knowledge of religion.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, they considered his reconnection with militant salafis as "problematic" and a serious obstacle for his deradicalization.<sup>48</sup> Although he lacked theological knowledge, Fejzulai continued to consult salafi websites after his release and was especially influenced by the salafi group "Im Auftrag des Islam"<sup>e</sup> (On Behalf of Islam) and other followers of the pro-Islamic State

d The final report of the expert enquiry commission on the Vienna attack stated that since 2016, all correctional facilities have had to cooperate with Derad when reintegrating extremist offenders. Ingeborg Zerbos, Herbert Anderl, Hubertus Andra, Franz Merli, Werner Pleischl, with Monika Stempkowski, "Abschlussbericht der Untersuchungskommission zum Terroranschlag vom 02.11.2020," February 10, 2021.

e The authors have monitored the online presence of Im Auftrag des Islam (IADI) since 2015. According to the authors' observations, IADI is a salafi group based in the town of Sontra in the German state of Hesse that can be considered the successor of the banned Milli Görüs (MG) splinter organization Kalifatstaat. The Milli Görüs movement belongs to the Turkish Islamist Saadet Party. Due to ideological conflicts within MG, Cemaleddin Kaplan founded Kalifatstaat in Cologne in 1994 with the goal of establishing a state ruled by sharia law. After the 9/11 attacks, the organization was banned by the German Ministry of Interior. See "Beschluss vom 02. Oktober 2003 - 1 BvR 536/03. Karlsruhe," Bundesverfassungsgericht, October 2, 2003. According to the authors' observations, IADI—in the ideological tradition of the Kalifatstaat—played a prominent role in recent years in the ideological conflict within the German-speaking salafi/jihadi milieu. Despite rejecting the Islamic State, members of the group praised the Turkish-Kurdish pro-Islamic State preacher Ebu Hanzala and were occasionally linked to terrorist plots.

preacher Halis Bayancuk (Ebu Hanzala).<sup>49f</sup>

Derad employees also recognized physical changes in Fejzulai: he started to take anabolic steroids, became very muscular, grew a beard, and wore salafi clothes again.<sup>50</sup> While the staff of Derad and Neustart had access to and some influence on Fejzulai, he was not willing to cooperate with the State Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism (Landesamt Verfassungsschutz Wien, LVT) after his release as he rejected a request to appear as a witness against another jihadi extremist.<sup>51</sup> Although his parents were initially involved in the reintegration efforts by the authorities,<sup>52</sup> Fejzulai increasingly tried to avoid his family. After the attack, his grandfather in North Macedonia said that he seemed withdrawn the last time he saw him at the end of December 2019.<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, Fejzulai's reengagement with young jihadis from Vienna, Germany, and Switzerland started to cause concern among security and intelligence agencies. Already in February 2020, Austria's military intelligence service HNA recognized that Fejzulai was in touch with a person linked to the Islamic State and forwarded the information to the BVT.<sup>54</sup> And German authorities warned their Austrian counterpart about Fejzulai's links to militant salafis in Germany several months before the attack.<sup>55</sup>

In July 2020, Slovakian police informed Austria's Federal Criminal Police (BKA) about Fejzulai's attempt to buy ammunition in a gun shop in Bratislava, which failed because he and an individual who accompanied him could not present a firearms license.<sup>56</sup> According to investigation files, the BKA forwarded the warning to the Austrian domestic intelligence agency BVT,<sup>g</sup> which prepared with the authorities in Vienna "further measures" against Fejzulai but never implemented them due to BVT's preoccupation with "Operation Luxor" against an alleged financial network of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>57</sup> For the very same reason, the BVT never analyzed the observations made of a July 2020 Vienna meeting between Fejzulai and jihadis from Germany and Switzerland shortly before the failed ammunition purchase.<sup>58</sup> The meeting had been put under surveillance after the German Federal Service of Criminal Investigation (BKA) had informed the BVT that some of the individuals from Germany were traveling to Vienna to meet Fejzulai. Vienna's intelligence service LVT claimed that it was not aware of Fejzulai's ties to these jihadi extremists from Germany and Switzerland as only one LVT employee received information from the BVT under the condition of confidentiality.<sup>59</sup> The preliminary report by the independent expert investigation committee on the Vienna attack later concluded that the delay in information sharing and measures of surveillance were caused by the then assessment of the BVT and other agencies, which did not consider the threat posed by Fejzulai to be very high.<sup>60</sup> It was only in October 2020 that the BVT considered him a high risk based on the intelligence collected on him and his contacts, but even that did not trigger

further investigative actions.<sup>61</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight, however, several circumstances indicate that Fejzulai began planning his attack at least several weeks ahead of time. Besides his attempt to buy ammunition, friends later revealed that he had expressed a wish to blow himself up.<sup>62</sup> It remains unknown (at least publicly) how he eventually acquired the weapons and ammunition used in the attack. According to Austrian media, during a raid on Fejzulai's apartment after the attack, police discovered that he had barricaded it for a firefight, anticipating that police would come to arrest him before or (if he survived) after the attack.<sup>63</sup>

On the night of the attack, a photo of Fejzulai holding an assault rifle, pistol, and machete that he posted on his Instagram profile shortly before or during the attack began circulating on social media. So too did a *bay`a* (pledge of allegiance) to the Islamic State's leader that he posted via Instagram.<sup>64</sup> On his Instagram account, he also posted a picture displaying the word *Baqiyya* (from the Islamic State's slogan *Baqiyya wa tatamadad*, which means 'remaining and expanding'), written with bullets.<sup>65</sup> The next day, the official Islamic State media channel Amaq claimed responsibility for the attack and uploaded a short video of Fejzulai as Abu Dujana al-Albani pledging his loyalty to Islamic State leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi.<sup>66</sup> It remains unclear how Fejzulai's video reached members of the Islamic State, but most likely, it happened through international contacts he had previously made online and offline.

### Kujtim Fejzulai and the Austrian Jihadi Milieu

Shortly after the attack, Austrian authorities launched investigations into 21 individuals connected to Fejzulai<sup>67</sup> and arrested 12 individuals who were in contact with the perpetrator. In addition, law enforcement agencies in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Turkey arrested individuals tied to the Vienna attacker.<sup>68</sup> A considerable proportion of them shared the same ethnicity as their families were rooted in the Western Balkans, especially in those countries with an Albanian population.<sup>h</sup>

Although Fejzulai was only 20 years old when he committed the

f Halis Bayancuk is a Turkish national of Kurdish origin who Turkish authorities labeled as al-Qa`ida's and later the Islamic State's leader in Turkey. He has been arrested several times for his alleged involvement in terrorism (such as the 2015 Suruç bombing) and the recruitment of jihadi foreign fighters. It is noteworthy that Bayancuk was sentenced to 12 years in prison just weeks before the Vienna attack. Kasim Cindemir, "Turkey's 'Islamic State Leader' Is Arrested Once Again," Voice of America, March 8, 2017; Emre Ayvaz, "Turkey jails senior Daesh/ISIS terrorist for 12+ years," Anadolu Agency, September 18, 2020.

g The Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism (BVT)

h A recent U.N. report stated that Fejzulai belonged to the terrorist group "Lions of the Balkans," which it described as "an international network composed of elements based in at least Austria, Germany, Switzerland and western Balkan countries." However, this was the first time the group's name appeared in a public document, and the authors and other experts they consulted were not aware of the group before. Interestingly, the United Nations also stated that the "Lions of the Balkans" were linked through Komron Zuhurov to the Tajik "Takim" cell in Germany that allegedly plotted attacks on U.S. and NATO military facilities. To finance their plot, the Takim cell allegedly accepted the contract killing of an Albanian businessman in Albania. Like Fejzulai's group, the Takim cell allegedly belonged to a transnational network of Islamic State members, which in the case of the Takim cell reportedly included links to individuals in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Russia, Sweden, and France. Given Kujtim's North Macedonian background, it is interesting that the U.N. report stated that "three returnees belonging to the 'Lions of the Balkans' were arrested in North Macedonia on 1 September 2020 after being enrolled in a reintegration programme, released from prison and then detected to be involved in the final planning stage of a terrorist attack." "Twenty-seventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations Security Council, February 3, 2021; Nodirbek Soliev, "The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany: The Tajik Connection," *CTC Sentinel* 14:1 (2021).



*A screen capture from an Islamic State video purporting to show the Vienna attacker, which was posted by the group's Amaq media outlet on November 3, 2020.*

Vienna attack, he had been part of the local salafi and jihadi milieu since his early teens. A former student of the notorious Vienna-based/Balkan-born preacher Mirsad Omerovic (Ebu Tejma)<sup>i</sup> confirmed he (the former student) and Fejzulai knew each other before Omerovic's arrest in November 2014: "He [Fejzulai] was a real loser, [...] someone who never had an opinion and who was always seeking attention," stated the former student, who also stated that Fejzulai had "tried to get into contact with radical groups, but no one took him seriously."<sup>69</sup> The authors have not been able to determine conclusively that Fejzulai belonged to the "Ebu Tejma group" at Omerovic's Altun Alem mosque in Vienna, but Fejzulai's previous trial confirmed that he and his friends frequented two other mosques in Vienna that were strongly influenced by (militant) salafis, the Tewhid and Melit-Ibrahim mosque.<sup>70</sup>

Fejzulai's connection to these two mosques is noteworthy. Each was led by a preacher who played a significant role in the radicalization of a generation of Islamist extremists in Austria. In the last decade, the Tewhid mosque repeatedly drew attention from the media and analysts due to some of those who frequented it and

its longtime imam Mohamed Porca. Like most salafi preachers of the Bosnian diaspora in German-speaking Europe, Porca had close ties to leaders of the salafi movement in Bosnia, such as Jusuf Baric and his successors Nusret Imamovic and Husein (Bilal) Bosnic.<sup>71</sup> In 2007, Porca was accused by the media of having incited to violence Asim C. who entered the U.S. embassy in Vienna with a backpack filled with two grenades, plastic explosives, and nails. Asim C. not only reportedly frequented the Tewhid mosque, but he also carried Porca's book *Namaz u Islamu (The prayer in Islam)* with him during the foiled attack.<sup>72</sup> By now, it is well known in the Bosnian diaspora community in Vienna that while still being an adherent of neo-salafi ideas, Porca has convincingly distanced himself ideologically from violent interpretations of Islam.<sup>73</sup>

Like Porca, the leader of the Melit-Ibrahim mosque, Nedžad Balkan, had a strong influence on the foundation and consolidation phase of salafism and jihadism in Austria. A former boxer and bouncer, Balkan studied at the Islamic University in Medina but never graduated, allegedly due to his disappointment with the Wahabi establishment in Saudi Arabia.<sup>74</sup> After returning to Vienna, Balkan preached at Porca's Tewhid Mosque but soon left because of ideological conflicts.<sup>75</sup> Balkan sympathized with jihadi ideologues such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.<sup>76</sup> Through his preaching activities, Balkan played a major role in popularizing takfirism in Austria and Germany.<sup>77</sup> Guido Steinberg speculated that Balkan possibly thereafter became an adherent of the very extremist Hazimi movement within the Islamic State.<sup>78</sup>

i After studying sharia law in Saudi Arabia, Vienna-based Serbian national Mirsad Omerovic (aka Ebu Tejma) became in the early 2010s one of the most prominent jihadi preachers in German-speaking Europe and the Balkans. According to the authors' research, a facilitation network associated with Omerovic helped dozens of foreign fighters from Austria (Vienna, Graz), Germany (Bremen, Weiden, Munich, Stuttgart), and Switzerland (Winterthur) to reach Syria. Arrested at the end of 2014, Omerovic was sentenced by an Austrian court in 2016 to 20 years in prison for recruiting at least 50 of his mostly young followers as foreign fighters. See Elisalex Henckel, "Österreichs 'Gotteskrieger' in aktuellen Zahlen," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, April 1, 2016.

j However, despite the accusations, it was never proven that Porca's book contained passages justifying and inciting violence. Damir Imamovic, "Wiener Extremisten-Connection," *Der Standard*, February 7, 2010.

By the end of the 2000s, Balkan had influenced a new generation of jihadis that probably included prominent extremists such as Omerovic<sup>k</sup> and the Austrian Islamic State operative Mohamed Mahmoud.<sup>l</sup>

For at least 15 years, Balkan and his followers have displayed an affinity for violence. In 2006, Balkan and six others attacked a Serbian man in the Bosnian town of Brcko.<sup>79</sup> Bosnian authorities also believed that Balkan influenced Haris Causevic, a Bosnian jihadi-terrorist who visited Balkan's sermons several times before he killed one police officer in a 2010 bomb attack on the police station of Bugojno.<sup>80</sup> One year later, Bosnian media alleged Balkan had radicalized the perpetrator of the 2011 U.S. Embassy attack in Sarajevo, Mevlid Jasarevic, who lived temporarily in Vienna, although Balkan vehemently denied these allegations.<sup>81</sup> What is clear is that in the last decade, Balkan's Milet-Ibrahim mosque was repeatedly frequented by known jihadi terrorists, including Mohamed Mahmoud and Lorenz K.,<sup>82</sup> a subsequently convicted member of a German-Austrian jihadi group that plotted attacks on a Christmas market in Ludwigshafen, Germany, and the Viennese metro system in 2016.<sup>m</sup> Balkan was arrested in January 2017 for recruiting several Austro-Bosnian families from the Taqwa Mosque in Graz for the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.<sup>83</sup> In March 2020, Balkan was sentenced to five years in prison for membership in a terrorist organization, membership in a criminal organization, and anti-state association.<sup>84</sup>

Although there is a high likelihood that Vienna attacker Kujtim Fejzulai and several of his friends knew Balkan, no details of possible connections have come to light to date. The question over whether Fejzulai knew Mahmoud and Lorenz K. (the latter of who at least for a period of time remained active in prison by secretly acquiring a mobile phone to contact other radicals in the summer of 2020<sup>85</sup>) also cannot yet be answered. However, the existing information provides a sense of the ideological environment in which Fejzulai and his friends radicalized.

Despite these mosques becoming a meeting place for Fejzulai's friendship circle—mostly men in their early 20s and mostly men



*A memorial for the victims of the Vienna terrorist attack is seen on November 6, 2020, four days after the attack. (Leopold Nekula/AP Images)*

k Omerovic, for instance, firstly visited Balkan's mosque but later started to frequent the Altun Alem mosque because Balkan became too radical even for him. Elisalex Henkel, "Der radikale Prediger im Sold des Stadtschulrats," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung Österreich*, March 20, 2016.

l Mohamed Mahmoud's father was a follower of the Egyptian Gama'a Islamiya and preached at the As-Sahabe mosque in Vienna, which became a focal point of Austrian salafism, although more radical members like Mohamed Mahmoud and Balkan left due to ideological conflicts. After serving a prison sentence for founding the German section of the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), Mahmoud moved at the beginning of the 2010s to Germany where he founded the jihadi youth organization Millatu Ibrahim. A few years later, Mahmoud became somewhat of the informal leader of German-speaking foreign fighters within the Islamic State. Due to internal ideological conflicts within the Islamic State, Mahmoud was detained by the Islamic State in 2018 due to ideological conflicts within the Islamic State. In November 2018, he was killed in an airstrike on the Islamic State prison where he was detained. Marion Kraske and Yassin Musharbash, "Wiener Propaganda-Zelle besuchte radikale Moschee," *Spiegel Online*, September 26, 2007; Stefan Malthaner and Klaus Hummel, "Die 'Sauerland-Gruppe' und ihr soziales Umfeld," in Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann eds., *Radikale Milieus. Das soziale Umfeld terroristischer Gruppen* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2012); Lars Wienand, "Hassprediger aus erstem deutschen IS-Video getötet," *T-Online*, November 28, 2018.

m Interestingly, Lorenz K. sent his *bay' a* (oath of loyalty) to none other than Mohamed Mahmoud in Syria. "Anklageschrift Lorenz K.," *Staatsanwaltschaft Wien*, Vienna, January 3, 2018.

with an Albanian, Turkish, or Chechen family background—many in his circle knew each other before they became radicalized. An analysis of open sources online revealed that some of Fejzulai's friends, including Fejzulai himself, played soccer together in Vienna; others were classmates in St. Pölten, a town close to Vienna.<sup>86</sup>

Fejzulai and most of his friendship group were known by security and intelligence services as belonging to the jihadi milieu. Several of them were the subject of criminal investigations before the Vienna attack.<sup>87</sup> A Bangladeshi national named Istiaque A., for instance, was sentenced in December 2020 to two years in prison for membership in a terrorist organization, sharing Islamic State propaganda, and inciting violence. In 2018, Istiaque A. had started to socialize with members of the Fejzulai friendship group and Fejzulai made him an administrator of his Telegram channel.<sup>88</sup> Accused by the prosecutors of having incited Fejzulai to join the Islamic State, Istiaque A. admitted that he was in touch with Fejzulai during Fejzulai's time in Turkey but claimed that he (Istiaque A.) had left the jihadi milieu already in 2019.<sup>89</sup>

This person was among the individuals who were arrested a



day after the attack due to their potential ties to Fejzulai. Almost three years ago, a 22-year-old convert whose identity cannot be disclosed because of privacy considerations stood trial along with three Chechens for planning in the summer of 2015 to rob a gun shop and attack a police station in St. Pölten. The group admitted that they received instructions by an Islamic State member in Syria after they sent him their oath of loyalty.<sup>90</sup> The plan ultimately failed due to an anonymous warning to the Austrian Ministry of Interior that became public.<sup>91</sup> Interestingly, the group was only identified at the beginning of 2017, in connection to the investigation into Lorenz K.<sup>92</sup>

For now, only a little information has come to light helping to answer the question to what extent friends of Fejzulai were possibly involved in the attack. All of Fejzulai's contacts who have been placed under investigation have either denied any involvement in the attack or being aware of it beforehand.<sup>93</sup> Some of Fejzulai's friends recognized him as the attacker in the videos posted on social media during the evening of the attack and, on the recommendation of members of the Islamic Religious Authority of Austria (IGGÖ), subsequently informed the police.<sup>94</sup> One associate of Fejzulai even claimed that he tried to reach Fejzulai by phone to talk him out of the attack.<sup>95</sup> Another of his companions, however, reportedly did not inform the police when he saw the photo and bay`a of Fejzulai that circulated online before the attack.<sup>96</sup> The car Fejzulai used to drive to Bratislava in his failed attempt to obtain weapons in July 2020 belonged to the mother of one of his associates under investigation, and another friend joined him on the trip to Slovakia.<sup>97</sup>

Investigators are unsure how Fejzulai reached the city center from his apartment on the night of the attack and still have not ruled out that he may have been driven by a friend.<sup>98</sup> Recently, a forensic report found traces of DNA from seven different people, including two women, on the weapons used by Fejzulai.<sup>99</sup> So far, two of these individuals have been identified and arrested: a 26-year-old Afghan and an individual of Chechen origin.<sup>100</sup> According to Austrian media, the former has family members who left for jihad in Syria.<sup>101</sup>

## The International Network of the Vienna Attacker

Local clusters of jihadi extremists often share transregional and transnational connections to other radicals forming geographically far-reaching networks based on shared ethnicity and language.<sup>102</sup> In Austria, this is especially the case for Islamist extremists within the Balkan diaspora in Vienna, Graz, and elsewhere. Austria's importance as an international hub for jihadi support activities became evident in the early 1990s when Islamic charities used their offices in Vienna to channel fighters, funds, and equipment to the foreign mujahideen who fought alongside regular combat units against the Serbian and Croatian armies.<sup>103</sup>

After the Bosnian War (1992-1995), a number of Bosnian salafis who had immigrated as foreign workers or refugees to Austria, Germany, and Switzerland played a key role in establishing salafi enclave communities in the Bosnian countryside such as the infamous Donja Bocinja and Gornja Maoca.<sup>104</sup> Commuting between the Balkans and Western Europe, they collected money among fellow brethren in the diaspora, facilitated the purchase of property, and often chose these enclaves as secondary residences.<sup>105</sup> These connections remained relevant for the mobilization of foreign fighters with Bosnian origin to Syria in the last decade as research by Vlado Azinovic and Muhamed Jusic showed: many

of the Bosnian foreign fighters they analyzed were linked to the diaspora in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland.<sup>106</sup>

Close connections to other German-speaking countries—partly because of homeland diaspora connections—is another aspect of the internationalization of the Austrian jihad. As described above, Nedžad Balkan, Mirsad Omerovic, and other Austria-based preachers played a key role in spreading the ideas of leading jihadi ideologues in German-speaking Europe.

Even by the age of 20, Fejzulai had built up a transnational network of contacts. The earliest clear evidence of Fejzulai making connections with jihadis abroad can be found during his short stay in Turkey in the fall of 2018. While he stayed in the Islamic State safe house in Hatay, Fejzulai made contact with two Germans and a Belgian also seeking to become foreign terrorist fighters.<sup>107</sup> The arrests of Ramazan O. (Ebu Haris), the owner of a salafi bookshop-turned-mosque, and a dozen other individuals in Izmir in connection to the Vienna attack suggest Fejzulai also established ties to Turkish extremists around this time (fall 2018) or later. There is, however, little open-source information on these connections.<sup>108</sup> His ties to Islamist extremists from Turkey, including his friend Burak K. from Vienna (who he had looked to travel to Afghanistan with), may be one of the reasons why Fejzulai consumed videos and lectures by the German-Turkish salafi organization "Im Auftrag des Islam" and other sympathizers of the pro-Islamic State preacher Halis Bayancuk (Ebu Hanzala).<sup>109</sup>

There is more detailed information about the Vienna attacker's ties to extremists in Europe. Fejzulai and his friendship group in Vienna developed close ties to Islamist extremists in Germany and Switzerland. One day after the Vienna attack, German police raided the apartments of five individuals from Bremen, Pinneberg (near Hamburg), Kassel, and Osnabrück. While one 18-year-old man was not directly tied to Fejzulai, the other four were in touch with the Vienna attacker.<sup>110</sup> One of Fejzulai's four contacts in Germany was an individual<sup>n</sup> who had been part of jihadi circles in Germany since the summer of 2015. In March 2016, this individual (hereafter referred to as Fejzulai's Germany contact) attended a seminar given by the jihadi preacher Abu Walaa in Hildesheim. An allegedly high-ranking Islamic State member, Abu Walaa currently faces charges for recruiting foreign terrorist fighters and was linked to several terrorists such as the 2016 Berlin Christmas market attacker Anis Amri.<sup>111</sup> During the event, Fejzulai's Germany contact made notes about staying fit, making farewell pictures, deleting computer data, and other tasks that investigators believed to be a to-do list for emigrating to the Islamic State.<sup>112</sup> In April 2017, Fejzulai's Germany contact and six others were arrested in Bulgaria en route to the Islamic State in Syria and subsequently sentenced by a German court to several months in prison.<sup>113</sup> After his release in the summer of 2019, Fejzulai's Germany contact moved to Vienna but was deported to Germany only a few weeks before the Vienna attack.<sup>114</sup> Fejzulai's Germany contact met Fejzulai shortly after arriving in Vienna, and both stayed in touch via WhatsApp after Fejzulai's Germany contact returned to Germany.<sup>115</sup>

In Switzerland, officers of the federal and cantonal police arrested two associates of Fejzulai on the morning after the Vienna attack. Eighteen-year-old Besar D. and 24-year-old convert-to-Islam Davide C. were detained in Winterthur, a town near Zurich

<sup>n</sup> Due to privacy considerations, the authors decided to anonymize this individual.

that has been a hot spot for jihadi radicalization in Switzerland.<sup>116</sup> For several years, Davide C. had belonged to a radical youth group with around 40 members, which used to meet at the infamous An-Nur mosque.<sup>117</sup> A dozen visitors of the mosque left for Syria in the first half of the 2010s. Most of them were younger than 20 years old and influenced by charismatic role models such as Sandro V., an extremist known as the “emir of Winterthur,” and a former Thai boxing world champion named Valdet Gashi. Interestingly, Vienna-based Mirsad Omerovic became a very important religious authority for the radical youth group at the An-Nur mosque. Since 2012, the youth group’s leaders, Sandro V. and Gashi, regularly communicated with Omerovic who shared their passion for martial arts.<sup>118</sup> A facilitation network associated with Omerovic most likely also helped some foreign fighters from Winterthur to reach the Islamic State.<sup>119</sup> When Omerovic was arrested in November 2014, members of the Winterthur group, especially younger ones, gravitated toward Abu Walaa and began attending his seminars in Hildesheim.<sup>120</sup>

It seems that Davide C. and Besar D. radicalized around the same time as most foreign fighters left Winterthur. Since at least 2015, Besar D., according to his YouTube account, watched lectures by salafi preachers such as Shefqet Krasniqi. Although most of their fellow brethren from the An-Nur mosque who left for the Islamic State died in Syria or Iraq, the youth group continued to exist. One of the only returnees, Visar L. (who was 16 years old when he departed with his teenage sister to Syria in December 2014) became the youth group’s new leader after what appears to have been a short-lived disengagement from militant salafism.<sup>121</sup> Both Davide C. and Besar D. were known to the authorities and the subject of criminal investigations in recent years. Davide C. and other members of the Winterthur youth group stood trial in 2018 for kidnapping and attacking an investigative journalist at the an-Nur mosque in November 2016.<sup>122</sup> After the trial, Davide C. moved with his wife to Turkey, but in early 2020, he was deported because Turkish authorities considered him a potential security risk.<sup>123</sup> It should be also noted that in 2019, several cantonal and federal law enforcement agencies launched a major counterterrorism operation targeting six suspects from the cantons of Zurich, Berne, and Schaffhausen who belonged to the Winterthur youth group.<sup>124</sup>

Members of Fejzulai’s transnational network not only communicated online but also met in person. A case in point—a meeting in Vienna in July 2020 has already been noted in this article. Between July 16 and 20, 2020 (one day before Fejzulai and a friend drove to Bratislava in their failed attempt to obtain weapons), Fejzulai, Istiaque A., and at least two other members of Fejzulai’s Vienna friendship group hosted the Winterthur duo of Davide C. and Besar D. in the Austrian capital as well as two individuals identified as Dylon G. from the German town of Kassel and Blinor S. from the German town of Osnabrück. They picked up their guests from the airport, visited several mosques, dined together, and slept at Fejzulai’s apartment.<sup>125</sup> Most of this meeting was observed by Austrian authorities; the observation was then dropped one day later, however.<sup>126</sup>

Two weeks later, Burak K. (the Austrian-Turkish extremist who had sought to travel to Afghanistan with Fejzulai) and other Turkish members of the Fejzulai’s Vienna friendship group traveled to Hanau, near Frankfurt.<sup>127</sup> They later claimed that they wanted to visit a friend of Burak K.,<sup>128</sup> but it is worth noting the Hesse city has for many years been home to a group of radical salafis of Turkish

origin at the local Baraa mosque, which was closed in 2015.<sup>129</sup>

At the time of publication, there is no open-source information on whether any of the international contacts of Fejzulai in Germany and Switzerland knew about his attack beforehand or even helped him. However, it seems that his wide-ranging connections made it possible to acquire the necessary tools for his terrorist activities in the years before his attack. A few days after the Vienna attack, Italian police arrested a 35-year-old Chechen asylum seeker named Turko Arsimekov in Varese near the Swiss-Italian border. It seems that Arsimekov was not a jihadi extremist but rather a petty criminal who ran a distribution center for forged passports and identity cards in Europe with two Ukrainian men.<sup>130</sup> Authorities suspected Arsimekov was part of a Balkan-Chechen cell connected to Fejzulai.<sup>131</sup> According to prosecutors in Milan and counterterrorism officials, Arsimekov not only provided forged documents to “the cell” of Fejzulai, but frequently provided Fejzulai’s group with small sums of money so they could purchase weapons.<sup>o</sup>

## Conclusion

Open-source information on the Vienna attacker’s network is still limited. However, the available information suggests that to some extent, Fejzulai’s network revolved around hubs that in previous years had been notorious for their involvement in foreign fighter recruitment. It seems as if these hubs partly remained connected after the arrest of their most prominent figures. A significant number of the individuals in this network, including the perpetrator of the Vienna attack, can be categorized as “frustrated jihadi travelers.” During the heyday of the so-called Islamic State, ties to this network provided important opportunity structures for foreign fighters from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. It is not yet clear what role, if any this network played in the preparations for the Vienna attack.

An important nuance to the discussion on the threat posed by frustrated travelers, including those set to be released from prison in the coming years, is that former FTFs and their family members, who stood trial in Austria after fleeing from the former territory of the Islamic State, in court appeared genuinely disillusioned by the caliphate project. This was, in part, due to the way they had been treated by Islamic State leadership, especially when the situation became ever more tense in the territory.<sup>132</sup> Cases such as the one of Fejzulai on the other hand demonstrate what the frustration of not being able to physically join the Islamic State might lead to.

What lessons can be learned from the Vienna attack for the prevention of violent extremism, both on the part of the authorities and on the part of NGOs involved in prevention, deradicalization, and disengagement? In the aftermath of the attack, there was finger-pointing between the different organizations involved in these efforts. As a matter of fact, since the attack, there have been fewer failures that have come to light in Fejzulai’s case with regard to the involvement of the justice system and the NGOs it mandates than with regard to the police and the BVT.<sup>133</sup> Although it was not a surprise that an individual from the jihadi milieu in Austria resorted to violent means, it is still troubling that someone who was

o Journalist Cesare Giuzzi even speculates that the Balkan-Chechen cell also had links to the beheading of teacher Samuel Paty by Abdoullakh Abuyezidovich Anzorov and the perpetrator of the Nice church attack, Brahim Aoussaoui. Cesare Giuzzi, “Arrestato il ‘falsario’ Turko Arsimekov: ha fornito documenti al terrorista di Vienna,” *Corriere Della Sera*, November 12, 2020.

convicted of membership in a terrorist organization and was part of a deradicalization and probation program was able to carry out an attack. It is all the more so given that foreign security agencies pointed Austrian authorities toward Fejzulai due to his links with members of the jihadi movement in Germany as well an attempt he made to acquire ammunition after his release from prison.

Fejzulai's trajectory from a failed foreign fighter who was sentenced for his attempt to join the Islamic State to the perpetrator of a terrorist attack in Austria's capital shows that Austria's deradicalization and disengagement efforts are far from perfect. Even though Derad, which has counseled more than 140 individuals who were imprisoned for jihadi related offenses since 2016,<sup>134</sup> increased employees from two to 13 in the last four years,<sup>135</sup> resources allocated to deradicalization and disengagement are still not sufficient. A study conducted in 2017 concluded that the work of deradicalization programs in Austria has to be professionalized and expanded in order to measure up to the challenges they are confronting.<sup>136</sup>

Furthermore, deradicalization and disengagement efforts during and after incarceration should be substantially expanded. The cooperation of different professionals, such as psychologists, psychotherapists, Islamic pastoral counselors, and social workers, is indispensable: Just as individual radicalization processes are multifactorial, so should be the approach to deradicalization and disengagement. Such an approach should involve case conferences in which the different actors have the opportunity to share their expertise and communicate with each other. Also important is continued counseling for individuals convicted for terrorism-related charges after their release from prison and after the end of any period of probation. Since 2014, 120 inmates in Austria who were imprisoned for offenses related to jihadi terrorism have left prison.<sup>137</sup> The mandate of institutions such as Derad ends with the prison term and/or the period of probation.

The fact that a well-connected jihadi sympathizer was able to carry out an attack of such a scope suggests significant failures on the part of the authorities. Fejzulai was part of a transnational

network of sympathizers, some of whom had been convicted or suspected of crimes related to terrorism. Taking into account the history and the connectivity of jihadi networks in Austria, the focus of the authorities prompts questions. As already noted, while the BVT observed the meeting of Fejzulai and sympathizers from Germany and Switzerland in Vienna between July 16 and 20, 2020,<sup>138</sup> why was the observation stopped one day later, just before Fejzulai would go to Slovakia to buy ammunition?<sup>139</sup>

After receiving information on the attacker's attempt to acquire ammunition, an official in charge of the Vienna's Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism recommended a higher level of risk assessment for Fejzulai, which was reportedly disregarded due to an ongoing operation against the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>140</sup> The raid against alleged members of the Muslim Brotherhood was carried out one week after the attack.<sup>141</sup> The chronology of events thus suggests that resources were put into an investigation on proceedings without imminent danger,<sup>142</sup> instead of further investigating a transnational jihadi networking get-together that ended in an attempt to buy ammunition.<sup>143</sup>

In the aftermath of the attack, the Austrian government introduced a draft bill to combat terrorism, which among other things includes a new statutory offense: "religiously motivated extremist association."<sup>144</sup> However, it is worth noting that given what is known so far about the Vienna attacker's case, the attack likely could have been prevented by resorting to existing laws. Measures on the basis of these laws, such as intensified surveillance and arrest, could have prevented the attack, if risk assessment, internally within BVT, as well as communication between BVT and prosecutors had functioned properly.<sup>145</sup>

According to a BVT employee, 70-150 highly radicalized individuals from the jihadi spectrum currently live in Austria.<sup>146</sup> Almost 100 individuals living in Austria are (as of late 2020) willing to join the Islamic State abroad.<sup>147</sup> The events of November 2, 2020, demonstrated the dangers they and the networks they belong to pose. **CTC**

## Citations

- 1 See, for instance, Miryam Davolio, Mallory Purdie, Fabien Merz, Johannes Saal, and Ayesha Rether, *Updated review and developments in jihadist radicalisation in Switzerland – updated version of an exploratory study on prevention and intervention* (Zurich: Zurich University of Applied Sciences, 2019).
- 2 See, for instance, Wolfgang Rössler and Christine Login, "Die neuen islamistischen Terroristen brauchen keinen IS," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, November 9, 2020, and Florian Flade and Volkmar Kabisch, "Ein Netzwerk und eine neue Generation," *Tagesschau*, November 11, 2020.
- 3 Maher Chmaytelli, Stephen Kalin, and Ali Abdelaty, "Islamic State calls for attacks on the West during Ramadan in audio message," Reuters, May 21, 2016.
- 4 Author (Johannes Saal) tracking of German pro-Islamic State Telegram channels in 2016; Johannes Saal, *The Dark Social Capital of Religious Radicals. Jihadi Networks and Mobilization in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, 1998-2018* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, forthcoming).
- 5 Raffaello Pantucci, "A View From the CT Foxhole: Gilles de Kerchove, European Union (EU) Counter-Terrorism Coordinator," *CTC Sentinel* 13:8 (2020).
- 6 Victor H. Asal, Na'ama Nagar, and Karl R. Rethemeyer, "Building Terrorism from Social Ties: The Dark Side of Social Capital," *Civil Wars* 16:4 (2014): pp. 402-424; Sean F. Everton, "Social Networks and Religious Violence," *Review of Religious Research* 48 (2016): pp. 191-217; Fernando Reinares, Carola Garcia-Calvo, and Vicente Alvaro, "Differential Association Explain-

- ing Jihadi Radicalization in Spain: A Quantitative Study," *CTC Sentinel* 10:6 (2017); Stefan Malthaner, "Spaces, Ties, and Agency: The Formation of Radical Networks," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12:2 (2018): pp. 32-43; Mohammed M. Hafez, "The Ties that Bind: How Terrorists Exploit Family Bonds," *CTC Sentinel* 9:2 (2016).
- 7 Donatella della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Saal, *The Dark Social Capital of Religious Radicals*.
- 8 Robin Simcox, "When Terrorists Stay Home: The Evolving Threat to Europe from Frustrated Travelers," *CTC Sentinel* 12:6 (2019).
- 9 Robin Simcox and Hannah Stuart, "The Threat from Europe's Jihadi Prisoners and Prison Leavers," *CTC Sentinel* 13:7 (2020).
- 10 Thomas Renard, "Overblown: Exploring the Gap Between the Fear of Terrorist Recidivism and the Evidence," *CTC Sentinel* 13:4 (2020).
- 11 Vanessa Gaigg, Katharina Mittelstaedt, Johannes Pucher, and Fabian Sommayilla, "Neun Minuten: Die Geschichten einer Nacht voller Heldentaten und Terror in Wien," *Der Standard*, November 6, 2020.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Walter Mayr, "Endstation Bermudadreieck," *Der Spiegel*, December 24, 2020.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 "Verdict [in the case] of Kujtim Fejzulai and Burak K.," Criminal Court of Vienna, May 6, 2019.
- 20 Eva Konzett, Florian Klenk, and Lukas Matzinger, "Die Protokolle einer mörderischen Radikalisierung," *Falter*, November 10, 2020.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Mayr.
- 23 Konzett, Klenk, and Matzinger.
- 24 Ingeborg Zerbes, Herbert Anderl, Hubertus Andra, Fraz Merli, Werner Pleischl, with Monika Stempkowski, "Zwischenbericht. Untersuchungskommission zum Terroranschlag vom 02.11.2020," December 22, 2020.
- 25 Ibid.; Michael Möseneder, "Terror in Wien: Der Attentäter musste sich schon 2019 vor Gericht verantworten," *Der Standard*, November 3, 2020.
- 26 "Verdict [in the case] of Kujtim Fejzulai and Burak K."
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 "Viyana Saldırısını Gerçekleştiren Teröristin Türkiye'den Sınır Dışı Edildiği Ortaya Çıktı," Emniyet Genel Müdürlüğü, November 8, 2020.
- 29 Simcox.
- 30 "Verfassungsschutzbericht 2019," Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung, Vienna, 2020.
- 31 Author (Felix Lippe) observation in 2017 of court trials involving §278b. §278b of the Austrian Criminal Code penalizes the membership in a terrorist organization with one to 15 years in prison.
- 32 Saal, *The Dark Social Capital of Religious Radicals*.
- 33 "Verdict [in the case] of Kujtim Fejzulai and Burak K."
- 34 Konzett, Klenk, and Matzinger; Möseneder, "Terror in Wien: Der Attentäter musste sich schon 2019 vor Gericht verantworten."
- 35 Zerbes et al. (2020).
- 36 Derad website.
- 37 Zerbes et al (2020).
- 38 Konzett, Klenk, and Matzinger.
- 39 Zerbes et al (2020).
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Thomas Hoisl, "Wie der Wien-Attentäter im Deradikalisierungs-Programm eingestuft wurde," *Profil*, November 7, 2020.
- 44 Zerbes et al (2020).
- 45 Hoisl; Florian Klenk, Eva Konzett, and Lukas Matzinger, "Vom Besslerpark ins Kalifat," *Falter*, November 18, 2020.
- 46 Hoisl.
- 47 Zerbes et al (2020).
- 48 Hoisl.
- 49 Klenk, Konzett, and Matzinger.
- 50 Zerbes et al (2020).
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Mayr.
- 54 Zerbes et al (2020).
- 55 Jörg Diehl, Roman Lehberger, Fidelius Schmid, Ansgar Siemens, and Wolf Wiedmann-Schmidt, "Terroranschlag in Wien: Razzien bei deutschen Islamisten," *Der Spiegel*, November 6, 2020.
- 56 Klenk, Konzett, and Matzinger.
- 57 Zerbes et al (2020); Gabriele Scherndl and Fabian Schmid, "BVT plante laut Akten Maßnahmen gegen Attentäter, war aber andersweitig beschäftigt," *Der Standard*, November 14, 2020.
- 58 Zerbes et al (2020).
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Klenk, Konzett, and Matzinger.
- 63 "Terror in Wien: Täter hatte Wohnung für Feuertreffen vorbereitet," *Kurier*, November 11, 2020.
- 64 Mayr.
- 65 Björn Stritzel, "Hauptverdächtiger kündigte Tat auf Instagram an," *Bild*, November 3, 2020.
- 66 "IS-Terrormiliz reklamiert Anschlag in Wien für sich," *Deutsche Welle*, November 4, 2020.
- 67 "Vienna terror attack: Police investigating 21 potential accomplices," *Deutsche Welle*, November 13, 2020.
- 68 Diehl, Lehberger, Schmid, Siemens, and Wiedmann-Schmidt; Kurt Pelda, "Verbindungen nach Österreich und Deutschland – Das Netzwerk der Winterthurer Salafisten," *Sonntagszeitung*, November 8, 2020; "Ünlü; 'si-lahlaniyorlar' demisti Selefî Vasat Kitabevi'nin sahibi Ebu Haris'in aralarında bulunduğu 11 kişi gözaltına alındı," *Cumhuriyet*, December 3, 2020; Cesare Giuzzi, "Arrestato il 'falsario' Turko Arsimekov: ha fornito documenti al terrorista di Vienna," *Corriere Della Sera*, November 12, 2020.
- 69 Edith Meinhart, "Wiener Islamisten Szene: 'Schwach halt, ein Mitläufer,'" *Profil*, December 8, 2020.
- 70 Fabian Schmid and Jan Michael Marchart, "Wiener Attentäter besuchte dieselbe Moschee wie Bombenbastler Lorenz K.," *Der Standard*, November 4, 2020.
- 71 Anes Alic, "Foreign Jihadis Face Deportation in Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* 5:21 (2007); Damir Imamovic, "Wiener Extremisten-Connection," *Der Standard*, February 7, 2010.
- 72 Joseph Gepp and Stefan Apfl, "Die Spur eines Verwirrten," *Die Zeit*, October 11, 2007.
- 73 Author (Felix Lippe) interview, local social worker, January 2020.
- 74 Juan Carlos Antunez, "Wahhabism in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Part One," *Bosnian Institute*, September 16, 2008.
- 75 Ibid.
- 76 Guido Steinberg, "Gutachten zur ideologischen Ausrichtung des Glaubensvereins at-Taqwa in Graz," Berlin, May 2017.
- 77 Stefan Malthaner and Klaus Hummel, "Die 'Sauerland-Gruppe' und ihr soziales Umfeld," in Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann eds., *Radikale Milieus. Das soziale Umfeld terroristischer Gruppen* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2012); Steinberg, "Gutachten zur ideologischen Ausrichtung des Glaubensvereins at-Taqwa in Graz."
- 78 Steinberg, "Gutachten zur ideologischen Ausrichtung des Glaubensvereins at-Taqwa in Graz."
- 79 Anes Alic, "Investigation into Backgrounds of Bosnians Involved in Vienna Plot," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* 4:32 (2007); Wienand.
- 80 Anes Alic, "Nedžad Balkan: The Face of Southeastern Europe's Newest Radical Threat," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, January 31, 2011.
- 81 "Wiener Prediger streitet Kontakt zu Jasarevic ab," *Die Presse*, November 7, 2011.
- 82 Meinhart.
- 83 "Beschluss 12 Os 139/17h," Oberster Gerichtshof Republik Österreich, Vienna, December 17, 2017.
- 84 Guido Steinberg, "Die 'Takfiristen'. Eine salafistisch-jihadistische Teilströmung gewinnt an Bedeutung," *SWP-Aktuell* 2021/A 09, January 2021.
- 85 Schmid and Marchart.
- 86 The details in this paragraph are from open-source information collected by the authors.
- 87 Zerbes et al (2020).
- 88 Michael Möseneder, "Terrorprozess: Haft für Musikliebhaber und Attentäterfreund," *Der Standard*, December 21, 2020.
- 89 Ibid.
- 90 "Mutmaßliche IS-Terroristen planten Attentat in St. Pölten," *Kurier*, February 13, 2018.

- 91 Ibid.
- 92 Ibid.
- 93 Scherndl and Schmid.
- 94 Ibid.
- 95 Ibid.
- 96 Klenk, Konzett, and Matzinger.
- 97 Scherndl and Schmid.
- 98 Herwig G. Höller, Garbiele Scherndl, and Fabian Schmid, "Einzeltätertheorie gerät ins Wanken: Wie kam der Attentäter in die Innere Stadt?" *Der Standard*, November 9, 2020; Edith Meinhard, Thomas Hoisl, and Stefan Melichar, "Terrorermittlungen: Neue Details zu mysteriösem Video," *Profil*, November 21, 2020.
- 99 "Anschlag: Auch weibliche DNA auf Tatwaffen," Österreichischer Rundfunk, January 7, 2021.
- 100 "Anschlag in Wien: U-Haft für zwei Verdächtige," *Kronen Zeitung*, December 21, 2020.
- 101 Ibid.
- 102 Saal, *The Dark Social Capital of Religious Radicals*.
- 103 Evan F. Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe. The Afghan-Bosnian Network* (New York: Oxford, 2004); John R. Schindler, *Unholy Terror. Bosnia, Al-Qa'ida, and the Rise of Global Jihad* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2007); Shaul Shay, *Islamic Terror and the Balkans* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2007).
- 104 Vlado Azinovic and Muhamed Jusic, *The New Lure of the Syrian War – The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2016); Asya Metodieva, "The Radical Milieu and Radical Influencers of Bosnian Foreign Fighters," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, January 18, 2021.
- 105 Saal, *The Dark Social Capital of Religious Radicals*.
- 106 Azinovic and Jusic.
- 107 Michael Nikbakhsh and Edith Meinhard, "Terror in Wien: Was wir bisher über Attentäter F. Wissen," *Profil*, November 3, 2020.
- 108 "Ünlü,'silahlıyıyorlar' demisti Selefî Vasat Kitabevi'nin sahibi Ebu Haris'in aralarında bulunduğu 11 kişi gözaltına alındı."
- 109 Klenk, Konzett, and Matzinger.
- 110 Diehl, Lehberger, Schmid, Siemens, and Wiedmann-Schmidt.
- 111 Georg Heil, "The Berlin Attack and the 'Abu Wala' Islamic State Recruitment Network," *CTC Sentinel* 10:2 (2017).
- 112 Diehl, Lehberger, Schmid, Siemens, and Wiedmann-Schmidt.
- 113 "Strafverfahren gegen sechs mutmaßliche Salafisten aus Norddeutschland," Hanseatisches Oberlandesgericht Hamburg, October 10, 2017.
- 114 Florian Flade and Cathrin Kahlweit, "Nicht tolerierbare Fehler," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 6, 2020.
- 115 "Terrorist von Wien hatte Verbindungen nach NRW," *Express*, 2020.
- 116 Saal, *The Dark Social Capital of Religious Radicals*.
- 117 Pelda, "Verbindungen nach Österreich und Deutschland – Das Netzwerk der Winterthurer Salafisten;" Ivo Mijnsen, Fabian Baumgartner, Florian Schoop, and Christoph Prantner, "Zwei Winterthurer fahren nach Wien und übernachten bei einem Attentäter. Warum?" *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, January 29, 2021.
- 118 Trial of Sandro V. and Bekim A., Federal Criminal Court, Bellinzona, August 11, 2020.
- 119 David Baum and Jost Kaiser, "Ein weggeworfenes Leben," *GQ Magazine*, July 8, 2015; Trial of Ahmed J., Federal Criminal Court, Bellinzona, July 14, 2016.
- 120 Kurt Pelda, "Winterthurer am Terrorseminar," *Tages-Anzeiger*, January 20, 2019.
- 121 Pelda, "Verbindungen nach Österreich und Deutschland – Das Netzwerk der Winterthurer Salafisten."
- 122 "Indictment of Mohammed E., Prosecution of Winterthur," January 29, 2018.
- 123 Daniel Glaus and Myriam Reinhard, "Schweizer 'Kollege' des Wiener Attentäters aus Türkei ausgewiesen," Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen, November 4, 2020.
- 124 "Combating Terrorism: Coordinated Operation," Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland, October 29, 2019.
- 125 "Islamisten-Treffen: Observation nicht fortgesetzt," *Kronen Zeitung*, November 9, 2020.
- 126 "Auch Schweizer bei Jihadisten-Treff im Juli in Wien," *Die Presse*, November 8, 2020; "Observation des Wiener Attentäters kurz vor Slowakeireise abgebrochen," *Der Standard*, November 9, 2020.
- 127 Clemens Neuhold, "Freunde des Wien-Attentäters auf Deutschland-Besuch," *Profil*, November 14, 2020.
- 128 Ibid.
- 129 Volker Siefert, "Von Hanau aus in den Dschihad," Deutschlandfunk, August 6, 2015; Gregor Haschnik, "Stadt schließt Moschee mit Salafisten-Treff," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, November 6, 2015.
- 130 Giuzzi, "Vendeva documenti falsi sui social, arrestato ceceno, si segue la pista del terrorismo internazionale," *Repubblica*, November 12, 2020.
- 131 Giuzzi.
- 132 Lippe, "Observation of court trials."
- 133 "Stellungnahme zum Entwurf des Terror-Bekämpfungsgesetzes (TeBG)," Institut für Rechts- und Kriminalsoziologie, February 2021.
- 134 Konzett, Klenk, and Matzinger.
- 135 Vanessa Gaigg and Gabriele Scherndl, "Wo Deradikalisierung in Österreich Lücken hat," *Der Standard*, November 5, 2020.
- 136 Veronika Hofinger and Thomas Schmidinger, "Deradikalisierung im Gefängnis. Endbericht zur Begleitforschung," Institute for the Sociology of Law and Criminology, January 2017.
- 137 Konzett, Klenk, and Matzinger.
- 138 "Auch Schweizer bei Jihadisten-Treff im Juli in Wien."
- 139 "Observation des Wiener Attentäters kurz vor Slowakeireise abgebrochen."
- 140 "Liveblog: Terror in Wien: Die aktuellen Entwicklungen," *Profil*, November 26, 2020.
- 141 Jan Michael Marchart, "Razzia gegen angebliche Muslimbrüder: Eine schlimme Befürchtung," *Der Standard*, November 20, 2020.
- 142 "Austria: Police raid Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas-linked targets," Deutsche Welle, November 9, 2020.
- 143 Scherndl and Schmid.
- 144 "Stellungnahme zum Entwurf des Terror-Bekämpfungsgesetzes (TeBG)."
- 145 Ibid.
- 146 Konzett, Klenk, and Matzinger.
- 147 Ibid.

# Extremism and Terrorism Trends in Pakistan: Changing Dynamics and New Challenges

By Hassan Abbas

**Even as Pakistan has made progress in reducing the threat from terrorist sanctuaries in the Pakistan-Afghanistan tribal areas, an increased crime-terror nexus in urban centers and a new terrorist recruitment drive by Islamic State Khorasan province, or ISK, in Baluchistan has raised alarms. Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is trying to stage a comeback, and sectarianism is also rising, creating a congenial environment for terrorist and extremist organizations, including some Kashmir-focused groups that have evaded counterterrorism scrutiny. Pakistan's poor investment in developing a much-needed countering violent extremism strategy makes it ill-equipped to respond to these challenges.**

**T**errorism in Pakistan is down, but by no means out. The number of terror attacks and the number of resulting fatalities have started to tick up again; sectarianism is growing and the causes feeding into radicalization of the population not only continue to exist but, in some instances, are aggravating the problem. The revival of the Afghan Taliban since its nadir in the fall of 2001 coupled with the striking emergence and resilient footprint of the Islamic State Khorasan province, or ISK, in adjacent Afghanistan, in parallel with the rise of Hindu nationalism in neighboring India, indicate worsening extremism trends in South Asia overall. The fact that various groups continue to enjoy immunity from state clampdowns adds a further layer of complexity to the challenge. South Asia has recorded more deaths from terrorism than any other region of the world for two consecutive years now—2018 and 2019.<sup>1</sup> Granted, this is partly due to a noteworthy decline in fatalities in the Syria and Iraq conflict theaters, yet it shows that terrorism in South Asia remains a very serious challenge. In terms of measuring the impact of terrorism, the 2020 Global Terrorism Index prepared by Australia's Institute for Economics and Peace ranks Pakistan seventh (for greatest

impact), right after Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Syria, Somalia, and Yemen (in that order) and followed by India, Congo, and the Philippines. To have Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan continue to hold a position in the top 10 in this category is not an encouraging sign for regional counterterrorism efforts.<sup>2</sup> The complicated relationships between these three countries are also factors at play.

In comparative terms, according to data from the Global Terrorism Index, terrorism attacks have declined since 2018 in Pakistan, as the total number of terrorist incidents dropped from 369 (causing 543 deaths) in 2018 to 279 (causing 300 deaths) in 2019, bringing the number of deaths from terrorism in Pakistan to its lowest annual number since 2006.<sup>3</sup> The Global Terrorism Index has not made data available yet for Pakistan in 2020. According to the South Asia Terrorism portal (SATP), there were 319 terrorism related incidents in Pakistan in 2020.<sup>4</sup> According to Pakistan's National Counterterrorism Authority (NACTA), terrorism attacks caused 357 deaths in Pakistan in 2020 (through December 21), a clear increase in the number of victims of terrorism from the previous year.<sup>5</sup>

While terrorism incident data reflects a generally positive counterterrorism trend, the underlying radicalization trends and lack of evidence that elements active in terrorist organizations (such as Kashmir-focused Jaish-e-Mohammad) have been brought to justice in some shape or form continue to raise legitimate concerns. Measuring extremism is harder as it requires a broader set of data ranging from hate crimes, health of minorities' rights, youth radicalization trends, and sectarian tendencies. Local security analysts, independent Pakistan watchers, and those with access to relevant data are mostly worried about Pakistan's direction. The survival of ISK in Afghanistan and Pakistan, despite enhanced counterterrorism operations, is one example of the persistence of the terrorism problem in the region. As Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines insightfully conclude, this is a result of ISK's "wide network of operational alliances in directly enhancing its lethality and geographical reach" as well as "access to a steady supply of experienced militants on both sides of the border."<sup>6</sup> A new generation of extremist recruits today is enhancing this capacity.

This article looks specifically at terrorism and extremism trends in Pakistan with a focus on relatively new developments that are deemed worthy of deeper analysis and attention. This article examines five dimensions of the terrorism threat faced by Pakistan. It first look at TTP's efforts to stage a comeback in Pakistan. It then looks at ISK's new recruitment strategy. Then it examines the upsurge in targeted killings in Karachi. The next section focuses on the evolving threat posed by Kashmiri-focused militant groups. The final section outlines the challenges posed by rising violent sectarianism inside Pakistan. This study benefits from interviews and conversations the author conducted in October-December 2020 with many security and law enforcement officials in Karachi, Kabul, Lahore, and Peshawar.

*Hassan Abbas is Distinguished Professor of International Relations at Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies (NESAS) at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C. He is the author of the forthcoming The Prophet's Heir: The Life of Ali ibn Abi Talib (Yale University Press, March 2021). Twitter: @wataandost*

*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Defense University or the Department of Defense.*

## Pakistani Taliban Regaining Foothold in the Pakistan-Afghanistan Border Areas

First, credit is due to Pakistan's security forces for terminating the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) reign of terror (roughly 2007-2015) through its effective Operation Zarb-e-Azb launched in June 2014. The U.S. drone campaign's success in decapitating TTP leadership facilitated it in no small way.<sup>7</sup> TTP splintered thereafter, and its surviving leaders escaped to Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> Some of its splinter factions either merged into ISK or pledged allegiance to it.<sup>9</sup> The TTP's most lethal splinter Jamaat ul Ahrar (JuA), in collaboration with TTP's Tariq Gidar Group, was responsible for major terrorist attacks, including on Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014.<sup>8</sup> It survived energized Pakistani counterterrorism operations and has continued its terror operations from its new base in Afghanistan's Nangarhar area.<sup>10</sup>

Many of these splinter groups, including JuA and Hizb ul-Ahrar (HuA), decided to come together again in August 2020 and renewed their pledge of allegiance to current TTP leader Noor Wali Mehsud, alias Abu Mansour Asim.<sup>11</sup> HuA, especially, has an agile terror network in and around the Peshawar region.<sup>12</sup> The return of a Mehsud as the TTP leader also persuaded many disgruntled Mehsud tribesmen (such as members of the Hakimullah Mehsud group, led by Mukhlis Yar) to return to the TTP fold.<sup>13</sup> Even Punjabi Taliban's Amjad Farouqi group, closely aligned with al-Qa'ida, and the Usman Saifullah group, a Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) splinter, also returned to the TTP platform.<sup>14</sup> The latest to rejoin this notorious gang of terrorists in late November 2020 was influential Ustad Al-eem Khan (from the Gul Bahadur TTP faction) and Umar Azzam.<sup>15</sup> TTP is proudly marketing the video of this allegiance through its media outlet Umar Media.<sup>16</sup>

According to a May 2020 UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team report, the number of Pakistani militants of all stripes operating in Afghanistan may be as high as 6,000 to 6,500.<sup>17</sup> A great majority of them will likely drift back into Pakistan if TTP regains control in parts of the Pashtun tribal belt sandwiched between Pakistan and Afghanistan. This area was known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan (FATA), but has been legally incorporated into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province since 2018. A U.N. report published in February 2021 maintains that TTP was responsible for more than 100 cross-border attacks from Afghanistan into Pakistan between July and October 2020.<sup>18</sup>

A significant increase in targeted killings in the Pakistani tribal areas during 2020 carried out by terrorist groups indicates that something is amiss. Those targeted lately are tribal elders (senior leaders), reminiscent of times when TTP emerged in 2007 and eliminated hundreds of them.<sup>19</sup> Analyst Daud Khattak maintains that increased targeted killings in Waziristan and Bajaur tribal districts are caused by TTP's "involvement in resolving local disputes, forcing people to pay protection money, and targeting those believed to be their opponents."<sup>20</sup> This was how they gained space in the tribal belt more than a decade ago.<sup>21</sup> Al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) did the same in Iraq over a decade and a half ago, showing how

terrorist organizations may be learning from each other and why timely comparative analysis of such campaigns can help counterterrorism efforts. According to Pakistani security analyst Amir Rana, by mid-December 2020, about 11 splinter groups had joined this reconfigured TTP, and attacks on security forces in South and North Waziristan, and in Bajaur and Mohmand areas—an old stronghold of TTP—have increased.<sup>22</sup> Pakistan's speedy effort to complete fencing work on the border with Afghanistan, with a goal to discourage militant movement, smuggling, and illegal crossings, has possibly convinced some TTP elements to return to Pakistan from Afghanistan while they can.<sup>23</sup> Rustam Shah Mohmand argues that prospects of a negotiated deal in Afghanistan between Kabul and the Afghan Taliban may mean restricted space for TTP types in Afghanistan, and hence, they have started returning to Pakistan.<sup>24</sup>

One of the major reasons behind TTP's resurgence as a serious threat, however, is Islamabad's lackluster effort toward bringing the FATA into the mainstream as envisioned by the 2018 FATA Reforms Bill, a major constitutional initiative.<sup>25</sup> The FATA was merged into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province through this belated but commendable legal initiative, on paper abolishing the draconian colonial-era regulations governing the frontier area. The legal, administrative, and financial measures needed to facilitate this process, however, are absent, or seriously lacking, in turn provoking a rise in public frustrations.<sup>26</sup> A pertinent example is the recent rise of the Pashtun Tahafuz (Protection) Movement (PTM) led by Manzoor Pashteen, a revolutionary but non-violent protest movement demanding an end to extrajudicial killings in the area by security forces and the elimination of military check posts that restrict the free movement of people. PTM pleads for Pashtun rights, maintaining that the lives of ordinary Pashtuns have been disrupted over the last two decades on a massive scale and that they are victims of both the Taliban and the security forces.<sup>27</sup> TTP also used similar criticism of security forces to gain public sympathy, but PTM emphasizes a non-violent approach, distinguishing it from militant organizations.

PTM's genuine but provocative slogans condemning the role of the Pakistan Army, however, resulted in Pakistani governing authorities publicly presenting it as a threat. To the contrary, it could be argued that PTM should have been welcomed by Islamabad as an ally against the extremist and radical ideologies propagated in the tribal areas, but short-sightedness served as an obstacle to such an understanding. PTM's popularity across Pashtun communities from Peshawar to Karachi appears to be rising despite the military's effort to contain the group's reach.<sup>28</sup> A few of the PTM's leading lights made it into the parliament but that did not prevent them from being depicted as 'Indian agents' or 'enemies of the state,' charges that are unfortunate and unfounded.<sup>29</sup> In fact, Pakistani security forces hired criminal elements and extremist elements to confront PTM on the ground, as explained by Ali Wazir, currently an elected member of Pakistan's National Assembly and one of the co-founders of the movement:

*It is ironic that the institutions responsible for protecting Pakistan's territorial integrity and protecting it from dangerous threats are bankrolling thugs to launch a Pakistan Zindabad Movement (Urdu for Long Live Pakistan Movement) ... It is telling that former Taliban commanders have addressed their gatherings. We also have indications that efforts are underway to mobilize sectarian terrorists and other fanatics to 'counter' our peaceful campaign.<sup>30</sup>*

Popular Pakistani columnist Nadeem Paracha calls PTM "a

a According to the ISIL and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee of the United Nations Security Council, the attack was conducted by Tariq Gidar Group (TGG) in association with al-Qa'ida and in conjunction with or on behalf of JuA, TTP, and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). See "Tariq Gidar Group (TGG)," United Nations Security Council.

contemporary version of classical Pashtun nationalism” that was “overshadowed by the rise of political Islam and then militancy among various Pashtun tribes.”<sup>31</sup> There are indeed elements of nationalist fervor in PTM’s narrative, but its primary focus is on human rights and rule of law and their leaders insist: “We have created a golden opportunity for Islamabad to shun its past as a security state and function as a normal country concerned with the welfare of its citizens.”<sup>32</sup> But arrests, kidnapping, and intimidation of PTM supporters and followers at the hands of state agencies continue.<sup>33</sup> TTP and other extremists in tribal areas must be relieved to see intelligence services and their proxies getting embroiled into confrontation with PTM rather than confronting TTP ideology and activities.

### ISK Expanded Recruitment Drive Targeting Baluchistan’s Brahui Ethnic Group

ISK, which had emerged around 2015 in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region as an extension of the Iraq- and Syria-based Islamic State, in its early days had greatly benefitted from a stream of defections from many regional militant organizations.<sup>34</sup> That process has run its course, it appears. Today, ISK is under stress due to regular elimination of its top leadership at the hands of Afghan and U.S. forces, and it is now experimenting with a model that includes a broader recruitment focus as well as the appointment of a foreigner, Shahab al-Muhajir, as its top leader.<sup>35</sup> Some changes in this direction were visible in early 2020, as evident by the recruitment of militants from the Indian state of Kerala who were then used to target a Sikh place of worship in Kabul.<sup>36</sup> The more terrorist groups are able to recruit from a particular area, the easier it becomes for them to recruit there because of their deepening local ties, but expanding recruitment to different ethnicities requires wider network and training needs (given linguistic and cultural factors).

As part of its broader recruitment focus, ISK is now likely looking to expand its recruitment efforts in the Brahui (or Brohi) ethnic community in the Pakistan’s Baluchistan province.<sup>37</sup> While only a small fraction of Brahuies have any sympathy for ISK, a number have been recruited into its terror campaign. For instance, the masterminds of terrorist attacks targeting a popular Sufi Shrine in Sehwan, Sindh province (2017), a police training center in Quetta, Baluchistan, and many Islamic centers associated with Shi`a communities in the Sindh province turned out to be Brahui militants by the name of Hafeez Pandrani Brohi and Abdullah Brohi, both killed in police encounters in 2019.<sup>38</sup> In the case of the Sehwan attack, one of the two suicide bombers was also from Brahui background, namely Barar Brohi.<sup>39</sup>

Pakistani officials believe that ISK cells are “predominantly present in the border areas of Baluchistan,” and the group keeps the size of these cells small as a strategy for securing their communications and target planning.<sup>40</sup>

The primary local partner of ISK in Pakistan remains Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami (LeJA), an offshoot of the terrorist outfit Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) known widely for its targeting of Shi`a

communities across the country.<sup>41</sup> While LeJ terrorist operations have been focused internally in Pakistan, the LeJA has aspired to operate regionally as its extended title al-Alami, meaning ‘international,’ suggests. More specifically, LeJA has attracted the most notorious of the LeJ cadre who were also more aggressive in their approach. Their parent ideological organization, defunct Sipah-e-Sahaba—now operating as Ahle Sunnat Wal Jammāt (ASWJ)—is also operating in Baluchistan, and there are strong allegations of its involvement in terrorist attacks targeting the Shi`a Hazara community in Quetta. Ramzan Mengal (ethnically Brahui), the top leader of ASWJ in Baluchistan, openly campaigned for the killing of Shi`a in the past but remains free and was even permitted to contest national elections in 2018.<sup>42</sup>

The Brahui factor needs further explanation to get across some important nuances.<sup>c</sup> The Brahui are distinct from Baluch in the anthropological sense, but they mutually share Baluch political identity and also support the cause of Baluch nationalism.<sup>43</sup> Brahui tribes, however, are more conservative and tribal in terms of their network and outlook as compared to other ethnicities and are generally lagging behind in the economic and educational domains.<sup>44</sup> They are in the majority in Khuzdar, Kalat, and Mastung districts but also have a significant presence in the Quetta, Noshki, and Kharan districts of Baluchistan as well as in some Sindh districts including Shikarpur, Jacobabad, and Qambar Shahdatkot. An important distinguishing feature of Brahui identity is their religious inclinations. Brahui areas host most of the madrassas (Islamic seminaries), and most prayer leaders in the province consequently are from Brahui background. That in itself is not worthy of security concern, but the fact remains that extremist groups have had opportunities to recruit through madrassas in this area.

Since its inception in 2010,<sup>45</sup> LeJA has made strategic inroads into Brahui-dominant areas in Baluchistan as well as Sindh province. One leading indicator of this was the trajectory of the terrorist leader Hafeez Pandrani Brohi (mentioned above), hailing originally from Baluchistan’s Mastung district and trained initially by LeJ.<sup>46</sup> Pakistani intelligence services, or some sectarian elements within it, possibly facilitated LeJ’s move to Baluchistan to confront the Baluch nationalists, especially Baluch Liberation Army (BLA), around the 2007-2010 timeframe. Scholar Stephen Tankel in his 2013 paper on militant infrastructure in Pakistan maintained that, “Rumors persist about Pakistani military support for LeJ militants in Balochistan to degrade the separatist insurgency in that province. There is no evidence of an institutionalized policy, however, and the military has denied these charges vociferously. It is possible some officers overlook or abet LeJ activities because they are seen as targeting enemies of the state.”<sup>47</sup>

Rahimullah Yusufzai, a Pakistani journalist known for his in-depth stories about the Taliban and other extremist groups, aptly argues, “Call it infiltration, or what you will, but the LeJ has succeeded in recruiting Baloch, once considered quite secular.”<sup>48</sup> According to reliable media accounts in Pakistan, LeJ training camps were run in the second half of the 2000s from Mastung and Khuzdar in Pakistan.<sup>49</sup>

The fact that many LeJ (and LeJA) militants have been able to

b There is still some speculation that Shahab al-Muhajir is a Pakistani, Afghan, or even a Tajik per some sources and that the name (with the addition of al-Muhajir, meaning immigrant/refugee) is an attempt to hide his local roots. See “Andrabi claims new Daesh leader is a Haqqani member,” Ariana News, August 4, 2020.

c The author is grateful to Baluch-American journalist Siraj Akbar for helping him understand these nuances. The framing, however, is the author’s. Author interview, Siraj Akbar, December 2020.





*Pakistani rescue workers examine the site of a bomb explosion in an Islamic seminary, in Peshawar, Pakistan, on October 27, 2020. (Muhammad Sajjad/AP Photo)*

escape from police and even military custody in Baluchistan has reinforced the view that there is an ongoing LeJ-security forces linkage.<sup>50</sup> The recurrence of such escapes (and from high security zone detention facilities) has further entrenched the view that official support was involved.

Shafiq Mengal (ethnically Brahui), an LeJ militant known as a “pawn set by the intelligence agencies to counter Baloch militants in the province,” is an example of a religious extremist turned national asset of Pakistani intelligence.<sup>51</sup> Tariq Khosa, former Inspector General of Police of Baluchistan and a brave writer, laments state backing for private militias and aptly argues that “the decision to use Shafiq as a proxy against certain Baloch separatist organizations allowed proscribed sectarian groups to regroup in and around Quetta.”<sup>52</sup> Rafique Mengal, another LeJ terrorist who was found involved in many killings of Hazara Shi`a in Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan province, received state protection, at least in the early 2010s, for his political work against Baluch nationalists.<sup>53</sup> Such state blunders continue to empower groups that widen sectarian rifts and open the doors for groups such as ISK to expand their terror networks in Pakistan.

Pakistan’s law enforcement agencies are very concerned about the recruitment drive of ISK-LeJA targeting the Brahui-dominated areas, and as discussed, this trend is also visible from publicly available data.<sup>54</sup> This indicates at the least that the ISK-LeJA tandem is looking for opportunities to exploit. LeJ used to get most of its recruits from south Punjab—a critical hub for many extremist organizations in Pakistan—so its move via its LeJA offshoot to Baluchistan (in alliance with ISK) is a development worth taking note of and probing further.

A likely motivating factor for ISK’s enhanced recruitment drive in Baluchistan is the high number of clashes between the Afghan Taliban (mostly Pashtun) and ISK occurring in Afghanistan’s Kunar and Nangahar provinces bordering Pakistan. This area is important for ISK as it hosts its central operational base. Given Pakistan’s past practice and presumed support for the Afghan Taliban in these campaigns, ISK’s retaliation through terror acts in Pakistan is highly probable. To pull off such a terror campaign, it is possible ISK will seek to step up the deployment of Brahui violent extremists as one way to both leverage and aggravate Baluch-Brahui versus Pashtun rivalries in the area.

The evolving nature of the Afghan Taliban-ISK war is evident from the October 27, 2020, ISK terror attack in Peshawar targeting a seminary led by Shaikh Rahim ullah Haqqani, a close ally of the Afghan Taliban, who had publicly declared followers of ISK as enemies of Islam.<sup>55</sup> Haqqani’s lecture was being livestreamed when the attack occurred, leading to the death of eight students while 136 were wounded.<sup>56</sup> Another Afghan Taliban commander, Abdul Samad Mullah Toor, was assassinated by unknown assailants in the outskirts of Peshawar, on January 24, 2021.<sup>57</sup>

### **Targeted Killings in Karachi**

Pakistani security experts believe that a new generation of religious militants is coming of age in Pakistan, and these tech-savvy individuals are mostly based in urban centers such as Karachi and Lahore.<sup>58</sup> In ideological terms, this pool of individuals harbors salafi-takfiri leanings, ever ready to excommunicate Muslims who are different from them, and they have relatively little baggage in terms of inter-group rivalries as was the case with those who

participated in the 'Afghan Jihad' of the 1980s.<sup>59</sup> These individuals are more global in their outlook and ambitions, and are largely radicalized through online sources.<sup>60 d</sup>

A rise in targeted killings by extremists in Karachi during 2020 raised serious concerns within Pakistani security agencies about the increased activities of some local extremist groups, some with transnational connections, that they were not tracking closely.<sup>61</sup> A senior counterterrorism department officer in Islamabad shared with the author that based on data from Karachi police, they have concluded that four terrorist groups allied with local criminal gangs are quite active in Karachi and Sindh province lately: 'Lyari gang,' a Karachi-based criminal network;<sup>62</sup> elements of Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), a designated terrorist outfit with its base in Baluchistan province;<sup>63</sup> Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army, a relatively new, shadowy group;<sup>64</sup> and criminal elements from the Altaf-led faction Mutthahada Qaumi Movement (MQM-A), a political party that has splintered into many factions since its London-based leadership were declared *personae non gratae* by many leaders of the party as well as Pakistani security agencies for their involvement in criminal activities and alleged ties with Indian intelligence.<sup>65</sup> Many criminal elements from MQM-A escaped Pakistan and now reportedly hide in South Africa.<sup>66</sup> It is important to clarify that some of the four Karachi groups specified above have been in existence for many years, but lately they have been more active than usual according to local police assessments. The author's conversations with police officials in Karachi indicate that many of the underground jihadists are found involved in narcotics smuggling activity and Sindh and Punjab police forces are closely monitoring this trend.<sup>67</sup>

Cracking down on these Karachi groups will in some cases need to be an international endeavor. The United Arab Emirates remains a destination for many criminals from the Karachi area and other parts of Pakistan.<sup>68</sup> For instance, the prime suspect in the attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi in November 2018, named Rashid Brohi and belonging to BLA, was arrested in July 2019 in UAE by Interpol.<sup>69</sup>

## The Evolving Threat Posed by Kashmiri-focused Groups

The activities of Kashmir-focused militant groups and other organizations that aspire to be active in Indian-controlled Kashmir remain a concern. There are no indications that groups such as Jaish-e-Mohammad (JEM) led by the notorious Masood Azhar have been decommissioned.<sup>70</sup>

In early 2020, a Urdu-language magazine managed by al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), titled *Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind* (roughly Voice of the Battlefield of India), started campaigning for focus on Kashmir, raising alarm bells in India.<sup>71</sup> The latest edition (January 2021) of this magazine not only carries articles on Kashmir but its language and content clearly indicates that it is published by 'battle hardened' militants with experience in Kashmir and Afghanistan.<sup>e</sup>

While Kashmir-focused militant groups are generally keeping

a low profile within Pakistan (likely due to the hanging sword of 'Financial Action Task Force' on Islamabad's head),<sup>f</sup> there is a real danger that some elements that differ with this quietism strategy may join AQIS. Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan warned his countrymen against any effort to "wage Jihad in Kashmir" and cautioned them by saying: "Anyone, who thinks that he will cross the border to join the Kashmiris, is a big enemy of them and Pakistan."<sup>72</sup> This indicates resolve on the part of political leadership at least. There is no credible evidence that AQIS is operating in Kashmir at this time, but its publications clearly show intent and motivation to do so.

Many of these Kashmir-focused Pakistani militants, as is known from their track record, jump between groups depending on geopolitics and security vulnerabilities. The mood of intelligence agencies is also kept in view.

## Deepening Sectarianism

Sunni-Shi`a sectarianism, mostly anti-Shi`a platforms, has long been exploited by violent extremist groups in Pakistan, and as outlined below, it is once again on the rise. Lately, Pakistan's Ahmadi community has also been on the receiving end as there has been a recent spike in targeted killing against them.<sup>73</sup> The intra-Sunni Barelvi-Deobandi rivalry also continues to simmer hazardously in the background, as Tehrike-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a radical Barelvi group, has energized its base by insisting on the strict implementation of Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws. In the process, it is regaining the political ground it had lost to the Deobandis "since the rise of jihadism in the 1980s."<sup>74</sup>

Disturbingly, recent months have seen heightened anti-Shi`a rhetoric expressed through major street protests, involving ultra conservative political forces, in Karachi and Islamabad.<sup>75</sup> Sectarian and extremist ASWJ played an active role in this campaign.<sup>76</sup> These street protests could lead to even more sectarianism, which has proved in the past to have empowered terrorists of all stripes in Pakistan besides widening the door for Saudi-versus-Iran games to be played in the country.<sup>77</sup> Islamic State-like organizations also thrive where sectarian tensions are high. An editorial of Pakistan's leading newspaper *Dawn* captured the gist of this development well:

*The embers of hate are once again being stoked. To prevent history from being repeated and innocent blood spilled in the name of religion, the government must act urgently and decisively. The state's silence is indeed inexplicable. It appears to have willfully chosen to close its eyes to this sinister development.*<sup>78</sup>

Pakistan's Shi`a Hazara, located mostly in Quetta, continue to pay a heavy price. 2021 began for them with the brutal murder of 11 Hazara coal miners who were kidnapped and their throats slit. Gruesome images of the victims were distributed through the Islamic State's Amaq news service.<sup>79</sup> The Pakistani security analyst

d It is important to note, however, that many established and older extremist groups continue to recruit and expand their network through physical contact and through extremist religious gatherings and printed publications.

e The magazine *Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind* was earlier titled *Nawai Afghan Jihad* (The Voice of Afghan Jihad) and has been printed continuously for the last 14 years, as claimed on its contents page.

f The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is the global money laundering and terrorist financing watchdog. FATF added Pakistan to its grey list in June 2018, indicating "strategic weaknesses" in Pakistan's countering money laundering and terror financing efforts. To avoid moving onto the FATF black list, Pakistan was asked to take a series of measures (27 actions to be specific). By October 2020, Pakistan was deemed to have taken action on 21 out of 27 specified areas, and its progress is still being reviewed by FATF. For details, see "Explained: FATF, Pakistan and the 'Grey List,'" WIRE, October 24, 2020. For Pakistan's progress, see "Mutual Evaluation of Pakistan," Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering, September 2020.

Amir Rana, in making security projections for Pakistan for 2021, aptly observes that “incidents of communal violence and religious and sectarian hatred have become a regular feature of Pakistan’s security and political landscape” and “sectarian discord and the groups promoting it continue to persist.”<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusion

As this article has outlined, Pakistan’s counterterrorism challenges are evolving. While there is relative stability in the Pakistan-Afghanistan tribal belt and the overall violence levels have dropped since 2018, the TTP in particular are assertively trying to regroup and stage a comeback. While their infrastructure has been degraded earlier, nothing tangible was done to challenge the extremists’ ideology of hate. Countering violent extremism efforts have remained limited in focus and poorly resourced.<sup>81</sup> Economic failings and disparities in Pakistan have also offered opportunities for ISK terrorists to target vulnerable communities for recruitment, such as the Brahui in Baluchistan. ISK is a serious danger for South Asia, and its potential to grow further should not be underestimated. ISK’s creation of two subdivisions, namely Islamic State-Hind and Islamic State-Pakistan, in 2019 reflect its ambitions in the region.<sup>82</sup> Islamabad’s policy of looking for proxies to fight insurgents and extremists has backfired.<sup>83</sup> And the Kashmir-focused militants, though quieter and keeping a low profile since 2017, could also come out of their hibernation—on the state’s behalf or possibly on their own out of frustration—redirecting their energies toward India, which could lead to India-Pakistan military conflict. Heightened sectarianism also complicates Pakistan’s security scene. As Tariq Parvez, a seasoned Pakistani counterterrorism expert and former head of NACTA, argues:

*The current resurgence of violent sectarianism in Pakistan is much more dangerous than the sectarianism in earlier decades, due to 3 factors, i.e. Barelvis joining them, Shia/Sunni returnees from Syria, and TTP/ISK/LeJ combo to attack each other. Government must react promptly and firmly.*<sup>84</sup>

The economic burden of dealing with COVID-19 is only going to make Pakistan’s counterterrorism challenges harder. While threats of suicide bombings in urban centers and terrorist attacks targeting progressive political leaders have receded relatively speaking, religious intolerance and threats to minority groups continue as serious problems. In the author’s assessment based on his field research, Pakistan’s criminal justice system, and especially

its police, lacks the capacity and resources to serve as the first line of defense against terrorism.<sup>85</sup> The present government of Pakistan under Prime Minister Imran Khan, despite its promises,<sup>86</sup> has failed to introduce police reforms. Afzal Shigri, a former inspector general of the police and an advocate for rule of law, warns that this will have “horrendous impact on the future governance and politics of Pakistan.”<sup>87</sup> The five dimensions to the terrorist threat discussed in this article will only grow in magnitude and lethality if they remain untreated.

Pakistani officials appear to be more prone to dismissing these challenges as externally induced efforts<sup>8</sup> to disrupt the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).<sup>h</sup> While regional rivalries and tensions are a reality, the hard truth is that the state of Pakistan has invested very little in its countering violent extremism campaigns and deradicalization programs. One potentially beneficial initiative recently introduced pertains to intelligence coordination, bringing all civilian and military intelligence agencies under one umbrella.<sup>88</sup> However, equally crucial is coordination—and in some cases, mutual trust—between the country’s law enforcement and intelligence agencies, and that remains a weak link in Pakistan’s counterterrorism efforts.<sup>89</sup>

Terrorists with a regional and global mission are constantly looking for opportunities to exploit, and Pakistan, having paid dearly in the past for its mistakes, needs to take these challenges very seriously. The infrastructure development projects under CPEC, as well as economic growth prospects, are at stake. Pakistan simply cannot afford to return to the old days when terrorism bogged it down almost completely, arresting its potential and progress. **CTC**

g In November 2020, Pakistan claimed it had “irrefutable evidence” that India was behind some terrorist activity in Pakistan. India has refuted this claim. Naveed Siddiqui, “Irrefutable evidence: Dossier on India’s sponsorship of state terrorism in Pakistan presented,” *Dawn*, November 14, 2020; Avinash Paliwal, “The strategic value of a dead dossier,” Observer Research Foundation, November 27, 2020.

h The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, benefiting from a multi-billion dollar Chinese investment, extends the land and maritime routes that connect the two countries through Gwadar port and a network of approximately 2,000 miles of railways, roads, and pipelines. For original plan details, see Khurram Husain, “Exclusive: CPEC master plan revealed,” *Dawn*, June 21, 2017; Andrew Small, “Returning to the Shadows: China, Pakistan and the Fate of CPEC,” German Marshall Fund of the United States, September 23, 2020.

## Citations

- 1 “Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism,” Institute for Economics and Peace, Sydney, November 2020, p. 2.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 4 “Number of Terrorism Related Incidents Year Wise, Datasheet - Pakistan,” South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), accessed February 11, 2021.
- 5 Amir Wasim, “Fazl among 20 politicians facing ‘serious threats to life’: minister,” *Dawn*, December 22, 2020.
- 6 Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, *Broken but Not Defeated: An Examination of State-led Operations against Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan (2015-2018)* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2020), p. VI.

- 7 For a discussion about the broader impact of the U.S. drone campaign, see Hassan Abbas, “Are Drone Strikes Killing Terrorists or Creating Them?” *Atlantic*, March 31, 2013.
- 8 Asad Hashim “Exclusive: Pakistani Taliban down but not out, says ex-spokesman,” *Al Jazeera*, April 3, 2020. See also Umair Jamal, “Are US Forces Striking Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan Members in Afghanistan for Islamabad?” *Diplomat*, February 14, 2020.
- 9 For details, see Amira Jadoon, *Allied and Lethal: Islamic State Khorasan’s Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018), pp. 35-36, 54-58.
- 10 See “Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA),” United Nations Security Council.
- 11 Daud Khattak, “Whither the Pakistani Taliban: An Assessment of Recent

- Trends," *New America*, August 31, 2020.
- 12 Author interview, senior police officer in Peshawar, October 2020.
- 13 Khattak.
- 14 "Twenty-fifth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations, January 20, 2020.
- 15 "Shamali Waziristan se Taaluk rakhne wale do Taliban groupon ka TTP se Ittehad Ka Elaan," *Tribal News*, November 28, 2020.
- 16 "Allegiance of two popular North Waziristan's Jihadi organizations' leaders, Maulvi Aleem Khan and Commander Ghazi Omar Azzam, to TTP leader Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud," Umar Media video, November 27, 2020. For a detailed assessment of this development, see Abdul Sayed, "Waziristan Militant Leader Aleem Khan Ustad Joins Tehreek-e-Taliban," *Militant Leadership Monitor* 11:12 (2021).
- 17 "Eleventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2501 (2019) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan," United Nations Security Council, May 19, 2020, p. 20.
- 18 "Twenty-fifth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team,"
- 19 "Four tribal elders shot dead in North Waziristan," *The News*, December 1, 2020. See also "Two More Tribal Elders Shot Dead In Northwestern Pakistan; Six Total Killed This Week," *Gandhara*, December 2, 2020.
- 20 Khattak.
- 21 For background, see Hassan Abbas, "A Profile of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan," *CTC Sentinel* 1:2 (2008) and Hassan Abbas, "From FATA to the NWFP," *CTC Sentinel* 1:10 (2008).
- 22 "Kya Qabaeli Azlaa main dahshatgard phir saar Utha rahee hain [Are terrorists again raising their heads in Tribal districts]," Urdu interview with Amir Rana, Rifatullah Orakzai YouTube Channel, December 15, 2020.
- 23 For details about border fencing, see Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan says Afghan Border Fence Nearly Complete," *Voice of America*, December 4, 2020.
- 24 Rustam Shah Mohmand, "Why attacks surge in northwest Pakistan," *Arab News*, September 24, 2020.
- 25 For details, see "Shaping a New Peace in Pakistan's Tribal Areas," *ICG Report No. 150*, August 20, 2018.
- 26 Author interview, Imtiaz Ali, December 2020. For detail about change in FATA legal status in merger into KPK province, see Imtiaz Ali, "Mainstreaming Pakistan's Federally Administrative Tribal Areas: Reform Initiatives and Roadblocks," *USIP Special Report 421*, March 2018, and Wajeaha Malik and Shakeeb Asrar, "Post-Merger Inaction in FATA: Expectations Vs. Reality," *South Asian Voices*, July 10, 2019.
- 27 For instance, see Abubakar Siddiqui, "Leader's Arrest Galvanizes Pashtun Rights Movement in Pakistan," *Gandhara*, January 30, 2020.
- 28 See Madiha Afzal, "Why is Pakistan's military repressing a huge, non-violent Pashtun protest movement?" *Brookings*, February 7, 2020.
- 29 "Radio Pak claims MNAs Dawar, Wazir 'fulfilling vested Indian agenda through Afghanistan,'" *Dawn*, March 10, 2020. See also Hasib Danish Alikozai, "Pakistani Activist Rejects Charges Foreign Spying Agencies Funding His Group," *Voice of America*, May 7, 2019.
- 30 Quoted in Ali Wazir, "What Does the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement Want?" *Diplomat*, April 27, 2018.
- 31 Nadeem F. Paracha, "Smoker's Corner: How Should the State Deal with PTM?" *Dawn*, February 3, 2020.
- 32 Ibid. See also Mohsin Dawar, "Opinion: We are peacefully demanding change in Pakistan. The military says we're 'traitors,'" *Washington Post*, February 14, 2020.
- 33 For instance, see "Peshawar police arrest MNA Ali Wazir," *The News*, December 16, 2020. See also Mohsin Dawar, "Pashtuns' struggle for rights cannot be silenced through violence," *Al Jazeera*, June 20, 2020.
- 34 For details, see Amira Jadoon, Nakissa Jahanbani, and Charmaine Willis, "Challenging the ISK Brand in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Rivalries and Divided Loyalties," *CTC Sentinel* 11:4 (2018).
- 35 Abdul Sayed, "Who is the New Leader of Islamic State – Khorasan Province?" *Lawfare*, September 2, 2020.
- 36 For details, see Animesh Roul, "Islamic State-Khorasan Remains Potent Force in Afghan Jihad," *Terrorism Monitor* 8:11 (2020).
- 37 Assessment based on multiple author interviews with security (counterterrorism) officials serving in Quetta and Karachi, October 2020.
- 38 "Mastermind of several major terror attacks killed in encounter," *Dawn*, March 1, 2019. See also Hafeez Tunio, "Two high-profile Daesh terrorists killed in encounter," *Express Tribune*, March 1, 2019.
- 39 Naem Sahoutara, "Two 'IS militants' get death on 70 counts in Qalandar shrine suicide blast case," *Dawn*, May 19, 2020.
- 40 Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, "ISIS schemes with jihadist groups in Pakistan," *Asia Times*, November 27, 2019.
- 41 For background, see Farhan Zahid, "Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami: A Pakistani partner for Islamic State," *Terrorism Monitor* 15:2 (2017). See also Jadoon, *Allied and Lethal*, pp. 40-41, 50-51.
- 42 Gul Yousafzai, "Minority Hazaras in Pakistan protest for third day after Quetta attack," *Reuters*, April 14, 2019; See also Asad Hashim, "Quetta Hazaras despair as religious supremacists contest elections," *Al Jazeera*, July 15, 2018.
- 43 See Haris Gazdar, Sobia Ahmad Kaker, and Irfan Khan, "Buffer Zone, Colonial Enclave or Urban Hub? Quetta: Between Four Regions and Two Wars," Working Paper no. 69, Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics, February 2010.
- 44 Author interview, Malik Siraj Akbar, December 2020.
- 45 See "Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al Alami," Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University. For a detailed profile of LeJ, see "Lashkar-e-Jhangvi," Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University.
- 46 See Syed Arfeen, "The Hunt for Hafeez Brohi," *Friday Times*, February 24, 2017. See also Zia Ur Rehman, "Militant North of the Country's South," *News on Sunday*, December 9, 2018.
- 47 Stephen Tankel, "Domestic Barriers to Dismantling the Militant Infrastructure in Pakistan," United States Institute of Peace, September 2013.
- 48 Zofeen T. Ebrahim, "Hazara Killers – supported from Punjab to the Middle East," *Dawn*, February 13, 2013.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 For instance, see "Usman Kurd, the man who caused fall of Raisani govt," *The News*, January 15, 2013.
- 51 Saher Baloch, "Herald Exclusive: Mangled Facts," *Herald*, March 20, 2014.
- 52 Quoted in Maqbool Ahmed, "How death stalks policemen in Quetta," *Herald*, April 25, 2018.
- 53 Author interview, police officer in Quetta, January 2021. For Rafique Mengal's LeJ connection, see Arif Rafiq, "How Pakistan Protects Itself from Regional Sectarian War," *National Interest*, September 15, 2015. See also Mohammad Taqi, "Murder and Mayhem in Balochistan," *Daily Times*, June 10, 2015.
- 54 Author interviews, police officers in Karachi and Quetta, November 2020.
- 55 See Shaikh Rahimullah Haqqani declaring ISIS/ISK followers as *khawarij*, meaning rejectionists, who left the fold of Islam, in "Who are Khawarij here: Full Details," YouTube video, February 4, 2020. See also "IS 'prime suspect' for Peshawar seminary bombing," *Dawn*, October 30, 2020.
- 56 For details, see Riaz Khan, "Bomb at seminary in Pakistan kills 8 students, wounds 136," *Associated Press*, October 27, 2020.
- 57 See Tahir Khan, "Senior Afghan Taliban commander shot dead near Peshawar," *Daily Times*, January 25, 2021.
- 58 Abdul Basit, "Threat of Urban Jihadism in South Asia," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 10:3 (2018): pp. 3-4. See also Huma Yusuf, "University Radicalization: Pakistan's Next Counterterrorism Challenge," *CTC Sentinel* 9:2 (2016).
- 59 On a new generation of salafi-thinking radicals in Pakistan, see Jasmin Lorch, "Trajectories of Political Salafism: Insights from the Ahle Hadith Movement in Pakistan and Bangladesh," *Middle East Institute*, October 30, 2018.
- 60 Author interview, police officers in Karachi and Lahore, December 2019.
- 61 For instance, see Zia Ur Rahman, "Recent attacks show resurgence of Sindh separatists and TTP in Karachi: CRSS report," *The News*, October 8, 2020.
- 62 See Imtiaz Ali, "Police see new underground group behind recent targeted killings in Karachi," *Dawn*, January 31, 2019.
- 63 See Animesh Roul, "Pakistan Confronts Resurgent Baluch Ethno-Separatist Militancy," *Terrorism Monitor* 18:15 (2020).
- 64 See Syed Raza Hassan, "Coordinated blasts kill four in Pakistan, including soldiers," *Reuters*, June 19, 2020.
- 65 For background, see Owen Bennet-Jones, "Altaf Hussain, the notorious MQM leader who swapped Pakistan for London," *Guardian*, July 29, 2013. See also S. Akbar Zaidi, "The rise and fall of Altaf Hussain," *The Hindu*, September 8, 2016.
- 66 See "Rangers arrest MQM-South Africa activists, recover 'biggest ever cache of weapons,'" *The News*, December 12, 2018. See also "Shehla Raza, Saeed Ghani receive life threats from MQM-South Africa," *ARY News*, May 4, 2019.
- 67 Author interviews, police officers in Lahore and Karachi, November 2020.
- 68 Author interview, police officer in Karachi, November 2020. See also "Pakistanis pose a threat to Gulf communities, says Dubai security chief," *Dawn*, January 2, 2020. UAE is also used as a transit point for human

- trafficking from Pakistan. For details, see "Recent trends of human trafficking and migrant smuggling to and from Pakistan," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, July 2013. For sex trafficking in and through UAE, see "Trafficking in Persons Report 2019," U.S. Department of State, June 2019.
- 69 Aamir Latif, "Pakistan: 'Mastermind' of Chinese consulate attack held," AA Agency News, July 3, 2019.
- 70 For a profile of Masood Azhar, see Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, "The Terrorist Who Got Away," *New York Times*, March 19, 2020.
- 71 See Rezaul H Laskar and Aadil Mir, "Al-Qaeda's India affiliate hints at shifting focus to Kashmir," *Hindustan Times*, March 22, 2020.
- 72 Shahid Hamid, "PM Imran warns against crossing LoC for Kashmir Jihad," *Express Tribune*, September 19, 2019.
- 73 "Pakistan: Surge in Targeted Killings of Ahmedis," Human Rights Watch, November 26, 2020.
- 74 For background, see Mohammad Taqi, "What Does the Death of Bareilvi Firebrand Khadim Rizvi Mean for Sectarian Politics," WIRE, November 28, 2020.
- 75 For details, see Shah Meer Baloch and Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "Pakistani Shias live in terror as sectarian violence increases," *Guardian*, October 21, 2020.
- 76 Jaffer A. Mirza, "The Changing Landscape of Anti-Shia Politics in Pakistan," *Diplomat*, September 28, 2020.
- 77 For background and details, see Hassan Abbas, *Shiism and Sectarian Conflict in Pakistan: Identity Politics, Iranian Influence and Tit-for-Tat Violence, Occasional Paper Series* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2010).
- 78 "Sectarian Tensions," *Dawn Editorial*, September 21, 2020.
- 79 See Asad Hashim and Saadullah Akhter, "Pakistani Hazara families refuse to bury dead after attack," *Al Jazeera*, January 4, 2021.
- 80 Muhammad Amir Rana, "Security projections for 2021," *Dawn*, January 24, 2021.
- 81 For details, see Rashad Bukhari and Qamar-ul Huda, "A Critique of Countering Violent Extremism Programs in Pakistan," *Center for Global Policy*, July 2020.
- 82 For details, see Ayaz Gul, "Islamic State Announces 'Pakistan Province,'" *Voice of America*, May 15, 2019.
- 83 For comparable examples, see Hassan Abbas and Nadia Gerspacher, "The Irregulars," *Foreign Policy*, March 30, 2015.
- 84 See Tariq Parvez, "TTP militancy was by one sunni sub sect ie deobandies and was anti state as ...," *Twitter*, September 19, 2020. Parvez reiterated what he stated in his tweet in a phone communication with the author in December 2020.
- 85 For details, see Hassan Abbas ed., *Stabilizing Pakistan Through Police Reforms* (New York: Asia Society, 2012). See also Robert Perito and Tariq Pervez, "A Counterterrorism Role for Pakistan's Police Stations," *USIP Special Report 351*, August 2014.
- 86 See Ansar Abbasi, "Police reforms – the govt's forgotten agenda," *The News*, July 17, 2019.
- 87 Afzal Shigri, "Politics of Police Reform," *Dawn*, December 19, 2020.
- 88 Baqir Sajjad Syed, "PM okays creation of liaison body for spy agencies," *Dawn*, November 24, 2020.
- 89 Author interview, Tariq Khosa, former Inspector General of Police in Baluchistan, Dubai, UAE, December 2019.