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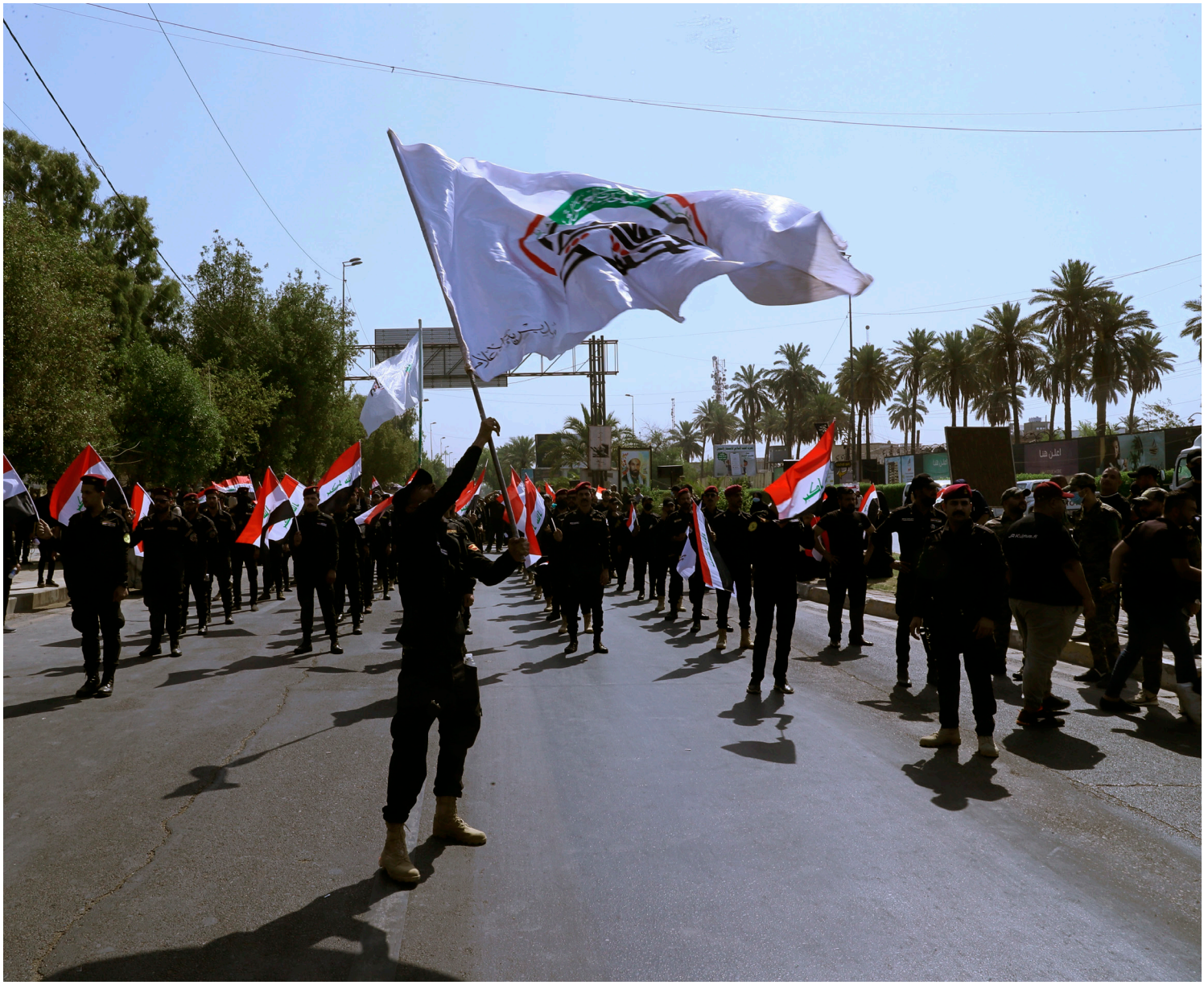

FEATURE ARTICLE

Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq

MICHAEL KNIGHTS, CRISPIN SMITH, AND HAMDI MALIK

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

H.R. McMaster

FORMER NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR

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FROM THE EDITOR

In this month's feature article, Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, and Hamdi Malik examine the increased discordance within the Iran Threat Network militias in Iraq (*muqawama*) based on their detailed tracking of recent dynamics for the "Militia Spotlight" platform at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. They find that "while the IRGC-QF (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force) still runs Iran's covert operations inside Iraq, they face growing difficulties in controlling local militant cells. Hardline anti-U.S. militias struggle with the contending needs to de-escalate U.S.-Iran tensions, meet the demands of their base for anti-U.S. operations, and simultaneously evolve non-kinetic political and social wings." The authors assess that, having under-performed in the recent elections, the *muqawama* will likely prioritize a bottom-up approach to building up their political base. And they warn that "any shift from Iran's de-escalatory position, perhaps linked to a failure of U.S.-Iran nuclear talks—or a more significant loss of Iranian influence over *muqawama* factions—could trigger a sustained escalation of *muqawama* operations against the U.S.-led coalition in 2022 and beyond."

In this month's interview, former U.S. National Security Advisor Lieutenant General (Ret) H.R. McMaster provides his perspective on what led to the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan.

In a commentary, Don Rassler argues that the United States needs to better leverage its vast terrorism data holdings by creating a new terrorism and counterterrorism data action plan that exploits the power of data-science and artificial intelligence driven approaches. That plan, he writes, should include five key precepts: 1) reinvest in and advance core terrorism data, 2) strategically leverage captured material, 3) better develop and utilize counterterrorism data, 4) practice data alchemy, and 5) automate basic and other analytical tasks, and augment data.

Jonathan Schroden looks at lessons learned from the 2021 collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces' (ANDSF). He writes that six themes that emerge are: "the ANDSF collapse was months—if not years—in the making; the United States did not give the ANDSF everything they needed to be independently successful; the ANDSF did put up a fierce fight in many areas; the ANDSF were poorly served by Afghan political leaders; the ANDSF were poorly served by their own commanders; and the Taliban strategy overwhelmed and demoralized the ANDSF. From these themes, there are three key lessons: the ANDSF's failure had many fathers; the U.S. model of security assistance requires reform; and greater emphasis on non-material factors (e.g., morale) is needed in future security force assessments."

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Cover: Iran-backed militia fighters march in central Baghdad, Iraq, on June 29, 2021. (Khalid Mohammed/AP Photo)

Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq: Militia Competition and Rivalry

By Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, and Hamdi Malik

Iran-backed militias have been scrambling to recover after the loss of their patriarchs Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis on January 3, 2020. Attempts to preserve a top-down, Iran-directed system of command have met resistance, both from independent-minded upstarts like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and the fragmenting powerbases within Kata'ib Hezbollah. To track these trends in detail and to an evidentiary level, the Militia Spotlight was stood up at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in February 2021. This article lays out the project's first eight months of findings, drawn from an open-source intelligence effort that fuses intense scrutiny of militia messaging applications with in-depth interviews of officials with a close watching brief of the militias. The key finding is that while the IRGC-QF (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force) still runs Iran's covert operations inside Iraq, they face growing difficulties in controlling local militant cells. Hardline anti-U.S. militias struggle with the contending needs to de-escalate U.S.-Iran tensions, meet the demands of their base for anti-U.S. operations, and simultaneously evolve non-kinetic political and social wings.

This study builds on a series of *CTC Sentinel* articles since 2019 that have charted the evolution of the self-styled, Tehran-backed resistance (*muqawama*) factions in Iraq that direct attacks on the U.S.-led coalition. In August 2019, at the apex of *muqawama* political power so far, one of these authors (Knights) reviewed the manner in which the armed groups were using the legal, administrative, and funding status of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to advance a process of state capture.[1] In January 2020, shortly after a U.S. airstrike killed Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the same author described the setbacks that befell the *muqawama* militias as they tried and failed to evict U.S. forces and quash Iraqi protests, finally losing their two iconic leaders to a U.S. airstrike on January 3, 2020.[2] In October 2020, the next *CTC Sentinel* piece by this author looked at the manner in which Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), the most prolific Iran-backed militia in Iraq, coped with the death of its overseer al-Muhandis.[3] The January 2020 article foresaw the likely development of a roadside bombing campaign against coalition supply routes,[4] which did occur in the summer of 2020,[a] and the October 2020 piece explored the idea that KH and other *muqawama* might be spawning a proliferation of "fake groups"[5] (media façades used to conceal responsibility for attacks).[6] The latter piece was published just as a new "conditional ceasefire"[b] was announced by a new coordination mechanism for the *muqawama* known as the Iraqi Resistance Coordination Committee (al-Haya al-Tansiqiya lil-Muqawama al-Iraqiya, or *Tansiqiya* for short).[7] The ceasefire became a bitter issue between the *muqawama* factions and would be broken on multiple occasions by dissenting militiamen.

In this article, a strengthened team of analysts will take forward the story of the evolution of *muqawama* groups in Iraq, drilling much deeper into the internal politics and inter-*muqawama* politics that has shaped—and often disrupted—*muqawama* kinetic and information operations in Iraq in the last 12 months. As 2020

a From an inaugural convoy attack on July 11, 2020, onward, the number of convoy attacks rose from five that month to 12 in August 2020, and 33 in September 2020. By the end of September 2021, there had been 317 reported convoy attacks in Iraq. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset.

b The conditional ceasefire was announced by the Muqawama Coordinating Committee on October 10, 2020. The statement was reposted across numerous Telegram channels. See, for example, Sabereen News (Telegram) at 16.09 hours (Baghdad time) on October 10, 2020. See also John Davison, "Iraqi militias say they have halted anti-U.S. attacks," Reuters, October 11, 2021.

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came to an end, the authors of this study assembled to form the Militia Spotlight team at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Observers were initially confused by militia use of façade groups,[8] which blurred the identity of the militant actors actually undertaking attacks. To counter this, Militia Spotlight undertook content analysis of militia use of social media (Telegram and other platforms), which provided a rich stream of qualitative insights into how the groups cooperated and frequently competed.

Militia Spotlight's online blog[9] and group profiles[10] were established to track this process in detail and produce evidentiary building blocks, using legal standards of proof and certainty.[c] The project collects militia statements in Arabic and other languages, archives evidence that may be taken offline at a later point, and uses a data fusion process to synthesize information and analyze trends. This online collection effort is strongly supplemented by the same kind of detailed interview process with U.S. and Iraqi subjects that underpinned the prior *CTC Sentinel* studies referenced above.[11] The below analysis represents the initial eight months of top-level[d] findings from the Militia Spotlight program (which began publishing analyses on February 10, 2021).

The overall story is one of increased intra-*muqawama* disagreements over paths of de-escalation or escalation against the U.S.-led coalition, and of competition between the armed groups or *fasa'il*. As anticipated in the October 2020 *CTC Sentinel* analysis,[12] the post-Soleimani and post-Muhandis KH has suffered significant ruptures in its leadership and perhaps in the degree to which that leadership is still trusted by the IRGC-QF.

The article starts with a concise review of militia anti-U.S. operations since January 3, 2020. Part two looks at how Iranian influence adapted during the post-Soleimani era. Part three examines how Iraqi militias tried to coordinate their actions post-Muhandis. Part four explores the difficulties between and within *muqawama* factions post-January 3, 2020. Part five looks at the evolution of *muqawama* information operations in this period. It explores apparent novelties in *muqawama* behavior such as the emergence of numerous façade groups used to claim operations and social media platforms, before linking these innovations to the more prosaic proprietary *fasa'il* networks and areas of responsibility that sit underneath all the razzle-dazzle. Part six examines the evolution of kinetic operations. In part seven, the study closes with predictions about next steps in *muqawama* evolution in the political, social, economic, and military spheres, with particular reference to *muqawama* setbacks in the recently completed October 10, 2021, elections in Iraq and their aftermath.

Below the surface of events and attacks, significant insight was gleaned from careful observation of militia communications and propaganda activities, and by interviewing officials and politicians with direct insight into the internal affairs of militia groups. The Militia Spotlight team undertakes large numbers of anonymized[e] interviews on an ongoing basis. When team members visit Iraq, as occurred in the summer of 2021, the conversations are substantive, usually over an hour of focused discussion on militia issues.[f] Alongside face-to-face interviews, two of the three authors (Knights and Malik) also undertook a dense web of communications with Iraqi interviewees using secure messaging applications, amounting to hundreds of specific information requests to verify data and multi-source points of detail, as well as secure transfer of large tranches of data and imagery. The authors use their combined multi-decade track record of interviewing Iraqis to assess information. Militia Spotlight analysis is thus the product of a synthesized open-source intelligence process.

1. Overview of Militia Anti-U.S. Operations in the Post-January 3 Era

The roots of today's operations by Iran-backed militias are often visible in the environmental factors experienced by such groups and their Iranian supporters in prior months and years. Piecing the chronology together, with hindsight, it is strongly arguable that Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis were executing a strategic plan in Iraq in 2018-2019. With major combat operations against the Islamic State ended and with Iraqi elections looming in May 2018, Soleimani and al-Muhandis pushed forward on three initiatives. First, a rough plan was hatched to consolidate command and control of the PMF, including boiling down the large number of PMF micro-brigades (each well under a third of the size of an Iraqi army brigade) into a more cohesive force mostly under the leadership of KH members.[13] Second, Soleimani and al-Muhandis invested huge effort in arranging the selection of Iraq's then prime minister, Adel Abdalmahdi, who took office in October 2018.[g]

Third, Soleimani and Iran's IRGC-QF (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force) began to recruit for a new resistance effort against U.S. forces in Iraq.[14] As this author noted in *CTC Sentinel* in October 2020, new *muqawama* umbrella groups such as the Free Revolutionaries Front began to emerge in 2019 with the express aim of evicting U.S. forces from Iraq.[15] Kinetic actions against U.S. sites and convoys were greatly intensified from May 2019 onward due to skyrocketing tension between Iran and the

c Militia Spotlight seeks to capture information from militia sources and compile it as a record of militias "in their own words" and "by their own actions." The team attempts to lay out its findings with information supporting each step in the team's conclusions' logical chain. Militia Spotlight captures and saves this information, though the platform does not publish every item, name, or other element of information collected. As a baseline, Militia Spotlight aims to demonstrate linkages between militias to the equivalent of a common-law civil case standard of proof—that is, by a preponderance of the evidence that the facts alleged are true.

d In addition to the findings presented here, Militia Spotlight is also generating timely warning data and other actionable material for relevant authorities. Remarkably detailed material is being generated for use in the blog and profiles and also in special studies. Intelligence community seminars are regularly undertaken. To give an example of the detailed insights, Militia Spotlight has developed very granular understanding of how *muqawama* undertake assassinations, including every stage of warning, approval, and execution. Another example of the detailed profiling undertaken by Militia Spotlight is the authors' studies regarding how *muqawama* media organizations have relocated their facilities and servers multiple times.

e All the interviews were undertaken on deep background due to the severe physical security threat posed by militias, and great care was taken, and is needed in the future, to ensure that such individuals are not exposed to intimidation for cooperating with research.

f The interviewees include individuals with detailed insight into *muqawama* operations. Many were interviewed multiple times, with very detailed notes taken.

g The authors have closely followed Iraqi politics and interviewed scores of informed observers of the inner workings of the 2018 government formation. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2018-2020, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

Iran-backed militia fighters march in central Baghdad, Iraq, on June 29, 2021. (Khalid Mohammed/AP Photo)

United States, and then again intensified[h] during the Iraqi protests that began the slow collapse of the Abdalmahdi government in November 2019 and sparked protests in Iran itself.

The pantheon of Iran-backed militias in Iraq have passed through a number of stages in the 21 months since a U.S. airstrike killed Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis on January 3, 2020. The first phase was simple revenge. Iraqi militia politicians passed a non-binding motion in Iraq's parliament to evict foreign forces on January 5, 2020, and Iran fired ballistic missiles at the U.S. site at Al-Asad Air Base two days later. A chaotic pattern of revenge rocket attacks by *muqawama* groups unfolded in the early months of 2020 against U.S. bases in Iraq, followed by what appears to have been Kata'ib Hezbollah's planned vengeance for al-Muhandis, a carefully prepared[i] series of rocket attacks that killed two Americans and one Briton at Taji in March 2020 undertaken by KH using a new "façade"—Usbat al-Thaireen (UT, League of the Revolutionaries).[16] The United States immediately struck back against KH rocket warehouses on March 13, 2020, seemingly causing no KH fatalities.[17]

KH seemed to accept this blow and tailor the resistance effort to less lethal harassment attacks. The main mode of resistance shifted to what became known as the "convoy strategy" against Iraqi civilian trucks servicing the coalition. Under a KH lead, often under the banner of KH's other main façade Qasem al-Jabbarin (QJ, Smasher of the Oppressors),[18] the roadside bombing campaign steadily expanded in the summer of 2020 until the number of attacks on Iraqi-manned trucks equaled those of rocket attacks on U.S. bases. Then, probably in response to intensifying U.S. threats of military and economic retaliation,[19] KH announced a "conditional ceasefire" (i.e., an end to rocket attacks) on October 10, 2020, likely seeking to lower the risk of escalation until the

h Iran sems to have viewed the protests in Iraq and Iran as sparked by U.S. intelligence action. An anti-U.S. politician refers to the "electronic army of the U.S. embassy" here: Suadad al-Salhy, "Third person dies as protests continue in Baghdad," Arab News, October 4, 2019. The KH newspaper (al-Muraqib al-Iraqi) refers to "Kadhimi's Electronic Army, which is an integrated program sponsored by experts who work at the U.S. Embassy as advisers while they are officially working for the US Central Intelligence Agency." See "The government wastes millions of dollars on electronic armies," al-Muraqib al-Iraqi, July 12, 2020. After the protests began, there was a notable increase in the apparent intended lethality of indirect fire on U.S. bases in November and December 2019 through the introduction of large multiple-rocket launch systems. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset.

i The Taji attacks were notable in being preceded by two weeks of warning for Iraqi forces to distance themselves from U.S. sites; the development and launch of a new façade group (Usbat al-Thaireen) that announced itself to claim the attack; the unusually meticulous installation of spring-loaded rising rocket cubes under overhead cover to mount the attack; and the accuracy and lethality of the March 11, 2020, strikes. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset.

situation became clearer in the November 2020 U.S. presidential election. The cessation of rocket attacks on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad and the Baghdad Diplomatic Security Center (BDSC) at Baghdad International airport[j] probably also reflected rising Iraqi public criticism of the *muqawama* for undertaking resistance operations in central Baghdad.[k] As noted, KH's partial ceasefire was not only directly communicated but echoed by the new KH-run coordination mechanism (the aforementioned *Tansiqiya*, which will be discussed in detail below), which emerged to speak for the *muqawama*.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's dissenting role

Not all Iraqi factions went along with KH's partial ceasefire, which represented a complete cessation of lethal attacks on Americans (because no Americans were on the convoys that the *muqawama* continued to strike). Militia Spotlight assesses[l] that Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) undertook two controversial rocket strikes (November 17 and December 20, 2020) on the U.S. embassy complex in Baghdad that drew criticism from KH and appears to have been undertaken by AAH in deliberate defiance of the *Tansiqiya*'s ceasefire. On February 15, 2021, a new major rocket attack (again assessed by Militia Spotlight as an AAH attack[20]) was launched against the U.S. base in Erbil, in Iraq's Kurdistan Region, followed by new rocket attacks on Balad Air Base on February 20[21] and BDSC on February 22.[22] AAH may have been seeking to assert an Iraqi leadership role of the *muqawama*, distinct from the IRGC-QF-directed effort.[m]

When the United States retaliated with deadly force on February 26, 2021, against KH and another Iraqi militia, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS), on the Iraq-Syrian border,[23] the situation changed again: KH ended the ceasefire on March 3, 2021, and initiated[24] a campaign of drone and rocket attacks focused on the remaining U.S. military "points of presence."[n] The accuracy of the *muqawama*'s first fixed-wing drone attacks allowed strikes on very specific aim-points such as U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) hangers[25] and missile defenses,[26] marking an apparent shift to a casualty-agnostic[o] but nevertheless pain-inducing campaign of attrition against the U.S. presence in Iraq.[p]

After four months of drone attacks,[q] the authors understand that Iran stepped in right after the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue in Washington, D.C., and issued new guidance via IRGC-QF (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force) commander Brigadier General Esmail Qaani on July 29, 2021, to cease use of drones and rockets against U.S. bases.[27] Probably driven by backchannel U.S. warnings to Iran to control the drone campaign, the Iranian demarche gradually brought about a decline in the number of drone

j The focus on Baghdad was likely due to the progressive closure of targetable coalition sites at Qayyarah West, K1 in Kirkuk, and Mosul in March 2020, and the closure of coalition training missions in Taji and Besmaya in August 2020. The next most prominent U.S. targets were in Baghdad, but these quickly proved controversial due to collateral damage concerns and political embarrassment to the Iraqi government. Militia attacks then shifted to less sensitive targets such as Al-Asad (a remote base with few civilians nearby) and later the Kurdistan Region (where Arab leaders in Baghdad do not strongly object to disruption or collateral damage).

k In addition to collateral damage, such as the killing of a mother and daughter by militia rockets in Baghdad on July 4, 2020, the regular rocket attacks on the government center and international airport caused global embarrassment to Iraqi leaders. Less obviously, the rocket attacks also resulted in regular, early morning alarms and the use of extremely loud Counter-Rocket and Missile (C-RAM) systems in exactly the areas where Iraqi politicians live and sleep.

l Militia Spotlight assesses AAH responsibility due to extensive monitoring of claims and inter-militia social media. Specifically, Militia Spotlight observed the November 17, 2020, attack initially claimed by Ashab al-Kahf, a façade group with ties to AAH. It also observed significant anger within KH media networks: while Ashab al-Kahf and AAH supported the strike, KH officials and media channels criticized it as a violation of the KH-led truce. This resulted in a media split in which Sabereen (an AAH-led outfit) became increasingly unmoored from KH media networks. Through much of December, Sabereen existed at the center of an active AAH media network, which posted out-of-sync with KH media, even as KH channels ignored many of their rivals' messages and promoted convoy attacks.

m This thesis will be unpacked throughout the analysis, but it is an analytic assessment that leans on the authors' close focus on AAH leader Qais al-Khazali's career and communiques. Al-Khazali is highly ambitious and tries to walk the fine line between Iraqi nationalism and support for the pan-Shi`a "Axis of Resistance." He is the foremost up-and-coming Shi`a politician in Iraq. For a good profile of al-Khazali, see Isabel Coles, Ali Nabhan, and Ghassan Adnan, "Iraqi Who Once Killed Americans Is a U.S. Dilemma as He Gains Political Power," *Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2018.

n Initially, *muqawama* groups attacked just Al-Asad and Balad, and then ramped up strikes into the Kurdistan Region (Erbil and Harir), before returning to strikes on BDSC from April 23, 2021. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset.

o The term "casualty-agnostic" is chosen because militia rocket and drone attacks are mostly either "aimed off" of populated areas or areas where high casualties might be caused, or else (with drones) seem to precisely strike non-occupied aim-points. Such attacks can easily cause casualties due to the inaccuracy of rockets, or during interception of projectiles (that veer off course), or because targeting data is incorrect or outdated, but the intent is not to maximize lethality. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset, and from the authors' extensive, related investigations into the circumstances, weapons, points of impact, and other features of attacks.

p By striking U.S. ISR assets, which are so-called 'exquisite' platforms that are rare and in high-demand, Iran and its proxies may be attempting a form of "anti-access" warfare to push what they see as the most dangerous U.S. systems (i.e., the drones and other aerial ISR that killed Soleimani and al-Muhandis) out of Iraq. Michael Knights and Crispin Smith, "Iraq's Drone and Rocket Epidemic, By the Numbers," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 27, 2021.

q The drone threat has been growing for a few years, but quietly and invisibly to general analysts. In October 2019, a drone was used to bomb a pro-protestor TV station. An armed quadcopter drone was discovered on a rooftop opposite the U.S. embassy in Baghdad in July 2020. A private security company in Baghdad was struck by militia drone attacks in September 2020. In March 2021, a drone attack was launched against Kurdistan leadership facilities by militias. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset, plus interviews. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple U.S. and Iraqi contacts, 2019-2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. See also Michael Knights, "Exposing and Sanctioning Human Rights Violations by Iraqi Militias," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 22, 2019.

attacks,[r] with the apparent outlier of one new double-drone strike on Erbil on September 11, 2021.[28]

The story of recent militia operations in Iraq thus seems to point to a relatively clear-cut arc of KH and AAH's competition for control over the resistance effort. In the following section, this article will look at how the IRGC-QF sought to reduce such friction and retain sufficient control of the Iraqi *muqawama* groups in 2020-2021.

2. How Iranian Influence Adapted in the Post-Soleimani Era

The months that followed the deaths of Soleimani and al-Muhandis saw the IRGC-QF and the *muqawama* adjust their internal relationships to account for the monumental loss of these two giants. Most militia leaders initially laid low within Iraq[s] or sheltered in Iran,[29] expecting follow-on U.S. strikes. A select group of *muqawama* leaders visited Soleimani's deputy and successor, Esmail Qaani, with primary favor shown to Abu Ala al-Walai of Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Akram Kaabi of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HaN, hereafter referred to as Nujaba).[30] (KH probably attended, but at that point, KH was settling its internal leadership vacuum and was not then in the habit of exposing its secretary-general's identity in public).[31 t]

On the surface, little appeared to change after Soleimani and al-Muhandis died, with IRGC-QF and KH remaining the key Iranian and Iraqi players. In the first eight months of Militia Spotlight's collection, a number of theories emerged and were tested concerning IRGC-QF's role in Iraq, including the notion that Qaani had significantly less control of Iraqi groups (compared to Soleimani's and al-Muhandis' combined grip over them) and the notion of significant internecine competition within Iran's security establishment over the Iraqi portfolio. Overall, these theories did not fully reflect the complexities of intra-*muqawama* and Iran-*muqawama* dynamics.

For instance, multiple interviewees in a position to know are unanimous that IRGC-QF still leads Iraq policy for Iran. IRGC-QF primacy in Iraq is still recognized by the Office of the Supreme Leader, Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS),[u] IRGC Intelligence Organization,[v] the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,[w] and Lebanese Hezbollah.[x] Yet, there is evidence that Qaani has less personal sway over Iraqi commanders, which is unsurprising considering Qaani's non-fluency in Arabic and his relatively limited track record with the Iraqi *muqawama* compared to the more charismatic Soleimani. Some *muqawama* actors (notably AAH) have been serially defiant toward Qaani, seeming to grandstand whenever the opportunity has arisen to snub him. However, in most ways, Qaani follows the same playbook as Soleimani, regularly traveling to Iraq for visits that include Najaf (to meet Iraq's clergy), Samarra (to interact with *muqawama* military commanders), Baghdad (to meet political and PMF leaders), and Erbil (to meet Kurdish leaders). As noted above, when Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei wished to convey a firm message to *Tansiqiya* commanders on July 29, 2021, he used Qaani to deliver guidance (to temporarily cease attacks on U.S. sites) rather than Iranian ambassador to Baghdad (and IRGC officer) Iraj Masjedi[32] or the MOIS country chief. This underlines the strong argument that Qaani is still the channel for top-level messaging from Khamenei and that IRGC-QF still leads Iran's policy on Iraq.

3. How Iraqi Militias Tried to Coordinate Their Actions Post-Muhandis

Probably the only real innovation[33] of the Qaani era is the *Tansiqiya*, which emerged with a widely shared public statement on the afternoon of October 10, 2020.[34] In its debut statement, the *Tansiqiya* reiterated old grievances against the United States and recounted the *muqawama*'s efforts to force the alleged occupiers out of Iraq. The statement then announced a conditional ceasefire

r Drone attacks dropped from six in June 2021 and four in July, and none in August. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset.

s Qais al-Khazali first hid in a shrine in Karbala and then rented a house on a street adjacent to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, to use the presence of Iraq's senior cleric to avoid being targeted. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

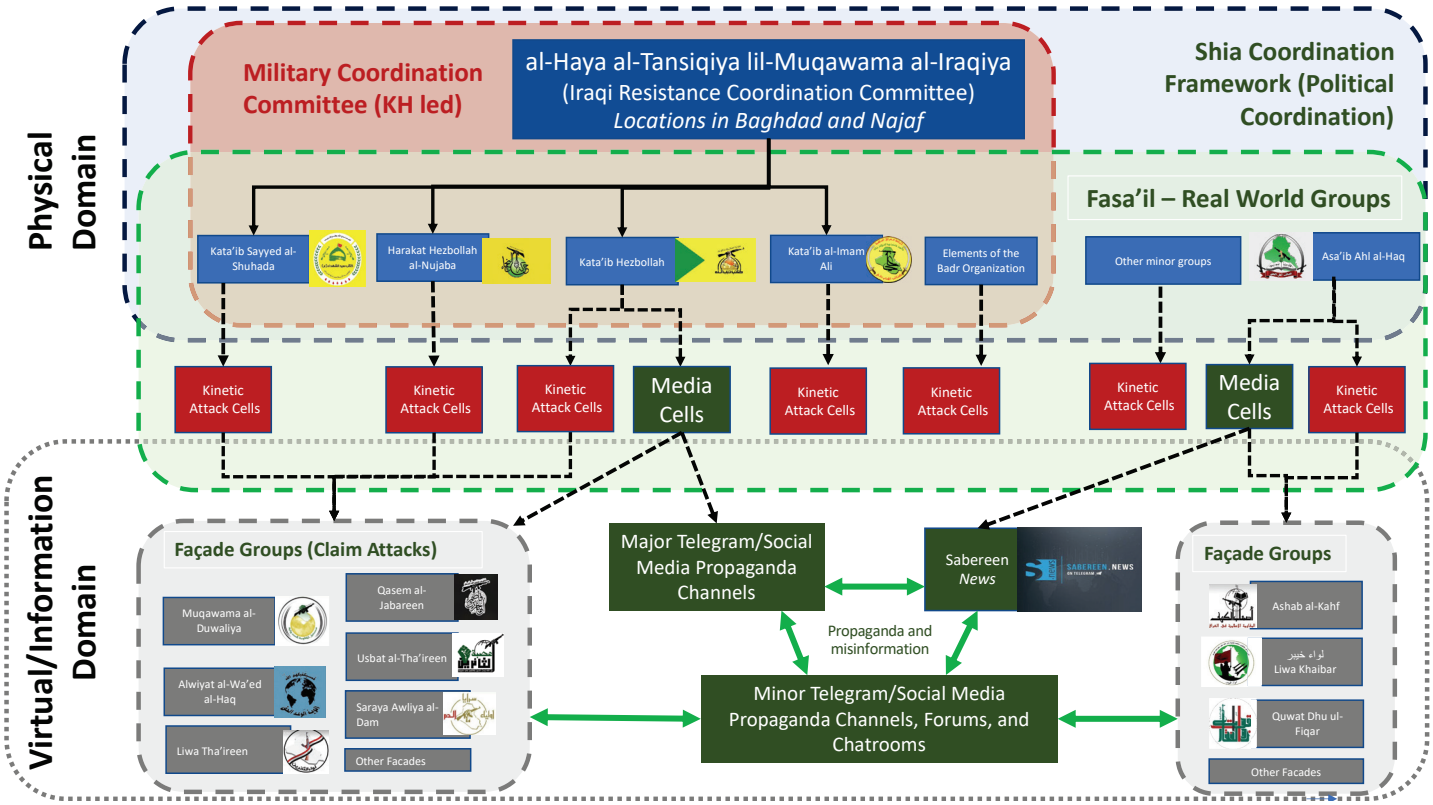
t KH first exposed Abu Hussein's name, and his role as secretary-general, on January 3, 2021, the one-year anniversary of Soleimani and al-Muhandis' deaths. See Kata'ib Hezbollah (Telegram) on January 3, 2021, and Kaf (Telegram) on January 3, 2021.

u The Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) mission in Iraq remains focused on threats that can affect the Iranian homeland, such as dissidents, Kurdish oppositionists, and the like. MOIS has an economic security focus, including aspects of the Iran-Iraq religious tourist trade and general trade. In parallel with these aims, MOIS has money-making schemes inside Iraq. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

v The IRGC Intelligence Organization (IRGC-IO) has professional equities in Iraq, particularly ensuring that Iraqi airspace is not used to attack Iran, through the use of shared radar data to understand Iraq's air picture and make Iraq's Directorate General of Intelligence and Security (DGIS) aware of foreign uses of its airspace. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

w Iran's former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was embarrassed by the *muqawama* (and perhaps, by extension, the IRGC-QF) when in July 2020, militias launched a rare daytime rocket attack on the Baghdad International Zone in the middle of the foreign minister's visit to Baghdad. See "Rocket attack hits Baghdad as Iran's Zarif visits," i24 News, July 19, 2020.

x Lebanese Hezbollah's interaction with the *muqawama* is worthy of a standalone piece, but briefly, Militia Spotlight has been surprised by the less prominent than expected political role of Lebanese Hezbollah in Iraq. Since the deaths of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, Lebanese Hezbollah does not appear to have filled in any significant gap. Some senior Lebanese Hezbollah leaders like Hassan Nasrallah and Mohammed Kawtharani are treated with respect by Iraqi factions, but they do not rival the IRGC-QF in Iraq. Very small numbers (tens) of Lebanese Hezbollah Unit 3800 advisors are present, as discussed elsewhere in this study, and Lebanese Hezbollah may have been highly influential on *muqawama* media operations and the sourcing of drone parts. Overall, however, Lebanese Hezbollah seems to be in Iraq to make money: the vast majority of interview material gathered relating to the activities in Iraq of Lebanese Hezbollah relates to corrupt deals to leach money off the Iraqi state (via welfare fraud and national identity cards and pensions illegally given to Lebanese persons, and via diversion of oil and gas byproducts (heavy oil, sulfur) to Lebanese Hezbollah). Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2020-2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. See also Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks," Middle East Institute, July 26, 2021, p. 34.



Militia Spotlight graphic (created by Crispin Smith) showing the assessed relationships between different levels of the muqawama *pantheon in Iraq, including the basic nature of the overlap between the* Tansiqiya*, the* fasa'il*, kinetic and media cells, and online façade brands.*

suggesting the *Tansiqiya* would suspend attacks in return for a clear plan for U.S. troops to leave.[35] The following morning, KH spokesman Mohammed Mohi told Reuters that "The factions have presented a conditional ceasefire … It includes all factions of the (anti-U.S.) resistance, including those who have been targeting U.S. forces." Mohi did not, however, "specify which groups had drafted the statement."[36]

Tansiqiya *communiques*

Compared with individual militias and their propagandists, the *Tansiqiya* communicates in public relatively infrequently. Including the October 10, 2020, statement, Militia Spotlight is aware of nine statements. These statements tend to respond to major paradigm changes in U.S.-*muqawama* relations, or political events with a bearing on U.S. withdrawal. In general, topics of *Tansiqiya* statements relate to high-level military strategy and political affairs. Statements appear to be released on closed Telegram or other messaging groups, and are then disseminated broadly by *muqawama* Telegram channels. Notably, channels affiliated with KH and Nujaba are almost always the first to "break the news" of a new statement, raising the possibility that statements are released to these groups first (or exclusively).[37]

The *Tansiqiya*'s second statement[38] was on February 27, 2021, and responded to the first airstrike of the Biden presidency, which targeted KH and KSS positions in Syria two days prior. The statement noted the existence of the alleged ceasefire put in place months earlier, criticizing the United States for violating it and the Iraqi authorities for allowing it to go ahead.[39] In response to the February 25 U.S. strike, the *muqawama* militias placed themselves on a war footing. On March 3, a militia (highly likely to have been KH) launched an unusual early morning, daylight rocket attack on a major U.S. installation. A new *Tansiqiya* statement[40] on March 4 formally ended the ceasefire and laid out new rules of engagement, saying "we are facing a new page from the pages of the resistance, in which the weapons of the muqawama will reach all occupation forces and their bases in any part of [Iraq]. The muqawama has the legal and national right and popular support for doing this … The muqawama sees confrontation as the only option."[41]

The next statement came on April 6, 2021, commenting on the then-ongoing Strategic Dialogue between the United States and Iraq, laying out demands from the process and threatening further reprisals if U.S. withdrawal was delayed.[42]

On May 20, the *Tansiqiya* held a street demonstration and rally in support of Gaza (during the May 2021 conflict). As Militia Spotlight noted: "At the event, a statement was read by Nasr al-Shammari (Nukaba's spokesperson) while Muhammad Mohi (KH's spokesperson) stood behind him. The reading was introduced as 'the statement of al-Haya al-Tansiqiya lil-Muqawama al-Iraqiya,' and Shammari concluded it with the same sign-off."[43]

The *Tansiqiya*'s next statements both related to the Iraqi Prime Minister's visit to Washington, D.C. On July 23, 2021, the *Tansiqiya* laid out—in detail[44]—requirements for the *muqawama* to be satisfied of U.S. good faith in any withdrawal process, while reaffirming the *muqawama*'s continued intent to fight U.S. forces in the absence of any withdrawal.[45] Then, as the Washington meetings concluded on July 28, the *Tansiqiya* criticized[46] the dialogue and called for all foreign forces and aviation to be removed from Iraq, threatening aviation by noting that "any foreign flight in Iraq will

be treated as hostile."[47] The *Tanisiya*'s most recent statements (at the time of writing) comprised an unusually concentrated burst of three post-election threats, released once the scale of the defeat of *muqawama*-aligned blocs became clear. The *Tansiqiya* used its statements to link the election results to an alleged agenda to disestablish the PMF. On October 12, 2021, the *Tansiqiya* reflected its shock by saying "we cannot accept" the election result, and attacked the electoral winner, Moqtada al-Sadr.[48] On October 17, the *Tansiqiya* explicitly alleged vote-tampering by "foreign hands" with the complicity of the government and its electoral commission, requiring the commission to "correct its path" or face a "crisis."[49] On October 18, the *Tansiqiya* laid the groundwork for demonstrations, with the *Tansiqiya* adopting a firm but more measured appeal to the electoral commission and expressing solidarity with the security forces.[50]

Military committees

Though there have been proto-*Tansiqiya* type umbrellas of resistance factions since 2018[51] and a pan-*muqawama* anti-protest "crisis cell" in 2019,[52] today's *Tansiqiya* is a more organized model that lives up to its title as a coordination mechanism. The *Tansiqiya* has a small number of headquarters in which its top-level leaders typically meet. The *Tansiqiya* has a rudimentary de-confliction mechanism based on committees organized by region. This reflects a strong geographic territoriality[y] that underpins how the *muqawama* de-conflict their kinetic operations (to ensure synergy and avoid disrupting each other's operations). Using geolocated attack data, Telegram claims of attribution, and other means of verification, Militia Spotlight assesses that:

- A leadership committee (Militia Spotlight's nomenclature) of a set of top Shi`a leaders from a select group of *fasa'il*[z] meets on an as-needed basis to discuss strategy and adjust or de-conflict their activities. Kata'ib Hezbollah chairs the political committee, with a senior chairman's role for Ahmad Mohsen Faraj al-Hamidawi (also known as Abu Hussein, Abu Zalata, and Abu Zeid), the KH secretary-general and the commander of KH Special Operations.[aa]
- The western committee (Militia Spotlight's nomenclature) covers Anbar and is headed by Kata'ib Hezbollah, aligning with KH's self-styled Jazira Operations Command.[53] This committee has exclusive control of attacks against the U.S. site at Al-Asad Air Base.[ab]
- The central committee (Militia Spotlight's nomenclature) covers Baghdad and the road systems linking Baghdad and Basra. Nujaba has some kind of coordinating authority for attacks on BDSC, while KH (during periods when attacks on the U.S. embassy are sanctioned by Iran) leads on embassy strikes from launch points in Albu Aitha, Doura, and East Baghdad.[ac]
- KH also oversees the "convoy strategy" of roadside bombings from its Jurf as-Sakr base, south of Baghdad, undertaking most[ad] of the small numbers of real *muqawama* convoy attacks (as opposed to false claims, double-reporting, and mafia-style criminal attacks).[ae]
- The expansive northern region (Militia Spotlight's nomenclature), including the areas bordering the Kurdistan Region, is nominally coordinated by KSS and includes local PMF brigades linked to the *muqawama* such as Liwa al-Shabak/Quwat Sahl Nineveh (PMF brigade 30), Babiliyun (brigade 50), and Quwwat al-Turkmen (PMF brigade 16,

y This territoriality applies to both operations against U.S. targets and also assassinations. If a *muqawama* cell wishes to kill an individual, it first checks in with the *fasa'il* that is recognized as controlling the area. The "*amni*" (intelligence chief) of the ground-holding *fasa'il* is consulted for permission to do the hit in his area, and he usually obliges and provides target intelligence, surveillance assistance, and a security cordon in certain cases. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2020-2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

z According to interviews with Iraqis in a position to know, the membership of the *Tansiqiya*, the *fasa'il* representatives, comprise: Ahmad Mohsen Faraj al-Hamidawi (also known as Abu Hussein, Abu Zalata, Abu Zeid), the KH Secretary General and the Commander of KH Special Operations; PMF operational commander and KH veteran Abd'al-Aziz al-Mohammadawi (Abu Fadak); KSS leader Abu Ala al-Walai; Adnan al-Bendawi (Abu Kawthar), the "jihadi assistant" to Nujaba's Akram al-Ka'abi; and Ali al-Yassiri of Saraya Talia al-Khurasani (PMF brigade 18). Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2020-2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

aa The United States has designated Ahmad al-Hamidawi as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) pursuant to Executive Order 13224. "State Department Terrorist Designation of Ahmad al-Hamidawi."

ab In an exception that proves the rule, KSS requested KH's permission to launch an attack on Al-Asad in early July 2021 as a revenge attack for the death of a KSS member in the U.S. airstrike on June 27, 2021. According to the author's (Knights) interview data, KSS asked Qassem Muslih, the local PMF axis commander and leader Liwa al-Tafuf, and he gained permission from KH. The truck-based rocket launcher was brought from Suqr (Falcon) base in Baghdad to its launch point in Baghdadi on July 7, 2021. This is the attack referenced here: Chad Garland, "Two wounded in rocket attack on Iraqi base housing US forces," *Stars and Stripes*, July 7, 2021.

ac The June 25, 2020, arrest of a Kata'ib Hezbollah in Albu Aitha is a public case where this launch area was used. The individual was seized on the basis of biometric ties to rocket attacks, and he was arrested on a KH base in Albu Aitha where rockets were stored, close to launch points. In the October 2020 *CTC Sentinel* article on Kata'ib Hezbollah, one of the authors (Knights) details other uses of the Doura area as a launch point for attacks on the U.S. embassy. Michael Knights, "Back into the Shadows? The Future of Kata'ib Hezbollah and Iran's Other Proxies in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 13:10 (2020): pp. 8, 14-16.

ad Detailed interviews by one of the authors (Knights) on the roadside bombing campaign give the sense that Kata'ib Hezbollah does most of the real anti-coalition convoy bombings itself. In particular, one well-placed interviewee estimated the proportion to be 70 percent KH attacks and 30 percent outsourced via teaming arrangements, including AAH and members from PMF units stationed in southern Iraq. Author (Knights) interview, single Iraqi contact, multiple sessions with significant detail, 2021, exact dates, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewee).

ae In the first quarter of 2021, there was a weekly average of seven reported convoy attacks and in the second quarter a monthly average of six. Multiple interviewees suggested that the number of actual proven anti-coalition convoy attacks each week was two or fewer, mostly undertaken by KH. They characterize the balance as false or duplicate reporting, or criminal actions that are disguised within the *muqawama* effort but which are actually simply extortion operations against trucking firms that are not carrying coalition supplies. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

based in Tuz and Kirkuk).[af]

- AAH, meanwhile, has typically ridden roughshod over these lines, striking the aforementioned coalition annex at Baghdad airport (BDSC) and the U.S. embassy, and using its own local networks around Mosul to direct attacks on Erbil (seeming to draw upon KSS support to do so),[54] and on Balad Air Base (sometimes utilizing sites where Badr is considered dominant).[ag]

At military committee level, IRGC-QF or Lebanese Hezbollah[ah] advisors are sometimes present to offer advice on technical aspects or operational security.[ai] The representatives from *muqawama* factions on the military committees are typically the "*amni*" (intelligence chiefs) responsible for the operational area in question (say, for instance, Al-Asad Air Base). An action is proposed, including a target, day and time, and this sets in motion preparatory activities such as selection and reconnaissance of an attack type, and sourcing and staging of weapons. (See the later section on kinetic operations.) In all the military regions, KH appears to be the predominant influence within the military committees, and the supposed "lead" of KSS in the north and Nujaba in Baghdad may be exaggerated or symbolic—i.e., nominally giving one region to each of the triad of most-trusted IRGC-QF partners: KH, KSS, and Nujaba.

Pre-election focus on political considerations

Another trend spotted by Militia Spotlight is the growing discomfort caused by *muqawama* kinetic actions that was felt by Shi`a politicians from large parties (like Badr) ahead of the October 10, 2021, elections. This has boosted efforts by Shi`a politicians to shape militia operations. The main vehicle has been the pan-Shi`a leadership group known as Shia Coordination Framework (al-Etar al-Tansiqi al-Shia), a talking shop of around nine majority-Shi`a political parties (including Badr and AAH) that has been meeting a couple of times each month since the October 2019 mass protest movement began.[55] [aj] Indeed, the only time AAH leader Qais al-Khazali has mentioned being in the "*Tansiqiya*," he explicitly referenced "al-Etar al-Tansiqi al-Shia," not the military organ called al-Haya al-Tansiqiya lil-Muqawama al-Iraqiya.[56]

This political level appears to have been emphasized since the May 26, 2021, face-off between *muqawama* factions and the government over the arrest of a senior KH-supported militiaman, Qassem Muslih.[57] *Muqawama* factions were embarrassed[ak] by the episode, which publicly undermined their claim to be legal organs of the state (via their PMF role) and under the prime minister's control. After May 26, there are multiple accounts[58] that Badr Organization leader Hadi al-Ameri has played an expanded role in advising the *muqawama* leaders on the political repercussions of their actions.

4. Difficulties Between and Within *Muqawama* Factions

The *Tansiqiya* has not been uniformly successful in marshaling the *fasa'il*. A key weakness has been the apparent absence of, or very weak connection to, AAH and its leader Qais al-Khazali. It is unclear if AAH was excluded or never actually wanted to join the KH-run body. There is no clear evidence to suggest that AAH ever formally joined the *Tansiqiya* but many indicators that AAH has instead jealously guarded and highlighted its ability to operate autonomously from IRGC-QF and to be unwilling to enter into ceasefires with the U.S.-led coalition.[al] AAH has even actively disrupted the ceasefire, with the balance of evidence suggesting that AAH broke the *Tansiqiya*'s partial ceasefire twice by rocketing the U.S. embassy in Baghdad on November 17, and December 20, 2020, coincident with Esmail Qaani transiting Baghdad to encourage compliance with the *Tansiqiya*'s conditional ceasefire. Then, as AAH broke the ceasefire again with a February 2021 series of

af Smaller local PMF brigades, including PMF brigades 16, 30 and 50, provide enormous benefits to the *muqawama*: they provide reconnaissance capability and local knowledge to the *fasa'il* and their attack cells. They also provide cover for infiltrating and exfiltrating cells that can hide among "legitimate" PMF units, or lay-up at PMF bases and safe houses. All the while, the smaller militias provide legitimacy for *muqawama* actions (as representatives of the local, often minority, communities) while helping set up alternative power structures that undermine the legitimate authorities. See, for example, Kamaran Palani, "Iran-backed PMFs are destabilising Iraq's disputed regions," Al Jazeera, May 8, 2021. On the most important small PMF unit, see John Foulkes, "Iran's Man in Nineveh: Waad Qado and the PMF's 30th Brigade," *Militant Leadership Monitor* 12:5 (2021).

ag In interviews, Camp Ashraf is a recurring theme as a hub of *muqawama* planning and logistic activity for rocket and drone attacks. At least one rocket attack on Balad was fired from within or close to Camp Ashraf. Most other attacks on Balad are fired from the AAH-controlled areas east of the Tigris, and one well-placed interviewee identified AAH's PMF brigade 43 as responsible for rocket attacks on Balad. In Militia Spotlight's assessment, attacks on Balad (where the presence of U.S. technicians is sporadic) are driven by a witches' brew of commercial extortion and political motives.

ah Though Lebanese Hezbollah's military training role can be valuable to its recipients in Iraq, Militia Spotlight generally assesses that LH's post-Soleimani political role in Iraq does not appear to be as great as suggested in pieces such as this: Suadad al-Salhy, "Exclusive: Iran tasked Nasrallah with uniting Iraqi proxies after Soleimani's death," Middle East Eye, January 14, 2020.

ai One obvious reason to involve such advisors would be to advise on how to probe, test, and defeat counter-rocket or counter-drone defenses, which would be of significant value to other military actors like Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah.

aj These meetings do not usually coincide with visits into Iraq by Esmail Qaani, and normal meetings do not involve Iranian or Lebanese Hezbollah participants. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2020-2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ak Iraqis with access to the discussions within militia leadership on May 26, 2021, describe the very delicate situation of the *muqawama*. They feared looking weak if Muslih was not immediately released, yet they did not want a release to appear to have been under extra-legal pressure from militias, lest they damage their status as part of the state through the PMF. The solution they sought was for Prime Minister Kadhimi to immediately release Muslih on a technicality and detail for the public the purported wrong procedures used. When Kadhimi refused, the militias were forced to wait for the whole pre-trial detention period for Muslih's release before he was released by the judiciary (not Kadhimi's executive branch). During that time, Hadi al-Ameri led a camp that internally criticized KH's military mobilization in the International Zone. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, in great detail, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

al For instance, on November 19, 2020, just after an AAH rocket attack that fell during Esmail Qaani's visit to Baghdad, Qais al-Khazali noted: "I sent a clear and frank message to Mr Esmail Qaani … the Americans occupy our country not yours, those martyred in Qaim were our sons … then the matter is related to us, regardless of other calculations, so please from now on if someone came to you, embarrassed you, please no one talks to us and we won't listen… our motives are national 100%…" Qais al-Khazali interview, Iraq Media Net, November 19, 2020, see 27:13.

rocket attacks, AAH and KH engaged in a public war of words over *muqawama* strategy (which Militia Spotlight termed the "Tuna and Noodles saga"[59]). This episode saw KH media channels criticize AAH's rocket attacks for only damaging parked cars, and AAH media channels lampoon the KH convoy strategy for "targeting convoys of tuna and noodles."[60] In essence, both sides criticized the seriousness of the other's resistance effort.

This sequence of February 2021 rocket strikes ended up being very consequential, triggering the new Biden administration's use of military force in the counter-militia airstrike on February 26, which spurred the KH-led *Tansiqiya* to ramp up rocket (and drone) attacks on U.S. sites from March 4, 2021, onward, carrying the risk of U.S. casualties and retaliation. Even after March 4, both KH and AAH undertook parallel indirect fire attacks, with AAH sometimes appearing to pre-empt or overshadow KH operations.[am]

KH reliability on the decline

This post-March 4, 2021, period has highlighted new weaknesses at the heart of the *Tansiqiya* system. As noted, the May 26, 2021, mobilization of the *muqawama* against the Iraqi government center was a demonstration of the volatility and poor political instincts of KH military leaders in the post-Muhandis era, resulting in veteran militiamen like Badr's Hadi al-Ameri being tapped to cast a political eye over *Tansiqiya* operations.[an] Yet, even this expedient showed poor results. The sharp increase in *muqawama* drone operations in June 2021 (11 drones used in six attacks)[ao] led to new U.S. airstrikes on June 27, 2021.[61] Escalation continued in July, with four more drone attacks, part of a retaliatory dynamic driven by lower-level *muqawama* leaders.[ap]

In response, Esmail Qaani visited Iraq on July 29, 2021, to address both the political Shi`a leaders and the gathered military committees of the *Tansiqiya* (in Baghdad and Najaf, respectively). In a tough tone, Qaani delivered a message from Khamenei that urged the continuation of the conditional truce, and ordered the cessation of attacks on U.S. sites, "especially drone attacks." Ordering the *muqawama* to pivot to elections preparations, Qaani warned: "Truce-breakers will be held accountable. We gave the drones and we know who has them. We can take them back."[62] As KH is the key operator of fixed-wing drones in Iraq, Qaani's warning was undoubtedly aimed at them.[aq]

Against a backdrop of unprecedented public *muqawama* appeals to their leadership for retaliation,[63] another less obvious reason for ongoing non-compliance by KH may have been the severe internal ructions being suffered within KH at the time. Coincident with Qaani's July 29, 2021, visit, Kata'ib Hezbollah held an internal leadership vote[64] for its secretary-general role, with the incumbent Abu Hussein (Ahmad Mohsen Faraj al-Hamidawi) getting only 14 votes versus 19 for his challenger,[ar] another KH Shura Council member called Sheikh Jassim al-Majedi (Abu Kadhim).[as]

am For instance, AAH likely knows when KH is going to strike and seems to have preceded KH attacks with its own AAH strikes on both June 6, 2021, and June 9, 2021. On both occasions, a double attack took place, in each case with a rocket attack on a typical AAH target (i.e., Balad) preempting a later drone attack on Al-Assad (June 6) and BDSC (June 9). The balance of evidence suggests this is competitive behavior, not coordinated behavior. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset.

an Hadi al-Ameri cast interesting light on this incident at the August 31, 2021, Rafidain Center For Dialogue Forum in Baghdad, noting: "It was a wrong decision by the Government and the Prime Minister to detain Qasem Muslih … It was also wrong by us (PMF) to spread our forces in the city. I ordered every single person to act peacefully and to manage themselves, and they did it." The video of the conference can be found at "Live: inside the Baghdad Forum for Dialogue, a special meeting with the president of the Fatah Alliance, Hadi al-Ameri," posted to Facebook by Rudaw News at 20:56 (Baghdad time) on August 31, 2021.

ao Drone attacks in June 2021 included: June 6, two-drone strike on al-Asad Air Base; June 9, strike on BDSC; June 15, two-drone strike on BDSC; June 20, strike on al-Asad Air Base; June 22, strike on BDSC in Baghdad; June 27, four-drone strike close to leadership complexes in Erbil. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset. See also Knights and Smith.

ap Militia Spotlight has observed a number of occasions in which *muqawama* members appear to have criticized leaders or other groups for insufficient efforts at resisting the United States. After the June 28, 2021, U.S. airstrike that resulted in the death of two *fasa'il* soldiers, some *muqawama* affiliates felt disappointed with what they saw as lack of retaliatory actions by *muqawama* leaders. When the leader of the Badr organization, Hadi al-Ameri, and the head of the PMF commission, Falih al-Fayyadh, attended the funeral of those killed in the U.S. strike, young *muqawama* members yelled at them, saying "we don't want condemnation … either take revenge or don't come [to these funerals] anymore… If Abu Mahdi was around, he'd tell us this is the [American] embassy and we'd burn it." See video posted to Alfaqaar (an AAH affiliated Telegram channel), at 02.14 hours (Baghdad time) on June 30, 2021. The caption reads "One of the Supporters of the PMF during the funeral of the martyrs of the American bombing in al-Qaim: 'if Abu Mahdi [al-Muhandis] was here he would have shaken the [U.S.] embassy.'"

aq As the primary user of fixed-wing drones, KH was likely the group addressed by Khamenei. Other groups might also have been intended audiences, but in a month when as many as ten drones were used, KH is highly likely to have been the main audience for the guidance. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset.

ar In October 2020, one of the authors collated what was known about KH's Shura Council, listing it as having five members. Since then, subsequent fieldwork in Baghdad uncovered that KH's Shura Council has five deputy secretary-generals (the five listed in the October 2020 piece) but far more than five members. The vote count (14 plus 19) from the June 29, 2021, leadership vote suggests the KH Shura Council has at least 33 members if all members voted in this important event and if only two candidates were fielded. The number might be higher if some members were absent or abstained or if other candidates also competed. Most likely, the number is 33 or close to that number. For the initial treatment of the KH Shura Council, see Knights, "Back into the Shadows?" p. 9.

as Sheikh Jassim al-Majedi (Abu Kadhim) is the final identified member of the Shura Council. He covers administration, including KH offices of veteran affairs, martyrs and families, and healthcare. Knights, "Back into the Shadows?" p. 9.

Resisting a palace coup that might have had Iranian backing,[at] Abu Hussein did not accept the vote, splitting KH's Shura Council and triggering extended mediation between Brigadier General Hajji Hamid Nasseri (the IRGC-QF commander for Iraq) and KH leaders.[65] Amidst the KH leadership crisis, Abu Hussein's faction within KH broke into the PMF administration department on August 7, 2021, and forced staff to hand over a full electronic register of all official and unofficial members of the PMF, with the stated motive of proving that AAH was being given more paid billets than KH.[66] (On August 8, PMF Chairman Falah al-Fayyadh issue an internal memo that ordered guards to exclude KH members from entering the administration offices.[67]) These events reveal deep divisions between and within the *fasa'il*, schisms that Iran is struggling to manage.

5. Information Operations: As Important as Kinetic Effects

One of the more novel features of *muqawama* activity in the post-January 3, 2020, era has been the dynamic expansion of militia activities in the information space, specifically the aforementioned utilization of numerous façade groups and media fronts. In an era of setbacks for the militias,[68] the *muqawama* ramped up their information operations[au] to offset real-world weaknesses. In fact, information operations are so intertwined with the *muqawama*'s kinetic and socio-political operations that it can be hard to determine at times whether information operations play a supporting role or have become the main effort. To give one example, following the arrest for murder of the KH-linked *muqawama* leader Qassem Muslih on May 26, 2021, the *muqawama* leaders quickly realized that they were not going to be able to secure Muslih's immediate release. With great agility, the *muqawama* switched their focus to an information operations-led strategy to (successfully) create the public and international impression that Muslih *had* been released.[69] Perception trumped reality, especially as the information operation was built upon the pre-existing bias in Iraqi and international observers that the Iraqi government is weak.

Key concepts: Soft war and lawfare

Two concepts appear to have shaped how the *muqawama* view information operations. The first is Iran's conception of soft war ("*jang-e narm*" [Persian] or "*harb na'ima*" [Arabic]) characterized by information warfare and the development of a network of covert and overt media actors.[70] In December 2020, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei laid out a framework for avenging Soleimani, highlighting the importance of "soft power" non-kinetic actions as perhaps the most appropriate response to the United States and allies.[71] Earlier in 2020, Khamenei claimed that "the online space could become a tool to punch the enemy in the mouth,"[72] calling those "fighting the enemy" in the online space "officers of the soft war."[73] This terminology has been echoed proudly by Iraqi *muqawama* activists.[74]

The second key concept is lawfare ("the strategy of using - or misusing - law as a substitute for traditional military means to achieve a warfighting objective"[75]). The *muqawama* expend considerable time and effort broadcasting their interest in law and their role as its defenders, while using legal arguments and Iraqi institutions in an attempt to discredit military and political opponents.[76] Lawfare efforts present the *muqawama* as legitimate upholders of Iraqi law and sovereignty (while discrediting and effectively constraining[77] [av] opponents). This helps maintain wider societal approval—a vital part in *muqawama* efforts to capture the Iraqi state. Militia Spotlight has documented the *muqawama*'s embrace of lawfare, and their fascination with the use of lawsuits and quasi-legal propaganda to achieve strategic ends.[78] Militia Spotlight has also observed the militias' fear of domestic and international law being used against them.[79]

Disinformation and deception tactics

The *muqawama* demonstrate considerable tactical proficiency in the information space. One tactic is the aforementioned use of façade groups, which are electronic brands (such as Usbat al-Thaireen,[80] Saraya Qassem al-Jabbarin,[81] Ashab al-Kahf,[82] and Raba Allah[83]) that are used by *fasa'il* to issue coded admissions of their involvement in kinetic attacks. This allows the militia to enjoy the benefits of the attack (demonstrating resistance, satisfying supporters, pressuring the government and coalition) while mitigating any risks (delaying retaliation while the coalition determines the "real" perpetrator, avoiding arrest and prosecution, and dodging popular disapproval). Throughout 2020 and early 2021, façade groups used Telegram[aw] and other social media to claim rocket and convoy attacks in the hours following an attack event. Often the façade's Telegram and social media platforms are created in the hours before the group's first claim, but pre-made unique iconography of each group[84] [ax] and the rapid growth of their

at It seems unlikely that the KH leadership vote and Qaani's visit was coincidental. Instead, it is likely that the vote was intended to occur during the visit, and that Qaani did not prevent this. The apparent result—against Abu Hussein—was probably not an unexpected outcome but Qaani may not have been prepared for an extended non-acceptance of the result. As a result, the balance of evidence suggests that the vote at least appeared to be Iran-supported.

au The term "information operations" is defined by the U.S. Department of Defense as "the integrated employment, during military operations, of IRCs [information-related capabilities] in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision making of adversaries and potential adversaries." "Joint Publication 3-13: Information Operations," U.S. Department of Defense, November 20, 2014, p. ix.

av The *muqawama* knows that its status as an organ of the Iraqi state (via the PMF) complicates efforts to counter it. By claiming attacks on its militias are attacks on the Iraqi state, the *muqawama* attempts to constrain the United States while building popular sympathy. In the aftermath of U.S. strikes, for example, *muqawama* statements and propaganda highlight the targeted militia's role within the Iraqi security forces. (Notably, Iran has done the same, most recently referring in its letter to the United Nations Security Council to the U.S. strike "against Iraqi forces.") See "Letter dated 12 March 2021 from the Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council," Islamic Republic of Iran, March 12, 2021.

aw Statements are usually disseminated via Telegram message in combination with an image that packages the text of the statement in a processed document format. The statements will often be signed "*al-muqawama al-islamiyya fi Iraq*" (the Islamic Resistance in Iraq) in addition to the façade group name. They generally begin with a Qur'anic verse and usually display the façade group's logo.

ax In general, characteristic images of fists, rifles, and globes predominate, all of which are common images in Iranian threat network iconography. The logos resemble (among others) the IRGC logo, the Lebanese Hezbollah flag, various Iraqi *fasa'il* (including KH, AAH, Nujaba, and Badr), and Yemen's Ansar Allah. Additionally, many Iraqi façade group logos incorporate the words "*muqawama al-islamiyya*" into the design.

media following suggests pre-preparation of façade brands for later use. Some groups have been used to claim strings of attacks, while other groups appeared for one or two attacks only before the brand name and associated media accounts fall into disuse.[ay]

Muqawama disinformation campaigns fall into several categories. Attacks on the U.S.-led coalition may be deliberately faked[85] or accidentally overreported[az] but not corrected,[86] or the impact of the attack exaggerated.[ba] *Muqawama* media also create false narratives around real events and people[bb] or fabricate entire events.[bc] The rapid "viral" spread of disinformation campaigns can have real-world effects: they can incite protests, further rounds of attacks, and lead to extrajudicial killings. Fake news promulgated between militia accounts is picked up by local and then international media and reported on as fact,[bd] contributing to wider misconception and decision-maker uncertainty. In one case, for example, the *muqawama*'s false narrative (that Qassem Muslih was arrested in a joint U.S.-Iraqi raid linked to maximum pressure on Iran) was re-posted on elite diplomatic message boards, where it played into the preconceptions of a very senior European diplomat and resulted in him withholding statements of support for the Iraqi government for a vital half-day window until it was proven to him that no Americans were involved (they were not) and Muslih was arrested on an Iraqi warrant for murder (he was).[87] The *muqawama* also target Iraqis with their information operations. *Muqawama* propagandists have targeted Iraqi security forces with information campaigns warning them to stay away from coalition forces (lest they become collateral damage).[88] Threats from infamous façade group brands like "Ashab al-Kahf" are used to threaten and coerce contract workers on military bases and embassies.[89]

Muqawama media campaigns also regularly cross the line between the information space and real-world intelligence activities and support to kinetic operations. Information operations channels and networks (discussed below) use their research functions as a social intelligence and targeting capability, for instance researching the social media profile of political opponents or civil society activists that the *muqawama* wish to intimidate, typically also researching their family, neighbors, and workplaces. When the *muqawama* want to muzzle an adversary or drive them out of Iraq, the information space (particularly Telegram and social media) is used to warn and threaten.[be] The information space is also used to target international players: for instance, threatening U.N. election workers in an attempt to reduce their freedom of movement, make some personnel leave Iraq, or discredit efforts to monitor federal elections and lay the groundwork for delegitimizing the result.[bf]

The muqawama *information operations mechanism*

In the first eight months of operations, Militia Spotlight took a close look at how *muqawama* information operations are organized and resourced with particular focus on which elements of the system are cooperative or competitive with each other. One top-level finding is that information operations is an area in which Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah play a very active support role. In the same manner that Lebanese Hezbollah built robust information operations capabilities in the 1990s,[90] the IRGC and (in another niche contribution) Lebanese Hezbollah has provided the Iraqi *muqawama* with strong financial and technical assistance, often delivered through the Iran-linked Iraq Radio and Television Union[91]

ay The Qasem al-Jabbarin and Ashab al-Kahf brands have both been used extensively to claim convoy attacks, while Usbat al-Thaireen was used for a large number of rocket attacks in 2020. Groups like Saraya Awliya al-Dam, Awlu al-Azam, Kareem Darsam, Liwa Khaibar, Fasa'il al-Muqawama al-Duwaliya, and Saraya Thair al-Shuhada have been used for smaller numbers of claims.

az For example, interpreting the testing of the alarms in a coalition site as a sign of an ongoing attack.

ba Generally, militia media channels attempt to report the scale of the attack (i.e., the number of projectiles) accurately (though the damage and effect of the event will generally be exaggerated). During a major escalation in July 2021, for example, militia accounts from across the *muqawama* appear to have banded together to exaggerate and inflate the scale and effect of a series of attacks launched in retaliation for U.S. airstrikes at the end of June 2021. See Hamdi Malik and Crispin Smith, "Are the Muqawama Signaling De-Escalation?" Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 9, 2021.

bb Militias have also attributed fake remarks to current and former U.S. officials to create animosity toward them among the wider Iraqi population. For example, in June 2020, *muqawama* social media (in conjunction with *muqawama* TV stations) claimed that former U.S. ambassador to Baghdad Douglas A. Silliman had asked for the assassination of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest Shi`a authority in Iraq, in order to finish Shiism and Islam in Iraq. See Shaajab News (a *muqawama* Telegram news and propaganda channel), posted at 21.25 (hours) on June 27, 2021. "The former US ambassador to Iraq, Douglas Silliman, calls for the killing of Sistani and the end of Islam, Shiites and the PMF…" The *muqawama* attributed other negative events in Iraq to the United Kingdom. On July 19, 2021, an Islamic State suicide bomber killed at least 35 people in Baghdad Sadr's city. The *muqawama* linked this incident to the U.K. ambassador. See, for example, KyankF (a KH-affiliated Telegram propaganda channel), posted at 23.46 (hours) on July 19, 2021, presenting a photoshopped (fake) image of the British ambassador taking a selfie in front of the destruction caused by the Islamic State bombing. For a reference to the bombing, see "Suicide attack in Iraq's Sadr City kills at least 35, wounds dozens -sources," Reuters, July 20, 2021.

bc The United States is regularly accused of launching attacks on militia positions on occasions when there was no attack. For instance, on January 19, 2021, the Unit 10,000 *muqawama* channel claimed that U.S. aircraft had struck the KH Jurf as-Sakr base, while actually an electricity pylon had been damaged to the west of Jurf by Islamic State fighters. See Crispin Smith, "'Pylon-Gate': Reconstruction of a Muqawama Disinformation Operation," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 12, 2021.

bd For instance, top-tier Western print and broadcast media were fooled into reporting that Qassem Muslih was released on May 26, 2021. The false militia narrative was then conferred the credibility of top-tier news networks. Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, Alex Almeida, and Hamdi Malik, "Muqawama Fake News Surrounding Qasim Muslih's Arrest (Part 1): International Zone Claims," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 28, 2021.

be It is a common practice for militias before attempting to assassinate an individual to "name" them on the *muqawama* social media platforms as a foreshadowing of the attack, to drive out or change the behavior of the individual, or to spread awareness that the *muqawama* undertook the eventual assassination attempt. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bf Sabereen News recently accused an official in the Baghdad office of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) of being a Mossad agent, because she had once allegedly represented Israel in international organizations.

(which is led by an Iraqi IRGC officer)[bg] and its parent organization, the Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU).[bh]

In addition to the television channels[bi] openly developed by the *fasa'il* with Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah support,[bj] there is now (in iNEWS TV, which is controlled by KSS)[92] also a *muqawama* television channel that appears specifically aimed at a more liberal youth demographic. (The iNEWS TV channel employs female presenters who do not wear the Islamic hijab[93] and features entertainment shows that are normally not run by Islamic channels[94] in an attempt to reach beyond the current *muqawama* base and expose Iraqi youth to pro-*muqawama* narratives.)

Beyond television, the *muqawama* have built out a social media conglomerate in the shape of Sabereen News,[95] created in January 2020, which has grown into a major propaganda and disinformation tool with more than 100,000 subscribers. The channel is a combined news service, propagandist, and social media targeting cell. The channel's large reach allows it to enjoy significant network effects, capitalizing on information received from an array of *muqawama* affiliates and sympathizers. Careful observation of Sabereen's posting patterns and content (and, equally importantly, observation of how other channels engage with Sabereen) led Militia Spotlight to conclude that Sabereen is heavily influenced by AAH.[bk] Militia Spotlight also views Sabereen as strongly supported by Iran, including through funding and technical assistance (arranged via Iraqi Radio and Television Union leader Sheikh Hamid al-Husseini);[bl] and through the basing of Sabereen servers in Kermanshah, Iran.[bm] The significance of Sabereen is not lost on the *muqawama* themselves, and Sabereen has received plaudits for its role amplifying the propaganda effect of attacks, promoting militia causes, and even operating as a kind of virtual *fasa'il*. In September 2021, one influential *muqawama* media figure heaped praise on the channel via Facebook, saying "I'm not exaggerating today if I say that the activity of Sabereen News is equivalent to a fasa'il on the ground. The channel was not satisfied with being the most prominent means of dissemination of the muqawama operations in Iraq, and so went beyond even the Palestinian media platforms to be the first channel to cover the news of the Palestinian muqawama … [Sabereen] was able to besiege and detect Zionist and American activities."[96]

Meanwhile, for every "Sabereen News," there are hundreds of mid-sized media accounts that promote proprietary militia interests on an hourly basis. These channels are often closely linked in with real-world *fasa'il* members and their kinetic activities.[bn] So-called "electronic armies" are also key players. These organizations are presented as specialists in online hacking and cyberwarfare (not unlike Israel's Unit 8200), though in reality the electronic armies are mostly troll farms engaged in attacking opponents on social media, carrying out open-source internet research, and intimidating (and inciting violence against) opposition activists.[97] Blending middle-aged veterans of kinetic operations with young tech-savvy unemployed university graduates recruited via student groups and university campuses,[98] these "electronic armies"[99] represent the cutting edge of Iran-backed recruitment operations in Iraq. Reaching out into all communities—Shi`a, Sunnis, Christians, seculars, and even non-Iraqis—the networks talent-spot capable journalists and influencers on platforms like Clubhouse and Twitter.[100] The most successful influencers work their way up to significant stipends of $2,000-$5,000 per month and prestige items like Toyota Land Cruiser cars and even bodyguard-drivers.[101]

bg Militia Spotlight noted that the Iraqi Radio and Television Union "is headed by Hamid al-Husseini, an Iraqi cleric who has close ties to the Supreme Leader's office. According to conversations with reliable sources in the Iraqi government, he has confided to people in his circles that he is a colonel in the IRGC—a connection that began forming after he fled Iraq during Saddam Hussein's era." Hamdi Malik, "Understanding Iran's Vast Media Network in Arab Countries," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 2, 2021.

bh "The Iranian Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU) and International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM) were designated pursuant to E.O. 13848 for being owned or controlled by the IRGC-QF. The IRGC, including the IRGC-QF, has been designated under multiple authorities since 2007." "Treasury Sanctions Iranian Entities for Attempted Election Interference," U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 22, 2020. See also "United States Seizes Websites Used by the Iranian Islamic Radio and Television Union and Kata'ib Hizballah," U.S. Department of Justice, June 22, 2021.

bi Over the past decade, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat al-Nujaba have all launched TV stations this way. These media platforms both feed and are fed by social media networks, producing and disseminating propaganda and disinformation. KH runs Al-Etejah TV. See Hamdi Malik and Crispin Smith, "Profile: Al-Etejah Satellite Television," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 1, 2021. Nujaba runs Nujaba TV. See Hamdi Malik, "Profile: Al-Nujaba Satellite Television," Militia Spotlight, Washington institute for Near East Policy, July 22, 2021. AAH runs Al-Ahd TV. See Michael Knights, "Profile: Asaib Ahl al-Haq," Militia Spotlight, Washington institute for Near East Policy, April 27, 2021.

bj For the most part, these TV stations are launched by or with the help of the Iraqi Radio and Television Union, an offshoot of the IRGC-affiliated Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU). Hamdi Malik, "Understanding Iran's Vast Media Network in Arab Countries," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 2, 2021.

bk Militia Spotlight logically links Sabereen to AAH because of Sabereen's repeated preferential treatment of AAH leaders and initiatives at times when most or all other *muqawama* media were critical of AAH. See Knights, "Profile: Asaib Ahl al-Haq."

bl Sabereen and its intelligence and cyber branches receive various types of support from the IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah, including funding, surveillance training and equipment, technical advice and security, server hosting, and hacker support (including rapid sanitization of online presence by *muqawama* entities). Sheikh Hamid al-Husseini lives on an AAH-secured street in an affluent area of Baghdad. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bm Sabereen servers have been relocated four times, most recently to Iran. This is a strong indicator that Sabereen, regardless of AAH relations with other *fasa'il*, continues to work closely with Iranian agencies and Lebanese Hezbollah. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bn Militia channels compete over demonstrating their level of access to the operators and planners of the attacks; inaccurate reporting risks harming their credibility. Telegram account holders often attempt to demonstrate their closeness to the military operators by hinting at knowledge of upcoming attacks, or revealing insider information about the attacks in their aftermath. The propagandists sometimes receive credit for their efforts. See, for example, Cotherion (Telegram propaganda account) posted 00.43 hours on August 16, 2021, "Shabab al-Islam dedicates an upcoming IED operation to Cotherion, and others engaged in 'virtual' (electronic) jihad."

6. Kinetic Operations: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*

As the above section made clear, some of the outward-facing aspects of today's *muqawama* operations give the sense of being a new and complex effort, while in reality the system is underpinned by the proprietary structure and resources of the individual *fasa'il*. In its first eight months of operation, Militia Spotlight looked deeply into the granular issues of *muqawama* kinetic cell recruitment, structure, de-confliction, tactics, and support functions. The picture that emerged was much more familiar and prosaic than the team initially expected. In essence, perhaps unsurprisingly, not much has changed in the way that *fasa'il* undertake indirect fire and roadside bombings, with the minor variation of the introduction of drones.[bo] The methodology developed by Militia Spotlight during eight months of trials in a real-world analytic laboratory suggests that when attributing attacks to specific *fasa'il*, what matters most is where the attack happens (reflecting proprietary areas of operation) and which media façade *first* claimed or eulogized the attack.[bp]

*Proprietary single-*fasa'il *operations*

Militia Spotlight assesses that attacks on U.S. sites are mostly single-*fasa'il* operations using that *fasa'il*'s own organic attack and support capabilities. Though an attack may be claimed under the name of, say, Qasem al-Jabbarin, Militia Spotlight assesses that the actual perpetrator of the operation is a pre-existing *fasa'il* that uses a new façade to claim its actions (i.e., that façades such as QJ are merely information operations brands without real-world kinetic branches and that no major new *fasa'il* have emerged in the last two years).[bq]

Attacks that are claimed are most often indirectly claimed by *fasa'il* through the use of proprietary single-*fasa'il* propaganda channels. This a critical indicator of the competitive and proprietary nature of the *fasa'il*, even those operating within the *Tansiqiya*. In the midst of an effort to blur their responsibility for attacks, individual *fasa'il* still want to individually brand attacks and claim credit in a way that is discernable to their inner circles and followers. For instance, based on sustained monitoring of Telegram platforms[br] fused with other methods of collection, including anonymized interviews in Iraq, Militia Spotlight assesses that:

- Kata'ib Hezbollah claims its roadside bomb attacks via its exclusive use of the Qasem al-Jabbarin brand and claims rocket attacks via its exclusive use of Usbat al-Tha'ireen brand, and has claimed drone attacks on Saudi Arabia through its exclusive use of the Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq (AWH, True Pledge Brigades) brand.
- Nujaba uses Fasa'il al-Muqawama al-Duwaliya (MD, International Resistance Faction) as a channel for exclusively claiming Nujaba attacks.
- Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq exclusively uses Ashab al-Kahf (AK, Companions of the Cave), Liwa Khaibar (Khaibar Brigade), and Quwwat Dhu al-Faqar (Zulfiqar Force) to claim its kinetic operations.

Teaming arrangements

In many areas, kinetic operations involve "teaming" arrangements put in place by KH to draw on the broader *muqawama*, albeit under KH's strong hand. For instance, KH appears to have a monopoly on the operation of fixed-wing drones.[bs] When such systems are used, KH appears to play a coordinating role, in some cases with assistance from IRGC or Lebanese Hezbollah advisors.[102] The broader logistical system that supports drone attacks uses three lines of supply: one operated by KH between Albu Kamal in Syria and the launch areas near Al-Asad Air Base, east of the Euphrates River; and two from Iran's Ahvaz and Kermanshah regions, utilizing Badr[bt] and smaller KH-overseen *muqawama* groups with long-term ties to IRGC-QF.[103]

In northern Iraq, KSS seems to play a special facilitating role at the Mosul and Nineveh Plains end of a supply chain for rockets and drones, with a broader KH-overseen network moving weapons using PMF minority units from sites such as the Badr-run Camp Ashraf in Diyala and the Turkmen PMF Martyr's Camp near Tuz Khurmatu.[104]

Likewise, KH runs the roadside bombing operations against convoys, and undertakes many of these attacks using their own KH Special Operations attack cells, but some attacks are undertaken

bo The introduction of one-way suicide drones (or loitering munitions) is a step forward in *muqawama* accuracy, but it does not necessarily require a major change in how indirect fire cells operate. This is because the drones are not controlled by a ground station throughout their flight and do not transmit video throughout, but are instead "fire and forget" pre-programmed, GPS-guided drones that do not have to be "flown" or recovered. Except for some training on pneumatic launch, *muqawama* drone attack cells do not need to be specially trained. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple U.S. and Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bp The logic being that the information operations group that first receives notification of the attack or unique access has a special connection to the real-world *fasa'il* undertaking the specific attack.

bq In other words, all the kinetic attacks are undertaken by KH and other familiar *fasa'il* with the new "groups," in fact, just being new covers or branding.

br Though specific monitoring methods and tools used by the authors need to be protected, key platforms include Telegram, Facebook and Twitter. Online forensic analysis of postings, cross-referenced with historic data and information derived from interviewees with direct insight into *muqawama* information operations, provides the data required for assessments.

bs The main fixed-wing drone used is similar to the Houthi-operated Sammad-1, a three-meter wingspan drone called KAS-04 by the U.S.-led coalition. The June 9 and June 15 drone attacks in 2021 against the coalition annex in Baghdad International Airport used smaller drones that appear to be reverse-engineered U.S. Switchblade or Coyote loitering munitions, which Iran-backed militias have captured in Syria. The June 27, 2021, Erbil attacks involved a third family of drones to be exposed this year in Iraq, which marry warheads bearing Iranian manufacturing labels with a variety of body, wing, and motor components. All of the drones appear to be GPS-guided with a pre-programmed set of waypoints. A final set of drones used largely for short-range operations in Baghdad are custom-made quadcopters with advanced battery management systems and numerous high-end design features and components. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple U.S. and Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. See also Farzin Nadimi and Michael Knights, "Militias Parade Under the PMF Banner (Part 1): Drone Systems," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 3, 2021.

bt For instance, there is strong consensus that Badr-operated PMF logistical convoys are used to make Iran-to-Iraq journeys carrying *muqawama* weaponry without fear of customs inspection. These convoys carry in-kind aid or purchased foodstuffs from Iran. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

in collaboration with smaller *fasa'il*[bu] and even AAH.[bv] As is often the case in Iraq, there do not appear to be any hard and fast rules about who can work with whom or where, only generally observable trends that will more often be accurate than not. The key finding is that KH considers itself dominant and not the equal of any other *fasa'il*, a position that AAH seems to flatly reject.

7. Next Steps for the *Muqawama* in Iraq

The post-January 3, 2020, history of the Iraqi *muqawama* has been largely characterized by disagreements over paths of de-escalation or escalation, and by competition between the *fasa'il*. As clearly anticipated in the October 2020 *CTC Sentinel* analysis,[bw] the post-Soleimani and post-Muhandis KH has suffered significant ruptures in its leadership and perhaps in its relations with IRGC-QF. As Soleimani and al-Muhandis recognized, the Iraqi *muqawama* is misfiring, after having grown too large, too corrupt, and too divided into personal fiefdoms. KH never played well with others, being prickly toward both foreign rivals like Lebanese Hezbollah advisors and domestic pretenders to the throne such as AAH. Today's "big KH" (estimated at 10,000 personnel versus 400 in 2011[105]) is difficult to control and deeply riven by a leadership challenge to Abu Hussein. KH's utility to IRGC-QF could eventually be supplemented or even surpassed by non-KH veteran leaders[bx] and smaller, better-led *muqawama* cells,[by] particularly Nujaba (and its Iran-favored leader Akram al-Ka'abi)[bz] and perhaps also KSS (and Abu Alaa al-Wala'i).[ca]

Creation of new IRGC-QF proxies?

Iranian dissatisfaction with Iraq's greatly expanded *muqawama* factions has been growing for some time. In 2018, IRGC-QF appears to have begun a recruitment effort[cb] that targeted dedicated *wala'i* fighters[cc] who were younger, less tainted by corruption, and not known to Iraqi or U.S. authorities for terrorism offenses. These new cross-cutting cells—with names like Warithuun (The Inheritors),[106] Zulfaqar (named for Imam Ali's Sword),[107] Liwa al-Golan (Golan Brigade),[108] Haris al-Murshid (Guard of the Supreme Leader),[109] and Fedayeen al-Khamenei (Khamenei's Men of Sacrifice)[110]—recur in interviews on militia groups in Iraq (and in some open-source reporting[111]) but usually only in older reporting from 2018-2019. Interviews suggest that talent-spotting, team-building, and even some activation of such groups did occur and even resulted in attacks on U.S. sites in Iraq in 2019.[cd]

Though seemingly paused by the deaths of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, the IRGC-QF search for dependable younger fighters and their combination in new cross-*fasa'il* tactical cells may have recommenced. Interview material from Iraqi contacts suggests that some cross-*fasa'il* operations restarted in April or May 2021.[112] The most common unit name associated by interviewees with these operations is "Zulfiqar."[113][ce] Whereas the earlier generation of cross-

bu For instance, the authors' (Knights) interview data suggests that fighters from Ansar Allah al-Tawfiya (PMF brigade 19) have been identified operating in support of KH roadside bombings in southern Iraq. What this interview data suggests is that KH uses willing operators from a number of smaller groups, perhaps to exploit their local ties along the highways of southern Iraq. Author (Knights) interview, single Iraqi contact, multiple sessions with significant detail, 2021, exact dates, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewee.

bv The involvement of AAH in growing numbers of roadside bombing activities is credible. In Q3 (third quarter) 2021, the average number of convoy attacks in Iraq by AAH-linked façades (especially Ashab al-Kahf) was five per month, versus 3.3 per month in Q2 2021, 3.6 in Q1 2021, and 1.3 in Q4 2020. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset.

bw The article noted: "Though KH remains the premier counter-U.S. force in Iraq, probably linked to a high proportion of recent anti-U.S. rocket and roadside bomb attacks, it has lost its political edge. The dominant militant wing within KH—Abu Hussein and Abu Zainab al-Lami—has little ongoing connection to the political process now that al-Muhandis is dead. They are highly committed *muqawamists* (i.e., committed to the transnational anti-U.S./Israel/Saudi "resistance" camp) and specifically to evicting U.S. forces from the Middle East and avenging Soleimani, al-Muhandis, and KH casualties. There are early signs that KH is becoming isolated and unresponsive to signals from partners, including Iran." Knights, "Back into the Shadows?" pp. 17-18.

bx For instance, Hadi al-Ameri, whose own political party Badr is slowly declining and who thus needs to demonstrate to Iran that he is a responsive and loyal proxy who listens closely to Iranian needs and guidance.

by One of the author's (Knights) August 2019 *CTC Sentinel* article lists such smaller *fasa'il*: "Newer Special Groups assessed to be primarily loyal to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and willing to provide material support to IRGC-QF include (from most militarily capable to least) Harakat al-Abdal (PMF brigade 39), Saraya al-Jihad (PMF brigade 17), Liwa al-Tafuf (brigade 13) and the less capable Liwa al-Muntadher (brigade 7), Ansar Allah al-Tawfiya (brigade 19), Saraya Ansar al-Aqeeda (brigade 28), Kata'ib Ansar al-Hujja (brigade 29), Quwwat al-Shahid al-Sadr al-Awwal (brigade 25), Quwwat al-Shahid al-Sadr (brigade 35), and Kata'ib al-Tayyar al-Risali (brigade 31)." Michael Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups," *CTC Sentinel* 12:7 (2019).

bz Akram al-Ka'abi is one to watch. He recurs in interviews as the Iraqi *muqawama* leader most trusted by Iran. Those interviewed by one of the authors (Knights) were quite consensual that Ka'abi is seen by IRGC-QF as loyal, ideologically pure, and relatively non-corrupt. One interviewee made the interesting claim that Ka'abi models himself on Hossein Taeb, the IRGC Intelligence Organization commander. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ca Abu Alaa also recurs in one of the authors' (Knights) interviews as being highly trusted and favored by Iran. Like Ka'abi, he provided good service to Iran in Syria, which seems to be a marker of reliability for IRGC. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cb Qualifying characteristics include ideological commitment to the *veleyat-e faqih* model of Islamic jurisprudence and 'good' war service since 2011 in Syria and Iraq. The *fasa'il* reportedly nominate candidates to IRGC-QF liaison officers, and these persons are sent to Iran, Lebanon, or Syria for further assessment, ideological development, and paramilitary training. They return to Iraq and re-enter their old professions (usually in the PMF) to await tasking, and receive a $600 per month bonus (versus their base PMF pay of 1.2 million dinars or $822 per month). Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cc In the words of one interviewee, Iran is seeking "the elite elements of the ideological *wala'i*." Author (Knights) interview, single Iraqi contact, 2021, exact date, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewee.

cd The existence of some new cross-cutting cells was a recurring feature when interviewees discussed the late Soleimani/Muhandis era *muqawama* operations in Iraq. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ce Zulfiqar is the name of Ali ibn Abi Talib's bifurcated sword, and is therefore significant in Shi`a iconography and naming convention—particularly relating to military items and operations. (The Iranian main battle tank is also known as the Zulfiqar.) The Iraqi references to a group named Zulfiqar do not relate to the Syrian-based group Liwa Zulfiqar. See Phillip Smyth, "Hizballah Cavalcade: Liwa'a Fulfiqar: Birth of a New Shia Militia in Syria?" Jihadology, June 20, 2013.

fasa'il recruits seemed to work directly for IRGC-QF, today's cross-*fasa'il* cells are built within the *Tansiqiya* military committees, involving negotiated temporary and covert secondments of some operators from supporting *fasa'il* to the attacking *fasa'il*, before returning to their original posting. The motive for this change of procedure could be operational security, as the teams do not know each other, the secondments blur attribution, and attackers can be drawn from outside the geographic area of the attack (complicating recognition by locals and CCTV).[114] The same methods could be used to talent-spot operators for IRGC-QF or Lebanese Hezbollah operations, including external operations outside Iraq.[115]

Muqawama *priorities*

Reflecting on the Soleimani-Muhandis agenda in 2018-2019, one can expect some of the same objectives to be pursued in coming years, albeit with a more defensive mindset of hanging onto as many gains as possible for as long as possible. The *muqawama* still have considerable paramilitary clout, but they have many worries now that were far less pronounced in their heyday in the summer of 2019. The movement lacks the inspired leadership needed to herd the many ill-tempered and willful cats of the *muqawama*.[116] The *muqawama* are afraid of many things: U.S. airstrikes, Israeli covert actions, arrest by the government, a clash with other Shi`a security forces, protestors, and the Shi`a religious establishment.[117] The *muqawama* are already deeply splintered and fear greater fragmentation.[118] The key thing for them now is arguably preservation of gains, not expansion.

Sustainment of the PMF structure, for instance, is absolutely critical to the *muqawama*. In addition to 165,000 jobs[cf] (supporting 990,000 persons at an average family size of six[119]), the PMF provides numerous tangible and intangible benefits to the *muqawama*. One is control of bases and the right to legitimately store heavy weapons, as shown when KH rocketeers arrested on June 25, 2020, claimed that their site was a PMF base and that the rockets there were PMF munitions.[120] A second benefit is the use of PMF-registered vehicles, which can pass through checkpoints and border crossings without being stopped or searched.[121] A third benefit is the "get out of jail free" card that the opaque nature of PMF membership provides, namely that any individual given a PMF membership card can try to claim the right to be tried under a PMF tribunal rather than Iraqi civilian or military courts.[cg] The *muqawama* can be counted upon to rally and closely cooperate whenever the PMF structure is threatened with reduction in size or budget or privileges (such as effective impunity from Iraqi law). As most of the *muqawama*'s financial hustles are linked to territorial control of Iraq's liberated areas and borders,[ch] the *muqawama* can be expected to pull together to resist removal of their garrisoning duties[122] at economic hubs.

State capture or societal capture?

Since the collapse of Abdalmahdi's ill-fated 2018-2020 government, the *muqawama* have become less likely to regain control of the prime minister's office, with other Iraqi factions and international players keenly aware of the lessons of this two-year period when the *muqawama* effectively ruled the Iraqi state from the top.[ci] Though it should be expected that *muqawama* players will attempt to shape government formation in the wake of the recent October 10, 2021, elections,[123] it is more likely that the *muqawama*'s main effort will be a gradualist, broad-based, and bottom-up approach to state capture—recognizing the need to adjust tactics from the days of Soleimani and al-Muhandis.

Conventional politics may not be the most promising avenue for *muqawama* groups to use for expansion. Their disappointing results in the October 2021 Iraqi elections—first results showing as few as 17 winners from the Badr and AAH list (versus 48 in the 2018 elections)—underline the difficulties faced by the *muqawama* in parliamentary politics.[124] The elections also saw KH's first political project underperform. Kata'ib Hezbollah operative Hossein Moanes Faraj al-Mohammadawi (Abu Ali al-Askari)[125] formed the Harakat Hoquq (The Rights Movement) electoral list, which only secured one seat in the 2021 elections (out of 32 fielded candidates, with Moanes failing to win a seat).[126] [cj]

Instead, the *muqawama* will probably now prioritize a bottom-up approach to building their political base. Kata'ib Hezbollah provides a clear example of the broadening of non-kinetic activities by *fasa'il*. Under the KH Shura Council, there are two powerful clusters of non-kinetic activities:

- **Media operations.** One is an information operations-focused media cell that includes the KH media wings such as Kaf (various platforms), Kyan kF, Unit 10,000, Shabakat al-Ilam al-Muqawama, many other social media channels, and Al-Etejah TV.[127]
- **Cultural and social operations.** Alongside this is the KH cultural and social wing, under the leadership of Maytham

cf In June 2019, Hashd chair Faleh al-Fayyad reported that the number of registered Hashd members was 135,000. In September 2021, 30,000 new billets were temporarily added ahead of the Iraqi elections. See Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces," *Policy Focus* 163 (2020): pp. 58, 61, 143.

cg As was the case in both June 2020 (with the Albu Aitha case) and May 2021 (with the Qassem Muslih case). On August 31, 2021, at the Rafidain Center For Dialogue Forum in Baghdad, Hadi al-Ameri noted about the latter case: "It was a wrong decision by the Government and the Prime Minister to detain Qasem Muslih, Muslih is a part of the PMF, and we should have handled the situation in a way." The video of the conference can be found at "Live: inside the Baghdad Forum for Dialogue, a special meeting with the president of the Fatah Alliance, Hadi al-Ameri," posted to Facebook by Rudaw News at 20:56 (Baghdad time) on August 31, 2021.

ch Militias focus on control of economic hubs. These include checkpoints and border points of entry (where trucking can be taxed); scrap metal yards, where wartime detritus can be monetized; oil and gas production sites (where oil products can be diverted); offices controlling real estate (which can transfer ownership of vacant property); and offices administering government payroll and pensions or the issuance of identity cards (which can be used to defraud the government). For further reading on militia money-making schemes, see Knights, Malik, and Al-Tamimi, pp. 112-117, and Renad Mansour, "Networks of power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the state in Iraq," Chatham House Research paper, February 25, 2021.

ci This assessment, first outlined in a January 2020 *CTC Sentinel* article, reflects regular and intensive interviewing by one of the authors (Knights) throughout the Abdal-Mahdi government, including with Abdal-Mahdi himself and almost every senior Iraqi official. The piece noted: "In the view of the author, based on years of close observation of Iraqi leadership dynamics, with Soleimani at his back, al-Muhandis had become the single most important man in Iraq." See Michael Knights, "Soleimani Is Dead: The Road Ahead for Iranian-Backed Militias in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 13:1 (2020): pp. 6-7.

cj Using the Iraqi Higher Electoral Commission provisional results, Militia Spotlight carefully monitored the Baghdad (Rusafa) district 4 winners (Moanes' constituency), and he was not among the elected MPs.

Kata'ib Hezbollah operative Hossein Moanes Faraj al-Mohammadawi (Abu Ali al-Askari), the founder of the Harakat Hoquq (The Rights Movement) electoral list, center, salutes his supporters at an election rally before parliamentary elections in Baghdad, Iraq, on Sepember 3, 2021. (Hadi Mizban/AP Photo)

al-Aboudi. This wing includes a fast-growing civil society arm that comprises the Harakat Ahd Allah al-Islamiya (HAAI), a social and cultural foundation;[ck] the Sharia Youth Gathering[128] and its subordinate Jihad al-Binaa employment and civic works program,[cl] Imam Hussein Scouts Association;[129] and other cultural and sports programs;[cm] plus the Majlis al-Tabiat al-Thaqafiyya (Cultural Mobilization Council); the Zainabiyat women's organization; and other cultural organizations and institutes.[130] In the political sphere, KH has street vigilante movements that can be turned to protest and counter-protest activities, namely Raba Allah[131] and Ahl al-Ma'arouf,[132] and a cyber-arm, the Fatemiyoun Electronic Squad,[133] that supports smear and intimidation campaigns against activists, media personalities, and politicians.

The future of anti-U.S. operations

The *muqawama*'s future posture toward the U.S. military presence in Iraq is less easy to predict than their desire to cling to their advantages and build new constituencies. Since the deaths of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, Iran has sought to restrain uncontrolled escalation between the Iraqi militias and the United States. Neither Iran's closest proxies (such as Kata'ib Hezbollah) nor its more autonomous affiliates (such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq) have ever been comfortable with externally imposed restraint.[cn] Whenever they have not been actively restrained, the *muqawama* have escalated, like a horse that runs faster and faster until reined in. The October 10, 2020, "conditional ceasefire" was a temporary cessation of attacks on U.S. points of presence if the United States agreed to "retreat" from Iraq.[134] Badr and AAH's Fateh Alliance welcomed[135] the withdrawal of all coalition "combat forces" from Iraq by the end of 2021 that was agreed in the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue in Washington, D.C., on July 26, 2021.[136] Yet Hadi al-Ameri, Fateh's leader, outlined a maximalist interpretation of withdrawal to include all forces when he addressed the Rafidain Center For Dialogue Forum in Baghdad on August 31, 2021. Al-Ameri noted:

> *The era of foreign forces in Iraq is over. We are asking that now is the time for all NATO forces to leave the country, and we support the latest agreement that the Government made, and we will demand that the Government live up to the agreement. On the 31st of December, 2021, there will be no*

ck "HAAI was established on November 3, 2020, by Sayyed Hashem al-Haidari, an influential *muqawama* ideologue. He was secretary-general of Kataib Hezbollah (KH) between 2016 and 2018." Hamdi Malik, "Profile: Ahd Allah Islamic Movement," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 5, 2021.

cl "Jihad al-Binaa (the Construction Jihad) [is] a development foundation engaged in providing services such as water facilities for poor communities." See Hamdi Malik, Crispin Smith, and Michael Knights, "Profile: Sharia Youth Gathering," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 29, 2021.

cm These include Muasasat al-Shabab al-Riyadhi (the Athlete Youth Organization), which is engaged in youth sport activities such as soccer tournaments, and Muasasat Ibn al-Jawad al-Thaqafiya (Ibn al-Jawad Cultural Foundation), which organizes cultural activities such as poster competitions. Malik, Smith, and Knights, "Profile: Sharia Youth Gathering."

cn Qais al-Khazali is defiant in public about making his own decisions on ceasefires with U.S. forces. See footnote al.

foreign forces.[137]

Admittedly, al-Ameri was making a televised address less than six weeks before a general election, but his comments (contrasted with his July 27, 2021, recognition of the Strategic Dialogue as "a national achievement"[138]) underline the contending pressures faced by *muqawama* leaders. At one end of the spectrum, most KH leaders reject all U.S. military presence but have also periodically honored the conditional ceasefire recommended by Iran and confined their attacks to what might be termed 'fake resistance'[co] by striking only Iraqi trucks with no risk of harming Americans. This dichotomy is one factor slowly tearing KH apart.

Meanwhile, these so-called "vanguard"[139] militias focused primarily on resistance activities (for instance, KH) are becoming more parochial, with their hardline vanguard elements peeling away from new non-kinetic branches focused on political, social, and economic activities. At the other end of the spectrum, the so-called "parochial"[140] militias focused primarily on political and economic activities (i.e., AAH and Badr) are sometimes the drivers of rhetorical and kinetic escalation due to their domestic political and factional needs. The *muqawama*—the resistance—struggle with the idea of a post-resistance era in which their *raison d'etre* could be undermined.

Given these dynamics, any shift from Iran's de-escalatory position, perhaps linked to a failure of U.S.-Iran nuclear talks—or a more significant loss of Iranian influence over *muqawama* factions—could trigger a sustained escalation of *muqawama* operations against the U.S.-led coalition in 2022 and beyond. Anti-coalition operations are, in reality, at a very low point today, with many escalatory courses of action at the disposal of the militias. Unless actively restrained by Iran or by Iraqi government actions, in the coming years the *muqawama* is likely to pose a greater threat to U.S. and Iraqi interests than it did in the 2020-2021 period. CTC

co This is a term regularly used within the Militia Spotlight team, conveying the *muqawama*'s use of such tactics to appear to be resisting the United States, while actually minimizing the risk of killing or hurting Americans and thus drawing retaliation onto the *muqawama* or Iran.

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91 Hamdi Malik, "Profile: The Iraqi Radio and Television Union," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2, 2021.

92 Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

93 The author team gathers this impression from watching a lot of iNEWS TV and comparing it to other *muqawama* networks.

94 The author team gathers this impression from watching a lot of iNEWS TV and comparing it to other *muqawama* networks.

95 Hamdi Malik, Crispin Smith, and Michael Knights, "Profile: Sabereen News," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 9, 2021.

96 Facebook post made by a prominent *muqawama* social media influencer via Facebook on September 19, 2021, at 23.40 local time.

97 See Cathrin Schaer, "Are the Middle East's 'electronic armies' the most dangerous of all?" Deutsche Welle, June 5, 2021.

98 The author team has gathered strong indicators of such recruitment methods via analysis of militia channels and interview processes. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, multiple sessions with significant detail, 2021, exact dates, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

99 See "The government wastes millions of dollars on electronic armies," al-Muraqib al-Iraqi, July 12, 2020.

100 The author team has gathered some indicators of incentive structures via interview processes. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, multiple sessions with significant detail, 2021, exact dates, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

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102 Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

103 The October 2020 *CTC Sentinel* article provided granular detail on the role of Saraya al-Ashura (PMF brigade 8) and its leader Kadhimi al-Jabiri, and Saraya al-Jihad (PMF brigade 17) and its leader Hassan al-Sari in the logistics network supporting *muqawama* rocket, drone, and assassination efforts. See Knights, "Back into the Shadows?" p. 16.

104 Militia Spotlight has looked closely at KSS networks in eastern Mosul and Nineveh Plains, and at the KH-run Martyr's Camp near Amerli, Tuz Khurmatu district. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

105 Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq," p. 2.

106 Knights, "Back into the Shadows?" p. 18.

107 Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

108 Author (Knights) interview, single Iraqi contact, multiple sessions with significant detail, 2021, exact dates, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewee.

109 Author (Knights) interview, single Iraqi contact, 2021, exact date, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewee.

110 Author (Knights) interview, single Iraqi contact, 2021, exact date, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewee.

111 Elias.

112 Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

113 Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

114 Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

115 Matthew Levitt, "'Fighters Without Borders' – Forecasting New Trends in Iran Threat Network Foreign Operations Tradecraft," *CTC Sentinel* 13:2 (2020).

116 This characterization is based on the author team's overall assessment of the difficulty of marshalling the personalities and powerbases of the *muqawama*.

117 Based on the author team's daily monitoring of *muqawama* propaganda and communiques, their video and written materials, and near-constant dialogue with Iraqi politicians and officials dealing directly with the *muqawama*. The key worries of the *muqawama* are not hard to discern based on their reactions and sensitivities.

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119 Knights, Malik, and Al-Tamimi, p. 143.

120 Knights, "Back into the Shadows?" pp. 14-16.

121 Note footnote bt regarding PMF food convoys. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

122 For further reading on which PMF units garrison which areas—which remains current in October 2021—see Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq."

123 See, for example, KyankF (a KH propagandist) (Telegram) at 02.06 hours (Baghdad time) on September 12, 2021. The post includes an image of a suicide drone launching with the caption "the largest bloc" (using the term used for political blocs in parliament and implying military intimidation will play a role in government formation).

124 Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Partial results show pro-Iran groups losing Iraq election," *Washington Post*, October 11, 2021. For Fateh early results, see the respected Iraqi political scientist Sajad Jiyad, "So my rough tally for seats …," Twitter, October 11, 2021. See also the respected Iraqi political analyst Farhad Alaaldin, "The #Iraqelection2021 resulted in two main factions …," Twitter, October 13, 2021.

125 For detailed discussion of the role of Moanes (Abu Ali) in Kata'ib Hezbollah, see Knights, "Back into the Shadows?" p. 10. Since that article, strong verification of Moanes' dual identity as Abu Ali al-Askari has been uncovered in interviews with Iraqis in a position to know

Moanes' activities. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2018-2020, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

126 Hamdi Malik, "Hossein Moanes Sparks Angry Words Between Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 14, 2021.

127 Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, and Hamdi Malik, "Profile: Kataib Hezbollah," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 1, 2021. See also Crispin Smith and Hamdi Malik, "Profile: Unit 10,000," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 25, 2021.

128 Hamdi Malik, Crispin Smith, and Michael Knights, "Profile: Sharia Youth Gathering," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 29, 2021.

129 Hamdi Malik, Crispin Smith, and Michael Knights, "Profile: Imam Hussein Scout Association," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 29, 2021.

130 Knights, Smith, and Malik, "Profile: Kataib Hezbollah."

131 Malik, Smith, and Knights, "Profile: Raba Allah."

132 Knights, Smith, and Malik, "Profile: Kataib Hezbollah."

133 Hamdi Malik, "Profile: Fatemiyoun Electronic Squad," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 26, 2021.

134 See, for example, Sabereen News (Telegram) at 16.09 hours (Baghdad time) on October 10, 2020. See also Davison.

135 Malik and Knights.

136 "Joint Statement on the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue," U.S. Department of State, July 26, 2021.

137 The video of the conference can be found at "Live: inside the Baghdad Forum for Dialogue, a special meeting with the president of the Fatah Alliance, Hadi al-Ameri," posted to Facebook by Rudaw News at 20:56 (Baghdad time) on August 31, 2021.

138 Malik and Knights.

139 Coined by Renad Mansour, in Section 3 of "Networks of power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the state in Iraq," Chatham House Research paper, February 25, 2021.

140 Ibid.

A View from the CT Foxhole: Lieutenant General (Ret) H.R. McMaster, Former National Security Advisor

By Sean Morrow

H.R. McMaster served as President Trump's National Security Advisor between February 2017 and March 2018. He is the Fouad and Michelle Ajami Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. He is also the Bernard and Susan Liautaud Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute and lecturer at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business.

Upon graduation from the United States Military Academy in 1984, McMaster served as a commissioned officer in the United States Army for 34 years before retiring as a Lieutenant General in June 2018. From 2014 to 2017, McMaster designed the future army as the director of the Army Capabilities Integration Center and the deputy commanding general of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC). As commanding general of the Maneuver Center of Excellence at Fort Benning, he oversaw all training and education for the army's infantry, armor, and cavalry force. He has extensive experience leading soldiers and organizations in wartime including Commander, Combined Joint Inter-Agency Task Force—Shafafiyat in Kabul, Afghanistan from 2010 to 2012; Commander, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Iraq from 2005 to 2006; and Commander, Eagle Troop, 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Operation Desert Storm from 1990 to 1991. McMaster holds a PhD in military history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His most recent book is Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World.

CTC: In some of your recent interviews,[1] you've mentioned incompetence and how it can sometimes be tied to a lack of an integrated approach by agencies. What do you think is the right role for the National Security Council (NSC) when it comes to counterterrorism policy?

McMaster: I think the primary role is to coordinate and integrate efforts across the departments and agencies to do two things: first, make sure that the president has the benefit of best advice from across the government, and also to provide the president [with] options for securing the nation and addressing the greatest challenges to our national security, our prosperity, and our influence in the world. And you can only really do that if you have a venue to bring together the leadership of those departments and agencies, because if you don't have that venue—in the Principals Committee of the National Security Council, for example—then you get exclusively bottom-up approaches to problems. And as a result, you subject counterterrorism policy and strategy to satisficing behavior, a lowest common denominator approach, the tendency to protect bureaucratic prerogatives rather than to work together in a collaborative manner and to improve effectiveness.

So, what we recognize as mission analysis and elements of the military decision-making process that involve commander's guidance, that's often missing in Washington. It's important, I think, for the National Security Council to preserve a strategic perspective, a long-term perspective, and to focus on that coordination and integration function, to present options, and then to assist with the sensible implementation of policies and strategies. And of course, periodically assess them and adjust them, so not to do the departments' jobs for them and their execution, but again, to focus on the integration of intelligence, for example, and operations broadly defined—against jihadist terrorist organizations, for example, or state-supported terrorists. And that includes the integration of intelligence with the military instrument, but it goes well beyond that. As your readers will know, counterterrorism involves the integration of counter-threat finance efforts and interrupting financial flows to these organizations. It has an important diplomacy, public diplomacy, and informational dimension associated with it to help separate jihadist terrorists, for example, from sources of ideological as well as financial support. And really, it's only the NSC that can be effective in doing that. Because if you designate a lead agency, none of those other agencies work for that lead agency, and so it's important to have that convening capability and coordination integration capability.

CTC: You talk about commander's guidance: when agencies or departments start kind of *sua sponte* doing their own thing, is it the president's role to kind of put them back into the box and coordinate through NSC or chief of staff?

McMaster: I think what you want is departments and agencies who are actually out of the box. You don't want in any way to have an NSC process that is mired in tactical details and thinks that it's in charge of all coordination between departments and agencies. You want to actually encourage that kind of collaboration outside of the formal venues that are used to convene leaders at the senior level, whether it's the Deputies or the Principals Committee, or even the Policy Coordination Committee level, the assistant secretary level. I think really what you want is departments and agencies out of their box. And this is, of course, one of the major lessons in the 9/11 Commission, which exposed a lack of information-sharing and continuous collaboration, especially between those who were focused on intelligence collection and analysis abroad and those who had responsibility for protecting the homeland.

CTC: When it comes to counterterrorism, did you feel like you had enough information about tools and tactics that work? Or how could we improve our counterterrorism policies?

McMaster: We can improve significantly in connection with the same area, of integrating all efforts. I think part of the problem is we don't frame the problem of jihadist terrorism or state-supported terrorism or transnational organized crime networks associated

with threats to the homeland in an effective manner.

The way to think about jihadist terrorist organizations begins with a charge to our departments and agencies to *defeat* terrorist organizations, and this is a word that I think ought come back into our lexicon. And by defeat, I mean ensure that these enemies of all humanity—enemies who pose a threat to the United States and our interests abroad—cannot accomplish their objectives and can't effectively pursue their main tactic, which is to commit mass murder of innocents and to use terror and fear in pursuit of political objectives—to establish the caliphate or to push the United States out of the greater Middle East or South Asia as the first step in accomplishing their broader objectives.

So I think we need to focus on defeating these organizations and to apply design thinking to understand the nature of these organizations and the threat they pose. And to ask the first-order questions: first of all, what is this particular movement? How are they connected across the ecosystem of transnational or international terrorist organizations?

The second is, what is their goal? What are they trying to achieve? Because ultimately what we want to ensure is that our strategy prevents them from accomplishing their objectives.

The third is, what is the strategy for pursuing those goals?

And only then, after that more holistic understanding, can we begin to really map the enemy network, which we've become pretty good at and to understand nodes in the network, the roles of those nodes in the network, the relationship between nodes in the network, but very important, the *connection* between these jihadist terrorist organizations and sponsors and those who give them resources or cover for action and range of criminal activity. For example, that nexus should have been much clearer between the Taliban, other organizations, like the Haqqani network and al-Qa`ida and Pakistan's ISI and donors, most of whom reside in the Gulf states as well as state support that we know came to some degree, indirectly maybe, from Russia, China, and Iran. So, we have to get better at understanding not only how we map the network but how we connect that network and nodes within it to outside entities that are important sources of strength. *Then*, we have to look at the flows internationally through that network of people, money, weapons, maybe narcotics or precursor chemicals or smuggled oil and other illicit goods, so that we can begin to imagine how we can attack the network holistically.

And then finally, the questions to ask in framing—about how we become more effective against jihadist terrorist organizations is, what is our overall goal and associated objectives associated with defeating this organization and then, what are the obstacles to progress, and what are the opportunities that we can exploit. And then what are the sources of strength and support of this network and what are the weaknesses, vulnerabilities? Once you frame it, the strategy is the answer to the question of how do you isolate this jihadist terrorist network from sources of strength and support, and attack vulnerabilities, such that you're able to defeat it? And I don't think that kind of thinking goes on within our government. We need to seize opportunities to attack these networks holistically to achieve simultaneous activity and actions against that network that bring to bear all elements of national power and efforts of like-minded partners.

CTC: When you're looking at what appears to be a local terrorist problem, to what degree do you think we need to be involved before it becomes transnational?

McMaster: Well, if it's an ally or partner, it's to provide support. So that indigenous leaders and institutions and law enforcement organizations are capable of ensuring that that terrorist organization doesn't become an international problem. We're not going to achieve the end of terrorism. What we can achieve is that terrorists are unable to marshal resources, the popular support, the strength overall to pose the kind of threat that they've been able to pose since the 1990s against us and against all humanity.

CTC: From President Bush to President Obama and again from President Trump through President Biden, over the past 20 years, various administrations have sought to focus on great power competition as the prime threat for U.S. national security. But for all of them, questions of transnational terrorism, especially al-Qa`ida, and their global affiliates came to be a serious concern. In your thinking, how do we reconcile this tension between the desire to get away from combating terror when, time and again, it keeps popping up as a challenge for the United States?

McMaster: I think that it's important to recognize that we fall victim to what I described in [my recent book] *Battlegrounds* as strategic narcissism,[a] the tendency to define the world as we would like it to be, to assume that what we decide to do is decisive toward achieving a favorable outcome. The problem with that kind of thinking is that it's self-referential and doesn't acknowledge the agency and influence and the authorship that others enjoy over the future, including jihadist terrorist organizations.

And because we believe that we are the principal actor internationally—and this applies across the political spectrum in the United States—we tend to think that our enemies, our adversaries, our rivals have aspirations only associated with their reaction to what we do. So when we say we're going to end endless wars, it's oftentimes based on the assumption that if we disengage from the epicenters of jihadist terrorism—whether it's in the greater Middle East, centered on the Tigris and Euphrates

"The way to think about jihadist terrorist organizations begins with a charge to our departments and agencies to *defeat* terrorist organizations, and this is a word that I think ought come back into our lexicon."

a Editor's Note: In his book *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World*, McMaster applies Hans Morgenthau's concept of "strategic narcissism" to "U.S. foreign policy and national security strategy," describing it as "the tendency to view the world only in relation to the United States and to assume that the future course of events depends primarily on U.S. decisions or plans." See H.R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York: Harper, 2020).

Former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster attends the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on "Global Security Challenges and Strategy" in Washington, D.C., on March 2, 2021. (Caroline Brehman/CQ Roll Call via AP Images)

River Valley, or in Khorasan region of the Afghan-Pakistan-Iranian border areas—that the world would be safer. And that's based on the conceit that jihadist terrorists have no aspirations except those that are in response to us. That's why you can't end endless wars by disengaging if your enemies, in this case, are waging an endless jihad against you. And so, what we need is a strong dose of what Zachary Shore calls "strategic empathy"[2] to understand our enemy better.

I think this is the greatest failure of the CT academic community that you're an epicenter of. [It's] that after so many papers and articles, monographs, after all the work that's been done in the CT area, how did our leaders buy into an extreme form of self-delusion in connection with the nature of our enemies in Afghanistan and Pakistan? To not recognize that the Taliban had not reformed and that the Taliban were not going to share power and impose a more lenient form of sharia, that the Taliban were not disconnected from other jihadist terrorist organizations, including the Haqqani network and al-Qa`ida, that the ISI rebuilt and sustained the Taliban and coordinated with al-Qa`ida in doing so, and planned and helped execute the offensive that we just saw in Afghanistan. How did the CT community allow our policymakers to buy into these fundamentally flawed assumptions about the nature of our enemy? And I think that what we need is definitely more rigor in academia and those who look at the counterterrorism problem or the problem of jihadist terrorism, and to not buy into those who engage in kind of fuzzy-headed, overgeneralized, maybe hopeful analysis about jihadist terrorists.

You and I have had exchanges in the past about some of the work even printed in *CTC Sentinel* that I think was delusional[b] about the nature of the Taliban. And so, I think that we should ask the question, why has the academic CT enterprise failed in such a profound way?

It has failed twice, really: the other time was between December 2011 and 2014 in Iraq when, remember, we ended the endless war there, and I don't think the alarm bells were rung loud enough. I think everybody who really understood al-Qa`ida in Iraq knew that they were coming back and were predicting exactly what happened with the rise of ISIS, the strength of that organization, the fact that it was able to establish an Islamic emirate across territory the size of Great Britain and become the most destructive terrorist organization in history. But we had declared that war over. Where were the people who were saying, 'Hey, the war's not over'?

How about the role of Iran in perpetuating the cycle of sectarian violence, including periodically reinforcing jihadist terrorist organizations like al-Qa`ida to keep that cycle going in an effort

b Editor's Note: The Combating Terrorism Center values a variety of different viewpoints and analyses to better inform scholarship and policy. We publish scholarship we believe is rigorous, objective, and relevant.

to keep the Arab world perpetually weak, to be able to continue to prop up the Assad regime in Syria and apply kind of the Hezbollah model broadly to the region, including not only in Lebanon, but in Syria, in Iraq, and in Yemen. How come the CT community didn't raise the alarm bells? Especially after everyone got access to the vast majority of the bin Ladin papers, which happened because I made their release a priority.

And the thinking that came from Barnett Rubin and others over the years who kept writing essays about how the Taliban is really this kind of rural movement that has an ideal in mind that is somehow consistent with Afghan culture? I mean, that's a complete myth. This is an organization that is completely intertwined with jihadist terrorists and enjoy support from the ISI.

We keep papering over the danger. And then we enable optimism bias across multiple organizations. There aren't too many quotations that are identical between President Obama and [former U.S. Secretary of State] Mike Pompeo, but one of those identical quotations is 'al-Qa`ida is a shadow of its former self.'[3] I think this is another example of the perpetual counting out of al-Qa`ida, even when we're faced with evidence to the contrary, such as the 2015 Shorabak Farms operation,[c] the largest al-Qa`ida training base ever encountered, guarded by, run by the Taliban. How about Badri 313?[4] When you have the State Department spokesman saying, 'Hey, the Haqqani network and the Taliban, al-Qa`ida, these are all separate organizations.'[d] And then, [as part of the Taliban takeover] you have Badri 313 in charge of security of Kabul airport.[e]

CTC: How do you see the evolution of the jihadi terror threat since 9/11?

McMaster: Well, what I see is the [jihadi terrorists] continuing to adapt based on very effective counterterrorism operations after 9/11 and very effective counterterrorism operations not only centered on the major war efforts in Afghanistan and in Iraq, but also where we are mainly enabling partners to go after these organizations. So they're gaining strength based on a number of factors: their ability to proselytize, their ability to communicate in new ways, to recruit more to the cause, their ability to take advantage of weak governance, to establish control of territory and populations and resources that allows them to gain strength. These dynamics have been seen in the G5 Sahel, across North Africa, across the greater Middle East, to Somalia and South Asia and then into the Far East, into the Philippines, for example. We responded to that threat effectively and appropriately based on the approach of enabling others to bear the brunt of the fight, enabling them with, obviously our extremely capable military—including special operations forces, but not just special operations forces—logistical capabilities like those we see in the G5 Sahel. And then, of course, intelligence collection and analysis capabilities that made operations much more effective.

But I think what's happening now, what's making these groups more dangerous is first of all, our disengagement from that fight. If you look at what the Biden administration has done recently, it has not only really completed what I would describe as our self-defeat and surrender to a jihadist terrorist organization in Afghanistan, which is what we did. We ought to call it what it is. But they have also taken a step back from our work with partners to continue counterterrorism operations against jihadist terrorists who still pose a threat to us and our interests abroad. That's the first factor.

The second is that these groups are much larger in magnitude. You have to remember that it was the alumni of the mujahideen resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan that committed the 9/11 attacks. Now you have a vast alumni from various groups in South Asia, including Lashkar-e-Taiba but also Lashkar-e-Taiba has spun off Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and how Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan became the core of ISIS Khorasan. These groups reside in a terrorist ecosystem in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area that essentially recruits adolescent males to the cause, systematically brainwashes and dehumanizes them, and then foments hatred as a justification for violence against innocents. We have to think of that region as a jihadist terrorist factory that commits child abuse on an industrial scale.

So, they're gaining strength. Look at the ISIS alumni. ISIS recruited I think was about 30,000 [foreign fighters][f] immediately to its cause with its much more adept use of technology in recruiting. And where are those alumni now? Many of them are back in Europe, in countries that don't require visas to travel to the United States. So their ranks are bigger, they're better connected internationally, and they have access to technology that makes them more effective and destructive. And here I'm thinking of Audrey Cronin's excellent book *Power to the People*, which I recommend,[5] which really explores this dynamic in greater detail and what we might call the democratization of destruction, that these groups now have access to more and more destructive capability.

So it's for those reasons that jihadi terrorist groups are becoming more dangerous: our disengagement, increasing size of these groups, and access to better technology. Now, you add onto that, giving them a state, giving jihadist terrorists Afghanistan that already exists in an ecosystem where there are [many] U.S.-designated terrorist organizations. So, is the world becoming more

c Editor's Note: In October 2015, U.S. and Afghan forces targeted an al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) training camp in the Shorabak district of Kandahar, which was "probably the largest" ever found in Afghanistan according to the U.S. military commander in Afghanistan at the time. As noted by one analyst, the location was "right in the Taliban's heartland." Dan Lamothe, "'Probably the largest' al-Qaeda training camp ever destroyed in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, October 30, 2015; Anne Stenersen, "Al-Qa`ida's Comeback in Afghanistan and its Implications," *CTC Sentinel* 9:9 (2016).

d Editor's Note: In answering a reporter's question during a press conference on August 27, 2021, U.S. State Department Spokesperson Ned Price stated that, "The Taliban and the Haqqani Network are separate entities." "Department Press Briefing – August 27, 2021," U.S. Department of State, August 27, 2021.

e Editor's Note: There are indications of a strong nexus between Badri 313 and the Haqqani Network. France 24 reported that Badri 313 is "seen as having benefited from training from the Haqqani network." Long War Journal noted that the Haqqani Network "has long advertised the operations carried out by its special forces in the 'Badri Army.'" "Taliban shows off 'special forces' in propaganda blitz," France 24, August 25, 2021; Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Taliban's special forces outfit providing 'security' at Kabul airport," FDD's Long War Journal, August 22, 2021.

f Editor's Note: In September 2015, *The New York Times* reported that "American intelligence analysts have been preparing a confidential assessment that concludes that nearly 30,000 foreign fighters have traveled to Iraq and Syria from more than 100 countries since 2011." Eric Schmitt and Somini Sengupta, "Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts," *New York Times*, September 26, 2015.

safe or less? I hate to say it, but we're becoming less safe. And a lot of it has to do with our own lack of will to sustain efforts against the enemies of all humanity.

CTC: In the September 2021 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, former acting CIA director Michael Morell assessed that following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, "the reconstruction of al-Qa`ida's homeland attack capability will happen quickly, in less than a year, if the U.S. does not collect the intelligence and take the military action to prevent it."[6] What's your view on that?

McMaster: Well, they've never stopped trying to attack us, right? And we have evidence. This is an area, Sean, that I wish that CTC could help with, is to advocate for the declassification of SOCOM documents. Initiate declassification for the purpose of public diplomacy, right? Exposing the brutality and the nature of this enemy, which can help maybe bolster our will because we don't even talk about the enemy in popular media at all, but then also to understand better how many external attacks have been foiled by sustained, effective multinational counterterrorism efforts. I think the American people need to know that story. Because the debate's going on now in Congress about the AUMF, the authorization for the use of military force, and we're talking ourselves into self-defeat based on an under-appreciation of how dangerous these enemies are. We need to maintain our will. A way to do that is to go back to the bin Ladin papers. They show that bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida never gave up their desire to attack the far enemy: us. We need to get the examples out there.

CTC: In the September 2021 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, your Stanford colleague Asfandyar Mir stated this: "In case al-Qa`ida decides to attack from Afghanistan, the group may not claim attacks in order to help the Taliban work around its commitments under the Doha agreement. The Taliban may also argue that any operation was planned by al-Qa`ida cells in Pakistan or that there is no proof of al-Qa`ida's role in the attack/presence in Afghanistan. With such denials, the Taliban may be able to claim compliance with the Doha agreement."[7] This speaks to concerns that the Taliban may try to publicly present that they have distance from attacks.

McMaster: This is exactly what they're doing right now. I think that's what they did in the attack that killed 13 of our servicemen and women at the Kabul airport. Did that attack happen without the knowledge of the Haqqani network, who's been running the Kabul threat network and the Pakistan network for over a decade? I don't think so. This idea that there's a bold line here between ISIS Khorasan and the Taliban is wrong. These groups, even though they do work against each other periodically, they often coordinate efforts, and they share people and resources and expertise, and this is all well documented. Even the U.N. came up with a better intel estimate for the connections between ISIS-K and these other jihadist terrorist organizations. And so I think that what we have to do is end our self-delusion and serial gullibility in dealing with these groups. We have to remember, we were so desperate to get the hell out of Afghanistan that we were fooled by the impostor who we paid $150,000 to negotiate with the Karzai government.[8] We just showed desperation. We released terrorists for the [Bowe] Bergdahl exchange,[g] opened up the Taliban, their [Political] Commission, and allowed them to put forward these people who were really acting as the shop window for the Taliban while they intensified their murderous campaign of assassination and mass murder attacks in Afghanistan.

"This idea that there's a bold line … between ISIS Khorasan and the Taliban is wrong. These groups, even though they do work against each other periodically, they often coordinate efforts, and they share people and resources and expertise, and this is all well documented."

We made concession after concession to them. We did not insist on a ceasefire. We did not include the Afghan government in negotiations; we forced them to release 5,000 of some of the most heinous criminals and terrorists on Earth.[9] And then we gave our enemies a surrender document that pledged to them that we would withdraw completely and gave them the timeline of our withdrawal and the troop caps that we would put into place as we executed that retreat, essentially, from Afghanistan. That's what we did, and not enough people are calling it that. They're using these euphemisms of 'we wanted to bring the war to a responsible end.' What we did is we surrendered to a jihadist terrorist organization. And we did it across two administrations. We had the Trump administration —Zal[may] Khalilzad, who presided over these capitulation negotiations, signed the agreement during Secretary Pompeo's visit, and then we adhered to that and the Biden administration just doubled down on the withdrawal, as an end-in-itself approach.

CTC: You served as the initial commander of the Combined Joint Interagency Task Force Shafafiyatthat was stood up by the U.S. military to combat corruption in Afghanistan.[h] The U.S. has been criticized for supporting some warlords and powerful figures, some even claiming that the Afghan government was a kleptocracy enabled and sustained by our financial assistance

g Editor's Note: In mid-2009, U.S. soldier Bowe Bergdahl "walked away from his unit's remote outpost in eastern Afghanistan and was held captive by the Taliban for the next five years until a controversial prisoner swap for five former Taliban officials held at Guantanamo." Luis Martinez, "Bowe Bergdahl to Face General Court Martial, Could Face Life Sentence," ABC News, December 14, 2015. For news reports on this exchange, see "Prisoner Released in Bergdahl Exchange Tried to Reconnect With Taliban," NBC News, January 29, 2015; Missy Ryan and Haq Nawaz Khan, "Key in Trump's deal with the Taliban: Ex-prisoners whose release in 2014 unleashed Republican furor," *Washington Post*, March 30, 2020; and Kathy Gannon, "5 freed from Gitmo in exchange for Bergdahl join Taliban's political office in Qatar," *Military Times*, October 30, 2018.

h Editor's Note: The International Security Assistance Force "created Combined Joint Inter Agency Task Force–Shafafiyat as a Deputy Chief of Staff unit, reporting directly to the Commander of ISAF, to formalize its nascent counter- and anti-corruption effort in 2010." Chad Brooks and Craig Trebilcock, "Fighting for Legitimacy in Afghanistan: the Creation of the Anti-Corruption Justice Center," *PRISM* 7:1 (2017).

and lucrative contracts that ended up with the elites. What did you learn during your time with this task force, and what advice would you have for anyone dealing with this now?

McMaster: First of all, corruption and organized crime were a fatal threat to the Afghan state, when we stood up this task force in 2010. What we sought to understand is, what is driving corruption and organized crime. And there are some people who would just say, 'Oh, those Afghans, they've always been corrupt.' This is what I would call bigotry masquerading as cultural sensitivity. The real reasons for unchecked corruption and organized crime that was fatal to the Afghan state was political, and it was related to, as you already alluded to, dumping aid assistance, logistical support into Afghanistan, especially after 2009, 2010—well beyond the absorptive capacity of those institutions and of that economy. But the other reason, that I think is paramount in perpetuating corruption and organized crime that turned out to be fatal to the state, is our short-term approach to what turned out to be a long-term commitment in Afghanistan. We were there for 20 years, but it wasn't a 20-year war, right? It was a one-year war fought 20 times over. And we kept telling the Afghans, 'Hey, we're leaving. OK, now we're *really* leaving. OK, here's the timeline for our leaving,' and people forget [given all the focus on the] much pilloried 'mission accomplished' episode of President Bush on the aircraft carrier[i] in connection with the Iraq War, Secretary [of Defense] Rumsfeld was in Afghanistan giving almost an identical talk, 'Hey, the war in Afghanistan is over.'

Meanwhile, we knew by 2003 that the Taliban were generating in Pakistan with the help of al-Qa`ida and the ISI. And what happened is that then the Karzai government and those associated with his government looked over their shoulders and thought: 'Who has our back? Nobody. So what we better do is we build up our power base in advance of a post-U.S. Afghanistan.' And they did that by affecting state capture over these nascent institutions that had to be rebuilt after the hell of Taliban rule from '96 to 2001 and to use the capture of those institutions to engage in a range of corrupt and criminal activity, including the commoditization of positions; a whole range of rent-seeking behavior; the diversion of state revenue, borders, and airports; the diversion of international aid and assistance and security force assistance and what they were preparing for was a return to the civil war from '92-'96 because they thought, 'That's what's going to happen if the U.S. disengages under these conditions.' And we kept reinforcing that message to them, that we're leaving.

Remember, then President Obama does this interminable assessment on Afghanistan and Pakistan and then so many of the people who were involved in that now say, 'We never really understood what was happening in Afghanistan,' which is complete and utter nonsense. They knew what was going on. The Riedel study,[j] all that stuff. They knew what was happening but instead they opted for self-delusion in this period of time, when they announced, in late 2009, the reinforced troop commitment in Afghanistan and at the same time announced the timeline for the withdrawal. And then said, after they gave the timeline for withdrawal, 'Hey, let's talk with the Taliban and cut a deal with them,' after you've told them you're on your way out the door. How does that work? We utterly disconnected what we were doing militarily from what we were trying to achieve politically. But all of this had an impact on corruption and organized crime, because it created this mentality of 'Hey, get as much milk out of the international cow as you can as it wanders across the Afghan plain for the last time.' So I think that the political causes of corruption and organized crime have been under-appreciated, and we have to understand the fatal threat as one that existed because of these criminalized patronage networks that were tied to the mujahideen-era elites and who were preparing for the next civil war.

"The other reason, that I think is paramount in perpetuating corruption and organized crime that turned out to be fatal to the state, is our short-term approach to what turned out to be a long-term commitment in Afghanistan. We were there for 20 years, but it wasn't a 20-year war, right? It was a one-year war fought 20 times over."

CTC: Shortly after the recent fall of Kabul, President Biden said, "we've developed counterterrorism over-the-horizon capability that will allow us to keep our eyes firmly fixed on any direct threats to the United States in the region and to act quickly and decisively if needed."[10] Former deputy national security adviser Juan Zarate has stated, "'Over the horizon CT' is a myth [without] eyes [and] ears on the ground. [Without] [an] Embassy, bases, allies, CT is hobbled. Presence [and] force apply fundamentally in CT. A lesson [that we] painfully learned after the 2011 withdrawal from Iraq. It will become evident again in Taleban-controlled Afghanistan."[11] What is your view?

McMaster: Well, Zarate's right. Everything in the president's statement is the opposite of reality. Everything. Firmly fixed? No,

i Editor's Note: This is a reference to President George W. Bush's appearance and speech aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln on May 1, 2003, when he declared "major combat operations in Iraq are over" with a "Mission Accomplished" banner in the background. Cleve R. Wootson Jr., "Trump's 'Mission Accomplished' tweet, and the premature declaration that haunted George W. Bush," *Washington Post*, April 15, 2018.

j Editor's Note: In January 2009, President Obama asked Bruce Riedel "to chair a review of American policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan the results of which the President announced in a speech on March 27, 2009." See "Bruce Riedel," Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies; "Remarks by the President on a New strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," The White House, March 27, 2009; and "Press Briefing by Bruce Riedel, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, and Michelle Flournoy on the New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," The White House, March 27, 2009.

you can't keep your eyes firmly fixed with only technical [means], without augmenting those technical means for surveillance capabilities and without a physical presence and a partner on the ground that allows you to maintain even sustained technical intelligence collection. As you know, the logistics difficulties associated now with the distances, having given up the air bases in Afghanistan preclude the 'firmly fixed' part of that statement. And then decisively? What does that mean? It means actually indecisive, is what it means, and ineffective. We have in many ways recreated the conditions, albeit with more advanced technology, that existed in 1998 when al-Qa`ida bombed our embassies and the Clinton administration really felt then it had no option other than to fire a few cruise missiles and call it a day and think that, 'Well, maybe they won't bother us anymore.' Well, you know, it's a pretty short period of time between that and the most destructive terrorist attack in history: the mass murder attacks on 9/11. So I think we're setting ourselves up.

And again, this is an element of self-delusion, and it's just an extraordinary example of not understanding the nature of our enemy and other elements associated with Pakistan that indicate that Washington policymaking is hopeless. It's hopeless. I think we don't have serious people there who are trying to understand these challenges on their own terms. They're all too happy to engage in a number of cognitive traps, including mirror imagining.

What have they said about the Taliban? The Taliban is going to be worried about international opprobrium and as a result are going to modify their behavior, become more enlightened or benign. What have they said? An example of optimism bias: they're going to power share. They're going to allow women to have their rights. They're not going to give a safe haven to jihadist terrorists. Siraj[uddin] Haqqani is the head of the MOI [Ministry of Interior]. What other evidence do you need? And then confirmation bias, every little thing that they do: 'Look, there's one woman involved somewhere in the government.' Everyone is trying to look for one indicator that confirms their delusion about the Taliban. And then, of course, mirror imagining is the other cognitive trap [they] fall into. [They] keep saying, 'Well, it's really not in the Taliban's interest to give safe haven and support to jihadist terrorists.' Well, what more do you need to know than the fact that [Taliban supreme leader] Haibatullah Akhundzada encouraged his son to commit mass murder as a suicide bomber?[12] Do you think he [has] interests at the top of the agenda, or is it ideology? Is it emotion, that emotion being maybe hatred?

So I think that what we need, as I mentioned at the outset, [is] a really strong dose of empathy, and we need our leaders in Washington and we need our military leaders to be serious. I was so disappointed when I heard senior military officers say that we were partnering well with the Taliban and that they're behaving in a professional matter. It should be gut-wrenching for all of us to hear this degree of self-delusion and an astounding degree of moral equivalence.

What we've seen in Afghanistan is an Orwellian reversal of the truth. Every statement that we've heard from Washington was the opposite of reality: 'The Taliban are working with us on the evacuation. It's going really well.' We left American citizens behind to adhere to our surrender document to a terrorist organization. We gave them a ready-made hostage situation, with U.S. citizens, permanent residents, citizens of our allies, and the Afghans who have been working with us over all this time. And that is shameful. But what's even more astounding is the degree to which it was painted as a success.

I'm sure you and many others who have Afghan friends have WhatsApp messages from people who couldn't get out, who were harassed and beaten at Taliban checkpoints, the people we're tracking like an American University of Afghanistan professor who we were helping with his paperwork, trying to get authorization to get [him on] a manifest on [a] flight out, was dragged out of his house, shot in the head in the street. We have so many examples of this. And what we kept hearing from Washington is this reversal of the truth, but essentially, I think what's happened is reversal of morality. If we were going to just get out of Afghanistan, why the hell didn't we just get out? Why did we actually strengthen the Taliban and do everything we could to weaken the Afghan government and security forces on our way out with these series of psychological blows we delivered to them? And then we advocated for a coalition government that included the Taliban? We thought that maybe Mullah Baradar could be the shop window for them and power share with Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah. [Zalmay] Khalilzad advocated for a Taliban role in the government. Well, how did that work out? But we advocated for them, and I think the former ISI chief was prescient a few years ago when he said, "When history is written, it will be stated that the ISI defeated the Soviet Union in Afghanistan with the help of America," and [then] "the ISI, with the help of America, defeated America."[13] We have defeated ourselves, and we need to acknowledge it.

CTC: In a recent talk, you referred to the Taliban in Qatar as 'window dressing.' And that was what a lot of people latched onto when they talk about this question of 'have the Taliban changed?' Do you think that there's any reasonable discussion about any difference or space between Taliban headquarters or Taliban Kabul and Taliban provincial? Do they have control of their fighters?

McMaster: No, of course not. This is a terrorist organization that is based on an ideology that wants to thrust Afghanistan back into the 7th century, eliminate all rights for women, impose their version of sharia, eliminate any kind of freedoms that we the United States [should believe], are unalienable, such as a right to have a say in how you're governed, some sort of due process of law. For those who were for years advocating for power sharing with the Taliban, my question to them was: what does that look like? Does that look like *every other* girl school bulldozed? Does that look like mass executions in the soccer stadium *every other* Saturday? So why is it that Americans were advocating for power sharing with a terrorist organization that always intended to inflict the horrors on the Afghan people that we're witnessing right now.

CTC: You mentioned this notion of 20 one-year wars in Afghanistan. In hindsight and for military commanders, strategists, policymakers, how do you string 20 one-year wars together into a meaningful campaign?

McMaster: Well, we didn't, right? So what happened is we went in affected by this orthodoxy of the revolution in military affairs: that future wars will be fast, cheap, efficient, waged from standoff range. And so, the campaign that CENTCOM designed under the direction of the Secretary of Defense was to demonstrate this capability. And

it was effective militarily. We enabled mujahideen-era militias with intelligence, our courageous intelligence professionals, our extraordinarily creative and effective special operations forces, and our tremendous airpower capability, and intelligence collection capabilities. And we overwhelmed the fielded forces of the Taliban [and] collapsed the Taliban government. But in our zeal and enthusiasm to demonstrate the effectiveness of the light footprint, we allowed the Taliban and al-Qa`ida, many of them, including Usama bin Ladin, to escape into Pakistan, where they began to regenerate. We had a hammer with that campaign, but we had no anvil. But really what happened [is that] by super-empowering the mujahideen-era elites and prioritizing just getting the hell out after that, we essentially allowed these militias to affect state capture, [as] I mentioned before, over these state institutions and functions—and we didn't pay enough attention to governance and institution-building that is critical to consolidating gains to get to a sustainable political outcome in Afghanistan consistent with what brought us into the war to begin with, which was to have in place an Afghan government that was hostile to jihadist terrorists and to have in place Afghan security forces and security infrastructure broadly that was strong enough to withstand the regenerative capacity of the Taliban. But we didn't do any of that up front. We prioritized just getting the hell out, and then we turned our focus to Iraq, and then in this period of time the Taliban regenerated.

Eventually, we realized that we were not on a peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan—remember, when our allies signed up for duty in southern Afghanistan, they thought they were going to Bosnia, and that's when the Taliban really intensified their campaign. This is when the British, Canadians, and the Danes found themselves in a hell of a fight in the south, and the situation was going to hell in the south and in the southeast and east, and to some extent in the north. But what did we do? We reinforced our security effort, but it wasn't the beginning of a long-term [commitment] and eventually to try to get to a sustainable commitment. That was the beginning of our withdrawal, the reinforcement in 2009. How the hell does that work?

If the great captains of history were to come back and take a look at the way we waged that war, they would think that we're idiots. And then because we wanted to get out, we created some myths. Pakistan would be our partner: 'All we really need to do is to pledge long-term support for Pakistan.' Again, neglecting the primary motivation for the Pakistani army and the ISI. And then we said, 'There's really no al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan.' Completely delusional. And so we focused really only on Pakistan. 'It doesn't really matter what happens in Afghanistan.' So then we built the strategy based on a U.S. government document that was produced at the time, which I think is maybe one of the worst strategic documents in American history, which drove our policy at that time. It was utter self-delusion. Everything that paper was based on was the opposite of reality. And then you, of course, have this idea that you can keep soldiers engaged in combat, but really maybe not actively target your enemy who's killing your own soldiers and committing mass murder against Afghans and killing Afghan security forces. We said that the Taliban was no longer a designated enemy. We were no longer actively pursuing them, even as we were taking more and more casualties. This was under the Obama administration, and then the actions associated with the beginning of what would become the capitulation negotiations in Qatar.

That's when I came in as National Security Advisor in 2017.

"In our zeal and enthusiasm to demonstrate the effectiveness of the light footprint, we allowed the Taliban and al-Qa`ida, many of them, including Usama bin Ladin, to escape into Pakistan, where they began to regenerate. We had a hammer with that campaign, but we had no anvil."

I felt like I owed it to President Trump to give him options. And what we did is we gave him options, and when we briefed him we began with withdrawal. We said 'OK, here's what it looks like.' And we painted the picture of exactly what's happening right now. And when he looked over that precipice, he said, 'I don't want to do that.' I think if you go back to [President Trump's] speech of August 2017,[14] that is the first time we've had in place a reasoned, sound, and sustainable strategy in Afghanistan that prioritized our interests and could accomplish really an outcome—an Afghanistan that was not under the control of the Taliban or jihadist terrorists—consistent with what brought us into the war to begin with. Our level of military effort was very low in that period of time. But what's most important is not the [troop] numbers, but what our military effort was enabling the Afghans to do, which was to bear the brunt of the fight, to begin to reverse the momentum, and reduce the losses that they were suffering when we ceded the initiative [to the enemy]. We said, 'OK, the Taliban is [an enemy].' Imagine that? That we're actually going to fight those who are fighting against us, instead of tying our hands behind our back. And then what we did is we said we're going to enable them with combat advisors and the ability to call in fires and air support down to the battalion level, which is what you need to do if you're going to be effective. And guess what? It was effective against the Taliban. Afghanistan wasn't turning the corner to become Denmark and there were still the issues of corruption and organized crime and other aspects of state weakness and of course continued dependence on the international community and international support, but it was at a sustainable level of effort and it was a level of insurance that we were paying that I think was actually cheaper compared to the cost of the collapse that we just witnessed.

And then Trump abandons that, by 2019, the Trump administration. We initiate the capitulation negotiations, between 2019 until February of 2020. And then we initiate our withdrawal. And you know what the Taliban did? They just went around to Afghans and said to political and military leaders, 'Here's how it's gonna go. The Americans are leaving. They're out the door. And so here are your options. On cue, either you accommodate with us or we kill your whole family. How does that sound?' And so what military professionals should have highlighted are the psychological effects of our actions. And I personally was not surprised at all with the rapid collapse of security in Afghanistan. It seems like we did everything we could to engineer it.

CTC: With the expansion of the Islamic State's official and

unofficial affiliates across Africa, the U.S. reductions in Somalia, and France shrinking its CT mission in the Sahel, what concerns do you have about Africa right now?

McMaster: It's a huge problem because we know that with these groups especially, with al-Shabaab and with AQAP, they have an agenda to establish a caliphate, but also to attack their near and far enemies. And so I think in each of these cases, what we have to do is assess the nature of the threat, obviously prioritize our security and interests abroad, and provide the kind of support that allows us to prevent the worst from happening again. I think what we should have learned from 9/11 is the threat from jihadist terrorists, once they reach our shores, can only be dealt with at an exorbitant cost. We should have learned that from COVID-19, by the way, as well. Once they turn into pandemics and reach the shore, [they] can only be dealt with at exorbitant cost. So sustained engagement abroad—not quite an endless war but waging a sustained campaign in support of indigenous partners to ensure that these enemies of all humanity don't gain strength and don't ever again commit the attacks against us on the scale of 9/11.

CTC: As a former national security advisor who assessed a broad array of threats to the United States, what do you think China and Russia learned or took away from watching us fight the last two-decade "War on Terror"?

McMaster: Well, they're celebrating because I think they think that America doesn't have the will to respond to various forms of aggression. And this is what I think we should learn from the un-enforced "red line" in Syria in 2013.[15] I think you can draw a direct line from that to the invasion of eastern Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, the rapid island building and weaponization of islands in the South China Sea. You already see Russia increasing its aggression, actions whether they're economic and having to do with using their energy for coercive purposes, but the massive campaign against Ukraine and informational/political subversion campaign but also the amassing of military forces. And then you saw what China said to Taiwan in *The Global Times*[16] the day after the deadly debacle in Kabul. They said, 'Hey, do you think America has your back?' If deterrence is capability multiplied by will, I don't think our will is to zero, but I think our enemies think that our will is to zero. So I think we're entering a dangerous period. And this, of course, ties with jihadist terrorists as well, who are now saying they have achieved victory over the world's superpower. And of course, nothing bolsters your recruiting more than success, as we learned from ISIS. So that's another factor that we have to consider. And even though we want to turn our eyes away from sustained effort against jihadist terrorists as a kind of emotional cathartic that will help us forget the long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, we have to recognize what the English philosopher and theologian G.K. Chesterton said: That war is not the best way of settling differences, but it may be the only way to ensure they're not settled for you.[k]

CTC: Last question, what keeps you up at night?

McMaster: What I'm concerned about these days is how we seem determined to weaken ourselves by this combination of an interaction between identity politics or critical race theory on one end of the spectrum and various forms of bigotry and racism on the other, and centrifugal forces associated with that vitriolic political partisanship and really the actions by political leaders that try to score personal or political points at the expense of confidence in our democratic processes and institutions and principles. And so I think that we have to compete more effectively abroad, certainly, and [develop] more strategic competence, but we also need Americans to come together to reinforce the warm fabric of our society, emphasize our common identity across various identity group, and restore our confidence in the great promise of this country.

We have to take time to celebrate what we have. Our republic is always going to be a work in progress. So let's work on it. What bothers me today is there's a sense of a lack of agency among people. And when you put the word systemic or institutional in front of every problem, what you're telling people is they don't have agency. And I think what we're getting in our society today is a destructive combination of anger and resignation. So I think we *all* have work to do to strengthen our own country so we can generate the resolve and the will to defend our interests and promote peace and security abroad. CTC

k Editor's Note: "War is not 'the best way of settling differences;' it is the only way of preventing their being settled for you." "War and Politics," Society of G.K. Chesterton, as quoted from *Illustrator London News*, July 24, 1915.

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Commentary: Data, AI, and the Future of U.S. Counterterrorism: Building an Action Plan

By Don Rassler

The United States has collected petabytes of data relevant to counterterrorism and the study of terrorism over the past 20 years. More recently, and especially since 2018, the U.S. government has been making some big moves to integrate and scale data-science, machine learning, and artificial intelligence-driven approaches across its national security enterprise as a way to push change, innovate, and prepare for the coming AI-driven future. This article examines the intersection of these two developments—the United States' vast terrorism data holdings and the transformative power of data science and AI—by highlighting additional potential associated with four types of data: terrorism incident data, primary sources recovered by U.S. and partner forces, terror propaganda, and data about counterterrorism activity. It argues that the United States should create a new terrorism and counterterrorism data action plan, and it offers five recommended focus areas that deserve attention and emphasis as part of that plan. These five focus areas, which are not exhaustive and are only designed to shape conversations, include the need to: 1) reinvest in and advance core terrorism data, 2) strategically leverage captured material, 3) better develop and utilize counterterrorism data, 4) practice data alchemy, and 5) automate basic and other analytical tasks, and augment data.

The United States has collected petabytes of data relevant to counterterrorism and the study of terrorism over the past 20 years.[1] The amalgamation and analysis of data led the United States to Usama bin Ladin's hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Innovations in how the United States processed and fused information and made data actionable has also been one of the most important and game-changing achievements of the United States' two-decade long war on terrorism.[2] Indeed, the tactical and operational counterterrorism successes that the United States and its partners have accomplished since 9/11 is a story intimately tied to how analysts and practitioners have exploited data to better understand and degrade terror networks.

The United States has shifted its strategic emphasis and focus to address the rise of, and threats posed by, China and Russia, a transition that is needed and overdue. Yet, despite the United States' desire to put terrorism in the rear or side view mirror, terrorism is not going away anytime soon. The threats posed by transnational groups like al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, key militant Iranian proxies, and other networks—to include a diverse mix of domestic extremists in the United States—will evolve and continue to manifest in one dangerous form or another. There is also a real risk, due to the enduring nature of the terrorism threat, that the manner of America's terrorism pivot could end up complicating the United States' ability to maintain its near-peer focus. This is because while the United States has moved on to other priorities, core U.S. terror adversaries have not, and they like to disrupt and spoil. Indeed, as Brian Michael Jenkins has noted in this publication, "Events, not plans or preferences, will determine how much the United States will be able to shift or not shift resources away from counterterrorism and toward near peer competition."[3]

Much is riding on how the United States balances and manages these two national security priorities—counterterrorism and near-peer competition—in practice, as in the years and decades ahead the United States is going to need to be able to deal with both challenges and do so simultaneously, and well. It needs to get better at both.

Data, and what the United States does with data, will be a central part of that future. The United States recognizes that data *is* a strategic asset[a] and that data science-informed approaches and artificial intelligence (AI)—like electricity—"holds the secrets

a For example, as noted in the U.S. Department of Defense's 2020 Data Strategy: "The DoD now recognizes that data is a strategic asset that must be operationalized in order to provide a lethal and effective Joint Force that, combined with our network of allies and partners, sustains American influence and advances shared security and prosperity." "DoD Data Strategy," U.S. Department of Defense, 2020, p. i. For another perspective on the strategic utility of data to U.S. national security, see Edmund L. Andrews, "Re-Imagining Espionage in the Era of Artificial Intelligence," Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence, August 17, 2021.

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which will reorganize the life of the world."[4][b] For the past several years, the United States has been making big moves to adjust, adapt to, and prepare for the coming AI-driven future, and to position itself to lead. One only needs to look at the mix of national-level to agency-specific AI strategy documents and plans,[5] hefty financial investments[c] and organizational adaptations made to drive and scale AI initiatives,[6] and the testing and operational application of machine learning (ML)/AI approaches[7] to see that the large, 'sea tanker-like bureaucracy' of the U.S. government is in the process of making an important strategic pivot.[d]

A high-level overview of recent changes that have taken place within the Department of Defense (DoD) is instructive.[e] Since 2018, for example, the DoD has released its artificial intelligence strategy (2018), digital modernization strategy (2019), and data strategy (2020). In 2018, the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA) announced a "multi-year investment of more than $2 billion in new and existing programs called the 'AI Next' campaign" with emphasis placed on key areas.[8] In 2018, these efforts and investments were given added organizational structure and form through the creation of the DoD's Joint Artificial Intelligence Center (JAIC), an entity established to be the focal point for carrying out DoD's AI Strategy.[9] That same year, U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) made a similar organizational move through the establishment of its Command Data Office, designed "to oversee … workforce transformation, as well as provide a node for industry outreach, data governance, and application of a data-focused perspective to capability development decision-making processes."[f] The Defense Innovation Unit has been active in "pursuing a number of AI projects to optimize business processes in the DoD" as well.[10]

"While counterterrorism assistance to foreign partners usually revolves around hardware, training, and financial assistance, the parties that will evolve and lead the counterterrorism field over the next decade are those actors who possess the 'best' data *and* who are able to make most effective use of that data."

The JAIC, SOCOM, and the National Media Exploitation Center (NMEC) have also played critical roles in operationalizing 'big data' through AI and ML approaches.[11] When it comes to counterterrorism, a seminal example is Project Maven, a "pathfinder effort" to employ AI and ML "in the fight against ISIS, al-Qaeda, and their geographically dispersed proxies."[12] As noted by the scholar Richard Shultz and SOCOM Commander General Richard Clarke, Project Maven's initial objective was "to automate the processing, exploitation, and dissemination of massive amounts of full-motion video collected by intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets."[13] This was achieved through the utilization of "specially trained algorithms," which "could search for, identify, and categorize objects of interest in massive volumes of data and flag items of interest."[14]

These moves are important signs of momentum and advancement. The data and AI strategy documents and plans that the U.S. government has released provide the broad framework for how it intends, or hopes, to move forward in the data and AI arena. And that has been complemented by vision offered by seasoned practitioners like former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency Lieutenant General (Ret) Robert Ashley for where these changes should, or are likely, to lead. For example, according to Ashley, in the future "Leveraging data from captured enemy material, applying machine learning and computer vision against petabytes of publicly available information, embracing open-source intelligence and open architectures should be a routine part of every military operation going forward."[15] But as the United States looks forward and works through how to 'right size' counterterrorism,[16] it also needs a more defined plan for how it intends to utilize, integrate, and more fully leverage the petabytes of terror and counterterrorism data it has collected, collated, and created over the past 20 years. Those vast quantities of data are an incredible resource—a strategic asset that if leveraged in smart and strategic ways will help the United States to continue to learn and transfer knowledge across generations, track future terror developments, identify new counterterrorism opportunities, and gain analytical efficiencies.

There are two primary reasons why such a new terrorism and counterterrorism data action plan is needed and should be developed and resourced. Like other domains, counterterrorism is evolving into a means of geopolitical influence that states, including the United States and its near-peer rivals, have been competitively using to develop relationships and to secure defense-related access and placement. And while counterterrorism assistance

b When it comes to national security, as noted by the 2019 NSCAI report, "AI will change how we defend America," "AI will change how intelligence agencies make sense of the world," and "AI will change how we fight." "Interim Report," National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, November 2019. For other views on the transformative potential of AI, see Greg Allen and Taniel Chan, *Artificial Intelligence and National Security* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, July 2017) and Michael C. Horowitz, Gregory C. Allen, Edoardo Saravalle, Anthony Cho, Kara Frederick, and Paul Scharre, *Artificial Intelligence and International Security* (Washington, D.C.: Center for New American Security, July 2018).

c For example, DARPA announced in September 2018 a multi-year investment of more than $2 billion in new and existing programs called the "AI Next" campaign. See "AI Next Campaign," DARPA.

d One important reflection of this pivot are the goals outlined in the 2021 final report from the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, which aim to have an "AI Ready IC by 2025" and an "AI Ready DoD by 2025." See chapters 5 and 3 of the final report for full context.

e The U.S. Department of Defense has been investing in AI approaches for a considerable period. For example, the National Media Exploitation Center has been investing in AI for at least 15 years. See Brooke Crothers, "Artificial intelligence linked to Bin Laden raid is being used to find future threats," Fox News, July 2, 2020.

f As Richard Shultz and Richard Clarke have noted: "Not only is SOF AT&L [Special Operations Forces Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics] taking steps to seek out potential applications of AI/ML in all existing programming lines, in March 2020, the directorate formally created a Program Executive Officer for SOF Digital Applications to improve enterprise-wide acquisition of software solutions." See Richard H. Shultz and Richard D. Clarke, "Big Data at War: Special Operations Forces, Project Maven, and Twenty-First Century Warfare," Modern War Institute, August 25, 2020.

U.S. Special Operations Command Chief Data Officer David Spirk, USSOCOM Commander General Richard D. Clarke, and USSOCOM Senior Enlisted Leader Chief Master Sergeant Gregory Smith officially open the USSOCOM Data Engineering Lab in Tampa, Florida, on September 25, 2019. (U.S. Air Force Master Sergeant Barry Loo/U.S. Department of Defense)

to foreign partners usually revolves around hardware, training, and financial assistance, the parties that will evolve and lead the counterterrorism field over the next decade are those actors who possess the 'best' data *and* who are able to make most effective use of that data. General (Ret) Joseph Votel, the former commander of U.S. Central Command, highlighted this point in a recent interview in this publication: "I do think the future will be dominated by those who understand it [data] the best, whether it is through publicly available information sources, managing large data, or whether it is the ability to see and understand what is happening in areas so that it preserves our decision space and informs our policy choices."[17]

A new terrorism and counterterrorism data action plan is also needed for efficiencies' sake. For if the United States wants to focus less on terrorism and more on China and other strategic competitors, it needs to find areas where efficiencies can be gained in the processing, analysis, and use of terrorism-related data through deeper focus on data science-informed approaches and investment in and broader experimentation and adoption of ML and AI. This article is designed to help shape the conversation of how this can be done.

The piece starts by unpacking in greater detail why such a new terrorism and counterterrorism data action plan is needed. The article is then organized around five recommended focus areas (in addition to other priorities) that deserve attention and emphasis as part of that plan. There is a need to: 1) reinvest in and advance core terrorism data, 2) strategically leverage captured material, 3) better develop and utilize counterterrorism data, 4) practice data alchemy, and 5) automate basic and other analytical tasks, and augment data. To ground those discussions, each section contains practical examples that demonstrate how specific categories, or types, of data could be better leveraged in relation to the five "need" areas, and how different approaches could be used to extract more utility from existing data sources.

While this article discusses various types of data, emphasis is intentionally placed on four categories of data: 1) terrorism incident data, 2) primary sources picked up by U.S. military and partner forces, 3) official terror group propaganda, and 4) data about counterterrorism activity and assistance. This article does not substantively examine the potential associated with other types of data, such as social media data or the general category often referred to as publicly available information (PAI),[g] court records, financial data, signals intelligence (SIGINT), human intelligence (HUMINT), geospatial intelligence (GEOINT), detainee records, biometric information, or data about how extremists use and/or exploit digital platforms. That is not because these and other types of data are not important to operations or the future of counterterrorism; they are extraordinarily important. Indeed, as

g The author recognizes that social media platforms are often primarily outlets or tools through which terror groups and violent extremists release propaganda material. The point being made here is that this article does not directly focus on or explore the potential associated with social media data as a general category of data. Instead, it discusses official terror group propaganda, which is often distributed online through social media mechanisms, as an example of one specific type of data that remains underleveraged.

Nicholas Rasmussen stated in 2015 when he was serving as the director of the National Counterterrorism Center: "Just the sheer volume of threat information that we see every day in social media communications suggests that we need to increase our capacity to make better use of this information."[18]

The importance of the four particular types of data discussed in this article—terrorism incident data, primary sources picked up by U.S. military and partner forces, official terror group propaganda, and data about counterterrorism activity and assistance—takes on even more significance when one considers that the fusion of these various sources, and the information gleaned from the integration of them, is usually even more valuable than the original sources themselves.

The decision to place emphasis on the four particular types of data was made for three reasons. The first relates to ease of use and access. Two of the four types of data—terrorism incident data and official terror propaganda—are open sources that can be found online. There are also fewer privacy concerns associated with using these two types of sources. The DoD has also taken recent steps to make primary source material recovered by U.S. and partner forces—another of the four types of data discussed in this article—more accessible and less controlled than it has been in the past. The combination of these factors makes these three types of data easier to access and use, which as Amy Zegart and others have highlighted should help to facilitate more rapid experimentation and testing of ML/AI tools and approaches, without the complexities associated with classified data.[19]

Secondly, emphasis was placed on data about counterterrorism activity and assistance because that category of data does not receive a lot of attention generally, despite its importance.

Thirdly, the public conversation about terrorism data and AI thus far has mostly focused on select types of 'big data' such as digital social media data or PAI, bulk telephone metadata, or full motion video collected from unmanned aerial vehicles or other surveillance assets.[20] Instead of covering the same territory, this piece narrows its focus to the AI potential associated with just the aforementioned four important types of terrorism data. This article aims to broaden, diversify, and advance discussions about what can or should be done with terrorism and counterterrorism data moving forward, and what is possible.

This article represents the view of a researcher who evaluates data and sources to address strategic, and not operational or tactical, questions. The views that this article presents and the suggestions it offers are also limited, as there are other important issues, such as privacy and ethical considerations, relevant to the collection and study of data and measures taken to ensure AI safety[21] that any new terror and counterterrorism data action plan would also need to consider and tackle.

Why a New Terror Data Action Plan Is Needed

An overview of some hard truths and challenges brings the need for a 'what to do with all that terrorism data' vision into focus. First, despite counterterror accomplishments, terrorism as a global and regional problem, or even a local one in the United States, is not going away anytime soon. The United States and its counterterrorism allies have degraded the ability of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State to conduct strategic attacks, and to directly attack the U.S. homeland in high-impact ways. The coalition to defeat the Islamic State has also been able to disrupt and limit the group's ability to seize and hold territory in Syria and Iraq. Thanks to collaboration among technology and social media companies, it is now harder for terror networks and sympathizers to maintain a consistent presence online, spread propaganda and share information, and virtually interact. Those hard-earned gains are important, but without consistent pressure, focus, and appropriate levels of ongoing investment, many of those gains will also be fleeting.

"The world is awash in data, information that can be leveraged to identify new threats or enhance understanding of existing terror dangers—that is, if one can identify which data is relevant *and* make sense of it in a timely way."

Indeed, as noted by Michael Morell, former acting director of the Central Intelligence Agency, the pattern of activity from mainstay groups like al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State is like a sine wave: "They get very dangerous, you degrade them, they weaken, you take your eye off them, and they rebound. And I don't think that pattern is going to stop. I think we're going to see this for quite some period of time."[22]

These challenges are compounded and complicated by other terrorism and threat landscape trends. Compared to 9/11, today's terror threat is more geographically dispersed, more diverse, and more complex.[23] Or put another way, today there are more terror groups active in more countries around the world, and more organizations, networks, interactions, and agendas for analysts and practitioners to understand and track.[24] The complexity of international and U.S. domestic terror threats have *both* gone up over the past five years, while U.S. emphasis and willingness to pay attention to foreign terror activity is being 'right sized'—or perhaps more cynically 'downsized.' One only needs to look at the proliferation of non-state, jihadi-inspired militants active in key regions of Africa,[h] or the diversity and fluidity of far-right extremist networks in the United States, to see that there are still a lot of active terrorism threats around the world, and a lot of different type of actors. And even though many of today's foreign terror groups do not present a direct, or substantive, threat to the United States, they still complicate local and regional security environments and threaten U.S. partners—so they need to be monitored.

But that may be easier said than done, as the resources needed to monitor even a prioritized list of terror networks is in competition with the diverse array of threats—from cyber, economic, and informational challenges to biological threats and those posed by new weapons systems or emerging technologies—with which the

h As Tricia Bacon and Jason Warner noted in this publication, jihadi "violence now affects at least five regions on the [African] continent and 22 countries, including several that had no history of jihadism prior to 2001, such as Mozambique and Burkina Faso." See Tricia Bacon and Jason Warner, "Twenty Years after 9/11: The Threat in Africa – The New Epicenter of Global Jihadi Terror," *CTC Sentinel* 17:7 (2021).

U.S. security enterprise must contend. Plus, as Amy Zegart has noted, "more threats" is only one of the "Five Mores"[i] dramatically changing the business of intelligence.

These threat-specific 'scope, scale, and complexity challenges' are complicated by two other issues: the flood of data that counterterrorism professionals need to weed through, and the velocity or speed at which information moves today.[j] The world is awash in data, information that can be leveraged to identify new threats or enhance understanding of existing terror dangers—that is, if one can identify which data is relevant *and* make sense of it in a timely way. Given the overwhelming and varied mix of data that the U.S. defense and intelligence enterprise collects *and* that is increasingly accessible through open or commercial sources, this is a fundamental challenge, one the intelligence community has acknowledged. For example, according to a key strategy document released by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) in 2019: "The pace at which data are generated, whether by collection or publically available information (PAI), is increasing exponentially and long ago exceeded our collective ability to understand it or to find the most relevant data with which to make analytic judgments."[25]

Two 'troves' of terrorism data recovered by U.S. forces during operations nearly a decade apart—the first in 2006 in Iraq and the second in 2015 in Syria—provide insight into the change in scale of data being collected that analysts, leveraging a variety of tools and tradecraft, must wade through. During the first operation, a mission that led to critical information about Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al-Qa`ida in Iraq's leader at the time, U.S. forces recovered a thumb drive "with 1 gigabyte of memory," which included "a trove of information … a treasure of data."[26] The second operation, a raid in eastern Syria, resulted in "four to seven terabytes of data" that was "harvested from laptops, cellphones, and other materials recovered."[27] The takeaway: what the U.S. government considered a trove of data recovered during operations jumped from one gig in 2006 to multiple terabytes less than a decade later.[k]

That jump in scale is not unique or limited to information scooped up during physical, on-the-ground operations, but is a broader challenge affecting multiple types of 'INTs.' An example cited by ODNI puts the scope of the challenge into context: the "Director of NGA [National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency] has publically estimated that at the current, accelerating pace of collection, we would need over 8 million imagery analysts by 2037 to process all imagery data."[28] [l]

"Due to the pace of counterterrorism operations over the past two decades, it has not been uncommon for material after it has been exploited for operational and tactical purposes to be set aside, where it typically remains underutilized, gathering proverbial dust."

Given the deluge, analysts often face three key problems: 1) navigating through the 'noise' to identify important pieces of information, 2) identifying how pieces of data relate to one another, or fit together, and 3) appreciating the deeper context, or history, associated with a particular issue or group.

This is not because government analysts are not talented (they are) or do not care (they do); it is because they typically do not have the luxury, space, or time to step away from the tactical and operationally focused tasks—like identifying and disrupting terror plots—that consume them. That level of focus is obviously needed, but it has also come at a strategic cost, as it has not been complemented by meaningful emphasis placed on the strategic review, analysis, and exploitation of terrorism data. For example, due to the pace of counterterrorism operations over the past two decades, it has not been uncommon for material after it has been exploited for operational and tactical purposes to be set aside, where it typically remains underutilized, gathering proverbial dust. Over time, the amount, diversity, and richness of the primary source data collected by the United States has only grown—and grown exponentially.

With this context in hand, this article next explores five areas that deserve attention and focus in formulating a new terrorism and counterterrorism data action plan.

Five Focus Areas for Terror Data

1. Focus on Fundamentals: (Re)Invest in and Advance Core Terrorism Data

To avoid detection and disruption, terror networks are security conscious and try to conduct their internal affairs in a clandestine way. This can make it hard to identify terror group plans or gain insight into how networks and their actions are evolving. The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and ongoing U.S. effort to 'right size' counterterrorism is compounding this issue and is leading to a reduction in the number and quality of sensors—the human and technical 'eyes and ears'—and key data injects that

i According to Zegart, the "Five Mores" are: 1) more threats, 2) more data, 3) more speed, 4) "the expanding number of decision makers who need intelligence," and 5) more competition. See Andrews, for background.

j Or, as succinctly characterized by Zegart, "more data" and "more speed."

k Reporting by *The Los Angeles Times* provides another data point with respect to this issue. According to reporting by W.J. Hennigan in 2016, up till that point, "The largest data trove was recovered when U.S.-backed Syrian rebel forces recaptured Manbij, an Islamic State stronghold in northern Syria, in mid-August [2016]. Intelligence agencies recovered more than 120,000 documents, nearly 1,200 devices and more than 20 terabytes of digital information." See W.J. Hennigan, "Captured battlefield cellphones, computers are helping the U.S. target and kill Islamic State's leaders," *Los Angeles Times*, October 26, 2016. It has been reported that the raid that targeted Usama bin Ladin in Abbottabad, Pakistan, resulted in the recovery of more than 470,000 individual files and 2.7 terabytes of data. See Sandra Erwin, "Can artificial intelligence help U.S. SOCOM track weapons of mass destruction?" Space News, April 24, 2018.

l Another example cited by Shultz and Clarke noted: "Full-motion video (FMV) collected by UAV platforms grew exponentially in the early 2010s. Understanding what this encompassed can be stupefying. For example, one estimate noted that in 2011, UAVs 'sent back over 327,000 hours (or 37 years) of FMV footage.' By 2017, it was estimated for that year that the video US Central Command collected could amount to '325,000 feature films [approximately 700,000 hours or eighty years].'" See Shultz and Clarke.

have been leveraged to better understand, track, and target priority terror groups.

To address and minimize this problem, the United States should identify how it can extract more meaning from existing terrorism data repositories; how it can creatively aggregate or stitch those sources of data together so it can better, and more efficiently, spot patterns, anomalies, and hidden trends; and identify what type of 'new' sensors or sources of data will need to be engineered or leveraged to maintain useful windows into the activity of terror groups around the world.

The United States should thus be looking at key terrorism data resources and holdings, and related data streams, to see if and how those resources can help to fill the gap and enhance understanding of terrorism dynamics and better illuminate how the strategic environment is evolving during this transitionary period. And it should start by looking at core data resources, like that provided by the Global Terrorism Database (GTD)—a key open-source repository that contains data on more than 200,000 global terror incidents since 1970—and then work outward.

When it comes to terror data resources, the GTD is not sexy: It catalogs base-level information about terror attacks, details such as "the date and location of the incident, the weapons used, nature of the target, the number of casualties, and—when identifiable—the group or individual responsible."[29] Analysis of GTD data is not going to help the U.S. government to identify or prevent the next terror attack, and as a result, in U.S. government circles it often does not receive the support or attention it deserves. But the GTD is a foundational and underutilized data resource that can be used to help identify longitudinal trends, evaluate shifting terror group priorities, and situate trends related to terror group interactions, tactics, or geography. Its core strength is that it provides data-driven historical context; information needed to baseline terror attack trends, identify change over time, and understand high-level threat patterns. Having that type of data on hand is critical for the United States to achieve strategic intelligence objectives[m] and optimize its counterterrorism activity and investments.

An example helps to bring the strategic utility of the GTD to light. The Philippines is often positioned and viewed as one of the Global War on Terror's success stories, an example of where and how a comparatively modest level of U.S. advise and assist activity and counterterrorism investment has led to the containment, or reduction, of Islamist-inspired terrorism. That is a useful narrative, but an analysis of 20 years' worth of GTD attack data demonstrates how that view is disconnected from reality. According to the GTD, terrorism has become considerably more of a problem in the Philippines over the last decade than the decade prior. For example, 79 percent of all terror attacks in the Philippines (regardless of ideological orientation) occurred between 2011-June 2019, while slightly more than 21 percent of such attacks took place from 2001-2010. Complicating matters further, the rise in the volume of terror attacks over the past decade in the country was not limited to one category of group, but was a standard trend across Islamist militant groups, communist-inspired organizations, and operations conducted by unknown entities.

Why do these long-term trends matter? Is not the GTD primarily a tool for academics? They matter because the Philippines is a treaty ally, a strategic partner, and a country that is extremely relevant to near-peer competition *and* the ongoing fight against Islamist militancy. The Philippines sits smack dab at the intersection of both of those issues. Given the importance of the Philippines alliance, it is critical that the United States understands how terror threats—from Islamist to communist-inspired—are evolving in the country so that it can be a better partner and optimize or adjust its investments or approach.

As explained in the automate and augment section below, the foundational data provided by the GTD is not just limited to identifying long-term trends, but through automation, it can also be leveraged, or enhanced, to help the U.S. government more effectively spot other more pressing patterns and changes in terror group behavior; information that can help the United States anticipate the direction and modality of future threats.

So as the United States' security establishment re-evaluates its terrorism data resources and maps out what it can, or should, do with them, it would be wise to focus on fundamentals and (re)invest in resources like the GTD.[30] The GTD is not a perfect resource, but there are few resources like it and the database provides core and reliable baseline data that the U.S. government can use to track change, inform shifts to U.S. counterterrorism policies and priorities, and enhance the utility of other tools and data resources.

2. Better Leverage and Make Strategic Use of Captured Material

The United States has collected a massive amount of information during counterterrorism operations conducted since 9/11. In an article published in *Joint Forces Quarterly* in 2020, it was estimated that the U.S. military was in possession of "over 300 terabytes of CEM gathered from across the globe."[31] [n] This diverse archive of material includes forensic material[32] and data from computers, external hard drives, and cell phones, and from physical items like books, manuals, diaries, letters, and other types of personal correspondence that have been recovered.

All that data, what the U.S. military has taken to calling 'Collected Exploitable Material (CEM)' or battlefield evidence, has been critical in helping counterterror practitioners identify and locate new terror targets and enhance understanding of internal terror groups dynamics, such as leader priorities, inter-group relationships, organizational challenges, and the bureaucratic minutiae associated with running terror networks. CEM holds great

m For example, GTD data is important baseline data to identify and assess, as noted by the 2019 U.S. intelligence strategy, "the capabilities, activities, and intentions of states and non-state entities to develop a deep understanding of the strategic environment, warn of future developments on issues of enduring interest, and support U.S. national security policy and strategy decisions" or to "Broaden and deepen strategic knowledge of the global terrorism landscape to provide context to customers." See "National Intelligence Strategy of the United States of America," Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 22, 2019, pp. 8, 12.

n Two other statistics help to provide a sense of scale of the amount of data collected. For example, over one four-month period in 2017, U.S. special operations forces were involved in or directly supported 2,175 ground operations against the Taliban, Islamic State Khorasan, and Haqqani network militants in Afghanistan. See "Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Quarterly Report to the United States Congress - October 1, 2017 - December 31, 2017," U.S. Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, February 16, 2018, p. 39. Second, as Shultz and Clarke noted about U.S. operations in Iraq, as "the JIATF took shape, and raids increased to three hundred a month, intelligence became unmanageable with massive amounts of captured enemy material—documents, hard drives, thumb drives, cell phones—flowing into the system." See Shultz and Clarke.

"The U.S. counterterrorism enterprise is also currently navigating a major inflection point, where U.S. counterterrorism posture and activity—given the emphasis placed on near-peer competition—is being reevaluated and 'right sized' across the board. If there ever was a 'good' time to re-envision how the U.S. government can better utilize and draw upon its rich repository of CEM, that time is now."

potential and has been used in important ways "to investigate and prosecute foreign terrorist fighters, screen and watchlist terrorist suspects, or deny" travel.[33]

Some additional detail highlights the strategic value of CEM.[34] The U.S. military's CEM archive includes personal correspondence between senior terror group leaders like Usama bin Ladin and his key lieutenants; the fingerprints and other signatures of bomb makers; detailed personnel, payment, and organizational data on tens of thousands of fighters who joined the Islamic State; internal records about and produced by the Afghan Taliban and key figures—including Jalaluddin Haqqani—who helped shape the direction of that movement; and troves of financial records produced in various languages.

Since 9/11, the U.S. government has made significant strides in how it processes and makes use of CEM, and that work—which has placed emphasis on speed, the use of various tools and approaches (e.g., "investments in text recognition technology, object detection, machine translation, audio and image categorization"), and the sharing of data—is ongoing.[35] CEM data *is* operationally valued and utilized by the U.S. counterterrorism community.[o] One important reflection of this is the U.S. government's use of AI to rapidly process the trove of more than 470,000 documents that Navy Seals recovered from Usama bin Ladin's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, and the efforts made to evaluate that collection of material in relation to a broader corpus of data to identify "future plots, emerging threats and [develop] a greater understanding of mysteries" about al-Qa`ida that were not well understood before.[36] "Had AI not been used in that instance," the Defense Intelligence Agency's Science and Technology director of artificial intelligence remarked in 2020, "it would have taken the entire federal workforce to piece the puzzle together and it still probably wouldn't have succeeded."[37] While the ability of seasoned experts to process such document collections and generate key national security takeaways on their own steam should not be underestimated, this sentiment speaks to the perceived benefits of AI-informed approaches.

For some of the ML and data analytics tools that the U.S. government has invested in, such as the Advanced Analytics and Machine Learning Microservices Platform (A2M2P), the bin Ladin archive was a key open-source test case. According to statements made in May 2019 by a representative of the company that developed the A2M2P tool, the "next step is to modify the tool to integrate sensitive-site exploitation data with information from open sources, signals intelligence and human intelligence."[38]

The bin Ladin example illustrates the power of AI and how the U.S. government has been leveraging AI to exploit large collections of CEM and other data for operational purposes.[p] Those gains are critically important, but the U.S. military's vast CEM holdings still remain a strategically underleveraged and underutilized resource. The Defense Department recognizes that the amount and varied nature of its CEM holdings have been key challenges and that it has "struggled to get these materials to our allies and partners in a usable format and timely manner."[39] [q] A new set of guidelines issued by former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper in January 2020 reflect DoD's awareness of these issues and the need to solve them, as the memo directed that "all new CEM be unclassified unless sensitive sources, methods, or activities were used to acquire it."[40]

As noted by Michael Fenzel, Leslie Slootmaker, and Kim Cragin, the "new guidance lays the foundation for CEM to be used well beyond the battlefield. It allows for easier transfer of CEM from the military to other U.S. Government agencies, as well as our allies and partner nations."[41] It will also make it easier for DoD to share CEM data with technology partners and other service providers.

Several factors have aligned to create a ripe window for the United States to step back and develop a plan for how it can make more effective and strategic use of CEM. For example, al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State both currently pose less of a significant threat to the United States. And as outlined above, the U.S. counterterrorism enterprise is also currently navigating a major inflection point, where U.S. counterterrorism posture and activity—given the emphasis placed on near-peer competition—is being reevaluated and 'right sized' across the board. If there ever was a 'good' time to re-envision how the U.S. government can better utilize and draw upon its rich repository of CEM, that time is now.

The opportunity may be fleeting, however. For instance, if the United States does not take advantage of this current window, there is a danger that as less and less new material gets added to the CEM archive, attitudes about the usefulness of CEM may shift and CEM may be increasingly viewed as a less relevant and historic out-of-date resource over time. The ongoing shift to strategic competition

o For example, in 2018 more "than 75 officials from across the U.S. government participated in a battlefield evidence senior leader seminar" held at SOCOM. See "US senior leaders explore battlefield evidence processes at USSOCOM," USSOCOM, December 10, 2018.

p In another interesting use case, the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security commissioned RAND Europe to conduct a study of a considerable portion of the full archive of material (470,000 records) recovered from Usama bin Ladin's compound and released to the public. That study leveraged different technologies and ML to make sense of the collection. See Jacopo Bellasio et al., *Insights from the Bin Laden Archive: Inventory of research knowledge and initial assessment and characterization of the Bin Laden archive* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021). The UBL archive has also been creatively utilized in other ways. For an example, see "Machine learning, UFOs, and Darth Vader," Fathom Information Design, August 20, 2018.

q As noted by Shultz and Clarke, "Data classification—both in terms of archival organization and security compartmentalization—had become a monumental roadblock." See Shultz and Clarke.

is only likely to amplify and compound these pressures.

There are numerous reasons why not developing a plan to strategically leverage CEM would be lamentable. Al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State—the two groups for which there is the most amount of CEM—have been degraded, but they are not going away. Those two groups will evolve and will present terrorism threats in the months and years ahead. Thus, as the United States continues to shift its strategic emphasis and focus toward near-peer competition, it is likely that deep knowledge about al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State will diminish over time, especially as seasoned government experts retire, shift to other problems, or take on new jobs. In the years to come, it seems likely that there will be fewer specialists well versed in the U.S. military's rich and varied CEM stockpile. Thus, one reason why developing a plan to make strategic use of CEM makes smart sense is because it would help capture institutional knowledge and fuel the continued development of such knowledge about the two primary terrorist adversaries the United States has been fighting for the past 20 years.

The U.S. military's primary source CEM archive, for example, could be used to write the definitive history of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, with specific chapters—and related CEM data appendices—tailored to key periods, regions, themes, or topics. Those two resources, which could be supported and underwritten by the U.S. government and developed by a mix of government personnel and leading scholars, would provide a detailed, thoughtful, and comprehensive 'go-to' resource for the next generation of analysts involved in activity to counter al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, or their future spinoffs and manifestations. That would be a smart, and relatively low-cost, investment that would allow the U.S. government to preserve knowledge and gain analytical efficiencies over time.

Another related reason why it would be lamentable to not do more with CEM is because not doing more assumes that the U.S. government has learned all it can from its archive; that the CEM archive does not contain data relevant to new counterterrorism lines of operation. Indeed, just as CEM can be leveraged to help look back and better understand the past, it can also be leveraged to help the United States uncover issues it has missed and identify information that could inform, or lead to, future actions. For example, the material could be used to enhance understanding of the Islamic State's global supply chain network (with potential emphasis placed on suppliers utilized in countries such as Turkey or China).

The importance of leveraging CEM in this way takes on additional salience when one considers the United States' Afghanistan withdrawal, and current predicament. Due to that decision, the United States—as noted by General Votel in an interview in this publication—is going to need to develop ways to understand and disrupt or attack terror targets at a greater stand-off distance.[42] One potential way it could do that is by focusing on the logistical and financial support networks that have helped to sustain groups like the Afghan Taliban or Islamic State Khorasan. The CEM archive contains thousands of financial ledgers, many of which are in Pashto or Dari, that were recovered by U.S. and partner forces in Afghanistan.[43] If the United States needs new ways to continue to apply pressure to those two groups, or gain leverage, the CEM archive likely holds some important insights, clues, and uncovered secrets.

Lastly, as Fenzel, Slootmaker, and Cragin have argued, CEM

"Just as CEM can be leveraged to help look back and better understand the past, it can also be leveraged to help the United States uncover issues it has missed and identify information that could inform, or lead to, future actions."

"also holds unlimited potential for strategic competition" and can be creatively leveraged in that regard.[44]

3. Create and Utilize CT Data Resources to Learn Lessons, Improve, and Advance the Study of CT

The stockpile of data the United States has acquired since 9/11 is not limited to data on terror adversaries. The U.S. military also holds detailed information about its own counterterrorism activity over the past two decades. This 'blue' data should be studied and leveraged so the United States can learn from it and identify which strategies or approaches have worked or not worked. Doing so would help the U.S. military determine how it can become more effective as a force. It would also advance the discipline of counterterrorism as an area of academic inquiry.

An example highlights why leveraging 'blue' data in a more comprehensive way to look inward would be a smart play.[r] One of the approaches that has guided the United States' counterterrorism approach since 9/11 has been leadership decapitation: the removal, either through capture or killing, of key terror group personnel. The strategy of decapitation and its effectiveness has been the subject of academic debate for more than a decade, and key studies have put forth different interpretations about how leadership decapitation impacts the survivability, or endurance, of terror groups.[45]

The U.S. military holds data on thousands, if not tens of thousands, of real-world counterterrorism operations that could be used to inform some of the decapitation points of debate and advance understanding of where, how, and under what conditions that approach has or has not worked. For example, existing studies typically examine leadership decapitation through the lens of top, or senior, terror group leaders on whom information has been published. Data on mid-level leaders or key terror personnel who might not necessarily be leaders but who play critical roles in an organization (e.g., key financiers, logisticians, etc.) is less available via open-sources.[46] It therefore would be useful to know how removal of other key terror group members, beyond senior leaders, has impacted or not impacted the ability of al-Qa`ida, the Islamic

r Two examples of data-driven efforts focused on this area include the Counterterrorism Net Assessment Data Structure (CT-NEADS) project and the Government Actions in Terror Environments (GATE) Dataset, the latter of which placed initial focus on Israel and Canada. For background on CT-NEADS, see "Counterterrorism Net Assessment Data Structure," START. For background on GATE, see Laura Dugan and Erica Chenoweth, "Introducing Government Actions in Terror Environments (GATE) Dataset," paper presented at The Construction of Terrorism Conference, December 3-4, 2015.

State, the Haqqani network, or the Afghan Taliban to operate.

Similarly, if the United States has an interest in improving its future use of leadership decapitation, it would be useful to know what the data says about when the effects of counterterrorism actions are more lasting: Is it when leaders and mid-level managers are removed in rapid succession, when key support personnel are targeted, or perhaps when kinetic actions have been complemented with additional counterterrorism approaches that place other forms of pressure on a group? The data could support some of the academic findings on the topic: that leadership decapitation is of limited effectiveness when regularly applied across time, especially when applied against older and more seasoned groups. And if that ends up being the case, the United States should give additional consideration to when leadership decapitation would be most beneficial, when it is counterproductive, and when other approaches might lead to more lasting effects.

Looking back on decades' worth of operational counterterrorism data will also likely pay other dividends, as when that data is reviewed in hindsight and from a strategic perspective it could reveal and spotlight patterns that the United States did not see, or was moving too fast to notice; information that could prove useful over the next five to 10 years as the fight against terror evolves.

Ideally, the United States would take a broad and comprehensive look at its counterterrorism data holdings, as there are additional types of data that can reveal important insights about the scale, application, and effectiveness of other U.S. counterterror tools and approaches.[s] In many cases, this includes data resources that are available but are either scattered—with pieces of data about a particular issue located in various places—or that are not well structured to facilitate data-driven analysis. One example is data about the United States' use of two primary terror sanction tools: Executive Order 13224 and the State Department's Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designation. In September 2020, the Combating Terrorism Center released a major longitudinal study that leveraged data from those two tools to attempt to empirically evaluate outcomes associated with their use.[47] Why? Because while the U.S. government believes those two tools are useful and lead to better or more effective outcomes, no one within government had done the work to empirically evaluate if that was the case. To facilitate that look, CTC just needed to add some structure to the data and examine it through an analytical framework. That took time, but it was not rocket science.

Unfortunately, when it comes to counterterror data, the shortcomings described above are not uncommon. Another example is U.S. security cooperation data. Given the ongoing 'right sizing' of U.S. counterterrorism, over the next decade the United States is likely going to need to rely on partners more, not less. U.S. security cooperation assistance provides an important set of authorities and tools to help the United States bolster the capabilities and capacity of allies, as well as maintain the relationships needed to enhance

"Ideally, the United States would take a broad and comprehensive look at its counterterrorism data holdings, as there are additional types of data that can reveal important insights about the scale, application, and effectiveness of other U.S. counterterror tools and approaches."

U.S. influence, shape or conduct counterterrorism operations, and enrich understanding of how foreign terror threats are evolving. Yet, despite the importance of U.S. security cooperation activity to the future of U.S. counterterrorism, the security cooperation data landscape leaves a lot to be desired. There is much data that exists about the topic, but it can be hard to find, and where structured publicly available data resources exist, they only provide a high-level view of security cooperation efforts. It takes an informed and discerning eye to make sense of the available data on counterterrorism-focused U.S. security cooperation programs. That makes it hard, and an inefficient process, to aggregate and stitch data together about historical and more current security cooperation programs that have a counterterrorism nexus, which in turn makes it even harder to provide a perspective on the effectiveness of those programs (typically valued at tens of millions of dollars) over time. It also makes it hard to empirically identify cross-cutting building partner capacity challenge areas tied to specific capabilities, systems, or U.S. approaches that can be common to various partners.

More structured analysis and tracking of security cooperation data also has other benefits, as when data on China's and Russia's counterterrorism-focused security assistance are matched with data on U.S. activity, it can reveal where the United States is competing, or not competing, with its near-peer adversaries around the world, and how that landscape is evolving.

4. Practice Alchemy: Aggregate, Integrate, Experiment, and Make Creative Use of Data

Sometimes, data relevant to terrorism and counterterrorism is hiding in plain sight: it just needs to be 'found' and leveraged in novel and creative ways. Thus, as the United States looks forward, it should also give serious consideration to what other types of under- or less-utilized data it can leverage to advance understanding of terror group behavior and counterterrorism activity. Two examples highlight the power of investing in and embracing terror and counterterror data alchemy.

The first example relates to data that was imaginatively extracted from a terror group's writings about its own fallen recruits. Recruits are the life blood of terror groups, as without members—and the recruitment of new members—terror groups stagnate and wither away. This is one of the many reasons why it is essential to develop insight into who joins terrorist groups, what motivates those individuals, and how terror organizations attract and make use of its new members. For a group like the Islamic State and its

s One useful resource that could help kick start and guide such an effort and related research inquires would be the Influencing Violent Extremist Organizations (I-VEO) Knowledge Matrix tool developed by START, which contains a list of 183 hypotheses "about influencing VEOs, from positive incentives to punitive actions." For background on that project, see "IVEO Knowledge Matrix," start.umd.edu; start.foxtrotdev.com; and "START launches new tool for counterterrorism community," start.umd.edu, August 31, 2012.

predecessor entities, there are a plethora of recovered documents—from payment spreadsheets to individual registration forms—that provide insight into that group's tens of thousands of recruits. But the same type of material is not as available for other important militant groups, like the Pakistani terror outfit Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which orchestrated the high-profile and complex attack in India's Mumbai in 2008.[48] So, if developing a deeper understanding of who joins a group like LeT, how they join, and what those recruits do in the group is a priority, then that data needs to be found elsewhere, or it needs to be engineered.

Fortunately, terrorist groups like to 'talk' and they like to publish material about their worldview, their activity, and their accomplishments. LeT is no exception. Indeed, since the 1990s, LeT, as well as many other FTO-designated Pakistani terror organizations, have openly published a mix of periodicals targeted to specific audiences—from Urdu language magazines designed for men, women, and children to publications released in English.[49] LeT's magazines are chock full of all sorts of information the group has decided to publicly privilege and publish, including tributes to fallen fighters who have died during LeT operations. Month after month, year after year, and across two decades, the group has published details about its fallen recruits. That data has been available: it just needed to be extracted, coded/structured, and analyzed. So, in the early 2010s, that is what a CTC effort did.

The result: the creation of a 900-person dataset filled with details about the background, recruitment, training, deployment, and death of recruits who joined the group across a 13-year period—the largest public dataset on Pakistani militant group members of its kind at the time.[50] The analytical report that accompanied the dataset provided granular, data-driven insights about where, down to the district and village level in Pakistan, LeT has historically recruited its members *and* the specific regions, usually in areas of India-occupied Kashmir, where those recruits died.[51] To derive more meaning, information about the educational background of the militants was also extracted from LeT's magazines and evaluated in relation to publicly available statistical data released by the government of Pakistan about male educational attainment levels in the country, data that helped to dispel some myths about the typical level and type of education LeT militants have received. In the LeT example, the explanatory power of the data did not lie in the individual martyrdom biographies that the group published, but in the longitudinal aggregation and statistical examination of that collection of data.

The second example of a novel use of data for counterterror purposes comes not from physical magazines, but from information captured overhead: from satellites. In early 2021, Eric Robinson and Sean Mann published a series of reports through a collaborative effort between RAND and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA).[52] As part of that effort, the two RAND researchers leveraged geospatial data on nighttime lighting to evaluate the temporal growth and continued use of 380 detention facilities in Xinjiang, China[53]—facilities the Chinese government has reportedly used to detain Uighur Muslims as part of its domestic efforts, it claims, to counter separatism, extremism, and terrorism in the country.

The project was unique due to the novel approach taken, particularly the creative analytical use of under-utilized data (i.e., nighttime lighting); its blended use of data; and its overarching focus (i.e., the initiative shined a data-driven light on the disconnect between China's claims about its detention facilities in Xinjiang and what commercial satellite data suggests about their use).

"Due to the diversity of terror threats and the complexity and scale of information that needs to be reviewed, the United States also needs to figure out which data processing and analytical tasks it can automate through investment in data science and ML/AI-driven approaches."

The effort was also noteworthy because it appears that the approach taken could—with some data science engineering—be automated, scaled, or applied to other similar use cases around the world.

5. Automate and Augment: From 'Big' and Merged Data to Smaller Scale, Basic-Level Applications

Due to the diversity of terror threats and the complexity and scale of information that needs to be reviewed, the United States also needs to figure out which data processing and analytical tasks it can automate through investment in data science and ML/AI-driven approaches. Regardless of whether one is a fan of the Star Wars spin-off series *The Mandalorian* or not, when it comes to the future, like the creed espoused by the show's main character, "This is the way."

The U.S. government has been moving in the automation direction and has recognized the broad potential of data-enabled technologies for years.[54] Indeed, as noted by Shultz and Clarke, Project Maven—DoD's AI 'path finder' counterterrorism effort to automate the processing of ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] data—"is not the endgame—it is a start point," a "first step toward a data-enabled force."[55] [t] The "PED [Processing, Exploitation, and Dissemination] problem with FMV [Full Motion Video]" that Project Maven aimed to address was, according to the two authors, "a single point of entry. The intelligence warfighting function alone has many other data-rich nodes, such as digital media and other forms of captured enemy material, that are ripe for AI/ML application."[56] The broad vision that the United States has for automation is also reflected in the National Security Commission for AI's 2021 report, which recommended that "Starting immediately, the IC [Intelligence Community] should prioritize automating each stage of the intelligence cycle to the greatest extent possible and processing all available data and information through AI-enabled analytic systems before human analyst review."[57] Such steps, if taken and executed well, will—as researcher Brian Katz has observed—

t As noted by the ODNI's AIM Strategy, the U.S. intelligence community holds a similar view: "Leveraging artificial intelligence, automation, and augmentation technologies to amplify the effectiveness of our workforce will advance mission capability and enhance the IC's ability to provide needed data interpretation to decision makers." "The AIM Initiative: A Strategy for Augmenting Intelligence Using Machines," Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 16, 2019.

lead to numerous benefits, such an helping to create more "strategic bandwidth" for analysts.[58]

A well-publicized area where the power and automation benefits of AI has been utilized for counterterrorism purposes is the identification, moderation, and removal of online terror content by social media and technology companies, from Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to Snap and others.[59] This includes AI tools and approaches utilized at these companies, to a content classifier created by a data science/AI firm in partnership with the U.K. Home Office,[60] to collaborative initiatives like the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT)[61] or the United Nations-supported Tech Against Terrorism,[62] which were set up to foster technical know-how, share knowledge, and advance research, as well as other efforts.[63] In July 2021, GIFCT made news by announcing it would be diversifying the ideological type of information it shares with partners via a central database it manages, with primary emphasis no longer placed just on Islamist extremist content, an historical area of focus, but also on information about far-right extremist activity.[64] GIFCT also announced that it would expand the types of information it shares—beyond photos and videos—to three new categories of content: "PDFs of terrorist or violent extremist attackers, terrorist publications that use specific branding and logos, and URLs that are often shared on social networks."[65] These developments point to a maturation of how extremist digital content is handled, and the scaling of AI and technical solutions to different types of extremist content and material produced by networks motivated by different ideologies.

AI has been used in more controversial ways to automate the identification of patterns of interest to counterterrorism practitioners. As highlighted by Kathleen McKendrick, one such example comes from "leaked details of the US National Security Agency's SKYNET" effort, "which was purportedly used in Pakistan in 2007."[66] The algorithm developed was "used to analyse metadata from 55 million domestic Pakistani mobile phone users. This was a machine learning model built by exposure to this data; it classified the phone users into two separate groups, one of which exhibited a usage pattern matching that of a small group of persons known to be terrorist couriers, the other comprising the remainder of the mobile phone users."[67] Even though the model reportedly had a low false positivity rate (0.008 percent), the scale of data collected and purportedly analyzed "would result in the wrongful identification of some 15,000 individuals as of interest"—a large number.[68] Despite the privacy considerations associated with the model and approach, it "shows how seemingly non-sensitive data may have predictive value when identifying close links with terrorism or likely intelligence value."[69]

DoD has also been placing AI emphasis on approaches that blend or fuse different types of data. Shultz and Clarke put the vision and emphasis into context:

> *The ability to access publicly available data, find connections within classified archives, and rapidly alert a strategic commander to a threat, update the situational awareness of a unit in the field, or enable quick and precise information operations became a very real possibility and an invaluable opportunity. Effectively, operationalized AI and cloud computing were inseparable. Recognizing the potential, USSOCOM extended the partnership with Project Maven and US Air Force research and development offices to build an algorithmic capability that will blend publicly available data with classified information across the intelligence, planning, and operational portfolios. This vision has expanded beyond Project Maven and USSOCOM, and now features prominently in DoD's Digital Modernization Strategy.*[70]

"Analysis of foundational and readily available open-source data on terror incidents could be automated and leveraged to provide insight into changes occurring in a specific place, or in relation to a group or issue."

In the discussion on the GTD above, it was pointed out how analysis of foundational and readily available open-source data on terror incidents could be automated and leveraged to provide insight into changes occurring in a specific place, or in relation to a group or issue. As noted earlier, there are a lot of groups and geographic ground for terrorism analysts to cover, and as a result, it can be hard for analysts to systematically track changes in key terrorism indicators—such as an uptick in the frequency of attacks in one area or a group's shift to a new type of target in another—over time. Analysts' time is precious and limited, and it is better spent on more complex analytical tasks rather than tracking a set of terrorism indicators or crunching that data; these tasks can and should be automated.[u] For example, GTD or another similar data repository like the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) could provide the historical data needed to generate and identify longitudinal, empirical terror trends. With one of those resources functioning as a data backbone, a data interface or dashboard could be designed that would allow users to select from a defined list of meaningful terrorism indicators (e.g., changes in scale of activity, geographic shifts, targeting trends, organizational complexity measures, lethality, etc.) that could be organized by region or group, tailorable to each user's specific interests.

The tool would then present results to the user when noteworthy changes (which could be toggled at different levels of sensitivity) or data anomalies occur—and do so in an automated, alert-type way. The tool, and not the user, would run the data analytics. The value is that the tool would arm the user with both immediate context and notification that a meaningful change in data has been observed. The data and technology exist to create such a tool, which would be akin to an automated notification tool, not for specific events (like Dataminr) but for specific terrorism data trends. That way, analysts can focus less on context and change, and more on navigating other data complexities. The power of such a tool would be enhanced even more if it relied not just on a single data source of data like GTD or ACLED, but if it also fused or integrated indicator data from

u Or as described by Shultz and Clarke: "Reinvesting the analyst's expertise and energy away from screen-watching and onto more exquisite tasks is not just economical, it is a combat multiplier." Shultz and Clarke.

multiple sources,[v] and eventually different types of data.[w]

To develop such a tool, the U.S. government could draw upon lessons learned from prior AI efforts sponsored by the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity (IARPA) and DARPA that have grappled with similar challenges. One example is IARPA's Open Source Indicators Program, which was launched in 2011, and aimed to "develop methods for continuous, automated analysis of publicly available data in order to anticipate and/or detect significant societal events, such as political crises, humanitarian crises, mass violence, riots, mass migrations, disease outbreaks."[71] Another example is the Integrated Crisis Early Warning System (ICEWS), a project that DARPA kicked off in 2007.[72]

Conclusion

U.S. counterterrorism is at an important inflection point. Data and what the United States does with data will enable, and be a critical driver of, what the future of U.S. counterterrorism looks like. To prepare for that future, the United States needs to figure out how it can more effectively harness, extract more meaning from, and make more efficient and timely use of the vast stockpiles of terrorism-related data it has, and will continue to acquire in the years ahead. Given the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the ongoing 'right sizing' of U.S. counterterrorism, the United States also needs to navigate how it can maintain visibility into the inner-workings and plans of key international terror networks, especially when operating more from afar, an issue that could affect the 'quality' or 'currency' of terror data over time, and create new risks.

Even though the United States' national security apparatus has access to state-of-the-art, leading-edge technology, what it can do to better leverage data is still constrained by technical obstacles and other barriers.[73] For example, as noted by Shultz and Clarke, the "greatest roadblock to advancing AI capabilities for the warfighter" is "the lack of a dedicated cloud-based data management infrastructure capable of quickly cutting across classification levels."[74] Navigating through those various challenges requires vision to guide change; the resources, leadership, infrastructure, technical know-how, and talent needed to advance it; and the development of a cultural environment[x] that fosters creativity, experimentation, risk and therefore the acceptance of possible failure, and that creates the time, 'space,' and opportunities needed to bring that future to life.[y]

The ideas shared in this article are designed to advance conversations, and hopefully spur debate, about what a terror data action plan could, and arguably should, look like; the need for it; and how components of it could be pursued. Given this article's emphasis on four types of data that have generally received less public data science and ML/AI-focused attention, the view that it offers is partial and limited. When it comes to the broader vision for what the U.S. government should do with its diverse and multifaceted data holdings that provide insight into terrorism and counterterrorism questions, a useful starting point is an effort that begins at two points of departure. The first would be more traditional and focus on the primary terrorism and counterterror data injects, resources, software, and systems that the United States already has in play, or plans to acquire, and develop approaches to help it structure, integrate, and derive more meaning in relation to key priorities.

The second approach would be a bit more unconventional and start from a blank sheet of paper. Such an approach is recommended as it would create an opportunity for the U.S. government to take a step back from the current suite of systems, tools, and solutions that it utilizes, which could limit or constrain the pace and power of change. This is because while existing data and AI-focused tools and systems are essential to the practice of intelligence and continuity of operations over the short-term, they may wed the United States to approaches that rely on those systems and in turn prevent the United States from designing and implementing new concepts and approaches that could help it to drive more radical, rapid, and meaningful change over the mid- to long term. Or, put another way, starting from a blank sheet of paper would give the United States the opportunity to think through and design a construct that would allow it to achieve the goals that is has for specific types of data and the collective integration of various forms of data. And do so without constraints. CTC

v A useful proof of concept in this regard is the ExTrac tool, which combines real-time terror attack data with terror communications and is marketed as leveraging AI to develop analytical insights. For background, see https://extrac.io/. Another useful case to look at is Andi Peng's undergraduate thesis paper, which provides "a novel approach to studying terrorism" by integrating "supervised machine learning techniques with terrorism specific domain knowledge to extract macro-level conclusions about the pattern of terrorist behavior." See Andi Peng, "An Integrated Machine Learning Approach To Studying Terrorism," Yale University thesis, April 20, 2018.

w As noted by the ODNI's AIM Strategy: "Nearly all current commercial applications of AI are narrow solutions in that they solve a single problem with a single kind of data. Image classification, face recognition, and human language translation are all examples of narrow AI solutions. The IC must bring together data from multiple INTs to provide context and meaning to analysts over a variety of different data. Multimodal AI presents a whole new group of challenges in a number of areas that the IC must overcome." See "The AIM Initiative: A Strategy for Augmenting Intelligence Using Machines."

x As a CSIS Intelligence and Technology Task Force report noted: "The primary obstacle to intelligence innovation is not technology, it is culture." See "Maintaining the Intelligence Edge: Reimagining and Reinventing Intelligence through Innovation," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2021.

y There are a variety of ideas and methods to foster creative approaches to data and data application challenges. For example, as noted by Amy Zegart, "One of the most intriguing ideas that the [CSIS Intelligence and Technology] task force [report] came up with is to have AI 'red cells,' or teams that use open-source information and AI and compete against human analysts." See Andrews. Another method, already pursued by SOCOM, is student competitions. See "MIT Army ROTC Cadets tackle SOCOM Innovation Challenge," U.S. Army Cadet Public Affairs, December 1, 2020.

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Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan's Security Forces

By Jonathan Schroden

Six themes emerge from a close examination of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces' (ANDSF) collapse in 2021: the ANDSF collapse was months—if not years—in the making; the United States did not give the ANDSF everything they needed to be independently successful; the ANDSF did put up a fierce fight in many areas; the ANDSF were poorly served by Afghan political leaders; the ANDSF were poorly served by their own commanders; and the Taliban strategy overwhelmed and demoralized the ANDSF. From these themes, there are three key lessons: the ANDSF's failure had many fathers; the U.S. model of security assistance requires reform; and greater emphasis on non-material factors (e.g., morale) is needed in future security force assessments.

On August 15, 2021, Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani boarded an aircraft bound for Tajikistan, effectively abdicating his position as the country's president and cementing the Taliban's victory over his Western-backed government.[1] The preceding four months, between President Joe Biden's announcement on April 14 that the United States would withdraw all of its military forces from Afghanistan[2] and Ghani's flight from the country, saw the Taliban conduct a nationwide campaign that quickly overwhelmed the country's security forces and forced their total collapse.

Since August 15, the United States—and indeed, the world—has tried to understand what happened in Afghanistan that led to this stunning turn of events. A plethora of forensic articles have already been published by news agencies and analysts,[3] and U.S. government officials up to and including President Biden have offered explanations as well.[4] From these initial offerings, three thematic narratives have emerged that are specific to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). The first is that Afghanistan's army—and therefore, the country—collapsed in *less than two weeks*. The most cogent rendering of this theme came in a remark from Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley, who said, "There was nothing that I or anyone else saw that indicated a collapse of this army, and this government, in 11 days."[5]

The second is that the United States and its international partners gave the ANDSF everything they needed to be independently successful.[6] And the third is that these forces simply did not fight.[7] The most significant advancement of the second and third themes came from President Biden, who has remarked on them several times. For example, in his August 16 speech to the nation, he stated:

> *American troops cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves. We spent over a trillion dollars. We trained and equipped an Afghan military force of some 300,000 strong … a force larger in size than the militaries of many of our NATO allies. We gave them every tool they could need. We paid their salaries, provided for the maintenance of their air force … We provided close air support. We gave them every chance to determine their own future. What we could not provide them was the will to fight for that future.*[8]

But are these themes accurate? And do they represent the primary takeaways from the events that unfolded in Afghanistan over the summer of 2021? In this article, the author will argue that these themes are incorrect—or at least, significantly incomplete. The article will present this case by first providing a reconstruction of events in Afghanistan from mid-April to mid-August 2021. The author will then identify a more complete and accurate set of key themes that flow from these events. And those themes will be used to offer a more salient set of lessons from the collapse of Afghanistan's security forces.

The author offers this article fully acknowledging that even though he was heavily critical of the ANDSF's capabilities for many years[9] and had called for significant reforms to address the issues he identified,[10] he was still one of many analysts who assessed that these forces would fare better on their own against the Taliban than they ultimately did. Indeed, he tweeted on August 12:

> *I am legitimately shocked at how quickly the cities of #Afghanistan have fallen. I knew the #ANDSF weren't as strong as advertised in rural areas, but I genuinely believed they'd stand & fight to defend the cities. I was wrong.*[11]

If lessons are to be learned from events as they unfolded in Afghanistan, it is imperative for all to revisit the details of what happened and why—and to use the understanding gained through historical analysis to identify what about the approaches and

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assessments were wrong. This article was written in that spirit and is an attempt to spark a broader conversation along these lines.

Before proceeding, a caveat: It is still too early to have definitive and comprehensive accounts of what happened in Afghanistan this past summer. For example, there is very little reporting from Taliban sources regarding the logic and extent of their actions, and accounts of the political dealings among Afghan elites and between them and Taliban interlocutors are missing. In addition, many Western sources uncritically promulgated the themes advanced by Western officials in real time (e.g., that the ANDSF collapsed in 11 days). As such, the author will primarily rely here on reporting from Afghan news sources, reputable Afghan journalists, and Western journalists and analysts who were based in Afghanistan.

Recap of the Collapse

Early 2021

In order to properly understand the events of this past summer, it is necessary to first illustrate the situation in Afghanistan as it existed just prior to President Biden's decision to withdraw from the country. Since the end of the U.S. and NATO combat mission in 2015, the government of Afghanistan steadily lost control of territory in the country. For example, according to FDD's Long War Journal (LWJ), in November 2017, the government controlled 217 of Afghanistan's 407 districts.[12] By April 2021, it controlled only 129—a decrease of about 40 percent.[13]

At a macro level, in early 2021, the author used LWJ's district assessments in conjunction with reporting from local sources (e.g., Afghan journalists) to identify 15 of Afghanistan's 34 provincial capitals as being effectively surrounded by Taliban-controlled areas.[a] Thus, even before President Biden's announcement in mid-April, the Taliban had heavily infiltrated areas immediately adjacent to major cities all across Afghanistan. This posture included the Taliban having severed many secondary roads—and even portions of Highway 1 (the primary "ring road" around the country)—in what *The New York Times* described in mid-2020 as a "slow creeping siege" of Afghanistan's cities.[14] In these efforts, the Taliban were likely aided by the release of 5,000 of the group's prisoners by the Afghan government (completed in early September 2020), which was heavily pressured to do so by the United States in order to meet one of the terms of the U.S.-Taliban agreement.[15] And the group was substantially assisted by financial, material, or diplomatic support that it had received for years from a variety of external actors (e.g., Russia, Iran, Gulf states).[16] The most significant source of such support came from Pakistan, which also provided sanctuary and strategic advice for the group's leaders as well as support to the recruitment, training, deployment, and recuperation of its fighters.[17]

In the immediate wake of the signing of the U.S.-Taliban Agreement in February 2020,[18] the ANDSF entered into an "active defense posture," which limited their actions "to impairing a hostile attack while the enemy is in the process of forming for, assembling for, or executing an attack on Afghan government elements."[19] While President Ghani ordered his security forces to go back on the offensive in a televised address in May 2020,[20] the Afghan National Army (ANA) Chief of General Staff issued an order in June 2020 codifying the active defense strategy[21] and the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) noted several months later that the ANDSF had maintained a defensive stance.[22] The effects of the active defense posture could be seen in a decreased number of total operations involving Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF; primarily the Commandos),[23] increased operational tempo of the Afghan Air Force (AAF),[b] consolidation of hundreds of ANDSF checkpoints into a smaller number of patrol bases,[24] and levels of Taliban-initiated attacks that were 45 percent higher than in 2019.[c]

"Even before President Biden's announcement in mid-April, the Taliban had heavily infiltrated areas immediately adjacent to major cities all across Afghanistan. This posture included the Taliban having severed many secondary roads—and even portions of Highway 1 (the primary 'ring road' around the country)."

Even with this slightly consolidated and defensive posture, the ANDSF were still arrayed across hundreds (if not thousands) of checkpoints and installations across the country, and the force consistently struggled with logistics and resupply of its positions.[25] As a result, by 2020, the ANDSF had transitioned from a "pull" logistics system in which regional Army corps were responsible for requesting necessary supplies from Kabul and then providing them to the point of need for their assigned forces, to one in which the Afghan Ministry of Defense (MOD) utilized "strategic national convoys" to push logistics packages on routine timelines to regional units. By the end of 2020, however, even these convoys had become unreliable due to the Taliban's disruption of the country's road networks, so the ANDSF were increasingly reliant on the AAF conducting weekly logistics flights to regional locations.[26]

The ANDSF were also heavily reliant on contractors to maintain

a These cities (and their provinces) were: Asadabad (Kunar), Pol-e-Alam (Logar), Gardez (Paktia), Ghazni City (Ghazni), Sharana (Paktika), Qalat (Zabul), Tarin Kowt (Uruzgan), Lashkar Gah (Helmand), Zaranj (Nimruz), Farah City (Farah), Qala-e-Naw (Badghis), Maimana (Faryab), Sar-e Pol City (Sar-e Pol), Baghlan City (Baghlan), and Kunduz City (Kunduz).

b Exact numbers of AAF airstrikes in support of ANDSF ground forces for all of 2020-2021 are not available (though some sporadic monthly totals do exist). But if one makes the assumption that the number of civilian deaths caused by AAF airstrikes is proportional to the total number of airstrikes, notable increases in the former in 2020 are suggestive of significant increases in AAF air missions that year. See Neta C. Crawford, "Afghanistan's Rising Civilian Death Toll Due to Airstrikes, 2017-2020," Brown University's Watson Institute, December 7, 2020.

c This percentage relates to the average daily number of enemy-initiated attacks from June 1 to November 30, 2020, as compared to the same time period in 2019. "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," U.S. Department of Defense, December 2020, p. 13. According to that report, over the course of 2020, "The Taliban continued to apply pressure on the ANDSF by maintaining high levels of violence through its military campaign across Afghanistan … The Taliban have deliberately maintained a high-volume of small-unit and indirect fire attacks against ANDSF checkpoints (CPs) and bases and have used improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to target ANDSF convoys." Ibid., p. 8.

Afghanistan (Institute for the Study of War)

their equipment. With the exception of its Mi-17 helicopter fleet, the AAF was almost completely dependent on contract maintenance.[27] In January 2021, the U.S. military entity advising the AAF stated that none of its aircraft were likely to be sustained as combat effective beyond a few months after the withdrawal of contracted maintainers.[28] During 2020, the percentage of Afghan army vehicle repairs being conducted by Afghans (as opposed to contractors) was 19 percent, far below the goal of 70-80 percent.[29] For the police, this number was seven percent, against a goal of 25-45 percent.[30 d]

For its part, by early 2021, the United States had reduced its footprint in Afghanistan to roughly 2,500 troops and 11 bases.[31] These troops were focused primarily on partnered counterterrorism missions with ASSF and advising the ANDSF in four primary areas: strategy and institutional oversight/support (at the security ministries), aviation (the AAF), special operations (ASSF), and supporting functions (e.g., command and control, logistics) for the ANA.[32] The United States provided significant support to these functions through the use of a Combined Situation Awareness Room and a set of Regional Targeting Teams. The most notable effect of these entities was to quickly bring airstrikes in support of ANDSF ground units, often within minutes of them being attacked by Taliban forces.[33]

Taken together, these observations paint a picture of slow, but steady degradations in security in recent years, a Taliban insurgency that maintained the initiative, had ample external support, and was well-postured to challenge the government across the entirety of the country, and an ANDSF that had mostly stopped conducting offensive operations and was heavily reliant on air support and U.S. advisors for both strikes and resupply, as well as contractors for maintenance of their equipment. In part due to these factors, a net assessment of the ANDSF and Taliban fighting forces that the author conducted in January 2021 for this publication concluded that after the withdrawal of U.S. advisors and air support from Afghanistan, the Taliban would likely have "a slight military advantage" over the ANDSF "which would then likely grow in a compounding fashion."[34 e] These factors also led Kate Clark of the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) to presciently observe:

As US troops withdraw over the next few months, the

d To put these figures in context, the United States only began fielding up-armored vehicles in large numbers to the ANDSF after the threat of improvised explosive devices became significant nationwide and the United States had fielded these vehicles to its own forces (circa 2014 to 2016). As these vehicles were fielded to the ANDSF, there was debate as to whether or not the goal should ever be for them to conduct organic maintenance of those vehicles, or whether an indefinite contract solution was acceptable (as it was deemed to be for the AAF). By 2017, the United States made the decision to sign the National Maintenance Contract – Ground Vehicles, which had the following goals: "In the case of the [Ministry of Defense], the goal is to build the capacity of the ANA to conduct its own maintenance. Within the [Ministry of Interior], the overarching goal is to transition away from coalition contracts to Afghan-contracted support." See "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," U.S. Department of Defense, June 2017, p. 38.

e The net advantage for the Taliban stemmed largely from the group's more effective strategy, self-sustainability, and better cohesion when compared to those aspects for the ANDSF.

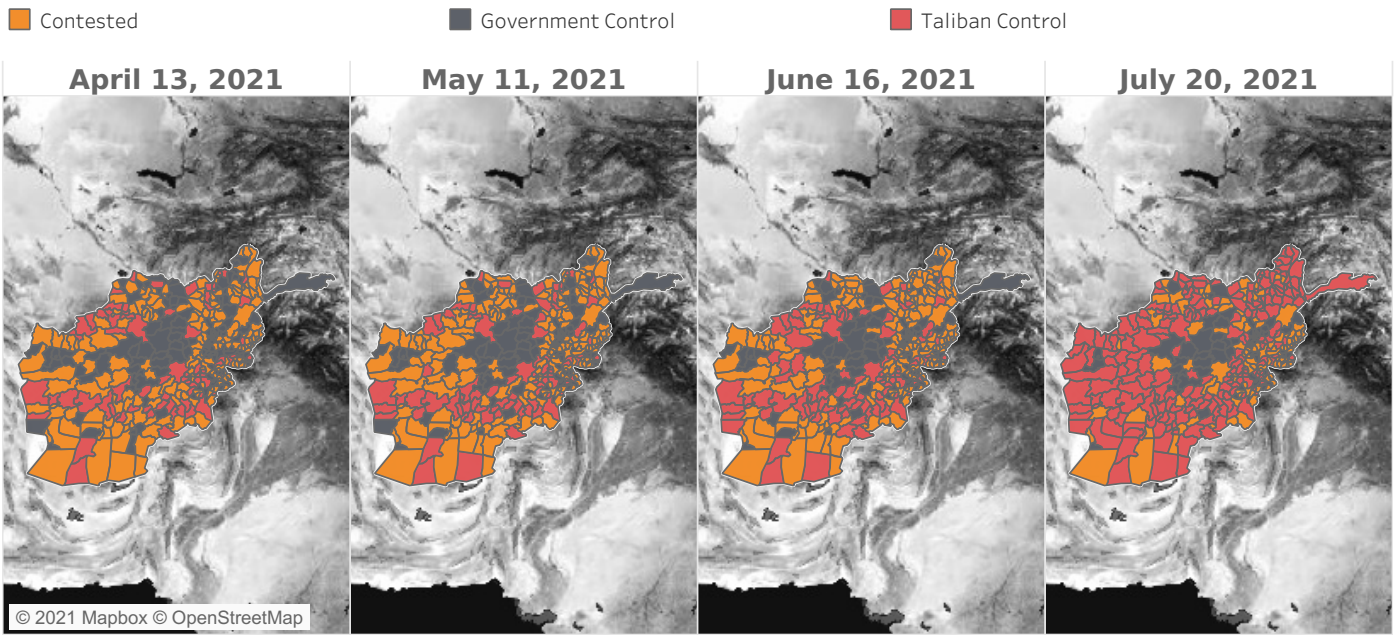

Figure 1: Assessments of government versus Taliban control of Afghanistan's districts at various points in 2021 (Source: "Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan," FDD's Long War Journal)

> *[ANDSF] can expect decreasing air support from its powerful ally and finally little or nothing at all. The Taliban's current position of harassing [ANDSF], consolidating control of territory and focusing on extorting money from travelers and other citizens could morph into them massing forces and launching offensives on provincial centers. Would a withdrawing America deploy its air force in 2021 as it did to defend Kandahar and Lashkar Gah in the autumn of 2020 if the Taliban start attacking Afghanistan's cities in the next few months? ... The Afghan air force has been conducting aerial strikes, but if its deterrent power proves to be less potent, major Taliban offensives will become more likely, with grave losses of life to both combatants and civilians.*[35]

April 2021

In the 16 days following President Biden's withdrawal announcement, a number of key events took place. The Taliban declared that they would not attend a diplomatic conference that the United States had been trying to organize in Istanbul to reinvigorate the Afghan peace process.[36] President Ghani declared that the Afghan government was "not at risk of collapse" after the U.S. withdrawal and assessments to that effect were a "false narrative."[37] Ghani's assertions were bolstered by those of his own generals, who stated that the ANDSF were "ready to safeguard the nation"[38] and "crush the Taliban" after the U.S. withdrawal.[39] These comments stood in stark contrast to one by the commander of U.S. Central Command, General Frank McKenzie, who told the U.S. Congress that he was "concerned about the ability of the Afghan military to hold on after we leave, the ability of the Afghan Air Force to fly, in particular, after we remove the support for those aircraft."[40] The latter concern was amplified by the Pentagon spokesman's announcement on April 27 that the United States would not continue to provide air support for the ANDSF after its withdrawal.[41]

On the ground in Afghanistan, the Taliban initiated increased attacks across the country, with violence reported in multiple regions and in 24 of the country's 34 provinces (e.g., Balkh, Kandahar, Herat, Nangarhar).[42] The ANDSF began a deliberate clearing operation in Balkh province,[43] and residents in lightly defended areas (e.g., Takhar) began to arm themselves in preparation for Taliban offensives.[44] The Taliban began sending letters to Afghan politicians asking them for direct negotiations (in an attempt to bypass the government's negotiating team in Doha and sow division among Kabul elites),[45] and protests erupted in Faryab over President Ghani's attempt to install a Pashtun loyalist as the governor of that province, further straining his relationship with the notorious northern strongman, Abdul Rashid Dostum.[46] By mid-April, LWJ assessed the Taliban to be in control of 77 districts and the government in control of 129, with the remaining 194 districts contested (Figure 1).[47]

At the end of April, *The New York Times* published a scathing assessment of the readiness of the ANDSF to fight the Taliban alone. The report cited a number of factors that had been called out previously by independent analysts,[48] such as slumping recruitment, high casualty rates, extreme corruption, and poor support of fielded forces, as major concerns that had resulted in one of the ANA corps fielding only about half of its authorized end-strength.[49] The report cited a police lieutenant in Herat as saying, "I have been in this job for eight months, during this time we only got air support once. No one is providing support for us, our forces are hopeless and they are giving up on their jobs."[50] Of the lieutenant's 30 police outposts, one had sold out to the Taliban, another had been overrun, and at least 30 of his officers had deserted.[51] In neighboring Helmand province, the report described ANA bases completely surrounded by Taliban-controlled areas and wholly reliant on resupply by helicopter. According to the newspaper, "Soldiers in Helmand Province recently tried to negotiate with the Taliban, in hopes of abandoning their base without being attacked. The Taliban refused to let them go unharmed unless they left behind their equipment and weapons."[52]

May 2021

On May 1, a date near the beginning of the traditional "fighting season" in Afghanistan,[f] the United States officially began withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan. The Taliban immediately surged attacks countrywide, with reports of intensified violence and additional district seizures by the Taliban in Uruzgan, Zabul, Helmand, Kandahar, Nangarhar, Kunar, Logar, Maidan Wardak, Baghlan, Ghazni, Balkh, Badakshan, Takhar, Kunduz, Herat, Faryab, and Farah provinces.[53] Unlike in previous years, these attacks did not draw punishing airstrikes in return.[54] In an ominous warning, Afghan parliamentarian Ahmad Eshchi said, "We are not well-prepared to save the cities."[55]

The most rapid, immediate advances by the Taliban came during the first couple of weeks in May, in Baghlan province. In what would become a repeated scene across the country, a half-dozen army bases in Baghlan were overrun by the Taliban and at least 200 soldiers stationed at them surrendered. Commandos were then deployed to try to retake the lost areas, scores of families were displaced by the subsequent fighting, local "public uprising forces" began to arm themselves, and parliamentarians publicly bemoaned the government's inability to secure the areas of the country that they represented.[56]

From May 13 to 16, separate unilateral ceasefires occurred on the parts of the government and the Taliban, to mark the Eid al-Fitr holiday. The U.S. commander in Afghanistan predicted that in the wake of the ceasefire, the Taliban would seek to "surge pressure on different provincial capitals."[57] This then happened, with Taliban attacks reported in 18 provinces (including in areas around their capitals) within two days of the ceasefires' end.[58]

As the month progressed, the security situation in Baghlan deteriorated, alongside significant degradations in nearby Laghman province.[59] Reports of ANDSF "tactical retreats" from bases and checkpoints increased in number and in consequence; reports surfaced of the ANDSF retreating not just from outlying posts, but from district centers as well.[60] Through most of the month, protests in Faryab over Ghani's governor appointment continued and intensified; these finally culminated on May 24, with Ghani's acquiescence and recall of his candidate.[61]

On May 25, Afghan parliamentarians convened a session at which they grilled the country's security leaders. While the latter attempted to shuffle blame onto Pakistan for its support to the Taliban and to downplay the significance of the threat—for example, by stating that the ANDSF were only fighting the Taliban in seven percent more districts than the year prior—Afghan lawmakers asked them such questions as: "What were the factors that led to the collapse of checkpoints in Laghman? Why did you not provide support to the soldiers while they were appealing for assistance?"[62] A statement by the head of the National Directorate for Security (NDS) typified the security leaders' responses: "Your security and defense forces are very determined and prepared, the enemy has suffered massive casualties and they do not have more strength."[63]

By May 25, U.S. Central Command said the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan was between 16 and 25 percent complete.[64] At the same time, ANDSF reinforcements sent to Laghman and attempts to consolidate positions there were unable to stem the Taliban's gains; the group advanced to the central prisons in the provincial capitals of Laghman and Baghlan.[65] Two days later, Australia shuttered its embassy in Kabul,[66] and on May 29, the United States transferred one of its primary bases in the city (New Kabul Compound) to the ANDSF.[67]

As May came to a close, the head of the NDS claimed that the Taliban were having major leadership problems and had suffered significant setbacks across the country.[68] He also claimed the ANDSF had killed 1,500 Taliban in a week.[69] This was contrasted by escalating Taliban attacks on Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province,[70] and another scathing *New York Times* report on the negotiated tactical surrender of 26 outposts and bases—and four district centers—to the Taliban across four provinces. This report described what happened in Laghman in detail, along with similar scenes in other areas:

> *… as American troops began leaving the country in early May, Taliban fighters besieged seven rural Afghan military outposts across the wheat fields and onion patches of the province, in eastern Afghanistan. The insurgents enlisted village elders to visit the outposts bearing a message: Surrender or die. By mid-month, security forces had surrendered all seven outposts after extended negotiations … At least 120 soldiers and police were given safe passage to the government-held provincial center in return for handing over weapons and equipment.*[71]

One of the elders involved in the negotiations said a key message that he delivered to local ANDSF forces was, "Look, your situation is bad — reinforcements aren't coming."[72]

June 2021

By the start of June, unofficial reports claimed that up to 100 Afghans (ANDSF plus civilians) were being killed or wounded by the Taliban per day,[73] as a result of fierce fighting across at least 24 provinces.[74] According to Fatima Kohistani, a parliamentarian from Ghor, the level of ANDSF casualties there reached the point of overwhelming the force's ability to collect its dead. She stated, "Our martyrs are on the ground, but no institution takes action to even collect them."[75]

Reports of districts falling to the Taliban accelerated, with Taliban captures taking place in at least Baghlan, Laghman, Maidan Wardak, Faryab, Ghor, Uruzgan, Badghis, Takhar, Sar-e-Pul, Balkh, Farah, Herat, Helmand, Kandahar, Nuristan, Badakhshan, Ghazni, Logar, and Zabul provinces.[76] By the middle of June, LWJ assessed that the Taliban controlled 104 districts outright, with another 201 contested, and the remaining 94 under government control—a gain of 27 districts for the Taliban and loss of 35 for the government since the announcement of the U.S. withdrawal in April (Figure 1).[77]

One standard talking point for the Afghan Ministry of Defense (MOD) at this time was that the ANDSF would "soon retake all those areas that have fallen to the Taliban."[78] But while the ANDSF did manage to retake several districts (e.g., Khan Abad in Kunduz), these gains came amid continued—and larger—losses in other regions.[79] These losses led to increased criticism of the government

f During the first 10 to 15 years of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, violence increased in accordance with the spring and summer seasons, and decreased over the fall and winter when some parts of the country received heavy snowfall, and roads and mountain passes were no longer traversable. The impact of these seasonal trends became less pronounced in recent years as a result of increased fighting all across the country, but the timing of the U.S. withdrawal nonetheless coincided with a time of year in which freedom of movement was possible throughout Afghanistan. See Eric Gons, Jonathan Schroden, Ryan McAlinden, Marcus Gaul, and Bret Van Poppel, "Challenges of Measuring Progress in Afghanistan Using Violence Trends: The Effects of Aggregation, Military Operations, Seasonality, Weather, and Other Causal Factors," *Defense & Security Analysis* 28:2 (2012): pp. 100-113.

by parliamentarians and military analysts. In particular, these audiences bemoaned the continued absence of the Minister of Defense (who was overseas for medical treatment), the appointment of yet another acting Minister of Interior, and the centralization of security policy in the Office of the National Security Council.[80] Representative comments came from parliamentarian Nilofar Jalali Kofi, who stated: "I am sure that provinces will fall if the situation continues. The Defense Ministry is fully paralyzed. It is not responsive,"[81] and from the parliamentarian Fatima Kohistani, who said that "the Ministry of Interior is on the verge of collapse."[82]

Conspiracy theories also began to broadly surface around this time. As stated by parliamentarian Sayed Hayatullah Alimi, "The people think there might be a deal behind the scenes, they think that the government in a sense wants to arm the Taliban and give territory to the Taliban."[83] These theories were bolstered by a widely shared social media video of what appeared to be the Taliban accompanying a convoy of security forces retreating from an outpost and leaving all of their equipment behind,[84] and by the active spread of corroborating misinformation by the Taliban.[85]

On June 17, a group of approximately 50 ASSF Commandos that had been sent to retake a district in Faryab were ambushed and overrun by Taliban fighters. The resulting death of 24 of the country's most highly trained fighters became a national story—in part because the dead included Major Sohrab Azimi, a well-known special operator—and one that weighed heavily on the ANDSF's morale.[86] Other ANDSF units fought to their end as well. For example, in Faryab's neighboring Shirin Tagab district, Afghan forces fought for days until they ran out of ammunition, at which point several hundred soldiers and police were captured or surrendered. The Taliban seized more than 100 vehicles and hundreds of weapons in the ensuing overrun of ANDSF positions.[87]

Over the next three days, the Taliban took a dozen additional districts across the country and briefly entered two provincial capitals in the north (Kunduz City and Maimana). Reports from the fallen districts indicated that, "In many cases, the security forces did not receive reinforcements and evacuated after hours of fighting … Many areas are falling to the armed opposition because security forces remain under siege and they have no equipment or supplies."[88] These trends continued through the end of the month, with the Taliban making additional net gains in districts across the country and pressuring additional provincial capitals (e.g., Taloqan, Pul-e-Khumri, Sar-e-Pul).[89] As a result of these losses, Afghans increasingly began taking up arms to protect their own areas, under the banner of "public uprising forces."[90] [g] By June 21, President Ghani issued a call to arms for such forces to rise up across the country.[91]

On June 25, Presidents Ghani and Biden met at the White House. Among other points of discussion, Ghani asked Biden for additional air assets to help bolster the level of air support to ANDSF ground forces. Several days later, the Pentagon announced that it would provide 37 more Blackhawks and two more A-29 attack aircraft to the AAF, and that about 200 contractors would stay to support the AAF until September.[92] The United States also reportedly used drones to conduct at least two airstrikes in support of Afghan forces battling to retake some areas in the north of the country.[93]

In the last five days of June, the Afghan Commandos pushed Taliban forces out of key areas of Pul-e-Khumri (Baghlan) and the ANDSF retook seven districts from the Taliban across Faryab, Baghlan, and Paktia provinces.[94] The efforts were bolstered by public uprising forces.[95] At the same time, the Taliban captured multiple border crossings, impacting neighboring Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.[96] Reports from the end of June consistently indicated multiple districts falling to the Taliban each day.[97] By the end of the month, the AAN estimated that the Taliban had captured 127 district centers—with most of those having fallen in the latter half of the month.[98] The resultant situation saw heavy fighting in and around numerous provincial capitals, most notably in Ghazni, Kunduz, Baghlan, Takhar, Faryab, Maidan Wardak, and Badakhshan.[99]

In total, during the month of the June, the ANDSF had only been able to recapture 10 of the 127 districts lost that month to the Taliban,[100] and the two elements that were predominantly used for reinforcement and recapture operations—the Commandos and the AAF—were wearing thin. The commander of the Afghan Special Operations Command stated that the Commandos—who were already being overused prior to the U.S. withdrawal—had seen their activity increase by 30 percent since May.[101] The AAF's activity roughly tripled. In June alone, it conducted 491 airstrikes, or about 16 per day.[102] The combination of increased demand for AAF support and a 75 percent decline in the number of contracted aircraft maintainers between April and June led to significant drops in aircraft readiness rates.[103] For example, the readiness of the AAF's UH-60 (Blackhawks) dropped from 77 percent in April/May to 39 percent in June.[104] To deliver even the same number of flight hours, the smaller number of available airframes had to fly well beyond their recommended flight-hour limits. By the end of June, the main advisory element to the AAF estimated that all available airframes were exceeding scheduled maintenance intervals by at least 25 percent and aircrews were flying hours well beyond levels recommended by safety protocols.[105]

As the month drew to a close, the Taliban made several concerted pushes to capture Pul-e-Khumri (Baghlan) but were repelled by the ANDSF.[106] The Italians transferred the last coalition base in Herat to the ANDSF and the Germans did the same in Mazar-e-Sharif.[107] Tallies of casualties led to declarations of June having been the deadliest month in Afghanistan in decades. Tolo News estimated nearly 1,700 ANDSF and civilian casualties over 30 days, the majority of which were suffered in northern and central provinces.[108] The MOD claimed (with little proof) to have killed or wounded nearly 10,000 Taliban fighters.[109] Amidst this carnage, the chairman of Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation (Abdullah Abdullah) worried publicly that "the survival, security, and unity of Afghanistan is in danger."[110]

July 2021

In early July, the MOD finally acknowledged that a "lack of equipment and delay in the delivery of emergency assistance" to its fielded forces were factors that had contributed to the loss of well over 100 districts to the Taliban in the month of June.[111] The acting Minister of the Interior admitted that "war management issues" were the main reason behind the deteriorating security situation. He claimed that public uprising forces were making a

g "Public uprising forces" was a blanket term used by the Afghan government to describe militias (a politically charged term) formed by locals to defend their own villages. These forces were often under the leadership of one or more local strongmen, though in some cases they operated under the auspices of a collective authority (e.g., an informal village council).

positive contribution, though leaders of those forces countered that the government was not providing them with adequate support.[112] The acting minister further stated that the ANDSF were "working on the plan to move to offensive status" and that "the centers of the cities will never collapse."[113] Vague pronouncements of "a new plan" being formulated had, by this time, become a common talking point for government officials. In a rare comment with more specificity, the commander of Afghanistan's special operations forces stated, "Our main goal is to inflict as many casualties on the enemy as possible. Besides that, our goal is to protect major cities, highways and key border towns that are important for our major cities and the country."[114] His emphasis on attrition of Taliban forces aligned with daily statements from the MOD touting the number of Taliban killed or wounded by the ANDSF. For example, of the 410 tweets posted by the Defense Ministry's Twitter account in July, 329 (80 percent) explicitly mentioned or showed Taliban casualties.[115]

On July 2, the United States withdrew from Bagram Air Force Base in the middle of the night and without informing the local base commander, a move that was interpreted as a lack of trust and confidence in the ANDSF.[116] By July 6, U.S. Central Command announced that the U.S. withdrawal was more than 90 percent complete.[117] Responding to the significant rate of Taliban advance, the Pentagon ordered the U.S. commander in Afghanistan (General Austin S. Miller) to remain in the country for an additional several weeks in an attempt to bolster ANDSF morale and "buffer the impact of the U.S. pullout on the Afghan people."[118] Reporting from regional sources in Afghanistan suggested that this had minimal effect. According to a civil society activist in Takhar, for example, there was "a large number of forces in the districts and in the provinces, but there is no morale and motivation."[119]

Daily reports of Taliban captures of additional districts continued over the first half of the month.[120] A number of northern provinces—especially Badakhshan and Takhar—were on the verge of collapse.[121] The Taliban increasingly made gains in strategic areas as well, most notably around Kandahar,[122] Herat (and its border crossing with Iran),[123] and Kabul, where five of the capital province's 14 districts were reported to be under significant threat.[124] The Taliban did, however, continue to face stiff resistance in these strategic areas and other parts of the country, with regular reports of failed attempts against cities such as Ghazni.[125]

By the middle of the month, fighting continued in at least 20 provinces.[126] While the ANDSF were able to retake a small number of districts, these successes were more than offset by additional losses elsewhere.[127] Over the previous 30 days, Taliban forces had focused on consolidating their positions and using this posture to generate additional pressure on the country's cities and central government. By mid-July, LWJ assessed that the Taliban controlled 216 districts—a gain of 112 since mid-June. The government controlled 73, a decrease of 21; 118 districts remained contested (Figure 1). The Taliban also continued to capture more border posts, including Spin Boldak, a major crossing point between Pakistan and Afghanistan.[128] And the group controlled all but three of the district centers along the southern arc of Highway 1 from Zabul to Herat.[129]

With these gains, the Taliban were able to make advances against a number of provincial capitals, including in Takhar, Kandahar, Helmand, Ghazni, Faryab, Kunduz, and Laghman.[130] In Herat, regional warlord Ismael Khan rallied his militiamen to defend the city alongside the ANDSF,[131] while President Ghani visited Balkh province. There, he assured the nation that security would improve within three months and that "the Taliban's backbone will be broken."[132] In the wake of his visit, the warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum publicly complained about the government's failure to provide support to the public uprising forces in the north.[133] Ghani went on to attend a summit in Uzbekistan, where he claimed that 10,000 jihadi fighters had entered Afghanistan from Pakistan in June.[134] He then visited Herat City, as 17 of the province's 19 districts—and its dry port with Iran (Islam Qala)—were in the midst of falling to the Taliban. According to local sources, many of these districts fell with little to no fighting, likely indicating the broader application of local negotiation tactics that the Taliban had earlier employed successfully in places like Baghlan and Laghman. Contrary to Ghani's claims during his visit that the government had plans to retake the fallen districts, no new operations were launched to do so.[135]

From July 20 to 23, the Taliban and the government separately ceased operations to allow Afghans to observe the Eid al-Adha holiday.[136] President Ghani used the holiday occasion to deliver a speech in which he claimed that the government was working on a new security plan that would improve the situation in three to six months.[137] The commander of the 209th Army Corps in the country's north claimed that his forces would "soon launch our offensive operations to recapture the areas that have been lost."[138]

In a joint press conference on July 21, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated that all U.S. forces would leave Afghanistan by August 31. General Milley asserted that a "negative outcome, a Taliban automatic military takeover, is not a forgone conclusion."[139] In support of this assertion, he offered that while the Taliban controlled about half of the country's districts and was pressuring half of the country's provincial capitals, none of the latter had yet fallen.[140] In the few days ahead of this press conference, the United States reportedly conducted several more "over the horizon" airstrikes in support of ANDSF positions.[141] General McKenzie said such strikes would continue, along with contracted logistics support, funding, intelligence sharing, and strategic advising.[142] He stated that he and Afghan leaders "had very good dialogue on the government's defense plan to stabilize the security situation" and that "the Taliban are attempting to create a sense of inevitability about their campaign but they're wrong. There is no preordained conclusion to this fight. Taliban victory is not inevitable."[143] Nonetheless, the United States reversed its stance of not facilitating the departure from the country of Afghans waiting for Special Immigrant Visas and instead arranged for the first flight of 200 applicants to depart Kabul on July 30.[144]

As July drew to a close, the Taliban captured key districts near Kandahar City (Arghandab, Dand), attacked the city's prison, and infiltrated into some of its neighborhoods.[145] The group's fighters pressed in on Herat, where Ismael Khan publicly bemoaned the failure of the government to send reinforcements.[146] The same situation existed in Lashkar Gah, where the Taliban had launched a sizable attack from all four directions after capturing nearby Marjah and Garmsir districts,[147] and for which *The New York Times* described a situation in which residents had lost hope in the government being able to defend the city.[148] Taliban fighters also infiltrated some parts of Kunduz City, where the ANDSF were unsuccessfully trying to root them back out.[149] Reports of ANDSF units surrendering to, or retreating from, the Taliban continued nationwide,[150] alongside reports of vicious fighting[151] and civilian

casualties that were the highest ever recorded in Afghanistan.[152] As *The New York Times* described: "The government's response to the insurgents' recent victories has been piecemeal. Afghan forces have retaken some districts, but both the Afghan air force and its commando forces—which have been deployed to hold what territory remains as regular army and police units retreat, surrender or refuse to fight—are exhausted."[153]

August 2021

On August 1, President Ghani held an event to tout a new "e-governance" initiative. At the event, he stated that one of the key problems on the battlefield had been delays in getting payments to soldiers and policemen. He beseeched government officials to avoid corrupt activities and to not make him "ashamed" in front of the country's partners.[154] He also emphasized his new plan to turn the security situation in the country around in six months, stating that a big part of the plan was the nationwide mobilization of public uprising forces[155] and the expansion of the Commandos from 20,000 to 45,000 special operators.[156] In the wake of his speech, Afghans questioned his strategy as the Taliban captured their first provincial capital (Zaranj, in Nimruz) after ANDSF forces there fled to Iran on August 6,[157] and then their second (Sherberghan, in Jowzjan) on August 7 after public uprising forces led by Dostum's son failed to stem the Taliban's advance.[158]

As these two capitals fell, fierce fighting continued to take place in Herat and Lashkar Gah. Government reinforcements finally arrived in the two cities, but not before Taliban fighters had advanced to the central parts of each one.[159] In Herat, public uprising forces fought alongside the ANDSF, the people showed solidarity with their protectors by chanting "Allahu Akbar" from their rooftops at night, and the combination of forces and *esprit* pushed the Taliban back.[160] In Lashkar Gah, the Army ordered citizens to evacuate the city so as to limit the number of civilian casualties and reduce the Taliban's ability to use them and their homes as shields.[161] Fierce fighting also took place in the north: reports indicated heavy clashes between the ANDSF and local forces, and the Taliban, in the capitals of Kunduz, Takhar, and Badakhshan, among others.[162]

By August 8, after over a month of fighting, the capitals of Sar-e-Pul, Kunduz, and Takhar fell.[163] Ramazan, a resident of Takhar, told reporters that "The security forces and public uprising forces have been fighting for the past 40 days and standing against the Taliban without the support of the central government. Unfortunately, the lack of equipment and central government's support has caused Taloqan to fall to the Taliban."[164] A deputy police chief in Kunduz City, where fighting had been ongoing for weeks, said, "We are so tired, and the security forces are so tired … we hadn't received reinforcements and aircraft did not target the Taliban on time."[165] Reporting from *The New York Times* corroborated this sentiment:

> *The Taliban's siege of Kunduz … began in late June, and they wore down government soldiers and police units in clashes that raged around the clock … a Kunduz resident said he had heard a barrage of gunfire as security forces and Taliban fighters clashed in the alley just outside his home. As the fighting intensified, about 50 members of the Afghan security forces massed in the alley. But the government soldiers appeared worn down. "They said that they were hungry — they had run out of bread."*[166]

The next day, the Commandos launched an attempt to retake Kunduz City,[167] while Aybak, the capital of Samangan, fell to the Taliban without a shot. This was due in part to the defection of a former parliamentarian and prominent militia located there, likely as a result of informal deals made by local officials with the Taliban.[168]

While the Taliban were hyping these victories on social and traditional media, the government made no public acknowledgment of the losses. Instead, the MOD continued to highlight Taliban casualties[169] and government officials promoted #SanctionPakistan—a hashtag first promoted by former Canadian diplomat Chris Alexander on Twitter in early June.[170] While five provincial capitals were falling, #SanctionPakistan became the top trending hashtag in Afghanistan on multiple social media platforms.[171]

By August 9, the Taliban's victories in Kunduz and Takhar allowed them to consolidate and mass forces in Baghlan and Badakhshan provinces, whose capitals then fell. As *The New York Times* described, in these cities, as elsewhere:

> *… witnesses and defenders described twinned crises of low morale and exhaustion in the face of unrelenting pressure by the insurgents. Mohammad Kamin Baghlani, a pro-government militia commander in Baghlan Province, described a sudden fall in Pul-i-Khumri after withstanding a Taliban siege that had stretched on for months. "We were under a lot of pressure, and we were not able to resist anymore," he said. "All areas of the city fell." Bismullah Attash, a member of [the] provincial council in Baghlan Province, confirmed that account, saying that despite months of heavy fighting around Pul-i-Khumri, the final fall on Tuesday was mostly bloodless.*[172]

In response to these captures—as well as the fall of Farah province[173]—President Ghani held an emergency meeting of senior officials on August 10 to discuss the formation of a centralized command center for public uprising forces, to better support and coordinate their efforts to combat the Taliban alongside the ANDSF, as was occurring in Herat.[174] This idea was proposed by several political figures, including Dostum, who had recently returned to the country to lead efforts to defend Mazar-e-Sharif[175] with some initial success.[176] On the same day, Afghanistan's acting minister of finance fled the country.[177]

On August 11, the 217th ANA Corps collapsed and was overrun at the airport outside Kunduz City.[178] President Ghani traveled to Mazar-e-Sharif, where he reportedly assigned Dostum as the lead for all military efforts in the country's north,[179] where fierce fighting continued in Jawzjan and Balkh provinces.[180] Meanwhile, the Taliban renewed its push for cities in the south and west. Attacks sharply increased against Kandahar, where the Taliban managed to capture the prison and free nearly 2,000 inmates.[181] In Lashkar Gah, the Taliban captured the provincial police headquarters after a 20-day siege.[182] In Uruzgan, the ANDSF repelled a concerted effort by the Taliban to take the capital, Tirin Kot.[183] The Taliban advanced on Herat from all four sides and surged forces against the capital of Badghis as well—both efforts were repulsed by a combination of ANDSF and public uprising forces.[184]

The next day, the governor of Ghazni province negotiated his surrender, and that of Ghazni City, to the Taliban in exchange for safe passage to government-controlled territory. Upon arrival at the latter, he was arrested by government forces.[185] On August 13—after fierce battles that had lasted nearly a month, preceded by siege periods spanning much longer—Herat, Kandahar, and

Lashkar Gah fell to the Taliban, cementing the group's control of the entire Pashtun south.[186] A day later, the capitals of Logar and Ghor provinces also fell, reports emerged of local elders in Uruzgan and Zabul negotiating the surrender of those provinces,[187] and the United States announced the deployment of 3,000 troops to facilitate the evacuation of its embassy from Kabul.[188]

Between August 14 and 15, the government lost any and all control of its forces. In some areas, the ANDSF continued to fight;[189] in others, they withdrew of their own accord from the cities to bases nearby;[190] and in others still, they were asked to leave by local leaders who wanted to spare their cities the destruction that had been levied on Lashkar Gah in previous weeks.[191] On August 14, President Ghani addressed the nation, saying that his top priority was the remobilization of the ANDSF and that he had "started widespread consultations within and outside the government" to that end.[192] A day later, six of the seven ANA Corps had surrendered or dissolved,[193] and in the wake of the Taliban saying they would not enter Kabul by force,[194] President Ghani fled the country[195] and the United States declined the Taliban's request to take responsibility for the security of all of Kabul and instead focused on securing the city's airport so as to facilitate the safe passage of its personnel from the country.[196]

Key Themes from the Collapse

There are many themes that emerge from close consideration of the events between President Biden's announcement of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's capture of Kabul. Here, the author will focus on six that are directly related to the collapse of the ANDSF.

The ANDSF did not collapse in 11 days: Contrary to General Milley's statement to this effect,[197] the ANDSF did not wholly collapse in a matter of days. As early May 2021 reports from Baghlan and Laghman provinces made clear, some ANDSF units were overrun—while others began to withdraw or surrender their positions to the Taliban—immediately after the United States began its withdrawal and the Taliban launched their offensive. These scenes were repeated across the country in the months that followed. The result was a domino effect (Figure 2), with each successive district's loss contributing to increasing Taliban momentum and perceptions of an eventual Taliban victory.

Even before the U.S. withdrawal began, however, the ANDSF were in a precarious position, as noted by analysts,[h] the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR),[198] and media outlets at the time.[199] Since the end of the U.S./NATO combat mission and shift to advising in 2015, the ANDSF had consistently lost ground to the Taliban and steadily become more reliant on U.S. air and logistical support. In other words, the ANDSF's collapse—while it occurred over the course of nearly four months and was surprising to serious observers even on that timeline[200]—had been years in coming.

h For example, this author noted in January 2021 that U.S. efforts to boost the ANDSF's technological advantages to slow its losses to the Taliban since 2015 had "come at the expense of dependency—the ANDSF are currently far too complex and expensive for the [Afghan] government to sustain." Jonathan Schroden, "Afghanistan's Security Forces Versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment," *CTC Sentinel* 14:1 (2021).

"The ANDSF did not wholly collapse in a matter of days. As early May 2021 reports from Baghlan and Laghman provinces made clear, some ANDSF units were overrun—while others began to withdraw or surrender their positions to the Taliban—immediately after the United States began its withdrawal and the Taliban launched their offensive. These scenes were repeated across the country in the months that followed. The result was a domino effect."

The United States did not give the ANDSF everything they needed to be independently successful: Contrary to President Biden's assertions to this effect,[201] the United States did not give the ANDSF everything the force needed to be independently successful against the Taliban. Biden unintentionally intimated as much himself, when he acknowledged that the United States "provided for the maintenance of their air force … [and] provided close air support."[202] There were, in fact, at least three key aspects of an effective fighting force that the ANDSF did not have after the U.S. withdrawal began.

The first was the ability to logistically sustain itself. As described above, there were numerous instances throughout April and May 2021 in which ANDSF forces tried to stand and fight against the Taliban. After a period ranging from a few days to some number of weeks, however, these units inevitably ran out of supplies and were rendered combat ineffective. The general inability of the ANDSF to conduct organic resupply was a trait long recognized and never fully addressed by the U.S. military in Afghanistan. As recently as December 2020, DoD listed "improving logistics" as its number-four priority effort for ANDSF development, behind "leader development," "reducing the number of vulnerable checkpoints," and "countering corruption" (all of which also contributed to issues with logistics).[203] As just one example of the ANDSF's inability to logistically sustain their forces, DoD assessed that "the ANDSF have struggled at the national level to maintain visibility of [their] on-hand logistics, which has had an impact on ANDSF operations."[204]

The second aspect that the ANDSF lacked, especially as the Taliban's campaign wore on, was the ability to provide timely reinforcements and air support to forces in the field. As the United States completed 90 percent of its withdrawal between May 1 and early July 2021, it removed all of its air support assets and the vast majority of its advisors, and it collapsed its footprint in the country to a small presence at the U.S. embassy and the airport in Kabul. With this rapid withdrawal went the vast majority of the contractors that were maintaining AAF aircraft and the ANDSF's vehicle fleet. The net result was two-fold: dramatic increases in the operational tempo of the AAF and Afghan Commandos, and significant decreases in the readiness of these forces over the

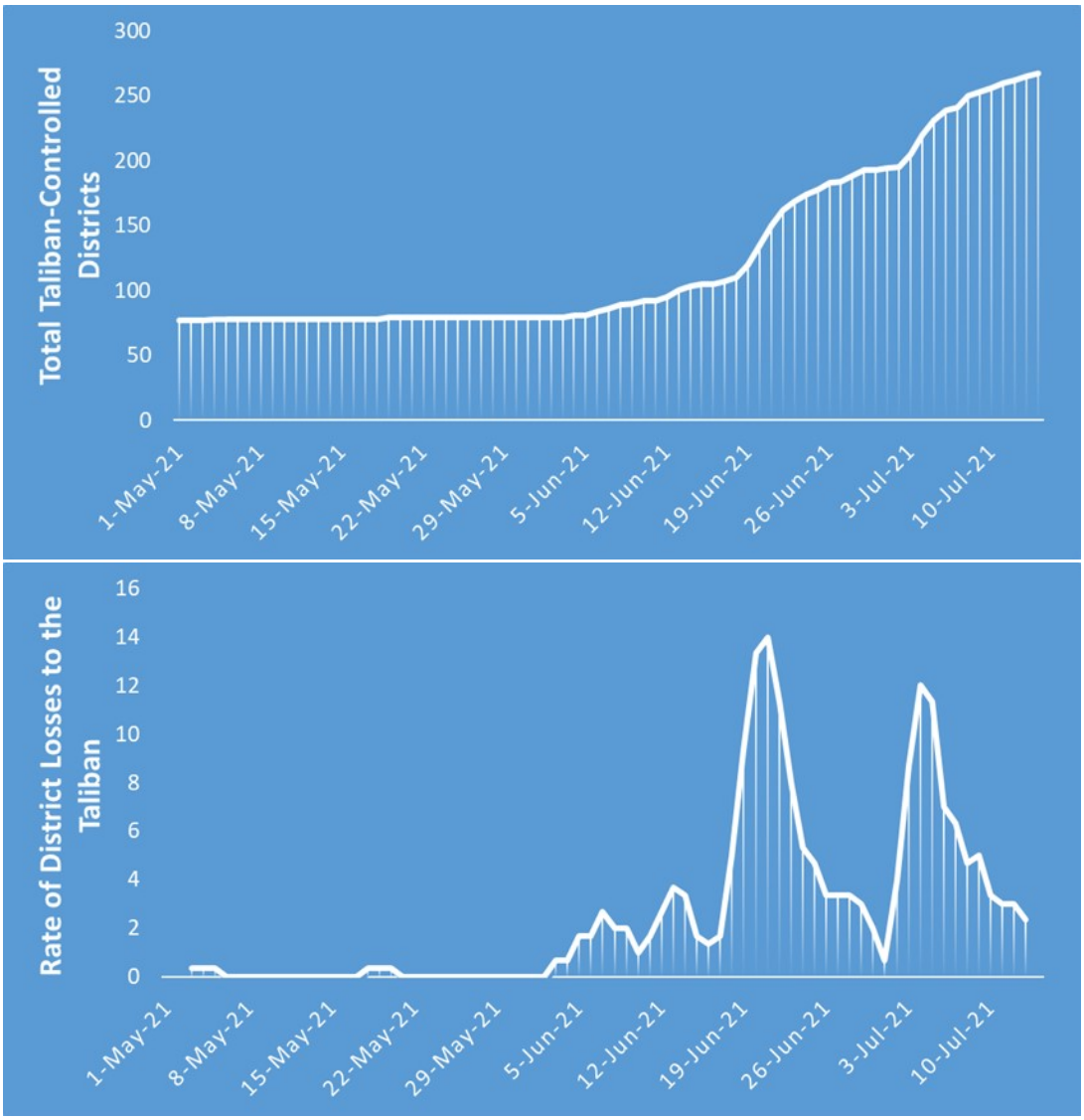

Figure 2: Total number of districts under Taliban control, from May 1 to July 14 (top) and 3-day average rate of district losses to the Taliban (bottom). (Source: Author created, using data from Kate Clark, "Menace, Negotiation, Attack: The Taleban take more District Centres across Afghanistan," Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 16, 2021)

month of June. As the weeks of independent ANDSF operations wore on, the AAF and Commandos wore out and the Ministry of Defense found itself unable to provide timely reinforcements and air support (e.g., airstrikes and logistics airdrops) to forces in the field. As described above, once soldiers and police on the frontlines knew that reinforcements and airstrikes were unlikely to come, they were less likely to stand against the Taliban and less likely to be successful even if they did.

The third element that the ANDSF did not have was sufficient leaders to command and guide the force. As the author described in a recent Politico article,[205] the United States has recognized leadership development as a key problem for the ANDSF since at least 2008. And yet, in its December 2020 assessment, DoD still listed "leader development" as the top challenge facing the force.[206] Despite consistent efforts by individual U.S. military officers to mentor and train ANDSF leaders during their time in Afghanistan, the United States on the whole failed to produce enough leaders for the ANDSF to be independently successful. This was largely because the United States failed to recognize that the shortfalls in ANDSF leadership were a symptom of an underlying root cause: the lack of sufficient and effective *institutions* that could educate, train, and manage Afghan military leaders *at scale*. As DoD's budgeting documents show, efforts to develop such leadership development institutions were consistently under-resourced relative to tangible items like helicopters and vehicles.[207]

The ANDSF did fight: Contrary to popular perceptions, in many cases and places, the ANDSF fought valiantly to defend the country. It is true that in the immediate aftermath of the United States beginning its withdrawal, some ANDSF units deserted or surrendered without a fight. But all across the country in the months that followed, ANDSF members fought and died in battles against the Taliban. At times, ANDSF losses were so great that they exceeded the force's ability to evacuate its dead and wounded from the battlefield.[208] To further illustrate the level of violence, over the first 10 days of August 2021, over 4,000 wounded Afghans were

treated by the Red Cross alone.[209]

These battles featured individual stories of heroism, such as that of Ahmad Shah. He and 14 other policemen were attacked at their checkpoint near Kandahar City; despite being wounded, he fought the Taliban for 18 hours before being rescued by reinforcements.[210] And they featured tales of units—most notably, the Afghan Commandos—who fought repeatedly and to the point of exhaustion.[211] As one researcher described, "Although Afghanistan's security forces seemed demotivated, unsupported and weak, there were those that would have, and did, continue to fight, but there was little or no central coordination, no chance of help or backup or resupplies, and a scarcity of clear messages, or leadership, from the Palace."[212] Under these conditions, the ANDSF units that did make a stand were eventually and inevitably left with little choice but to flee, surrender, negotiate withdrawal, or fight to the death. That even a fraction of them chose to do the latter belies claims that the ANDSF simply did not fight.

The ANDSF were poorly served by Afghan political leaders: As the U.S. withdrawal began, President Ghani was in the midst of a political crisis of his own making via the appointment of a Pashtun loyalist as the governor of Faryab. This, combined with continuous squabbling with other political leaders such as Abdullah Abdullah over negotiations with the Taliban in Doha, created unnecessary distractions at a pivotal time for the country's security forces. Even worse, Ghani and his small inner circle, led by National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib, failed to act on the recommendations of U.S. and Afghan security leaders in late 2020 to consolidate ANDSF forces into a smaller array of more defensible positions, focused on strategic elements such as key roads, cities, and border crossings. According to both the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken[213] and independent media,[214] Ghani refused this advice, fearing it would make his government look weak. In that meeting, Mohib reportedly stated, "We're not giving up one inch of our country."[215] As some observers noted, "While the Taliban were planning for the U.S. withdrawal, the government failed to take on board what a post-U.S. war would look like or apparently prepare for it. Indeed, the Afghan elites behaved as if they did not believe the U.S. would ever actually leave."[216]

All throughout the Taliban's offensive as the United States withdrew, there were again calls from Afghan parliamentarians, military analysts, and U.S. and Afghan military officials to pull the ANDSF back to a set of more defensible and strategic positions. By late July 2021, after a call with President Biden in which he impressed upon Ghani that "close air support works only if there is a military strategy on the ground to support,"[217] Ghani finally gave the orders to enact such a plan. However, at that point it was too late to matter: the Taliban had already taken control of at least 144 additional districts since their offensive began on May 1.[218] As one analyst described:

> *The government did not give the impression of having created a war room, nor did it exude any sense of urgency. President Ghani and his small inner circle of confidantes seemed to approach the situation either as a piece of policy that people needed to get behind or a psychological war that could be won, or at least weathered, by buttressing morale and framing the narrative … There seemed to be little connection to, or interest in, the actual situation on the ground.*[219]

"Throughout the United States' attempts to build the ANDSF, there were consistent reports of rampant corruption among ANDSF leaders … The poor treatment of soldiers and police by their own leaders well before the U.S. withdrawal started meant that the ANDSF began the post-U.S. era from a place of generally low morale."

The ANDSF were poorly served by their own commanders: Throughout the United States' attempts to build the ANDSF, there were consistent reports of rampant corruption among ANDSF leaders,[220] which included stealing pay from soldiers and police, selling fuel and ammunition on the black market, and buying shoddy equipment and low-quality food at cut rate prices and pocketing the difference.[221] Notably, these activities lasted until the very end of the ANDSF's existence.[222] The poor treatment of soldiers and police by their own leaders well before the U.S. withdrawal started meant that the ANDSF began the post-U.S. era from a place of generally low morale.

In addition, while ANDSF leaders were prohibited from pursuing a consolidation and defense strategy by the country's political leadership, they compounded the problem in two ways. The first was through the continuous deployment of ASSF Commandos to areas that had been recently taken by the Taliban. Once the dominoes of districts—and then cities—began to fall, rather than attempting to anticipate the Taliban's next moves and pre-empt them, ANDSF leaders instead chased after the problem of the day, with little in the way of lasting results and to the eventual exhaustion of those forces being sent willy-nilly across the country. The second was via a fixation on Taliban deaths as both a metric of success and a primary means of government propaganda. Senior leader statements, MOD spokesman comments and press releases, and the MOD's social media presence all placed strong emphasis on Taliban body counts—and often unbelievably inflated ones.[223] This repeatedly signaled to Afghans and external observers that the MOD lacked a coherent plan (beyond killing for its own sake) and called into question the veracity of other information that the MOD was releasing to the public.

The Taliban strategy overwhelmed and demoralized the ANDSF: The Taliban designed and executed a brilliant campaign that identified, and then systematically exploited, the ANDSF's weaknesses, of which three were particularly significant. The first was the ANDSF's posture. When President Biden made his withdrawal announcement, the Taliban were well-positioned to launch a nationwide offensive, having encroached on the majority of district centers and nearly half of the provincial capitals across the country. The ANDSF were poorly postured to defend across such a wide space,[224] especially as the traditional fighting season in Afghanistan was just getting underway.[225]

The second weakness that the Taliban exploited was the

ANDSF's critical capability shortfalls: logistics, maintenance, air support, quick response forces, and command and control. As the U.S. withdrawal began, the Taliban initiated what could be described as a "flowing water" strategy. This consisted of two key facets. First, attack everywhere, all at once. Second, hold and lay siege where resistance is met; advance where it is not. As two prominent scholars described, this is a time-tested strategy:

> *It aims at forcing the enemy to exhaust themselves trying to defend the cities while their trade and communication lines falter, using the countryside as a staging ground and its population as a recruiting pool. While it is not known whether the Taleban have studied Mao's, Ché Guevara's or Regis Debray's handbooks of guerrilla warfare, their strategy seems to [have been] taken from these textbooks.*[226]

This approach resulted in slow but steady gains for the Taliban during April and May 2021, but by mid-June, the ANDSF were overwhelmed trying to defend, resupply, and re-attack everywhere and the avalanche of district collapses began (Figure 2). The Taliban, on the other hand, seemed to have effectively addressed their own logistics and resupply requirements. While information on how they did this is lacking, a journalist in Kunduz City at one point remarked that local Taliban fighters had at least two months of supplies on hand[227]—vastly more than most ANDSF units appeared to have.

The third weakness targeted by the Taliban was the ANDSF's morale and cohesion. The ANDSF started from a low bar of morale due to the predatory nature of their leadership and, as the author has previously described in this publication, the ANDSF were a force with generally low levels of cohesion due to a variety of structural factors.[228] A major component of the Taliban's campaign was, therefore, deliberate and devastating psychological operations (PSYOP) designed to target these weaknesses. These operations took two forms. The first was relatively quiet outreach to local ANDSF units to convince them to defect, surrender, or withdraw. These efforts were conducted by Taliban "Invitation and Guidance Committees."[229] Once the Taliban had severed the roads used to resupply an ANDSF position, members of these committees would conduct deliberate, consistent outreach to ANDSF leaders at that position. The Taliban's offer was to spare their lives—and sometimes, those of their families—if the troops would abandon their outposts, weapons, and ammunition. The Taliban often upheld their end of this deal by giving those who had surrendered amnesty, money, and free passage back home, but not before they filmed the exchange for propaganda purposes.[230] As districts began to fall, the Taliban also apparently tried to convince some ANDSF members that the United States had already made a deal that would allow the group to take over the country.[231]

The second form of PSYOP employed by the Taliban was overt media operations. As described by one researcher, the Taliban uploaded "a deluge of carefully curated images and videos on social media"[i] alongside their capture of ANDSF positions and district centers.[232] More specifically:

> *Videos with fighters running through towns … were followed by footage of Taliban fighters wandering through government buildings or sitting behind desks and on sofas. These were followed by videos of mass prisoner releases … showing crowds of men carrying bags walking along the road. Also widely distributed were photos of the Taliban flag raised in various locations, interviews with or statements by the new local leadership, and countless images of vehicles and weapon arsenals … Much of the footage [sought] to convey a message of law and order and seem[ed] intended to reassure and intimidate in equal measure.*[233]

These elements of PSYOP supported an overall narrative that the Taliban sought to advance, which was one of *inevitability*.[234] U.S. military leaders seemed to sense the dangerousness of this narrative taking hold, as evidenced by comments from Generals Milley and McKenzie in mid-July that no outcome in Afghanistan was pre-ordained.[235] But the Afghan government did nothing to effectively counteract this narrative, choosing instead to focus its messaging on the number of Taliban it was killing and attempting to deflect blame for the collapsing situation onto Pakistan.

"The ANDSF's shortfalls in leadership and their structural weaknesses in critical support areas such as logistics and maintenance, as well as the force's heavy reliance on air power, were issues that the United States knew about years in advance of its withdrawal."

Lessons from the Collapse

There are many lessons that the United States should learn from its experience in Afghanistan, and there is little doubt that much will be written along those lines in the years to come. Here, the author will offer three major lessons that flow from the themes just discussed.

The ANDSF's failure had many fathers: The ANDSF were not set up for success when the United States began its withdrawal. The weakness of the ANDSF's posture and its low morale are attributable to Afghan political and security leaders, as is the government's abysmal failure to devise and implement an effective counter-strategy as the Taliban campaign unfolded. But the

i Social media access is prevalent across Afghanistan. For example, "by 2018, roughly 40 percent of Afghan households had access to the internet—and 90 percent to a mobile device." Emerson T. Brooking, "Before the Taliban took Afghanistan, it took the internet," Atlantic Council, August 26, 2021. Additionally, as of mid-August 2021, the Taliban's three primary spokesmen combined had over 800,000 followers on Twitter. Kabir Taneja, "From 'Night Letters' to the Internet: Propaganda, the Taliban and the Afghanistan Crisis," Global Network on Extremism and Technology, August 16, 2021.

ANDSF's shortfalls in leadership and their structural weaknesses in critical support areas such as logistics and maintenance, as well as the force's heavy reliance on air power, were issues that the United States knew about years in advance of its withdrawal.[j] Prior to President Biden's decision to leave, the United States had failed to adequately address these weaknesses—and in the case of air power, it had consistently made decisions that exacerbated them. For example, in 2017, DoD assessed that "the AAF has proven more than capable of maintaining the Mi-17 [helicopter]. The AAF are largely self-sufficient with the Mi-17."[236] And yet, due primarily to political preferences to move away from Russian-made equipment, the United States decided to provide the AAF with UH-60 (Blackhawk) helicopters, which required retraining hundreds of pilots and crew chiefs[237] and for which the United States anticipated an indefinite reliance on contract maintenance.[238] The U.S. government also failed to prioritize mitigation of these weaknesses as its withdrawal commenced, and it largely ignored the "contagion dynamic"[239] of ANDSF desertions that unfolded as its withdrawal rapidly progressed.

The U.S. model of security assistance requires reform: Between Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, there are now three examples of large-scale U.S. security assistance efforts—designed to build or rebuild a foreign military wholesale—that have resulted in dismal failures.[240] As described in detail in several SIGAR lessons learned reports, these failures stem in part from the lack of dedicated elements of the U.S. government to oversee and conduct these types of major security assistance efforts.[241] But even more critical is that the U.S. model for security assistance focuses heavily on developing tactical capabilities, providing material goods, and encouraging mirror-imaging of U.S. forces. Far less emphasis is placed on critical non-material factors such as leadership, logistics, maintenance, and institutional oversight, and properly accounting for partner-specific attributes such as available human and financial capital.[242] As the case of Afghanistan illustrates so clearly, this approach—especially when applied at scale—fails to create a foreign military that is capable of conducting effective operations and independently sustaining those operations over time. Instead, it creates a foreign military that is addicted to U.S. support for its effectiveness, if not also for its long-term sustainment. The collapse of the foreign military when that support is withdrawn—especially if it is withdrawn quickly—should be seen not as a bug in the U.S. model of security assistance, but rather as a feature of it.[k]

Greater emphasis on non-material factors is needed in future security force assessments: There is widespread agreement that, even among those who were watching and studying Afghanistan closely, the collapse of the ANDSF over the course of four months was surprising. While U.S. intelligence estimates on the ANDSF remain classified, public discussions of them indicated that facets of the intelligence community believed the ANDSF could prevent the government's collapse for at least six months, if not significantly longer.[243] The author's own assessment—based on a comparison of the situations in Afghanistan at the beginning of the Soviet and U.S. withdrawals—was that the ANDSF would be able to slug it out with the Taliban around the country's cities until 2022, at which time the force would either fail or a new stalemate would be established.[244] How did this author, and so many others, get the assessments wrong? The answer lies in not putting enough weight on the non-material weaknesses of the ANDSF, and not anticipating how aggressively and effectively the Taliban would campaign against those weaknesses and how dramatically they would be affected by the speed of the United States' withdrawal. For example, in this author's January 2021 net assessment of the ANDSF and Taliban fighting forces, he compared five aspects of each force and concluded that after the U.S. withdrew, the Taliban would have a slight military advantage that would compound over time based on those factors.[245] Four of the five factors were material in nature (size, material resources, external support, force employment) and only one was non-material (cohesion). Had the author included the other two major non-material factors that featured prominently in the Taliban's campaign—morale and PSYOP—they would have tipped the scale to a strong, if not overwhelming, Taliban military advantage. These factors are much harder to assess than material ones; nonetheless, the case of Afghanistan makes clear how vitally important their inclusion is for the accuracy of any security force assessment.

Conclusion

As one analyst recently commented, "it is important to note that [Afghanistan] did not go from relative stability to utter chaos overnight."[246] As the author has described above, all of the trends that unfolded in rapid fashion in the four months after President Biden's withdrawal announcement were present before his speech. In other words, the seeds of Afghanistan's collapse—and those of the ANDSF's collapse as well—were sown by U.S. and Afghan officials' decisions long before the United States began its withdrawal. Recognition of this, however, does not support the narrative being advanced by U.S. officials that the ANDSF collapsed in 11 days, that these forces had everything they needed to be independently successful, and that they simply did not fight. Given the ANDSF's inability to consistently resupply forces engaged in combat with the Taliban, to sustainably provide them timely air support and reinforcements, and to effectively lead line soldiers and police in battle on their own—critical weaknesses that the United States acknowledged as recently as December 2020[247]—the fact that they hung on for four months after the United States began its withdrawal in earnest belies claims that the ANDSF abandoned a winnable fight in less than a fortnight. Even worse than being incorrect, this narrative obscures the true causes of the ANDSF's collapse and stands as an official obstacle to learning from what happened.

Looking ahead, it will be crucial for the United States to

j These themes were prevalent in DoD's twice-yearly assessment of progress in Afghanistan going back to at least 2015. See, for example, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," U.S. Department of Defense, June 2018.

k In recent years, DoD has taken some steps to try to improve its approach to security assistance, for example by issuing DoD Instruction 5132.14, "Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation [AM&E] Policy for the Security Cooperation Enterprise," in January 2017 and by standing up an AM&E office underneath the Deputy Assistance Secretary of Defense for Security Cooperation to formally evaluate major security cooperation programs and activities. Congress has stimulated these steps through a series of requirements levied on DoD via the National Defense Authorization Acts of the past five years. Yet, as the discussion in this paper makes clear, these steps are far from sufficient to address the magnitude of failure that occurred in Afghanistan.

correct its narratives about the ANDSF's collapse, to conduct truly introspective assessments of its attempts to build an independent security force in Afghanistan, and to make corrections to the way it develops and assesses foreign security forces going forward. If three data points constitute a pattern, the United States' failure to develop security forces at scale in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan suggest that failure to take these steps now will very likely result in the future collapse of some other security force currently being built by the United States overseas. CTC

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