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FEATURE ARTICLE

The Islamic State at Low Ebb in Iraq

Michael Knights and Alex Almeida

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Amy Zegart

Senior Fellow, Hoover Institute and Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University

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FROM THE EDITOR

Notwithstanding a night attack that killed 11 Iraqi soldiers on an army base in the Iraqi province of Diyala earlier this month, the Islamic State is at its lowest ebb in Iraq in many years, according to new data published by Michael Knights and Alex Almeida in this month's feature article. They write that "a comprehensive analysis of attack metrics shows an insurgency that has deteriorated in both the quality of its operations and overall volume of attack activity, which has fallen to its lowest point since 2003. The Islamic State is increasingly isolated from the population, confined to remote rural backwaters controlled by Iraq's less effective armed forces and militias, and lacks reach into urban centers." They note that "the key analytical quandary that emerges from this picture is whether the downtrend marks the onset of an enduring decline for the group, or if the Islamic State is merely lying low while laying the groundwork for its survival as a generational insurgency."

In this month's interview, Amy Zegart speaks to Brian Fishman and Don Rassler about her soon-to-be published book *Spies, Lies, and Algorithms: The History and Future of American Intelligence*. In the interview, she calls for the creation in the United States of a dedicated open-source intelligence agency because "OSINT will never get the priority or resources the nation needs without its own agency."

Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed, and Andrew Mines assess the threat trajectory of Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) in the wake of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. They assess that "given the absence of multilateral counterterrorism pressure, the Taliban's limited capacity to govern, and a worsening humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, ISK now finds itself perhaps in the most permissive environment yet to rebuild, rally, and expand." Drawing on extensive fieldwork, including interviews with bandits and jihadi defectors, James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz examine the nexus between Nigeria's bandits and jihadi organizations in northwestern Nigeria. They find that despite widespread fears bandits and jihadis would find common cause, there has been infrequent cooperation between them because they have conflicting approaches in their treatment of local inhabitants and because the more powerful bandits feel they have little to gain from working with the jihadis.

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Cover: The Islamic State's flag is seen in an area after Kurdish troops (peshmerga) regained control of some villages west of Kirkuk, Iraq, on September 30, 2015. (AP Photo)

The Islamic State at Low Ebb in Iraq: The Insurgent Tide Recedes Again

By Michael Knights and Alex Almeida

Following a sustained buildup in attacks throughout 2019 and into first half of 2020, the Islamic State's insurgency in Iraq underwent a steep decline over the last 20 months. A comprehensive analysis of attack metrics shows an insurgency that has deteriorated in both the quality of its operations and overall volume of attack activity, which has fallen to its lowest point since 2003. The Islamic State is increasingly isolated from the population, confined to remote rural backwaters controlled by Iraq's less effective armed forces and militias, and lacks reach into urban centers. The downtrend in Iraq is likely attributable to stepped-up security operations, pressure on mid- and upper-tier leadership cadres, and the Islamic State's refocusing on Syria—graphically illustrated by the January 20, 2022, attempted mass breakout by the Islamic State at Syria's Ghweran prison. The key analytical quandary that emerges from this picture is whether the downtrend marks the onset of an enduring decline for the group, or if the Islamic State is merely lying low while laying the groundwork for its survival as a generational insurgency.

Incidents like the January 20, 2022, Islamic State prison break[1] at Ghweran, Syria, or the January 21, 2022, massacre of 11 Iraqi Army soldiers in Diyala, Iraq,[2] give the sense of another Islamic State resurgence,[a] but a longer and more methodical survey of attack metrics shows that the Islamic State's insurgency in Iraq is looking increasingly anemic, in contrast to the sustained resurgence it enjoyed over the course of 2019 and early 2020. Attack activities plummeted across the board in mid-2020, falling from a high of 808 Islamic State-initiated[b] attacks in Q2 2020 to 510 during the third quarter of that year. Attack trends persisted in an erratic pattern of ups and downs for the remainder of the period surveyed in this study, averaging 330 per quarter over the remaining 17 months from July 2020 to November 2021. These national-level figures, supported in this article by an exhaustive qualitative and province-by-province breakdown, paint a picture of an insurgency that feels increasingly isolated and disconnected from the broader Sunni Arab population. Under pressure from rolling security offensives, the expansion of the government security footprint further into rural areas, and an energetic campaign of leadership decapitation strikes, the Islamic State is struggling to maintain even historically low levels of attack activity. While all these factors have certainly contributed to driving down attack activity in Iraq, in the authors' view, they lack the explanatory power to fully account for the ebbing of the insurgent tide over the last 20 months. The key analytical quandary for insurgency watchers

a For instance, the Soufan Center asks in a January 25, 2022, paper whether this "flurry" of attacks is the leading edge of a new momentum in Islamic state operations. See "Islamic State attacks in Syria and Iraq demonstrate a growing momentum," Soufan Center IntelBrief, January 25, 2022.

b By "Islamic State-initiated" attacks, the authors have used the same criteria as with the three prior *CTC Sentinel* metrics studies. Based on the authors' extensive experience of analyzing threat incidents in Iraq, "Islamic State-initiated" attacks are assessed to have been undertaken by the Islamic State and exclude violent incidents in which the Islamic State did not intentionally undertake combat actions. So, for instance, the authors would not include a security force ambush of Islamic State fighters or an airstrike that collapsed a shelter with Islamic State fighters inside. The authors would, conversely, count a recently installed Islamic State booby trap initiated by a security force patrol, as this military effect was exactly what the Islamic State was intending and aids understanding of their intentions and capabilities. See Michael Knights, "Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies," *CTC Sentinel* 10:7 (2017); Michael Knights, "The Islamic State Inside Iraq: Losing Power or Preserving Strength?" *CTC Sentinel* 11:12 (2018); and Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "Remaining and Expanding: The Recovery of Islamic State Operations in Iraq in 2019-2020," *CTC Sentinel* 13:5 (2020).

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Alex Almeida is the lead security analyst at Horizon Client Access, an analytic consultancy headquartered in New York. He is the co-author of Back to Basics: U.S.-Iraq Security Cooperation in the Post-Combat Era, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2020. Twitter: @AlexAlmeida2020*

that emerges from this study is how much of the Islamic State's present weakness can be attributed to these variables, or if some other, unseen factor, such as the deliberate preservation of forces by the Islamic State, is driving the trajectory of the insurgency.

This article extends the metrics-based analysis used in three prior *CTC Sentinel* pieces[3] in 2017, 2018, and 2020, adding a further 20 months of Islamic State attack metrics in Iraq, picking up from the start of April 2020 (where the last analysis ended) to the end of November 2021. As in the prior study, this article looks at Islamic State attacks in Anbar, Salah al-Din, Baghdad's rural "belts,"[c] Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Diyala. The authors also look at the Islamic State's provinces in Syria, making some rudimentary comparisons between activity levels in Iraq and the areas of Syria directly adjacent to the Iraqi theater of operations.[d]

As with previous studies, to maximize comparability, this analysis used exactly the same data collection and collation methodology as the December 2018 and May 2020 *CTC Sentinel* studies. Attacks were again broken down into explosive or non-explosive events,[e] and also by the four categories of high-quality attacks (effective roadside bombings,[f] attempts to overrun Iraqi security force checkpoints or outposts,[g] person-specific targeted attacks,[h] and attempted mass-casualty attacks[i]). As with any set of attack metrics, this analysis represents a partial sample that undoubtedly favors more visible attack types (explosions, major attacks) over more subtle enemy-initiated actions (such as kidnap or intimidation). Nevertheless, as with the previous studies, the immersive, manual coding of thousands of geospatially mapped attacks remains one of the best ways to gain and maintain a fingertip-feel for an insurgency.

The piece will unfold in a recognizable format borrowing from previous studies. First, the authors will review national attacks trends and high-quality attack trends. Then, the piece will proceed with quantitative and qualitative attack trends at the provincial level. Next, the article addresses the question of centralized direction and resourcing. In the period examined in this article, there have been two attack campaigns by the Islamic State that suggest surviving centralized direction and resourcing: first, efforts to carry out "external attacks" into the well-secured Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and second, an integrated assault on Iraq's electricity sector in the summer of 2021. Both will be examined in turn. The article will conclude with an analytical section on the potential causal factors of the Islamic State decline (including conditions in Syria) and then discusses the predictive outlook for the future of the Islamic State insurgency in Iraq.

National Trajectory of Islamic State Attacks

The December 2018 *CTC Sentinel* study of Islamic State attack patterns in Iraq chronicled a stark decline in Islamic State attack metrics in late 2017 and the first half of 2018,[4] while the May 2020 *CTC Sentinel* metrics study described a strong partial recovery of Islamic State attacks in Iraq in the second half of 2019 and the first quarter of 2020.[5] In this new study, as shown in Figure 1, the authors discovered that the partial recovery of Islamic State capabilities in Iraq appears to have peaked in Q2 2020 and has since experienced a slow reversal in quantitative terms.

c The Baghdad belts are heavily irrigated farmlands that contain the ranches of former government officials and the town houses of tribal sheikhs and serve as a logistics hub for trucking companies and vegetable markets. They include the rural districts bordering Baghdad but not within the city limits (*amanat*) and include places such as Taji, Mushahidah, Soba al-Bour, Tarimiyah, Husseiniyah, Rashidiyah, Nahrawan, Salman Pak, Suwayrah, Arab Jabour, Yusufiyah, Latifiyah, Iskandariyah, and Abu Ghraib.

d This basic analysis of Islamic State activities in Syrian provinces is an attempt to remedy a long-standing weakness of the 2018 and 2020 *CTC Sentinel* Islamic State attacks metrics pieces from 2017, 2018, and 2020, namely the artificial cut-off of focus at the Syrian border. As the Islamic State seems to operate fluidly across the national boundary, analysis of the Iraqi theater should also take into account the dynamics over the border.

e Explosive events include attack categories such as improvised explosive device (IED), under-vehicle IED (UVIED), vehicle-carried or vehicle-concealed IEDs, all categories of suicide bombing, indirect fire, hand-grenade and rocket-propelled grenade attacks, guided missile attacks, plus recoilless rifle and improvised rockets. Self-detonation of suicide vests to prevent capture are not counted. Of particular note, it is vital to not include in the count the detonation or disposal of old mass-emplaced "legacy IEDs," which is often mentioned explicitly in reporting and hinted at in imagery of IED finds.

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

g Defined in the authors' dataset as attacks that successfully seized an Iraqi security force location for a temporary period, or which killed or wounded the majority of the personnel likely to have been present at the site. The latter type of 'stand-off' but intense bombardment of outposts became more regular than actual overruns in this period of study.

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

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

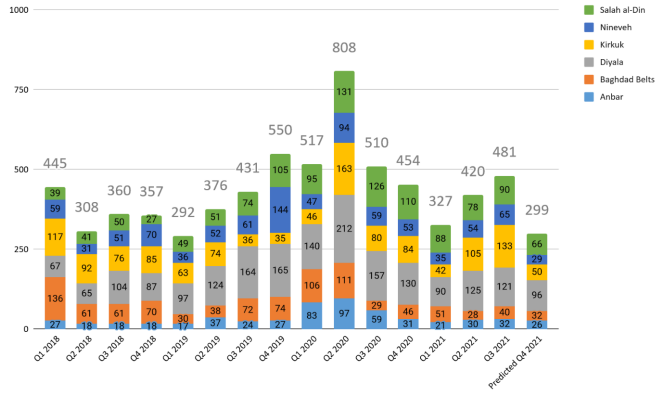

Figure 1: Iraq national attack trends, by quarter and province. The graph plots all Islamic State-initiated attacks. Q4 2021 figures are predicted based on the extension of statistical average in October and November 2021 across December 2021. Based on the authors' partial sampling of December, it looks on-trend with October and November. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset.

As the May 2020 analysis predicted (based on metrics up to March 31, 2020), Islamic State attacks continued to increase for some months in Q2 2020, reaching a level similar to 2012 intensity[j] (including 315 Islamic State attacks in April 2020 and 319 in May 2020,[6] a period roughly correlating with Ramadan in 2020[k]). Yet this upward trajectory was not sustained. Instead, the number of Islamic State attacks dropped off sharply in June 2020 and throughout the third quarter of 2020, settling back at a level more commonly seen in 2019.[7] Though undulating above and below the trendline in specific months, the quarterly attack metrics trended downward in 2021. This gradual decline trend is clearer when viewed via the monthly Islamic State attack metrics shown below (Figure 2).

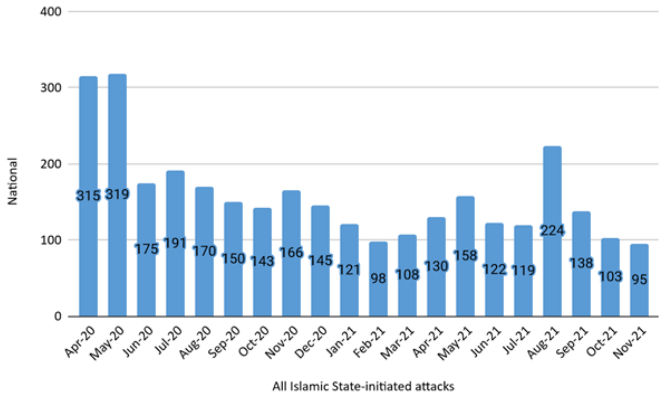

Figure 2: The new dataset of Iraq national attack trends, by month. The graph plots all Islamic State-initiated attacks. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

Another very clear trend is a steady and unmistakable decline in the quality of Islamic State attacks in Iraq in late 2020 and 2021. Figure 3 shows the raw numbers of high-quality attacks (effective roadside bombings, attempts to overrun Iraqi security force checkpoints or outposts, person-specific targeted attacks, and attempted mass-casualty attacks). Again, the second quarter of 2020 marked a high point for high-quality attacks within the new study period, but this level of performance was not sustained. As Figure 4 shows, the proportion of high-quality attacks declined, from an average of 61.6% of attacks in Q2 2020 to an average of 41.6% in Q3 2021.[8] All categories of high-quality attacks also declined, as shown in Figure 5, but two weathered 2020-2021 better than the others. Effective roadside bombing held up relatively well as a tactic, and the targeted killing of specific security and local officials overtook attempted overruns of positions as the second most common high-quality tactic from Q3 2020 onward.[9] In the authors' experience of analyzing Iraqi security dynamics,[l] this speaks to the Islamic State's declining capability to win stand-up fights against Iraq security force (ISF) units, with fewer overrun efforts being undertaken and a lower proportion being effective enough to be coded as recognizable overruns. As this study will discuss at various points, the gradual hardening of ISF outposts may have helped in this process, with thermal camera masts[m] giving outposts better situational awareness of Islamic State raids mustering to attempt overrun attacks.[n] Table 1 in the appendix provides the quarterly national metrics for Islamic State-initiated attacks in Iraq since the beginning of 2018, including across the different categories of high-quality attacks.

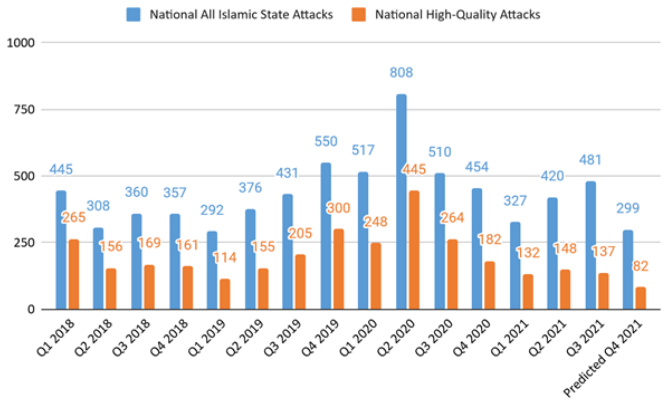

Figure 3: Iraq high-quality attack trends, by quarter. The graph plots all Islamic State-initiated attacks in blue and all coded high-quality Islamic State attacks in orange. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

j In 2012, there was an average of 576 attacks in Iraq by the Islamic State (then known as the Islamic State of Iraq) per quarter, which jumped to an average of 1,554 attacks per quarter in 2013, with Q2 2020 in between at 808 attacks.

k Ramadan in 2020 took place from April 23 to May 23.

l The authors have a combined 27 years of experience in Iraq security metrics collection and analysis, with 18 years of continuously operating collection for one and nine years for the other.

m "The masts are electro-optical, lightly-armored camera systems described by Iraqis as 'thermal cameras.' The masts retract into an armored box when not in use." See a discussion of the masts in the authors' last metrics study in Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "Remaining and Expanding."

n It is noteworthy that the small number of successful outpost overruns have usually been preceded by takedown of camera masts. For a recent example, see the overrun and massacre of a rural outpost position in Diyala's Udhaim River Valley by a vehicle-mounted raiding force in January 2022, described in Jared Malsin and Ghassan Adnan, "Islamic State Kills Sleeping Iraqi Soldiers, Attacks Syrian Prison," *Wall Street Journal*, January 21, 2022.

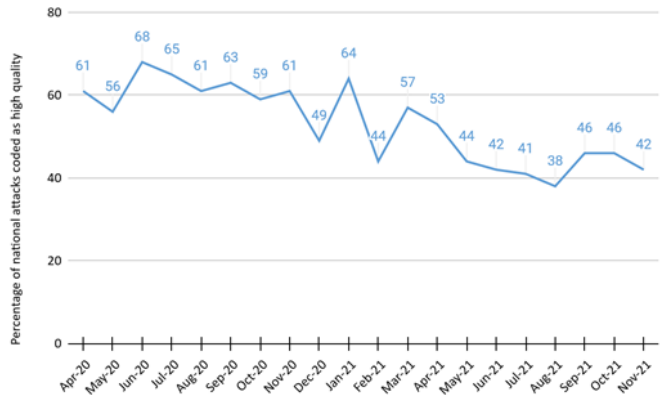

Figure 4: Iraq high-quality Islamic State attacks as a (declining) percentage of all Islamic State-initiated attacks. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

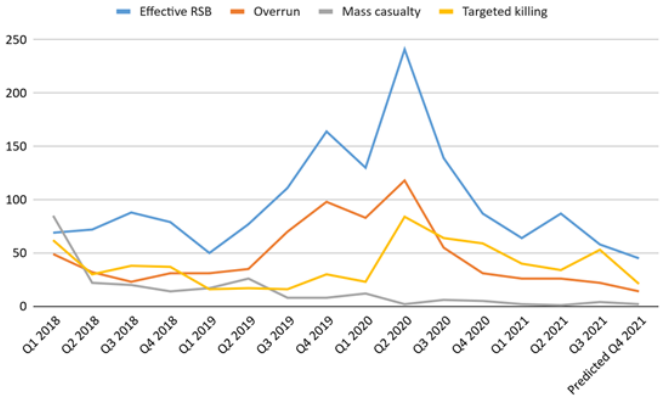

Figure 5: Different categories of high-quality Islamic State attacks. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

Quantitative and Qualitative Attack Trends at the Provincial Level

In terms of provincial-level comparisons (see Figure 6), Diyala produced the highest number of Islamic State attacks in all but four months of the new 20-month dataset,[o] confirming its longstanding position as the most consistently active operating environment in Iraq for the Islamic State.[10] One stand-out observation from the new attack data is the growing role of Salah al-Din as a cockpit of Islamic State attack activities in Iraq, with the province moving from being a relative backwater to the second or third most active attack location in any given quarter of 2020 and 2021.[p] By contrast, early 2020 Islamic State attack hotspots such as Anbar and the rural Baghdad belts fizzled out in the latter half of 2020 and Kirkuk struggled to maintain a consistently high level of attack activities.[11] To dig more deeply into provincial dynamics and trends, the following sections will proceed governorate-by-governorate across the six provinces.

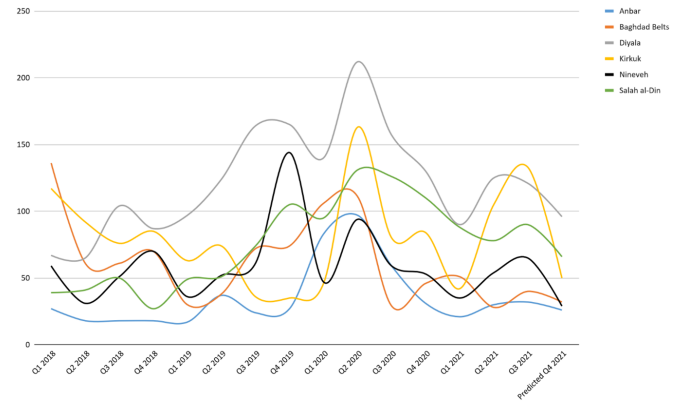

Figure 6: Iraq Islamic State attack trends, by province, by quarter. (Note: The provincial boundaries are Iraqi provincial/governorate boundaries, not those of the Islamic State wilayat. One reason for this choice is that government provinces are stable boundaries, allowing for comparable counting across years, while Islamic State boundaries shift. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

Anbar

In the authors' May 2020 *CTC Sentinel* metrics analysis, Anbar was showing signs of recovering as a major Islamic State attack location after years in the doldrums. In the first quarter of 2020, there were three times the number of attacks each month (27.6) than the 2019 average (8.7).[12] This continued in the second quarter of 2020, with a monthly average of 32.3 attacks in Anbar.[13] But the Islamic State then suffered a precipitous drop-off of all forms of attack in Anbar from June 2020 through to late 2021. While the monthly attack average was 22.5 in 2020[14] due to the high levels of Islamic State activity early in the year, the monthly attack average for the first 11 months of 2021was just 9.0,[15] essentially a return to the very low attack levels of 2019.[16]

High-quality attacks in Anbar also dropped sharply after the summer of 2020. In Q2 2020, the Islamic State in Anbar was still striking out regularly from rural redoubts in the Wadi Husseinat, on the high plateau east of Rutbah.[17] Effective overruns were targeting border guard stations on the Syrian, Jordanian, and Saudi borders, as well as outposts on the highways ringing the central desert plateau.[18] Islamic State cells were moving back down onto the International Highway between Amman and Baghdad to abduct truckers and security forces at fake military checkpoints.[19] Notably, the Islamic State was beginning to construct car bombs and motorcycle bombs in this redoubt for use in intimidation attacks on Sunni cities like Rutbah, Ramadi, and Fallujah.[20] Effective roadside bombs were being used an average of 10.6 times a month in Q2 2020, including vehicle-carried devices detonated at highway bridges as a form of vehicle-emplaced roadside bomb.[21]

Fast forward to the second half of 2021 and the picture changed considerably. There were 32 Islamic State attacks overall in Q3 2021, versus 97 in Q2 2020.[22] Vehicle bombings and other attempted mass-casualty attacks were down to zero in the second half of

o The four months in which other provinces were higher are August 2020, November 2020, and January 2021 (when Salah al-Din was higher) and June 2021, when Kirkuk just surpassed Diyala by one attack.

p In the new 20-month coverage period, Salah al-Din totaled 668 attacks, second only to Diyala (899) and just higher than third-placed Kirkuk (640 attacks). All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

2021.[23] [q] Effective roadside bombings dropped to 2.2 per month in the second half of 2021 versus 10.6 per month in the second quarter of 2020.[24] With the exception of some Islamic State raiding around Nukhayb,[25] [r] overrun attacks in Anbar largely ceased, with just 1.6 overrun attacks per month in July-November 2021 versus an average of 6.6 per month in Q2 2020.[26] In general, Anbar Islamic State cells have migrated toward the softest of soft targets: dropping electricity pylons and abducting and ransoming shepherds.[s]

Baghdad Belts

Like Anbar, the Baghdad belts (areas constituting heavily irrigated farmlands in rural districts bordering Baghdad but not within the city limits) were recovering as an Islamic State attack location in early 2020, with an average of 37 attacks per month in Q2 2020,[27] high for the post 2014 insurgency around Baghdad but lower than even the quietest moments in Iraq's 2003-2011 insurgency.[t] Yet even this level of activity dropped off sharply in July 2020 and has not yet recovered at the time of writing. By the third quarter of 2021, the monthly average in the Baghdad belts dropped to 13.3 attacks.[28] Of note (see Figure 7), high-quality attacks in the Baghdad belts dropped by an exact order of magnitude, from 23 per month in Q2 2020 to 2.3 per month by Q3 2021.[29] The roadside bombing cells active in western Baghdad's Abu Ghraib in the latter half of 2019 disappeared completely, with effective roadside bombings in the Baghdad belts dropping from a monthly average of 13.3 in Q2 2020 to a measly 0.6 in Q3 2021.[30] [u] Overruns of rural checkpoints in the Baghdad belts dropped from an average of five per month in Q2 2020 to 0.3 per month in Q3 2021.[31] Precision killings also dropped from an average of five per month in Q2 2020 to 1.6 per month in Q3 2021.[32]

As was the case in the authors' May 2020 *CTC Sentinel* metrics analysis,[33] the northern Baghdad belts remained the principal locus of Islamic State attack activity in the Baghdad belts in the new data coverage period, accounting for 49.2% of all attacks in the Baghdad belts and 60.3% of all high-quality attacks in those areas.[34] Areas such as Tarmiyah, Mushahidah, Taji, and Soba Saab al-Bour continued to be tough operating environments in Baghdad for ISF units and tribal militias throughout the period on which this study focuses.[35] [v] Tarmiyah is historically viewed by the Iraqi intelligence community[36] as the major "switch-point" between the Islamic State operating areas west of the Tigris (Anbar, the Euphrates River Valley, plus desert zones around Lake Tharthar) and those to the east (radiating northeast up the Tigris, Udhaim, and Diyala River Valleys, and the Kurdish border). As one Iraqi intelligence operator noted: "Tarmiyah was the first wilayat of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and all the walis of Baghdad have sheltered there."[37] Yet, as the next section on Salah al-Din will note, the Islamic State may have found Tarmiyah too hot to handle in the face of sustained ISF[w] and coalition pressure,[x] prompting an apparent relocation of the redoubt further north to Yethrib.

As in other provinces, the Baghdad belts saw a steep decline in the quality of Islamic State attacks during the new data period. In Q2 2020, the Islamic State still carried out numerous effective ambushes and roadside bombings,[38] [y] and successfully attacked Iraqi Army battalion and brigade headquarters.[z] Yet Islamic State high-quality attack activity in the northern Baghdad belt dropped off sharply from August 2020, and then again (almost to nothing) from April-May 2021 onward.[39] Aside from sporadic targeted killings and half-yearly efforts to send a suicide bomber into Baghdad,[40] the northern belts grew extraordinarily quiet in 2021, and almost devoid of high-quality attacks.[41] [aa]

q One mass-casualty attack may have been intended but was foiled at an early stage: a car bomb that appears to have been intended for use on a Ramadi police station but was discovered on October 14, 2021. Qualitative insight drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

r Nukhayb is a desert town on the junction of a road system that links Saudi Arabia, Anbar, and Karbala.

s These rural activities carry very low risk of interference by security forces as these plentiful targets—pylons and shepherds—can be engaged far away from security force outposts and at a time and place of the Islamic State's choosing.

t Even in very low Islamic State attack activity periods like Q1 2011, Baghdad still had 357 attacks, nearly an order of magnitude higher than the present levels. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

u The authors take special care to also exclude roadside bombings and other convoy attacks undertaken by Shi`a militias, not the Islamic State. These bombings are typically claimed by known militia outlets, not claimed by the Islamic State, and occur in a rarified subset of locations. For more detail on the convoy strategy of the militias, see Michael Knights and Crispin Smith, "Ashab al-Kahf's Takeover of the Convoy Strategy," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute, November 22, 2021.

v The dataset also captures security force actions, so the authors have a fine-grain feel for ISF activities and unit-level performance and challenges. Based on author's (Knights) interviews with Iraqi military and U.S. military advisors, the northern Baghdad belts are considered a 'hot' province in which ISF are given more regular leave and danger pay. Based on the authors' conversations with Iraqi and U.S. military officers working on the Islamic State, 2018-2019; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.

w The Tarmiyah area is the site of numerous opulent Baathist leadership ranches and well-irrigated farmlands, both very valuable commodities. Both Iraqi Army and PMF units compete to dominate these areas and the lucrative (i.e., corrupt) business of running the highways to the north of Baghdad. As a result, the Tarmiyah area has been swamped with ISF units in recent years. Based on the authors' conversations with Iraqi and U.S. military officers working on the Islamic State, 2018-2019; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.

x Without fanfare, the U.S.-led coalition has provided significant intelligence, strike, and special forces support to the fight in the northern Baghdad belts since 2014, due to the special importance of preventing the Islamic State from developing bombing cells close to the capital. Based on author's (Knights) interviews and visits with U.S. intelligence officers working on the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, 2018-2021; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.

y Roadside bombs and other booby traps frequently kill three to five men, which is often the whole occupancy of a utility vehicle. Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset.

z For instance, on July 17, 2020, the Islamic State killed Staff Brigadier General Ali al-Khazraji (commander of the local ground-holding unit, the Iraqi Army 59th Brigade) along with three other soldiers in an ambush on their convoy near Tarmiyah. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

aa September to November 2021 marks the first period in the authors' recollection and records since 2003 in which zero high-quality attacks were registered for consecutive months in the northern Baghdad belts.

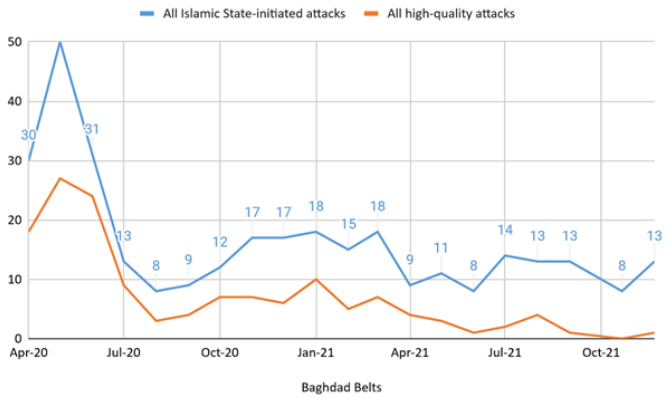

Figure 7: Declining quality of Islamic State attacks in the Baghdad Belts. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

Salah al-Din

The authors' May 2020 *CTC Sentinel* metrics analysis characterized Salah al-Din as a formerly sleepy Islamic State operating location that was waking up and becoming highly active in early 2020,[42] ranking as the third most active Islamic State attack location (after Diyala and Kirkuk).[ab] In Q2 2020, Salah al-Din suffered an average of 44 Islamic State attacks per month, including an average of 26 high-quality attacks (59.0% of all attacks, comparable to the national average of 61.1%).[43] Compared to other provinces, Salah al-Din saw a more sustained and even pattern of attacks in late 2020 and 2021 that only gently declined over a longer period. For instance, between April 2020 and November 2021 attacks halved in Diyala, reduced to one-third of their April 2020 levels in Baghdad and one-quarter in Nineveh, to one-seventh in Kirkuk and one-eighth in Anbar. In contrast, in Salah al-Din, Islamic State attacks were still more than half their April 2020 levels (40 attacks) by November 2021 (24 attacks).[44]

Admittedly, Islamic State attacks in Salah al-Din became much lower quality in late 2020 and 2021, with a 39.4% decline in all attacks from Q2 2020 to Q3 2021, but a whopping 71.8% decline in high-quality attacks during the same period.[45] The type of high-quality attack that held up the most between Q2 2020 and Q3 2021 in Salah al-Din was targeted killings: Whereas roadside bombs dropped by 64.9% over this period and overruns by 85.8%, targeted killings continued at almost unchanged levels from Q2 2020 to Q2 2021 (4.6 attacks per month in Q2 2020 and four attacks per month in Q2 2021).[46] A high proportion of the Islamic State's remaining effective attacks in Salah al-Din was actually some variation of active defense measures,[47] such as raiding, mortaring, and sniping at the security forces surrounding Islamic State redoubts like the Jallam Desert, the Zarga area south of Tuz Khurmatu, the Makhul range, and the desert west of Bayji.[48] Overall, in the authors' assessment, the Islamic State tried very hard to prevent security forces from making greater inroads into Islamic State rural redoubts in Salah al-Din.[49]

The only notable offensive campaign launched by the Islamic State in Salah al-Din in the period examined in this article seems to have been a determined effort to build a new defensive bastion in Yethrib, a densely irrigated farming community in southern Salah al-Din that fills the eight-mile space between Balad city and Balad airbase. Only 40 miles north of Baghdad, Yethrib may have been developed by the Islamic State from June 2020 onward[50 ac] as an alternative to Tarmiyah as the "switch" point between the Syria-Euphrates line of Islamic State guesthouses and the lines branching off east of the Tigris to Jallam, Diyala, Hamrin, and Kirkuk. There certainly does appear to be a correlation between the July 2020 drop-off of Islamic State activity[ad] in Tarmiyah and the ramping up of Islamic State activities in Yethrib, just 20 miles north of Tarmiyah and directly accessible via farming areas between the Tigris and the main north-south road corridor, Highway 1. Throughout 2020 and 2021, the Islamic State accelerated the targeted killings of Yethrib tribal, government, and security force leaders,[51] a familiar pattern (in the authors' experience) in areas where they seek to overawe the local populous and establish "no-go" zones for the security forces and farmers.[52] The worsening situation in Yethrib gained national and international notice when the Islamic State undertook a massacre of tribal militia and police troops at a funeral in Yethrib on July 30, 2021, killing at least eight persons and wounding at least 19.[53] If the authors' identification of a new Islamic State base zone at Yethrib is accurate, it would be an indication that the movement can still undertake a kind of operational-level redeployment in order to avoid intensive targeting by government forces (such as the ISF surge at Tarmiyah in early 2020).[54]

Nineveh

In their May 2020 *CTC Sentinel* metrics analysis, the authors took note of what seemed to be an increasingly strong and well-entrenched insurgency taking root in Nineveh.[55] Overall attack activity rose continuously through 2019, before surging to an average of 34.1 attacks per month in the six month-period including Q4 2019 and Q1 2020.[56] And yet during the following months, Nineveh showed a clear downtrend in insurgent activity, with attacks falling steadily from an average of 31.3 per month in Q2 2020 to 19.7 during Q3 2021.[57] Islamic State attacks then recovered somewhat for around a year, then fell into another less pronounced decline to an average 16.7 attacks per month after June 2021.[58] Effective roadside bombing activity in the Tigris River Valley (TRV)[ae]—the main driver of quality attacks in the province—all but shut down during the latter half of 2021, averaging just 2.5 attacks per month.[59]

High-quality attacks in Nineveh saw an even steeper decline, from an average of 20.6 during the busy second quarter of 2020 to 4.6 in Q3 2021.[60] The decline in high-quality activity noted

ab Diyala suffered 212 Islamic State attacks in Q2 2021, Kirkuk 162, Salah al-Din 132, Baghdad belts 111, Anbar 97, and Nineveh 87. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

ac A pattern of unusually aggressive Islamic State actions began in Yethrib in June 2020.

ad In June 2020, there were 19 Islamic State attacks in the northern Baghdad belt, and in July 2020, there were four. (High-quality attacks dropped from 14 in June 2020 to three in July.) As the time of writing, neither all attacks nor high-quality attacks in north Baghdad have recovered to their June 2020 levels.

ae Iraq and Syria's main river valleys tend to become known in military circles by these three- or four-letter acronyms. The Tigris River Valley (TRV) is used to describe the Tigris River and adjacent land north of Baghdad, inside Iraq.

The Baghdad belts, Diyala, and adjacent areas of Salah al-Din (Rowan Technology)

across Iraq during the period covered in this study was particularly stark in Nineveh. In the first half of 2020, the rural TRV south of Mosul was experiencing an energetic insurgent roadside bomb campaign. IED cells based out of historic insurgent staging grounds in Hammam al-Alil, Ash Shura, and the Jurn corridor generated an average of 15 effective roadside bombings per month in the first six months of 2020,[61] mostly targeting tribal militia and police vehicles on local road systems.[62] Local emergency police and tribal militia checkpoints were routinely targeted with drive-by gunfire attacks and rural Sunni Arab communities were subjected to persistent insurgent intimidation via roadside bomb strikes on produce trucks, irrigation pumps, and farming equipment.[63] ISF and Shi`a Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) clearance operations into insurgent fallback zones in the deserts west of Highway 1 were aggressively contested by the Islamic State with effective, high-casualty roadside bombings and ambushes.[64]

During the latter half of 2021, attack activity in Nineveh was almost entirely sustained by two dramatic spikes in the demolition of electricity transmission lines in July and August 2021.[af] One of the more intriguing aspects of the insurgency in Nineveh was the possible reactivation of local bombing cells to join in the Islamic

af There were pylon attacks in Nineveh in July and in August 2021. In several incidents, attacks on electricity towers were used to draw repair crews and their security force escorts onto 'come on' roadside bomb attacks. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

Iraqi security forces conduct a search operation in Taramiyah, north of Baghdad, Iraq, on July 23, 2019. (Hadi Mizban/AP Photo)

State's national campaign of pylon attacks.[ag] The uptick in pylon strikes in Nineveh in Q3 2021 was particularly noticeable in otherwise dormant operating areas such as Mosul's western rural "belts,"[ah] an area that was the focus of an intensive Islamic State *mukhtar* (tribal chiefs and village elders) killing effort in 2018 and 2019.[65] In the authors' assessment, this hints at a latent kinetic attack capability that was briefly switched on and off, presumably with some degree of centralized direction.

By the end of 2021, attack activity in Nineveh had largely tapered off, with the province apparently relegated by the Islamic State to the role of a transit corridor and temporary staging hub. The apparent deactivation of Nineveh as an insurgent attack area after Q2 2021 was accompanied by a noticeable increase in reports of transit by Islamic State cells through the province toward active attack locations like Salah al-Din and Kirkuk.[ai] Based on reports of successful arrests of would-be infiltrators, it is likely that a stream of Islamic State members and their families entered Iraq from Syria

ag In the authors' view, based on their experience of analyzing Iraqi attack networks, the spike in bombing activity in previously dormant operating areas associated with pylon attack campaign may reflect the use of 'part-time' insurgent contract labor hired on specifically to conduct (low-risk) pylon strikes, likely from the large pool of Islamic State-adjacent individuals (former recruits, relatives, sympathizers) potentially available to conduct such attacks. Another interesting aspect of the pylon attack campaign in Nineveh was the repeated use of heavy munitions, including large-caliber 120mm mortar rounds and in a few cases 155mm artillery shells (each single shell more than sufficient to destroy an unarmored vehicle) as IED main charges to knock down individual pylon struts. This suggests an abundance of cached munitions, and also potentially a lack of familiarity with munition explosive yields, pointing to a lack of bomb-making experience. Data on munitions recovered in pylon IED finds is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset. The authors have reviewed many hundreds of reported IED finds, often with photographic evidence as well as text descriptions of the finds.

ah This area includes the rural Jurn "triangle" south of Mosul and the Badush corridor, which runs west of Mosul to the major road junction at Kisik.

ai According to the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset, arrests along a 90-kilometer segment of the border between Nineveh and northeastern Syria rose from a single family picked up in the second half of 2020 to 25 persons in the first half of 2021. Ninety-five persons were arrested after crossing the border in the second half of 2021. While specific details on the nationality of detainees are not always available in media reportage or the official arrest statements released by the Iraqi security forces on their social media pages, arrests involved a mix of military-aged males and occasional larger groups of several families, including women and children (in some cases, specifically identified as so-called "IS families"). Individuals identified as Syrian nationals generally outnumbered Iraqis. In several cases, detainees were specifically identified as Iraqi nationals who had crossed illegally into Syria. In one notable incident in September 2021, a group of four Islamic State families transporting six AK-pattern rifles and over 5,000 detonators was picked up by Iraqi security forces shortly after crossing the border. See "21 infiltrators arrested near the Syrian border," Iraqi News Agency, September 12, 2021.

during the latter half of 2021.[aj] The majority of these Islamic State returnees crossed into Iraq along the border between Nineveh and northeastern Syria's Hasakah province, before moving down the Islamic State 'rat line' of guesthouses in the TRV and Wadi Tharthar to the Lake Tharthar area and the Euphrates River Valley north of Baghdad.[66] During their transit through Nineveh, these Islamic State groups passed through former Islamic State rural redoubts around Tal Afar, Ayadhiyah, and the Jurn corridor[67]—all areas where security operations continue to turn up large stocks of cached weapons, explosives, and other materials, but where the Islamic State has apparently made no significant effort to recommence attacks.[68] [ak] This may be another indicator that northern Nineveh is an area of latent insurgent potential for the Islamic State, if and when the movement decides to reactivate its attack activities there.

Kirkuk

Kirkuk province was another powerhouse of the early 2020 insurgency[69] that struggled in late 2020 and during 2021 to sustain its elevated status. In Q2 2020, attacks in Kirkuk spiked to 54.3 per month, driven by a remarkably strong surge in attacks during April and May (i.e., Ramadan) following a slow start to the year over the first quarter of 2020.[70] From Q3 2020 to Q1 2021, Kirkuk saw a steady decline in activity, dropping to a record-low monthly average of 14.0 attacks in Q1 2021.[71] Attack activity in Kirkuk then bounced back up to an average of 39.6 average monthly attacks during Q2 2021 and 44.3 in Q3 2021, followed by a notably weak final quarter (including a prorated December based on the average of October and November metrics), with the monthly average dropping to 16.3 attacks.[72] [al]

High-quality attacks in Kirkuk declined, falling sharply from an average of 32 high-quality attacks per month during Q2 2020 to a low of 6.6 in the first quarter of 2021.[am] Though high-quality attacks did slightly increase again (to an average of 12.6 per month in Q3 2021),[73] effective attacks represented a significantly diminished percentage of all Islamic State-initiated activity (30% of all Q3 2021 attacks, versus 58.8% of Q2 2020 attacks).[74] Effective roadside bombings and successful outpost overruns saw the most dramatic drop-offs in Kirkuk, falling from an average of 15.7 and 13 attacks per month in Q2 2020 to 4.9 and 2.7 averaged across the Q3 2020 to Q3 2021 period, respectively.[75] Targeted killings held up slightly better, declining from an average of six per month in Q2 2020 to 3.4 over the subsequent 17 months.[76] In the authors' assessment, this pattern of striking softer targets usually occurs in areas across Iraq where the Islamic State is less confident that it can tactically overmatch ISF units.[an]

A detailed review of attack activities, ISF clearance operations,[77] and coalition surveillance patterns[78] suggests that the Islamic State has struggled to expand its geographic footprint in Kirkuk since the May 2020 *CTC Sentinel* study. Despite a consistent pattern of "*mukhtar* slayings"[ao] plus other targeted killings and lower-visibility intimidation of local communities, the Islamic State has been unable to expand[ap] from its sanctuaries along southern and western edges of Kirkuk province into the more densely populated Jabbouri

aj Islamic State family members frequently move into Iraq before adult male fighters in order to establish secure bed-down locations and transit safehouses and to facilitate the movement of Islamic State fighters on to active insurgent operating areas. See "Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2021 - June 30, 2021," U.S. Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, August 3, 2021.

ak The authors have reviewed many hundreds of reports of cache finds, often with photographic evidence as well as text descriptions of the finds. To cite only one recent example, in August 2021, security forces cleared a large rural cache south of Tal Afar containing 27 120mm mortar rounds, 25 81mm rounds, an artillery shell, four home-made IEDs, four propellant charges and 700 rounds of 12.7mm ammunition. See "Five Infiltrators Arrested and a Cache Found in Western Nineveh," BasNews, August 8, 2021.

al When viewed in a longer context, Kirkuk has tended for most of the period since its liberation from the Islamic State to suffer around 25 Islamic State attacks per month. In this context, the mid-2020 and mid-2021 Islamic State attack surges in Kirkuk are anomalies, well above the more typical "resting level" of the province.

am Despite the sharp drop-off in quality attack activity in Kirkuk since Q2 2020, the Kirkuk Islamic State insurgency remains capable of generating some lethal high-quality attacks, particularly close to its rural staging grounds in Rashad and Daquq. While rarer than in early 2020, deliberate outpost overrun efforts in the period of study continue to demonstrate sophisticated complex assault tactics, with squad-sized infantry assaults supported by mortar fire frequently followed by 'come on' roadside bomb attacks against Federal Police reaction forces. The September 2021 overrun and massacre of a 19th Federal Police Brigade squad outpost in the Rashad farmlands, which ended with the deaths of over a dozen Federal Police troopers, stands out as a particularly brutal example of this trend. Incident data is drawn from the author's SIGACT dataset. See "13 soldiers & policemen killed, 8 injured in the disputed territories," KirkukNow, September 5, 2021.

an The logic being that in areas where Islamic State forces no longer feel confident enough to attack the security forces directly, they tend to focus instead on unarmed civilians and other 'softer' targets. This kind of displacement has historically occurred in all provinces, in rural and urban areas. Qualitative insight drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

ao Assassinations of village *mukhtars* in Kirkuk's rural subdistricts were averaging 3.5 per month in 2018 before falling to 0.75 by the second half of 2019. The winding down of the campaign against the *mukhtars* tracks closely with the gradual weakening of the Kirkuk insurgency and its contraction from Hawijah district into the Obeidi areas of southern Kirkuk over the course of 2019. See the Kirkuk section in Knights and Almeida, "Remaining and Expanding."

ap Tracking of geolocated security incidents in the Kirkuk farmbelts over the course of 2019 and into 2020 shows a gradual contraction of the insurgency's footprint from the Jabbouri-dominated farming areas north of the Kirkuk-Tikrit highway into Obeidi-dominated Rashad and Daquq, and increasing reliance on the southern Kirkuk *wadi* systems as an operational sanctuary and staging ground. In the authors' assessment, based on their experience of Iraqi insurgency networks in Kirkuk, this points to a real failure by the Islamic State to hold on to its territorial control in Hawijah, despite strong activity during most of 2018.

Kirkuk and parts of Nineveh, Salah al-Din, and Diyala (Rowan Technology)

tribal confederation[aq] farming areas of Hawijah, the Mahuz triangle, and the Riyadh corridor, all historic strongholds for insurgent groups like Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandi (JRTN) and Ansar al-Sunna.[79] As in May 2020, Islamic State activity is restricted to the thinly populated Obeidi tribal confederation areas[ar] of Rashad and Daquq districts, where hardscrabble, semi-abandoned farming villages are interspersed with impassable, densely vegetated *wadi* canyons.[80] Much of the Islamic State's intimidation efforts in rural Kirkuk (i.e., killings and abductions of local farmers) seem purely predatory in intent, aimed at generating protection payments and extorting food and other supplies, as opposed to offensive shaping of the human terrain to support an active insurgency.[as] Sporadic attempts by the Islamic State to stage mass-casualty IED and suicide bombings in urban Kirkuk also largely tapered off in the

aq One of the authors (Knights) worked in Kirkuk on a regular basis in 2008-2012, supporting reconstruction activities. The lands north of the Kirkuk-Beyji pipeline and road corridor were largely populated by Jabbouri confederation tribes that were imported to the area by the Baathist regime and settled on newly irrigated farmlands.

ar One of the authors (Knights) worked in Kirkuk on a regular basis in 2008-2012, supporting reconstruction activities. The parched Obeidi farmlands of southern Kirkuk are considerably less densely populated than the core (Jabbouri) farming areas around Hawijah and Riyadh (north of the Kirkuk-Tikrit highway), which benefit from an extensive irrigation infrastructure developed under the Saddam regime, when large numbers of Sunni Arab transplants from Nineveh and Salah ad-Din were settled in the area.

as This is reflected in the steady pattern of kidnappings for ransom of farmhands and extortion of local villagers in comparison with the decreased number of high-quality attacks targeting higher-profile figures such as tribal sheikhs or *mukhtars*. Qualitative observations are drawn from the author's dataset.

latter half of 2020 and have not yet returned.[at] An Islamic State-planned suicide assault and prison break in Kirkuk city in April 2021 was successfully disrupted by security forces.[au] In the authors' assessment, the Islamic State attack cells have been all but locked out of urban Kirkuk—at least temporarily—by security force and popular vigilance.[81]

In the authors' view, one key factor in the decline in high-quality rural attacks in Kirkuk (and more broadly) —particularly the steep drop-off in successful outpost overruns—has been the distribution of mast-mounted thermal camera systems among the dense mosaic of Federal Police brigades stationed in the Kirkuk farmbelts and in Samarra in Salah al-Din.[82] While Iraqi Federal Police forces still rarely venture outside their outposts after nightfall, when insurgents are at their most active, the camera masts have greatly improved basic situational awareness.[83] By distributing camera masts down to small squad-sized rural security posts,[84] the Iraqi Federal Police have developed a system of interlocking mortar-fire support bases, establishing what amounts to nocturnal "free fire" zones[85] that have reduced the Islamic State's nocturnal safety and freedom of movement.[86] This seems to be reflected in the declining number of successful outpost overruns, and their replacement by less effective nocturnal sniping and stand-off small-arms and rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) harassment, and in particular by the rise of sniping activity dedicated to damaging mast-mounted cameras.[87]

Diyala

In their May 2020 *CTC Sentinel* study, the authors tracked a gradual ramp-up of the insurgency in Diyala during the latter half of 2019, culminating in the Q2 2020 with a peak average of 70.7 attacks per month.[88] As in most other provinces, Islamic State attacks in Diyala then dropped sharply—to 37 in August 2020—coincident with the culmination of major ISF operations in Diyala.[89] Despite periodic fluctuations, overall activity remained at this level with remarkable consistency, averaging 37.8 attacks per month for the Q3 2020 to November 2021 period.[90] While well below the high of 2017 (when the Islamic State launched an average of 79.6 per month),[91] attacks in Diyala are now consistently falling between the Diyala monthly attack averages of 2018 (26.9) and 2019 (45.8).[92]

While the overall quality of attacks in Diyala underwent a noticeable decline in the coverage period of this study, the downtrend was less pronounced than in other governorates, with high-quality attacks in Diyala averaging 35.5% of all Islamic State-initiated activity in the latter three quarters of 2020 and 25.3% throughout 2021.[93] The category of high-quality attacks that occurred most consistently was targeted killings, which declined from an average of five monthly attacks in the second half of 2020 to 3.5 in 2021.[94] [av] Effective roadside bomb activity nearly halved, falling from an average of 9.8 attacks per month during the latter half of 2020 to 4.9 in 2021.[95] Attempted overruns of ISF outposts became rarer, declining from an average of five per month in Q2 2020 to only one per month in Q3 2020 to Q4 2021.[96] Even in successful outpost attacks, the majority of security force casualties were typically incurred during follow-on IED strikes on reaction forces.[aw]

The absence of major outpost overrun efforts by the Islamic State in Diyala was partially offset by persistent sniping and long-range small-arms harassment of road checkpoints and rural security posts.[97] Islamic State sharpshooters—frequently equipped with rifle-mounted night-vision optics[ax]—kept up a near nightly pattern of these attacks, averaging around 22.7 per month in Q3 2020 and Q3 2021.[98] While these attacks rarely produced multiple fatalities (at worst, one killed and two injured in severe incidents but more often no killed but rather one or two wounded),[99] the sheer volume of sniping activity accounted for a significant portion of all security force casualties in the province.[100]

As the authors' noted in their 2016 *CTC Sentinel* analysis of the Islamic State's insurgency in Diyala, the varied physical and human terrain and unique sectarian dynamics have long given the Diyala insurgency a somewhat autonomous and self-contained character,[101] distinctive from insurgent operating areas more directly connected with the Islamic State's Syrian and western Iraq systems.[102] The variegated local character of each mini-insurgency in Iraq was fully in evidence throughout the new data period surveyed in this study, particularly in Diyala. In contrast to governorates such as Kirkuk or Anbar, where the local insurgencies have been pushed back or confined to remote desert or "deep rural" redoubts,[ay] the Islamic State has maintained a presence in nearly all of Diyala's subdistricts, from the Kurdish badlands of Kifri district in the north to the palm groves and highway corridors between Baqubah and Baghdad in the south.[103] A particularly noticeable aspect of Islamic State

at The Islamic State undertook periodic coordinated multi-IED bombings in urban Kirkuk during major religious festival dates in 2019, as well as under-vehicle bombings targeting police and security officials. The last mass-casualty attack attempted by the Islamic State in Kirkuk city involved a botched suicide shooter raid on the Kirkuk security directorate headquarters in April 2021. All incident data is drawn from the author's SIGACT dataset.

au The disrupted plot was for over a dozen suicide attackers wearing security force uniforms to enter Kirkuk on vehicles painted to resemble police pickups and raid the city's central prison and main courthouse. Suicide car bombs would have been employed to breach the prison compound. Security forces disrupted the planned attack in early April 2021. Incident data drawn from the authors' SIGACT dataset. Based on author's (Knights) interviews with Kurdish intelligence officer working on the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, 2021; name and place of interview withheld at request of interviewee.

av Tracking of targeted killings in Diyala is somewhat complicated by the multitude of active tribal and factional or political disputes raging in the province, which can make it difficult to distinguish assassinations undertaken by Islamic State cells from those conducted by other non-insurgent actors.

aw A recent November 2021 attack on a Peshmerga outpost in the Kulajo area of northern Diyala is a stand-out example of this trend. Sharpshooter harassment of a fortified outpost was used to draw a Peshmerga reaction force onto an effective roadside bomb attack. All five Peshmerga fatalities (plus another four injured) were incurred when a Humvee evacuating casualties from the attack hit an IED on a dirt access track leading to the outpost. Incident data drawn from the authors' SIGACT dataset.

ax Insurgent sniping cells in Diyala are known to employ a range of mid- to high-end night-vision optics, with Pulsar Apex XD50/75 and Pulsar Trail XP35/50 thermal imaging scopes being the most frequently attested models. Usage of Iranian Rayan Roshd thermal weapon sights, as well as Fortuna and ATN models, is also likely but not reliably documented in Diyala. Employment of night-vision goggles is also unverified but probable based on reports. NVGs are likely commercial derivatives of AN/PVS-7 and AN/PVS-14 models, or possibly originals captured from Iraqi military stocks. Data provided by a materiel and non-state groups analyst focused on Iraq via email to the authors, January 2022.

ay Such as southern Kirkuk farm districts like Ghaydah, on the foothills of the Hamrin range, or the Jallam Desert in Salah al-Din.

operations in Diyala, which has given the local insurgency some of its dynamic flavor, is the presence of persistently operating mortar, sniping, and bomb-making teams within each local cell across the entirety of the province at the same time.[104][az] The western suburbs of the governorate center of Baqubah—a historic AQI and Islamic State of Iraq stronghold going back to the mid-2000s[105]—remains the only urban area in Iraq where the Islamic State still mounts attacks on a fairly regular basis, including under-vehicle bombings and other targeted hits on government and security officials.[106]

Evidence of Centralized Direction and Resourcing

Among the campaign objectives of the coalition war in Syria and Iraq against the Islamic State[ba] was the erosion of the Islamic State's ability to undertake coordinated multi-city actions in Iraq[107] or to mount "external operations"[108] against foreign targets in better-secured environments abroad. These kinds of actions typically require a degree of centralized direction and resourcing that exceeds the capabilities of a locally focused rural insurgency.[bb] As a result, they make good yardsticks concerning the degree to which the Islamic State has been splintered into small, low-impact local cells. Iraqi government intelligence professionals currently view the Islamic State as being highly decentralized,[109] with each wilaya controlling most of its own resources—businesses and extortion rackets, cash and gold hoards, and cached explosives.[110] Yet in the coverage period of this study, there have been two Islamic State attack campaigns that appear to hint at surviving centralized direction and resourcing: first, efforts to conduct 'external attacks' into the well-secured Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and second, an integrated attack on Iraq's electricity sector in the summer of 2021, which saw the simultaneous, coordinated spike in pylon strikes across every Islamic State wilaya in northern and central Iraq.[111]

'External Attack Planning' against Iraqi Kurdistan

While not strictly an 'external operation' undertaken abroad, one visible example of ongoing centralized direction and external attack plotting appears to be the determined and well-resourced Islamic State effort to penetrate the KRI, which is separated from federal Iraqi provinces by a militarized internal border (known formally as the "Kurdish Control Line")[bc] and which enjoys a qualitatively better security situation than Iraq proper.[bd] According to Iraqi government intelligence professionals,[112] the Islamic State's motive for striking Kurdistan has been to demonstrate that the group can strike anywhere it chooses, even comparatively hardened locations. In this sense, Kurdistan may now play the same role that Islamic State "reach"[113] attacks into the "deep south" of Iraq (particularly Basra and the Dhi Qar area of Batha) used to play in demonstrating the group's ubiquitous access to targets far removed from Islamic State launch pads in northern and central Iraq.[114][be]

After the liberation of Mosul in 2017, the then Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi tasked a senior operative called Khuzair Abbas Dahlaki to develop an attack campaign against the Kurdistan Region.[bf] To develop this campaign, during 2018-2019, various patient efforts were made to probe and test Kurdistan Region entry procedures by air travel and land border movement, with persons brought to the KRI capital of Erbil from refuges like Al-Hol camp, Baghdad, northwestern Iran, or cities in southeastern Turkey, including Adana, Gaziantep, and Sanliurfa.[115] In many cases, the Islamic State operatives bedded down and went inactive for a year or more before later being contacted and activated.[116]

In early 2021, the Islamic State's probing of the KRI was upgraded into an intensified, centrally directed, penetration effort, with effects soon felt on the ground. According to the authors' canvassing of Kurdish counterterrorism and intelligence agencies,[117] this was the result of directives issued by Islamic State leader Amir Muhammad Said Abdul Rahman al-Mawla (also known as Hajji Abdallah), who replaced al-Baghdadi in November 2019.[118] Sometime in the latter half of 2020 or early 2021, al-Mawla ordered the Islamic State to form a new Kurdistan Wilayat, seeking to incorporate the remnants of various Kurdish salafi terrorist groups—including Ansar al-Islam,[119] the al-Qa`ida in Kurdistan Brigade (AQKB),[120]

az In less attack-prone provinces like Anbar or Nineveh, a territory will often be haunted by an Islamic State cell specializing in a certain type of attack (for instance, a mortar cell, or a sniper, or a cell that kills targeted individuals at night). In Diyala, most operating areas seem to have multiple specialist cells working in parallel, more reminiscent of the old "articulated" high-intensity insurgency that had sub-leaders for various articulated functions—roadside bombing, suicide operations, sniping, indirect fire, etc. Based on the authors' combined 27 years of analyzing Iraq insurgent cell activity at provincial level.

ba One of the authors (Knights) was a member of the Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) campaign assessment team in 2015. In essence, the aim of CJTF-OIR was to whittle the Islamic State down to its early 2012 level—before the era of regular multi-city, coordinated, mass-casualty bombings and attacks on Western targets from Iraq and Syria.

bb External attack plotting sometimes—but not always (in the case of cyber-coaching lone wolves or small teams)—requires penetration of border security and/or global airline security, and can involve more costly and complex preparations, including false documentation, long-range target reconnaissance, renting or buying property, and a host of issues that localized insurgencies encounter less frequently.

bc The northern stretch of the Iraq-KRI internal border is fortified with an extended berm and ditch system, interspersed with flood-lit observation posts and segments of barbed-wire fencing. Most of the southern Kurdish border is less intensively fortified, with entry into the Region controlled primarily by checkpointing of the main highways leading into the KRI interior and a loose screen of widely spaced outposts in rural areas. Both authors have visited multiple segments of the KRI frontline with federal Iraq and visually inspected the defenses in 2008-2021, and one author (Knights) has moved back and forth across the Baghdad-KRI lines, observing immigration and security procedures.

bd Most notably, the lack of an active insurgency within its territorial borders generating attacks on a daily basis.

be The Islamic State and its forerunners tended to pick Shi`a-dominated areas far from Baghdad where they could exploit very small Sunni communities like Abu al-Khasib, Zubayr, and Safwan in Basra, or al-Batha near Nasiriyah. One of the authors (Knights) worked closely with Iraqi security forces in Basra and Dhi Qar in 2010-2012, when such "reach" attacks were becoming more common. Michael Knights, "The Role and Significance of Signature Attacks in the Iraqi Insurgency," *CTC Sentinel* 3:9 (2010).

bf A veteran Islamic State *amni*, Dahlaki was identified as a former Baathist intelligence *apparatchik*. Based on author's (Knights) conversations with Kurdish intelligence officers working on the Islamic State, March 2019; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.

and Kurdish combat units of the Islamic State[121][bg]—into a single organization. Prior to the 2021 incidents,[bh] successful attacks in the KRI mostly involved homegrown Kurdish salafi terrorist networks in 2015[bi] and 2018.[bj]

The first new Erbil-based attack cell was rolled up in April 2021, with another cell taken down in July, a third in September and a fourth in December 2021.[122] In the southern Kurdistan Region, security forces nabbed a small, family-based Kurdish salafi cell in Said Sadiq, near Halabja in January 2021,[123] followed by another large group based in Halabja and several other towns in the southern KRI during March-April 2021.[124] Another cell was captured in Chemchemal in July 2021.[125] Finally, a second larger network was rolled up in the Halabja area in December 2021, though this latter group was made up entirely of local salafi Kurdish militants and had no established operational links with the Islamic State.[126]

In many respects, the Islamic State penetration effort in the KRI bears a greater resemblance to the European attack plots directed by the Islamic State's notorious external operations bureau during its terrorist heyday in 2015-2016 than with contemporary insurgent operations in Iraq proper.[bk] The majority of the 2021 attack plots in the KRI were guided, if not directly controlled, by the Kurdistan Wilayat's emir, Abu Harith,[bl] and by Syria- and Turkey-based Islamic State *amnis* (external operations and intelligence operatives).[bm] Indeed, the role played by Islamic State networks in southeastern Turkey in enabling operations in Kurdistan stands out as a key feature of the group's activities in the KRI. Turkey-based facilitators were directly involved in supplying two of the KRI cells with firearms and bomb components.[127] Islamic State facilitators, logisticians, and smugglers operating out of southeastern Turkish cities and Istanbul were responsible for moving Islamic State recruits and operatives from Syria and facilitating their entry into the KRI via 'rat lines' through Iran and the Lake Van area.[128]

The cells taken down in Erbil in 2021 were made up predominantly of young Iraqi Arabs,[bn] either conscripted into the Islamic State during the final phase of its territorial control in Iraq or recruited after its transition back into a clandestine insurgency.[129] Each cell was formed by or organized around an experienced terrorist operator.[bo] In several cases, young recruits without insurgent histories appear to have been deliberately used to minimize the risk of operators being flagged by Kurdish security agencies.[bp] Target reconnaissance operators entered and left Kurdistan in 2019 without engaging directly with in-place attack cells, though at a later point in 2021, cells were sometimes detected due to their pre-attack foot reconnaissance of potential targets.[bq]

bg Ex-members of Katibat Salah ad-Din and Ansar al-Islam residing in the Halabja area were also involved in earlier attempts to reactivate the Kurdistan Wilayat in mid-2018. Based on author's (Knights) conversations with Kurdish intelligence officers working on the Islamic State, March 2019; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.

bh The Kurdistan Region suffered a wave of infiltration during the Islamic State's heyday in 2015-2016, though only one of these culminated in a successful attack operation. The bulk of the 2015-2016 penetration effort was undertaken against the southern KRI, where Islamic State operatives sought to establish safehouses and training camps in remote rural locations. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

bi In April 2015, the Islamic State successfully detonated a car bomb outside the U.S. consulate offices in Erbil's Ainkawa neighborhood, killing two and wounding 14. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

bj In July 2018, a homegrown cell of Kurdish teenagers radicalized by an Islamic State-inspired salafi imam based in Erbil undertook a shooter team raid against the Erbil governorate headquarters in the city center. The cell had originally planned to conduct an attack against the French consulate in Erbil, but switched to the governorate building when arrests by security forces disrupted their preparations. Another Erbil-based cell part of the network formed around the same salafi imam planned to attack the Kawergosk refinery outside the city. Based on author's (Knights) conversations with KRI intelligence officers, 2018; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.

bk In terms of its permissiveness as operating environment for the Islamic State, the authors assess that the core KRI is closer to the European countries that were the focus of the Islamic State's 2015-2016 terror campaign than Iraq proper, or even southeastern Turkey. Operationally, this has imposed certain functional similarities, including the remote direction of cells by *amnis* of the Islamic State's external operations bureau and the use of clandestine facilitator and smuggling networks in the Islamic State's 'near abroad' to move personnel, weapons, and explosives. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

bl Also identified as Abu Fahd by Kurdish officers in conversations with the author (Knights), March 2021; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.

bm Abu Harith was personally involved in remotely directing the cell taken down in Erbil in September 2021 via the social media messaging app Telegram. The Islamic State's *amniyat* chief for Syria, Abu Walid, was responsible for directing the cell arrested in Erbil in April 2021. A Turkey-based Islamic State *amni* directed the cell nabbed in July 2021. Based on Kurdistan Region Security Council (KRSC) confession videos and author's (Knights) conversations with KRI intelligence officers, July-September 2021; names and places of interviews withheld at the request of interviewees.

bn The cell operatives were generally junior Islamic State members from Anbar or Nineveh in their early to mid-twenties, usually with family or local tribal links. Data drawn from KRSC confession videos.

bo The initial leader of the cell taken down in Erbil in April 2021 was an Islamic State veteran in his late thirties from the Fallujah-Ramadi area of Anbar province who joined the group in 2014. The leader of the cell nabbed in July 2021 was an Anbari Ansar al-Sunna veteran with over 16 years in the insurgency. Data on the cell members' backgrounds, places of origin, and personal histories are drawn from publicly available confession videos posted on the Facebook page of The Directorate General of Counter Terrorism (CTD) in the KRSC: "Arrest of a terrorist cell and the defusing of their plans," posted April 12, 2021; "Confessions of a dangerous ISIS group planned to conduct terrorist attacked during Eid al-Adha in Erbil," posted July 13, 2021; and "Confessions of a terrorist group planned attack inside city of Erbil," posted September 5, 2021.

bp Both the cells taken down in Erbil in July and September 2021 included new recruits—among them, three teenaged relatives of deceased Islamic State members—who were used to conduct close-target surveillance in downtown Erbil. The group rolled up in the southern KRI in March-April 2021 also included multiple new recruits who lacked arrest records that could trip security flags, making it easier for them to move into and out of the Region. Confession videos of the two cells, posted on the Facebook page of the CTD in the KRSC: "Confessions of a dangerous ISIS group planned to conduct terrorist attacked during Eid al-Adha in Erbil," posted July 13, 2021, and "Confessions of a terrorist group planned attack inside city of Erbil," posted September 5, 2021. Plus author's (Knights) conversations with Kurdish intelligence officers, April 2021; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.

bq Two members of the cell taken down in Erbil in July 2021 were tracked by CCTV cameras as they walked around the citadel in downtown Erbil and nearby commercial streets. Based on KRSC-released confession video, available on the Facebook page of the CTD in the KRSC: "Confessions of a dangerous ISIS group planned to conduct terrorist attacked during Eid al-Adha in Erbil," posted July 13, 2021.

Only three of the cells taken down in Erbil and the southern KRI managed to acquire weapons—crude explosive devices with command wire detonators, suppressed handguns and rifles[130]—while the remaining five were successfully disrupted by Kurdish counterterrorism agencies before they could arm themselves.[131]

Overall, Islamic State external operations plotting against the KRI was more determined than successful.[br] The cells that reached Erbil made the same unimaginative targeting choices that characterized earlier attack plots,[bs] fixating on hardened or high-visibility government targets such as the Erbil governorate building (aiming to repeat the July 2018 shooter team attack outlined in footnote BJ[132]) and the touristy bazaars around the citadel in downtown Erbil.[133] A specific and to an extent myopic focus on security targets also continued to characterize their target selection.[bt] The authors began to detect a shift in Islamic State targeting priorities in the KRI in summer 2021, possibly reflective of changed operational guidance from above.[bu] In addition to their other targets, both cells taken down in Erbil in July and September 2021 also planned to target malls and other locations frequented by foreigners, including military or diplomatic personnel.[134]

In the southern Kurdistan Region (i.e., Sulaymaniyah and Halabjah provinces), Islamic State cells have traditionally shown a more imaginative and locally informed approach to their target selection, reflecting their roots in local Kurdish salafi mosque networks.[bv] Islamic State cells taken down in Chemchemal and Halabja were actively planning to conduct assassinations of Asayesh officers as well as kidnappings for ransom of affluent local nationals to fund their operations.[bw] Southern KRI-based cells entering via Iran or the Kirkuk, Tuz Khurmatu, and Diyala areas have also tended to include more veteran Islamic State operators (usually of Kurdish background) with experience fighting in the insurgency in federal Iraq.[bx]

The 2021 'Pylon Campaign'

A second potential example of a centrally inspired campaign could be the escalation of attacks against Iraqi electricity transmission and distribution systems from November 2020 onward, and particularly in the summer of 2021. Though it is always difficult to say with certainty who attacked pylons in Iraq and for what primary motive,[by] careful case-by-case parsing of attack reports produced the assessment below (Figure 8) of pylon attacks (and attacks on pylon repair crews) that can reasonably be ascribed to the Islamic State.[bz] The campaign bore some resemblance to the late 2004/

br As noted above, of the eight cells rolled-up in the KRI over the course of 2021, only two managed to obtain weapons or explosives, and all (with the exception of the cell nabbed in Erbil in early in July 2021 that was taken down only about a week prior to the date of its first planned attack on Eid al-Adha (July 19-20, 2021)) seem to have been arrested in the fairly early stages of attack planning. None managed to get off a successful attack. Data drawn from KRSC confession videos and conversations with KRI intelligence officers throughout 2021; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.

bs The Islamic State's focus on the same set of hardened or high-profile government and diplomatic targets has persisted even as the terrorist group's ability to mount successful mass-casualty attacks inside the KRI has steadily degraded. Following coordinated mass-casualty attacks on the Erbil Asayesh headquarters and Ministry of Interior building in 2013 (previously hit with a truck bombing in 2007 staged by an AQKB-linked cell), the Islamic state was only able to mount the relatively low-casualty VBIED against the U.S. consulate in 2015, followed by the storming attack on the Erbil governorate building in 2018. As noted in footnote BJ, the cell responsible for the 2018 attack on the Erbil governorate headquarters had also planned to target the French consulate in Erbil. Finally, the Erbil-based cell arrested in July 2021 had also planned to re-attack the governorate headquarters with a suicide shooter team raid.

bt For example, the Islamic State cell arrested in April 2021 planned to conduct IED attacks on Asayesh and police vehicles passing along the Erbil-Makhmour road near their safehouse in the city's southern outskirts. An Islamic State sleeper operative captured in Erbil in July 2021 was directed to conduct close-target reconnaissance of the Directorate General of Counter-Terrorism, allegedly in preparation for a planned jailbreak operation. Finally, the group arrested in September 2021 planned to emplace an under-vehicle explosive charge at a floating checkpoint near the Erbil citadel. Based on confession videos posted on the Facebook page of the CTD in the KRSC: "Arrest of a terrorist cell and the defusing of their plans," posted April 12, 2021; "Confessions of a dangerous ISIS group planned to conduct terrorist attacked during Eid al-Adha in Erbil," posted July 13, 2021; and "Confessions of a terrorist group planned attack inside city of Erbil," posted September 5, 2021.

bu In the authors' experience of monitoring Iraq attack cells, this is suggested by the fact that the persons and networks responsible for directing attack plots earlier in 2021 (Abu Harith of the Kurdistan Wilayat, and the cluster of Syria and Turkey-based *amnis*) were the same that provided targeting guidance to the cells rolled-up in July and September 2021—i.e., there do not seem to have been major changes to the roster of Islamic State operators responsible for directing attacks against the KRI. This suggests the shift in targeting priorities may have originated in guidance from the senior levels of the Islamic State central leadership.

bv In contrast with the northern KRI cells, which were made up almost entirely of young and inexperienced Arab outsiders unfamiliar with the urban Kurdish environments of Erbil. Qualitative insight drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset, which includes arrest data.

bw Islamic State cells in the southern KRI during 2018-2019 often developed plans to attack specific Asayesh targets or made threats to specific Asayesh officers, in retaliation for major arrests or with the aim of coercing them to release captured Islamic State members with links to Islamic State-friendly tribes. This back-and-forth 'conversation' between Islamic State operators and their Asayesh opposites gives a good feel for the sense of familiarity developed during the long-running cat-and-mouse game between the Islamic State and security forces in southern Kurdistan. Based on the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset and author's (Knights) conversations with Kurdish intelligence officers, March-April 2019 and January-April 2021; names and places of interview withheld at request of interviewees.

bx For example, the six-man terrorist cell uncovered in Chemchemal in July 2021 included several insurgent combat veterans with specialization and significant experience in bomb-making, arranging suicide attacks and other combat and logistical functions. Based on the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset and conversations with Kurdish intelligence officers, March-April 2019 and January-April 2021; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.

by In the authors' experience of working in Iraq and studying criminality and insurgency at the local level, attacks on electricity transmission systems generally involve some mix of political and financial motive. Even when political motives are in the forefront (e.g., reducing electricity supply ahead of an election to undermine the government and its foreign backers), there will often still be a commercial angle: payment to conduct the attack, stripping of valuable copper sheathing from the lines, scrap metal, reconstruction, and establishing new paid guard forces for the transmission lines.

bz The authors looked for pylon attacks that took place in Iraqi provinces (and the parts of those provinces) where the Islamic State conducts attack activities. If there is an indication of primarily economic motivation, the attack is not counted. Attacks that took place during periods of intensive pylon targeting are scored as more likely for inclusion.

early 2005 coordinated effort[ca] by AQI to black out Iraq's electrical system and related water treatment and pumping systems, which included a widespread pylon destruction campaign.

The 2020-2021 pylon campaign reached its crescendo in Q3 2021, at the period of peak heat and electricity demand in Iraq,[cb] and just a few months ahead of Iraqi general elections in early October 2021.[cc] The focusing of significant numbers of attacks on pylons is also reminiscent of the centrally inspired but largely decentralized 2019 campaign of crop-burning by Islamic State cells in farming communities across Iraq during the drought of that year.[cd] Like the crop-burning campaign of 2019, the 2021 pylon campaign by the Islamic State is assessed by Iraqi government intelligence officers to have been an effort to demonstrate the ongoing relevance and potency of the Islamic State and its ability to have more than local or tactical effects.[135] "It was an effort to say 'we are still here,'"[136] noted one senior Iraqi intelligence officer specializing in the counter-Islamic State mission. An alternative explanation, given the dearth of Islamic State leadership commentary on the pylon attacks, is that the pylon (and crop-burning) attack series were an example of local Islamic State cells logically identifying pylons as a more attractive target during periods of peak heat, and/or mimicking a growing trend of such attacks.

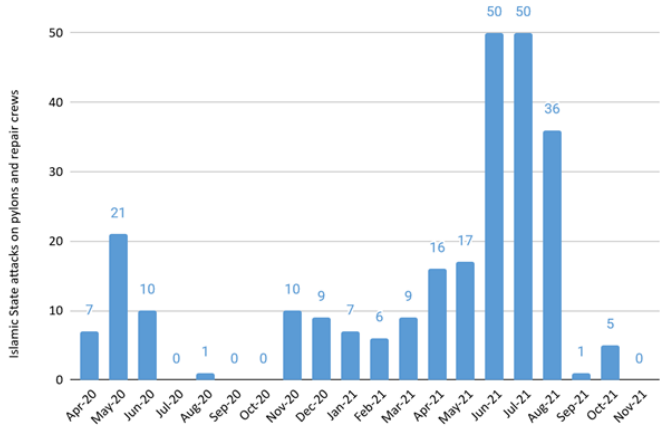

Figure 8: Anti-pylon and repair crew attacks in Iraq in the new data collection period. The Islamic State campaign against pylons was so expansive that it probably detracted from other types of explosive attacks such as roadside bombings. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

As Figure 9 shows, the pylon campaign was mostly focused in the provinces of Kirkuk, Diyala, Nineveh, and Baghdad, albeit with every Islamic State wilaya in Iraq taking part.[137] Three 400Kv heavy transmission lines were targeted repeatedly: the Iran-Diyala line, the Kirkuk-Qayyarah line, and the Qayyarah-Mosul line.[138] Numerous 132Kv local transmissions lines were repeatedly targeted at Udaim and Buhriz (in Diyala's Udaim and Diyala River Valleys), on the lines that handrail the Kirkuk-Beyji and Kirkuk-Tikrit highways, and at connection points to distribution networks serving towns such as Samarra, Dour, Balad, Muqdadiyah, Khanaqin, Hawijah, Dibis, Al-Qaim, Nahrawan, and Taji.[139] In the northern Baghdad belts, the Islamic State struck repeatedly in the Tarmiyah area and with a special focus on the Karkh water treatment plant,[140] the same node used in late 2004 to cut off western Baghdad's drinking water supply.[141]

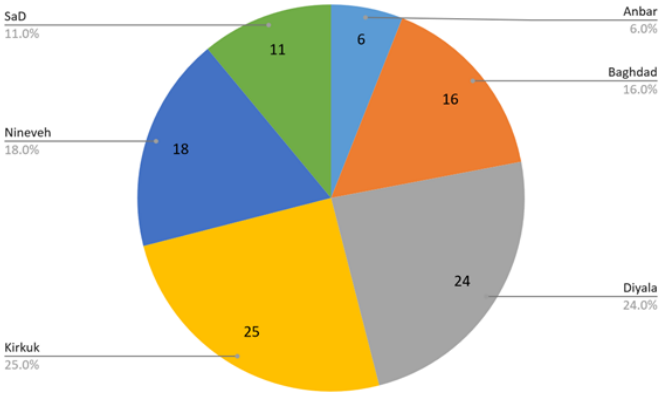

Figure 9: Geographic distribution of pylon attacks and attacks on repair crews. Figures inside each slice are actual numbers of pylon attacks, April 2020 - November 2021. The distribution of attacks suggests that this campaign was a national effort, rather than a set of coincidental local efforts across the provinces. A multi-province campaign may be good evidence of a coordinated effort, guided by a central directive. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

The Apparent Weakening in Iraq of the Islamic State: Causality

The prior May 2020 *CTC Sentinel* Islamic State attack metric study[142] highlighted three causal drivers that seem to shape Islamic State attack activity in Iraq. One is the situation in Syria, where civil war conditions gave the Islamic State an influx of foreign fighters, territorial resources, a sanctuary, and access to heavy weapons and explosives.[143] The second and third drivers are interrelated and discussed together below: the status of ISF leadership and capabilities, and the degree of international support given to the ISF by the U.S.-led coalition.[144] These levels of analysis are still useful ways to approach the issue of why Islamic State attacks levels increase or decline in Iraq, and how they will evolve in the future.

The Role of Syria

On the issue of Syria, the May 2020 *CTC Sentinel* analysis partially attributed the surge of Islamic State attacks in Iraq in the latter half of 2019 and early 2020 to an influx of veteran insurgent

ca The 2004-2005 effort was partially successful, crashing Iraq's electricity grid twice (January 7 and January 29, 2005) and cutting off water supply to western Baghdad for a week. The campaign in 2004 was bolstered by integrated attacks on piped and trucked fuel supply to Iraqi power plants. See Michael Knights, "Iraqi Insurgents Undertake Sophisticated Targeting of Critical Infrastructures," Jane's Intelligence Review, December 2005.

cb Peak temperatures in Iraq (80-100 degrees Fahrenheit) occur in June-September.

cc In the 2004 campaign, also undertaken in the lead-up to elections (January 2005), an average of 66 pylons were dropped each month versus a still-considerable 22 per month in the 2020-2021 period. Knights, "Iraqi Insurgents Undertake Sophisticated Targeting of Critical Infrastructures."

cd The issue of widespread crop-burning, for extortion and driving off farmers, is analyzed with satellite imagery in Wim Zwijnenburg, "Torching And Extortion: OSINT Analysis Of Burning Agriculture In Iraq," Bellingcat, June 3, 2019.

manpower[145] [ce] released by the collapse of the final Islamic State-held pockets in the Syrian Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV) in March 2019. Does it follow, therefore, that some reduction of this flow might be partially responsible for the stagnation and qualitative decline of the Islamic State insurgency in Iraq in the second half of 2020 and much of 2021?

To better understand the Islamic State operating environment over the border in Syria, it is useful to make a rudimentary comparison of Islamic State attack metrics in Iraq and Syria during the Q2 2020 to Q4 2021 period. The authors drew on a geolocated incident dataset collected using a broadly comparable methodology for collating and categorizing attacks (including a separate category for high-quality attacks, grouped under the same definition).[146] There remain persistent issues with building a comprehensive picture of Islamic State activity in Syria, including significant—and probably deliberate—under-reporting by the Islamic State of its attack operations.[147] In addition, differences between the information gathering and media environments in Iraq and Syria make drawing a quantitative like-for-like comparison of monthly SIGACT tallies between individual Iraqi and Syrian provinces a challenging exercise. Nonetheless, the authors believe the data on Syrian attack metrics is sufficiently deep to infer a vague relationship between trends in attack activity in Syria and Iraq.

Interestingly, the authors noted a tentative but almost exact inverse relationship between Iraqi and Syria attack trends by the Islamic State.[cf] The drop-off and then slow decline of the Islamic State insurgency in Iraq after Q2 2020 was exactly mirrored by a sustained ramp-up in Islamic State attacks in adjacent regime-held areas of Syria. For instance, the peak of the Islamic State's 2019-2020 buildup in Iraq was an exceptionally quiet time for the Islamic State in Syria, with an average of just 20.3 Islamic State attacks per month in regime-controlled areas of Syria from Q3 2019 to Q1 2020.[148] As the Islamic State got less active in Iraq in the second half of 2020, there was a gradual increase in Islamic State attacks in Syria,[cg] to a peak average of 38 attacks per month in Q1 2021. As Iraq briefly saw a partial recovery in the late summer of 2021, Islamic State attacks in Syria got quieter again.[ch] There is no direct relationship between rises or drops in Islamic State attacks in Iraq and those in Syria (the two theaters are scaled differently, for instance with an average of 135.3 attacks per month in Iraq in Q1-Q3 2021, versus an average of 29* attacks per month in Syria over the same period) but the exact inversion is nonetheless intriguing, even if potentially coincidental.[ci]

Anecdotal reporting from Iraqi intelligence officers with a special focus on the Islamic State[149] suggests that they (Iraqi government analysts) believe the 'upstream' release of veteran fighters from Turkey, Iran, and Syria into Iraq is still a driver of the operational tempo of the Iraqi insurgency.[150] As noted in the Nineveh section of this article, ISF arrest reports[151] do suggest a growing pattern of Islamic State combatant and family border-crossings into Iraq from Al-Hol (via Rabia and Sinjar), as well as other less direct routes via the Turkish and Iranian borders with the Kurdistan Region. In the same manner that Mayadeen in Syria was a 'release point' for operational Islamic State reserves during the 2014-2019 major combat operations,[cj] and Turkey was a similar spigot for strategic reserves of fighters,[ck] it is likely that Idlib, Al-Hol, and Turkey still serve as a reservoir of Islamic State combat veterans who have only been partially remobilized by Islamic State leadership thus far.[cl] The January 20, 2022, prison assault in Ghweran, Syria, is a reminder that prisons in Iraq and Syria are another potential pooling of reserve forces that the Islamic State may seek to draw upon more regularly in the future.

Iraqi Capabilities and Coalition Support

Within Iraq, it appears clear that ISF operations, backed by coalition intelligence and airstrikes, have been a factor in driving back down Islamic State attacks from their recent apex in May 2020. Kirkuk, Nineveh, Baghdad, and Anbar all witnessed dramatic downturns in the quantity and quality of Islamic State attacks from June 2020 onward.[152] In the authors' view, this decline can be partly explained as a natural reset after a surge of activity during the Islamic State's Ramadan offensive.[cm] This spring 2020 Islamic State surge can also be partially explained by the accelerated drawdown of coalition

ce An injection of veteran insurgents, including experienced tactical leader and bomb-making specialists drove a 260% increase in effective roadside bomb attacks and successful outpost overruns between Q1 2019 and Q2 2020. Knights and Almeida, "Remaining and Expanding."

cf The inverse relationship does not suggest a like-for-like exchange of Islamic State attacks in Iraq and Syria, as the decreases and increases in Iraq are objectively much larger than the ups and downs of Islamic State attacks in Syria. As a notional example, a 20% increase in Iraq incidents (+26 on a previous month of 130 attacks) is not an exact mirror of a 20% decrease in Syria incidents (say, -6 on a previous month of 30 attacks). Though based on a relatively small number of sample months, this apparent inversion underlines the manner in which veteran Islamic State cadres may fluidly alter their focus on Syria or Iraq but rarely both at the same time. At the very least, the relationship between Islamic State operational activity in Iraq and Syria is worth more detailed study.

cg Both the volume and quality of Islamic State attacks in Syria trended steadily upward, reaching an average of 38 attacks per month in Q1 2021.

ch While Islamic State attack activity in Iraq bottomed-out in Q1 2021 and then began a slow but noticeable recovery, Islamic State attacks in Syria fell steadily from an average of 26.7 per month in Q2 2021 to 22.3* during Q3 2021.

* Editor's Note (February 11, 2022): The authors corrected the Q3 monthly attack average in Syria and the Q1 to Q3 monthly attack average in Syria in this updated version of the article.

ci Anyone who has spent years compiling the metrics of attack patterns is familiar with the weird coincidences that do occasionally seem to happen.

cj One of the authors (Knights) was a member of the Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) campaign assessment team in 2015. The Mayadeen area of Syria was consistently used by the Islamic State as a central location for reserves to allow such forces to be switched back and forth between different battlefields in Iraq and Syria.

ck The use of Turkey as a reservoir for Islamic State fighters was a coalition concern that one author (Knights) detected working on the CJTF-OIR campaign assessment team and interviewing U.S. and Syrian officers on the Islamic State. In the author's (Knights) recollection, the Islamic State would release built-up "headwater" (recruits and foreign fighters) from safe locations in Turkey into the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields. Turkey then, and perhaps still, played the role of a canton for reserved and resting Islamic State forces.

cl To cite only one recent example, during the latter half of 2021 some 150-200 militants from the Islamic State-linked Jundullah group based in Syria's Idlib province relocated to Iraq via Islamic State 'rat lines' through Rabia, Turkey, and Iran following a crackdown on the group by Syrian militants. See Shelley Kittleson, "Militants from Syria blamed for multiple attacks on Iraqi Kurds," Al-Monitor, December 10, 2021.

cm Ramadan in 2020 lasted from April 23 to May 23.

forces from forward advisory locations in north central Iraq,[cn] the distraction of the coalition effort by militia threats,[co] and initial COVID-related disruption to ISF security operations in Q1 and early Q2 2020,[cp] all of which cumulatively had the effect of adding an external 'artificial' boost to the Islamic State's resurgence in the first half of 2020. However, another variable that probably subsequently drove down insurgent attacks was the effective ongoing targeting of senior Islamic State leadership[cq] and the large-scale "Heroes of Iraq" phased security offensives launched during Q2 and Q3 2020. Together, all these factors may have acted as a momentum-breaker on the Islamic State's' nascent recovery in early 2020.

These operations somewhat differed from previous clearance operations because each focused more deliberately on a specific Islamic State rural redoubt[cr] and each operation combined mass-mobilization of clearance forces and fire support[cs] with intelligence-led raids and strikes on Islamic State mid-level leadership.[ct] The big downward step-changes in monthly Islamic State attack numbers in Anbar, Kirkuk, and later Diyala track quite closely with the "Heroes of Iraq" series of offensives in those areas. These operations were followed up with other targeted large-scale, coalition-supported operations along the Iraq-KRI disputed line of control, including joint Iraqi-KRI operations such as the "Ready Lion" operation in Makhmour in March 2021[cu] and numerous smaller follow-on operations in Diyala, Salah al-Din, and Kirkuk throughout 2021.[153] Alongside such offensive actions, the whole ISF has gradually built-out some of the rudimentary necessities of counterinsurgency in Iraq, such as fortified outposts, night vision equipment disseminated to outpost level, basic route clearance, auxiliary units manned by local people, and organic mortar support and quick reaction forces.[154] The 'head-start' in insurgency that the Islamic State was described as enjoying in a December 2017 *CTC Sentinel* study[155] may have finally been eroded by ISF advances. Combined with steadily improving tactical leadership,[156] the ISF—though still rough around the edges by international standards—is outfighting the Islamic State in most parts of Iraq.

"The drop-off and then slow decline of the Islamic State insurgency in Iraq after Q2 2020 was exactly mirrored by a sustained ramp-up in Islamic State attacks in adjacent regime-held areas of Syria."

It may be notable that the Islamic State has best maintained its level of high-quality attacks in areas of Diyala and Salah al-Din that are garrisoned by the least developed security forces with the worst access to coalition intelligence and air support—namely the Federal Police and particularly the units of the PMF that draw support from Iran and that oppose coalition support to the ISF.[157] In the authors'

cn These included advisory cells at al-Qaim and Taqaddum in Anbar, the NiOC operations center and Qayyarah-West in Nineveh, Balad air base in Salah al-Din, and K1 base in Kirkuk. In addition to hosting a U.S. advisory cell embedded with the Iraqi operational headquarters in Kirkuk, K1 also served as the advanced operating base for a U.S. special operations cell that was actively supporting counterterrorism raiding into rural Hawijah by Iraqi CTS. See the Lead Inspector General for OIR quarterly reports for Q1 and Q2 2020: "Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve I Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2020 - March 31, 2020," U.S. Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, May 13, 2020; "Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020 - June 30, 2020." U.S. Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, August 4, 2020.

co Militia threats to coalition bases forced a reallocation of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets, and strike aircraft, to base-protection missions. See "Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020 - June 30, 2020."

cp Though the COVID-19 pandemic did not put a long-term crimp on ISF operations, it did cause some early disruption and made coordination with coalition advisors more problematic. See "Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020 - June 30, 2020."

cq For instance, on May 17, 2020, a joint U.S.-Syrian Defense Forces raid killed Ahmad Issa Ismail Ibrahim al-Zawi (also known as Abu Ali al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State *wali* of northern Baghdad) and Ahmad Abd Mohammed Hasan al-Jughayfi (also known as Abu Ammar, the Islamic State's logistics chief of cross-border Iraq-Syria movements). Then, on May 26, 2020, the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) announced the death of senior Islamic State leader Mutaz Numan Abd Nayif Najm al-Jabbouri (also known as Hajji Taysir, the Islamic State *wali* for all of Iraq). See "Counter-Terrorism Service: Moataz al-Jubouri, the deputy leader of ISIS for states affairs, was killed," Al-Mirbad Agency, May 26, 2020.

cr Operation Heroes of Iraq I in Anbar kicked off in mid-February 2020, followed by Heroes of Iraq II in the Kirkuk *wadis* and the Hamrin spine in early June 2020. Heroes of Iraq III followed in late June 2020, covering the border areas between Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, and Diyala provinces. The run of offensives (originally planned as a series of eight to 10 sequenced operations) concluded with Heroes of Iraq IV in northern Diyala during mid- to late July 2020. See "Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020 - June 30, 2020," and "Iraqi Security Forces hunt Daesh in Diyala for 'Heroes of Iraq 4,'" U.S. Central Command, August 1, 2021.

cs One feature of major security operations in 2020 and 2021 has been improved integration of coalition-supported Iraqi special forces with clearance operations, including denser fielding of coalition-trained Air Weapons Teams (capable of directing air and helicopter strikes). See "Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2020 - September 30, 2020," U.S. Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, November 3, 2020.

ct Until recently, ISF clearance operations regularly kicked off with pre-planned sets of coalition airstrikes on Islamic State cell bed-down locations and other targets developed by an extensive airborne surveillance "soak" over the preceding weeks. These strikes, along with coalition-enabled rural raids by the Iraq CTS, inflicted a series of heavy blows to the Islamic State's mid-level leadership cadre inside Iraq. One notably effective example of this kind of partnered strike was Operation Sweeping Torrent in the Jurn corridor area south of Mosul in December 2020, which killed the emir of the Islamic State's Dijla Wilayat and destroyed most of the insurgent network in southern Nineveh. Drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset, which also includes security force operations and airstrike data.

cu Ready Lion involved a two-week siege of the Islamic State base complex in Makhmour's Qara Chaugh hills during March 9-24, 2021. During the operation, the Qara Chaugh ridge system was pounded by 133 coalition airstrikes while Iraqi CTS (plus embedded U.S. special forces operators) and Kurdish Peshmerga cordoned off the hills and picked off insurgent "squirters" with sniper and mortar fire. Some 27 insurgents were killed during the operation (including the local Islamic State emir of the Makhmour area), plus dozens more presumably buried in cave systems demolished by the airstrikes. Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset, which includes security operation details.

assessment,[158] [cv] Iran-backed militias are dominant in exactly the places that the Islamic State is still the strongest—Sinjar, Baaj, the districts of Daquq and Tuz Khurmatu, Khanaqin, the Iran-Diyala border, Yethrib, the Jallam Desert, the Hamrin foothills, the desert outskirts of Bayji, the Makhul Mountains, and Nukhayb. Thus, some of Iraq's least disciplined and least resourced troops[159] continue to hold the key to stabilization in the areas that the Islamic State is increasingly gravitating toward. In many of these vital "liberated" areas, such militias undertake racketeering that includes smuggling Islamic State fighters and families through checkpoints or taking bribes to allow supplies into Islamic State pockets like the Pulkhana redoubt. In such areas, international and Iraqi media visibility of the real character of insurgency and counterinsurgency is reduced: informal truces abound between outsider militias and Islamic State remnants, for mutual comfort and for profit.[160] In the authors' assessment, terrain under the authority of Iran-backed militias inside Iraq's borders has arguably become one of the last real sanctuaries that the Islamic State enjoys inside Iraq.[cw]

"It may be notable that the Islamic State has best maintained its level of high-quality attacks in areas of Diyala and Salah al-Din that are garrisoned by the least developed security forces with the worst access to coalition intelligence and air support—namely the Federal Police and particularly the units of the PMF that draw support from Iran and that oppose coalition support to the ISF."

The Outlook in Iraq for the Islamic State

The three prior *CTC Sentinel* Islamic State attack metrics analyses illustrated the undulating pattern of the Islamic State insurgency in Iraq: In the August 2017 issue of *CTC Sentinel*,[161] one of the authors explored the head-start that the Islamic State insurgency enjoyed over security forces that had not yet pivoted to counterinsurgency. The December 2018 *CTC Sentinel* study[162] analyzed a precipitate decline in Islamic State attack activity, and the May 2020 update sought to explain a partial recovery of Islamic State attack capability in late 2019 and early 2020. This new January 2022 study notes new downward steps in Islamic State attack capabilities. The first and most obvious finding of this study is that neither an Islamic State recovery nor further decline is inevitable, as this quartet of studies has already chronicled multiple cycles of Islamic State remission and recovery.

Indeed, *conditions* in Iraq and Syria will dictate the level of Islamic State attack capability in the future. Short-term conditions—including insurgency in Syria, capabilities and leadership in the ISF, and the level of coalition support—must be carefully monitored in data-led analyses undertaken by experienced analysts inside and outside of the intelligence community. Particular attention should be directed toward the potential that reduced coalition special forces and airstrike activity could create breathing space for a recovery of centralized leadership functions and planning in the Islamic State. If U.S. forces in Iraq have indeed ceased all combat activities, and are not requested by the Iraqi government to provide such support, then there is a strong possibility that Iraq will struggle to conduct time-sensitive strikes using its own air forces.[163] This could result in a recovery of the Islamic State's leadership cadre and its ability to plan more complex operations within a six- to 12-month timescale. Routine day-to-day insurgency would take longer to recover and may be "capped" by other underlying factors.[cx]

Other long-term drivers such as reconstruction of liberated areas,[164] resettlement of displaced persons,[165] and reintegration of Islamic State families[166] are slower-acting factors that may have less impact on today's ebb and flow of insurgency, but which will be critical factors—unobvious but vital battlefields—when the insurgency is later viewed through the prism of a generation-spanning struggle against violent extremism.

For now, at the outset of 2022, the Islamic State insurgency in Iraq is at a very low ebb, with recorded attack numbers that rival the lowest ever recorded.[cy] The Islamic State was so disrupted and weak in 2021 that it was apparently unable to exploit golden opportunities such as the potential for global attention-grabbing attacks during Pope Francis' daring March 5-8, 2021, visit to Iraq,[167]

cv One good example outlined by Kurdish intelligence officers is Pulkana, where an Islamic State enclave manages to resupply itself despite being completely surrounded by Iraqi and Kurdish security forces. Another is Sinjar and al-Baaj, on the Nineveh-Syria border, where PMF units smuggle Islamic State families and fighters in from Syria to the TRV. In the Sharqat area, PMF units and the Islamic State have clearly understood red lines about which roads or pipelines or electricity lines they are, or are not, allowed to cross without entering the other's terrain. Author's (Knights) conversations with Kurdish intelligence officers, March-April 2019 and January-April 2021; names and places of interview withheld at request of interviewees.

cw It may seem logical that the Islamic State can also recruit more easily in places where outsider Shi`a militias are garrisoning Sunni areas. This was the author's (Knights) expectation in the August 2017 *CTC Sentinel* article, where he wrote about a future "colonization zone" in which the insurgency would be at its strongest as local Sunni resentment of outsider security forces increased. This issue of Islamic State recruitment in Shi`a militia-garrisoned areas is worthy of on-the-ground investigation. Knights, "Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies."

cx Coalition support including airstrikes, enabling, and intelligence support is focused on leadership targeting and disrupting the Islamic State's external operations capability versus grinding down the routine low-level insurgency in Iraq's rural backwaters. For a discussion of the factors "capping" a potential insurgent rebuild, see Joel Wing, "Can The Islamic State Make A Comeback In Iraq Part 3? Interview With Horizon's Alex Mello," Musings on Iraq, August 2019.

cy There were 95 Islamic State attacks throughout Iraq in November 2021 (the lowest level of the new 20-month data period) and an average of 159.5 attacks per month across the entire period. As noted earlier, May 2003 (when incidents were poorly recorded) saw 145 recorded attacks, and the lowest other recorded month with credible incident collection efforts was September 2011 (278 incidents). Attack levels in Iraq are now mostly below the lowest levels seen in the 2003-2011 conflict. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

or extensive attacks on religious festivals (like Ramadan) in 2021,[cz] or even exploitation of reducing levels of coalition air support and periods of poor flying weather.[da] The pylon campaign in the summer of 2021 demonstrated that the Islamic State still has a glimmer of its old instincts and, in the authors' speculation, perhaps felt the need to reverse its obvious stagnation with a centrally inspired 'concept campaign' (attack electrical power supply in summer), albeit one aimed at one of the most defenseless, vulnerable, but also repairable target sets in Iraq.

One reason that Islamic State leadership needs to occasionally boost its profile is precisely because the attack cells of the movement have largely relocated (in the assessment of the authors) to the depopulated deserts and hills of Iraq. In his December 2017 *CTC Sentinel* article, Hassan Hassan discussed the growing importance of deep desert sanctuaries for the Islamic State.[168] Iraqi intelligence officers likewise stress the Islamic State's special connection to the desert, with one interviewee noting that the Islamic State was "fully harmonized with the cruel deep desert environment."[169] It is notable to the veteran Iraq-watcher that the Islamic State has been forced into defending corners of Iraq that were never really theaters of conflict in the 2003-2011 period[170]—in the authors' assessment, places such as the Makhul and Qara Chaugh ridges, the *wadis* of southern Kirkuk, the Jallam Desert, the empty Jazeera steppe between Hatra and Rawa, Wadi Husseinat, or the Nukhayb area in Anbar. In the authors' assessment, these barren fly-blown backwaters are the Islamic State's main strongholds now.

Yet an insurgency that is primarily constrained to such deserts and other uninhabited environments can fade into irrelevance, ruling only the parts of Iraq that most Iraqis can afford to live without. Hence, in the view of some Iraqi intelligence professionals and the authors, the Islamic State may continue to mount campaigns to remind Iraq of its existence—whether by a regular drumbeat of mortar fire out of the Jallam Desert into the suburbs of Samarra, or with an annual campaign to deny the cities the electricity that is transmitted across Iraq's deserts. To remain relevant, the Islamic State may decide that it has to come out of the deserts and back closer to the cities, or to hit cross-desert transit systems like roads, pipelines, and electrical grids on a more systematic basis.

In closing, nothing is simple about the cyclical rise and fall of the Islamic State's insurgent activities in Iraq. Diagnosis of whether an insurgency is strengthening or fading, and why, is a maddening analytical task. In the same manner that a rising tide or a receding tide both create a steady pattern of waves, an analyst always has to ask, "Am I looking at a strong wave, or a rising tide?" or even "Is the tide receding because a tsunami is gathering strength?" Unlike the sea—itself notoriously unpredictable—there are no neat tables to bound the range of high and low tides. In this current study, the authors are not fully satisfied that the known explanatory variables—the ramp-up of the insurgency in Syria, improved capabilities and leadership in the ISF, and the level of coalition support—capture the whole story of the Islamic State's downturn in Iraq since the early summer of 2020. The authors can feel some "unknown unknown" out there that needs to be identified and analyzed, an "X factor" or "dark matter" that invisibly shapes Islamic State activity levels.

Occam's razor—the rule that the simplest answer is usually the best—would suggest that the downturn is simply due to the Islamic State's exhaustion, years of attrition, and isolation from a disillusioned Iraqi Sunni population, with a less pronounced downturn in areas where outsider Shi`a militias have colonized the environment.[171] Projecting this trend, the Islamic State will continue to get weaker and concentrated in fewer areas in coming years, and focus on less and less ambitious attacks.[db]

But the non-linear path of the Islamic State—weaker one year, stronger the next—suggests a less tidy outlook. The Islamic State's apparent gradual diminishment in Iraq could to some extent involve deliberate conservation of offensive capacity[dc]—based on the Islamic State's professed strategic patience and belief in outlasting enemies[172]—resulting in a 'withholding' of attacks in which the Islamic State was not fighting as hard as it could in 2020 and 2021.[dd] As *CTC Sentinel* authors Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter have noted, the Islamic State has a proven capability to absorb tactical defeats, encyst in new safe havens, partially hibernate, learn from mistakes, and return to fight new campaigns.[173] As this study has observed, in Iraq the Islamic State presently uses only a fraction of its available explosives and seems to deliberately attempt very few suicide operations or urban attacks, but given a cadre of new high-quality operators and the decision to resume such attacks, it could return to these activities and find cities as vulnerable as, or more than, in the past.[de]

This study has noted that the Islamic State can, with suspicious

cz In Ramadan 2020, the Islamic State undertook 317 attacks in Iraq, versus 144 in Ramadan 2021. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

da Over the past six years, the Islamic State has traditionally exploited periods of low-visibility weather that hamper the effectiveness of coalition airpower to mount major offensive operations. In one notable example, in November 2015, the Islamic State mounted a company-sized micro-offensive on Kurdish Peshmerga forces on the Makhmour peninsula. Data drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.

db For instance, the Islamic State may continue the current trend of shifting from more risky and uncertain physical overruns of outposts to long-range harassment, sniping, and mortaring that is less likely to cause casualties than determined attacks that involve close assaults. The apparent Islamic State preference for 'come-on' roadside bombs against nocturnal quick reaction forces is another indicator of the Islamic State adopting a more risk-avoidant approach.

dc This was also a nagging concern in the author's (Knights) December 2018 *CTC Sentinel* article, as suggested by its title. See Knights, "The Islamic State Inside Iraq: Losing Power or Preserving Strength?"

dd Indeed, it is possible and even likely both factors are at work, with the Islamic State's struggles to re-embed itself with the border Sunni Arab community driving a strategy of conserving strength for a generational insurgency, as the movement holds out for 'better days' in the future. For one particularly notable example of a 'generational' insurgent, see Shelly Kittelson, "Iraq continues to kill, capture IS members as effectiveness questioned," Al-Monitor, December 24, 2021.

de In one of the authors' (Knights) view, having visited Baghdad in 2021 and maintaining a deep knowledge of urban security arrangements in Iraqi cities, the remission of Islamic State urban mass-casualty attacks is likely to have encouraged a degree of security force and public complacency that may be later exploited by the Islamic State. One concerning incident was the mass breakout of hundreds of Islamic State detainees from a prison in Syria's Hasakah province in January 2022. This company-sized assault, initiated with a diversionary car bombing (recapitulating the group's famous "Breaking the Walls" campaign of 2012-2013), offers a possible template for how this latent attack capability could re-emerge in urban environments, not only in Iraq but Syria as well. See Ben Hubbard, Hwaida al-Saad, and Asmaa al-Omar "ISIS Fighters Attack Syria Prison to Free Fellow Jihadists," *New York Times*, January 21, 2022.

ease, periodically reactivate bombing cells in parts of Iraq for special purposes, such as the pylon campaign. Further study should investigate whether the Islamic State has the intention and capability to reactivate an under-utilized reserve of experienced manpower scattered in sleeper cells across southeastern Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and beyond. All these conundrums suggest that analysts should leave a wide margin that some fraction of the Islamic State's decline in Iraq is, in fact, dormancy[df] or latency[dg] that could be reversible under the right conditions. CTC

df Dormancy is defined as "the state of having normal physical functions suspended or slowed down for a period of time; deep sleep." See the Lexico website.

dg Latency is defined as "the state of existing but not yet being developed or manifest; concealment." See the Lexico website.

Appendix

Table 1: Iraq national attack data, by attack type

	All Attacks	High-Quality	Roadside Bombs	Overrun	Mass Casualty	Targeted Killing
Q1 2018	445	265	69	49	85	62
Q2 2018	308	156	72	32	22	30
Q3 2018	360	169	88	23	20	38
Q4 2018	357	161	79	31	14	37
Q1 2019	292	114	50	31	17	16
Q2 2019	376	155	77	35	26	17
Q3 2019	431	205	111	70	8	16
Q4 2019	550	300	164	98	8	30
Q1 2020	517	248	130	83	12	23
Q2 2020	808	445	241	118	2	84
Q3 2020	510	264	139	55	6	64
Q4 2020	454	182	87	31	5	59
Q1 2021	327	132	64	26	2	40
Q2 2021	420	148	87	26	1	34
Q3 2021	481	137	58	22	4	53
Predicted Q4 2021*	299	82	45	14	2	21

** Q4 2021 figures are predicted based on the extension of statistical average in October and November 2021 across December 2021. Based on the authors' partial sampling of December, it looks on trend with October and November. All incident data is drawn from the authors' geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset.*

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135 Based on author's (Knights) conversations with Iraqi intelligence officers working on the Islamic State, 2019-2020; names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees.
136 Based on author's (Knights) conversations with a senior Iraqi intelligence officer working on the Islamic State, in 2021 in Iraq; name and place of interview withheld at request of interviewee.
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139 Qualitative insight drawn from the authors' geolocated SIGACT dataset.
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A View from the CT Foxhole: Amy Zegart, Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution and Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University

By Brian Fishman and Don Rassler

Dr. Amy Zegart is the Morris Arnold and Nona Jean Cox Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution and Professor of Political Science (by courtesy) at Stanford University. She is also a Senior Fellow at Stanford's Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Chair of Stanford's Artificial Intelligence and International Security Steering Committee, and a contributing writer at The Atlantic. *She specializes in U.S. intelligence, emerging technologies and national security, grand strategy, and global political risk management.*

Zegart has been featured by the National Journal as one of the 10 most influential experts in intelligence reform. Most recently, she served as a commissioner on the 2020 CSIS Technology and Intelligence Task Force (co-chaired by Avril Haines and Stephanie O'Sullivan and has advised the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence. She served on the Clinton administration's National Security Council staff and as a foreign policy adviser to the Bush 2000 presidential campaign. She has also testified before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and advised senior officials on intelligence, homeland security, and cybersecurity matters.

The author of five books, Zegart's award-winning research includes the leading academic study of intelligence failures before 9/11— Spying Blind: The CIA, the FBI, and the Origins of 9/11 *(Princeton 2007). She co-edited with Herbert Lin* Bytes, Bombs, and Spies: The Strategic Dimensions of Offensive Cyber Operations *(Brookings 2019). She and Condoleezza Rice co-authored* Political Risk: How Businesses and Organizations Can Anticipate Global Insecurity *(Twelve 2018) based on their popular Stanford MBA course. Zegart's forthcoming book is* Spies, Lies, and Algorithms: The History and Future of American Intelligence *(Princeton 2022).*

CTC: Next month, your book *Spies, Lies, and Algorithms: The History and Future of American Intelligence* will be released by Princeton University Press. What's the central thesis of your book, and what are some of its key findings and takeaways?

Zegart: The central thesis of the book changed. I originally was going to write this book a decade ago—I'm a little embarrassed to even admit that—and it was supposed to be a textbook for university undergraduate courses. It started back when I was at UCLA where I polled my students and found out, much to my surprise, that most of their information about intelligence came from spy-themed entertainment. So the original thesis of the book was just [to] provide a textbook that separates fact from fiction and that provides an introduction for a wide audience to understand intelligence. But that thesis changed dramatically with the rise of cyber threats, Edward Snowden's revelations, and other profound changes driven by technology. One of the benefits of taking so long to write the book is that the world changed, and how U.S. intelligence agencies make sense of this dizzying threat landscape in the tech age became a much more interesting topic.

The thesis of the book now is that this is a moment of reckoning for the intelligence community, that we've never before had the convergence of so many emerging technologies—whether it's internet connectivity, AI [artificial intelligence], quantum computing, synthetic biology, and that this convergence of emerging tech is transforming every aspect of intelligence. I summarize this moment of reckoning as an adapt-or-fail moment much like it was on 9/11 for the intelligence community, and the reason is emerging technologies are driving what I call the five "mores": more threats able to threaten across vast distance, through cyberspace for example; more speed, threats are moving at the speed of networks, not the speed of bureaucracy, and so that means that collection has to be faster, analysis has to be faster, decisions using intelligence have to be faster; the third more [is] more data. Analysts are drowning in data. How can we use emerging technologies to sift vast amounts of data? The amount of data on Earth is doubling about every two years.

[The fourth more is] more *customers* who need intelligence to advance the national interest. Intelligence isn't just for people with clearances anymore. Voters need intelligence, critical infrastructure leaders need intelligence, tech platforms need intelligence. So how do intelligence agencies produce for the open? That's a radical transformation.

And then the fifth more: more competitors. The government's ability to collect and analyze information is nowhere near dominant compared to what it used to be in the Cold War. Open source isn't just a type of intelligence, or an "INT," that spy agencies need to collect. Open-source intelligence is an ecosystem of new players who have their own incentives, capabilities, dynamics, and weaknesses. U.S. intelligence agencies can't just add more open-source intelligence and stir. They have to figure out how to deal with a world where anyone can collect and analyze information and make it available to the world. Much of this information can be useful, but it can also be dead wrong, deliberately misleading, and it can create unintended consequences. For example, third-party open-source intelligence could make crises harder to manage because their real-time "fact checking" could limit the ability of states to compromise, negotiate in secret, and use useful fictions to find face-saving ways to de-escalate. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, we provided covert support to the Afghan rebels. The Soviets knew it and we knew the Soviets knew it, but both sides pretended not to know. That useful fiction helped keep the Cold War from escalating.

This too is a radical new environment for the intelligence community, and what it means is U.S. dominance and intelligence

is declining. The playing field of intelligence is leveling, not to the advantage of the United States. For all of those reasons, emerging technology is creating a need for radical transformation of the intelligence community.

CTC: You've served on the National Security Council and have played a key role in various commissions related to AI and other intelligence reform topics. If you were back in the NSC or had a senior role in the DNI, what would be the top three initiatives that you would want to kick off so the U.S. could better prepare to tackle those five "mores"?

Zegart: That's such a difficult and good question. To the [Biden] administration's credit, I think there are a lot of people working on this problem. I'm not the first one to talk about it. As you mentioned, I was on the CSIS Technology and Intelligence Task Force co-chaired by Avril Haines [current Director of National Intelligence] and Stephanie O'Sullivan [former Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence]. So there are a lot of smart people working on these problems; I didn't invent the awareness of the problem. But if I were in the seat of government today, I would focus on three drivers. Rather than specific recommendations, I think [about] what's going to drive reform over the long-term because this is an urgent and important issue, [and] we need long-term change. Number one, organization; number two, strategy; and number three, talent.

One of the things that I really felt very strongly about in the [CSIS] task force, and you'll see it in the report, was we need a dedicated open-source agency. I was reluctant to recommend a 19th intelligence agency because as we all know, when you have more agencies to coordinate, coordination becomes harder, and so if you're worried about coordination as I am, a new agency may not seem like such a great idea. But I'm convinced we need a new open-source agency. Much like air power didn't get the attention it needed until the Air Force became its own service after World War II, OSINT [open-source intelligence] will never get the priority or resources the nation needs without its own agency. There are open-source initiatives in the IC [intelligence community] already, but secret agencies will always favor secrets. For intelligence to succeed in this era, open-source intelligence has to be foundational. And for it to be foundational, it has to have a dedicated organization focused relentlessly and single-mindedly on that mission. So I think that organizational piece is key.

The second piece is strategy. What's our strategy and intelligence for emerging technology? We need one, and it needs to guide everything we do. And then the third thing, and I know they're focused on this and [CIA] Director [William] Burns is focused on this a lot, [is] talent. How do we get the right people in the door, and how do we get the right flow of people in and out of government in intelligence so that we can harness emerging technologies ourselves, developing better working relationships with the private sector, and better understand how technologies are driving the threat landscape?

CTC: [As you know], the challenge is not just for the intelligence agencies and the production of information, but it's also prepping the 'customers.' Are our senior leaders prepared to accept guidance drawn from open sources? And when you think about that broader range of customers, how do we prep them to hear from intelligence agencies so that those agencies can be effective?

"I'm convinced we need a new open-source agency … OSINT will never get the priority or resources the nation needs without its own agency. There are open-source initiatives in the IC already, but secret agencies will always favor secrets. For intelligence to succeed in this era, open-source intelligence has to be foundational. And for it to be foundational, it has to have a dedicated organization focused relentlessly and single-mindedly on that mission."

Zegart: It gets also to, how do we have customers [that] become champions of intelligence reform, not just recipients of intelligence products? They go hand-in-hand. I think there has always been a need to educate customers about what intelligence can and can't do. Sue Gordon[a] has said to me in an interview that I use in the book: Policymakers always have some friction with intelligence because intelligence steals presidents' decision space. By that, she meant that intelligence often has to deliver bad news—telling presidents that events may be unfolding in ways they don't like and can't control. I think there needs to be an education function not just within the IC but among customers about what's possible with intelligence, what isn't, and why. And I don't think we're going to get there unless customers are partnering in the intelligence reform endeavor.

CTC: What should the intelligence community be learning from entities like Bellingcat and other data journalists that are taking innovative approaches to leveraging data or making interesting, novel use of open-source data?

Zegart: I think OSINT is too often viewed in the intelligence community as an INT. It's *stuff* that people can use, and I think that's wrong. OSINT is an ecosystem; it is a group of organizations and individuals, and what an open-source center should be doing is actually providing a node of engagement with the ecosystem so that it's not just how can we use the stuff that Bellingcat is producing or how can we use the tools that they're using today, but how can we have a continuous learning and collaboration process with a variety of open-source actors—and they're constantly evolving—so that we produce our own open-source stuff, but we're also engaging in that interaction with the open-source community? I think that's

a Editor's Note: Sue Gordon served as the Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence from August 2017 to August 2019.

the most important thing that an open-source agency should be doing, is reframing it from the INT as a way of collecting stuff that we already collect towards viewing open-source as a whole new ecosystem of actors with its own capabilities, weaknesses, dynamics, and incentives.

But beyond that, I think Bellingcat is such an interesting example of, how can you harness the crowd without turning the crowd into a mob? And I think Bellingcat's done a really good job of that. Other open-source actors have not done as good a job at that, and it's an emerging ecosystem with norms and standards and training, and it's learning from Bellingcat: how were they able to do that globally on a volunteer basis, and how do they actually exert quality control when anyone can join and it's a volunteer effort? Because, as you know, in the IC, quality control tends to be bureaucratic, it's rigid, it's top down. There are some benefits to that, but it's slow. Bellingcat is kind of the opposite. It's fast, it's bottom up, it's dispersed, it's decentralized, but there are risks to that, too. And Bellingcat's done a really good job at actually mitigating the risks, so I would focus there.

CTC: One element is the analysis; the other part is using that open-source data, right? I thought [it] was an interesting observation that we could use open-source data to train machine-learning tools and potentially apply that in other realms where the data is held more securely. How should the government be thinking about acquiring and using that data? And how do you work with the private sector in that realm, where a lot of this data may be held?

Zegart: Let's start with the easy sort of open-source data, which is foreign open-source data. We're not talking about U.S. persons on social media inside the United States, which raises constitutional, First Amendment questions. As you know, it's not just getting foreign data; it's getting structured data that is usable in a variety of ways. How do we collect haystacks in ways where we can actually use machine learning and other analytic tools to harness insights that we wouldn't otherwise get? And how can we do it quickly? That's kind of the key question. I'm always struck by the fact that foreign adversaries have access to our data in ways that we don't have access to anybody else's data. I feel like right now we're living in the worst of all worlds: The internet is free and open for adversaries to collect our data and use it, but it's not free and open for us to understand what's going on inside of China or to share what the news actually is inside of denied environments. It's only free and open for the adversaries who are autocrats. I don't have a good answer [for] how we deal with getting more data other than to say I think it takes trust more than anything else. We can have laws and we can have mandates and all the rest of it, but at the end of the day , you have to trust the government with access to data, and that requires oversight. We can't just access more data. We have to think much more systematically about what kind of oversight we're going to have so that there are guardrails on how data of Americans, in particular, is collected and used.

CTC: The United States government has been investing in data science, machine learning, and artificial intelligence driven approaches in various ways for decades. You served as an advisor to the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence (NSCAI).[1] How much progress has the U.S. government made on the AI front? What are the key remaining challenges, and how do you assess our progress given the efforts of countries like China?

Amy Zegart (CISAC/Stanford University)

Zegart: I'm going to sound like so many government reports that say, 'Progress has been made but there's more room to improve.' Have we made progress? Absolutely. I think that commission (NSCAI) did tremendous work. You see a lot of its recommendations now getting into the NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act] over the past couple of years, and its work is ongoing. But we are way behind the curve on this. Look also at the Belfer Center report that just came out.[2] We are losing. People don't like to use the 'L' word, but we are losing the tech race with China. We're losing in almost every technological area. The gap is narrowing, and China is expected to surpass the United States in just about every area except semiconductors. And they're working hard on that, too: the semiconductor supply chain. That's not to say we *have* to lose, but the trend is not in the right direction, and time is not on our side.

One of the least noticed areas of the tech competition that I would highlight is the human capital dimension. I am really worried that we are eating our seed corn when it comes to AI education. What do I mean by that? Look at the percentage of AI faculty at leading research universities that are no longer faculty. They're going to industry. Two-thirds of Ph.D.s in 2019 who got their Ph.D.s in computer science specializing in AI, two-thirds of them did not stay in academia. They went to industry, which means there aren't

enough professors to teach the next generation of students to do AI. So if we're thinking about long-term, what does our tech innovation require? People. Nearly all the numbers are bad when it comes to higher education. The percentage of international students getting Ph.D.s in STEM fields: really high and getting higher. I welcome international students. The question is, do they have visas that enable them to stay so they can continue working in the United States? The answer is no. It's too hard for them to continue to stay. Our K-12 education system [during] COVID has gotten worse. All our performance in international science and math competitions is getting worse despite spending more money. So if we look at the long-term, strategic tech competition is about talent, and we are losing the race for talent. And that really concerns me, especially the sort of brain drain of our top AI researchers to industry.

CTC: Having been myself [Brian Fishman] in industry, there is incredible demand obviously for that talent, and folks are getting offerings. Is there a way to balance that out? Should the government step in? You can imagine programs to incentivize talented folks to stay in academia to train folks. We've done that in the past with key languages, for example.[3] Are there things we ought to do to counter this specifically?

Zegart: I think the government should step in and provide more funding to keep talented researchers at universities. I had this argument with someone in industry who said, 'Why is that a bad thing, all these people going to industry?' and I said, 'Because you're looking to monetize products, and academics are looking at the frontier of the frontier.' If you're looking at basic research that will fundamentally change how we do what we do in 20 years, it's not going to come out of Google most likely. It's not going to come out of industry. It's going to come out of academia. I have a colleague here at Stanford who says his sort of 'test' for his doctoral students is 'Go come up with a dissertation topic and go pitch it around the Valley, and if you have people that want to fund it, I'm gonna reject it. Why? Because you're not thinking big enough, because you're thinking too near-term. You're thinking about what can be monetized. That's not our job. Our job is to be bolder, to be on the frontier of the frontier.'

How can we solve this problem? Money from the government to retain top talent in universities would help. Compute power and resources to enable them to do what they do in industry within universities would also help. Once you get past the really wealthy universities, it's hard to put together packages and the capabilities for the leading researchers to actually do the work that they want to do. They have to be able to do it with access to compute power and data.

The other thing, and I've been talking with folks I know at the Pentagon about this, is there are more windows of opportunity for the U.S. government to harness the creative energies of top researchers in universities today. I'll give you an example. If you're a first-year Ph.D. student in computer science at a top university, you have to figure out what your dissertation is going to be. Guess who provides all sorts of great advanced tools for you to play around on the new gizmos in the lab. Industry. Path of least resistance: What's my dissertation going to be? It's going to be on this thing that I can do research on that's already in my lab. Why doesn't the U.S. government actually provide problem sets and capabilities to departments for first-year Ph.D. students to work on *their* toughest problems? There's talent looking for problems to work on; the government has problems looking for talent. But they haven't crossed that bridge. And first-year doctoral students are an ideal group to cross the bridge.

"If we look at the long-term, strategic tech competition is about talent, and we are losing the race for talent. And that really concerns me, especially the sort of brain drain of our top AI researchers to industry."

CTC: It's fascinating that you're conceptualizing technological talent in truly a national power sort of way, in industry, in academia. How do we get some of these folks? And what is the right model for bringing in this kind of talent direct to government, whether it's the NSC or the Department of Defense or wherever? And how much do we need to [get] talent direct in[to] government versus making sure that talent is just accessible to the folks that need to make decisions within the IC or the defense community more broadly?

Zegart: They're really two questions embedded in there. One is, how can we get this talent pool to be interested in government? I think there's a lot more interest than the government realizes. I often joke that the Pentagon is the only organization in the world that thinks it can market the same way to 18- to 25-year-olds about its products now as it did 25 years ago. You have to know how to reach people, and cohorts change pretty fast in that age group in terms of what speaks to them. So I think the Pentagon tends to use too many D words: deny, degrade, destroy. And tech folks like to use C words: create, collaborate, change. So I think there's a sort of marketing issue there, but I think there's a reservoir of interest among top talent in the academic world and I think the onus is on the government to figure out ways to reach them more and give them low-cost, low-risk ways for them to go in and out. For example, you're a doctoral student and you're interested in doing stuff for the government, but you're not going to take time away from your dissertation project to go work in the Pentagon. But you might go for a couple of weeks for a boot camp to understand how policy works. So then you've met the right people and you understand how government works, and now you've got that network that you can draw on in both directions for the future. I think that part of it—how can we tap that resource better—there are a whole number of ways that we could do better.

CTC: How in government do you utilize those folks that are not in government all the time?

Zegart: I think the question here is, what is the talent problem in the government? And I think we actually conflate three talent problems inside the government with respect to tech. We need champions, we need innovators, and we need implementers.

Implementers: You can grow your own. This is Kessel Run.[b] This is what a lot of DoD efforts are doing. So you can grow your own—implement better coding, etc.

Champions: That gets to, how do we get senior leaders to understand what technology can and can't do for them? That's education of senior leaders so that a combatant commander actually understands what AI can do with threat analysis, for example.

Innovators: There, you probably do need to have more in and out of the private sector. I think it's the category of the innovators—who's at the cutting-edge of the cutting-edge—those are the people that need to be going in and out of government more. But the model can't be lifers, right? It's got to be ambassadors, going in and out of the two worlds.

CTC: You made comments in previous interviews and we touched on a little bit here in this interview about open source being a potential laboratory for the experimentation and testing of ideas.[4] As we all know, government classification of data and some of those restrictions make it challenging to have that interaction and movement of people back and forth, which limits the pool of people who can do that. What do you see as open source's value or utility in that regard?

Zegart: I'm glad you brought that up. When I say open-source center, I really think of three areas of goodness that it could create. One is pounding the table for open source; you've got a stakeholder [saying] that open source really matters, right? But two is, it encourages innovation in terms of, now we have open-source data, let's test various tools and see what we find. And we can do that in an unclassified environment. It enables more innovation more quickly because it's all unclassified. And then the third area of goodness is recruiting people. If you're not geographically constrained to be in the Beltway, now you can go where talent wants to live. You have to forward deploy to where the talent wants to live. So you gotta go to Austin. You gotta go to Denver. You have to go to Portland and other places. Imagine an open-source center that has forward deployment offices in other locations because it's all unclassified. The communication's much easier. People can work more seamlessly. So I think it's all three of those things: pounding the table, experimenting with new tools because it's unclassified data, and drawing people in because you are located where they want to be.

CTC: On this organizational question, the Department of Defense recently announced it is consolidating organizations focused on digital transformation.[5] If you imagine AI contributing to the Department's mission in three broad buckets—intelligence, operations, and the "business" or back-office side of managing the department—what would like to see the Department do in each of these areas?

Zegart: I hope—and I think DoD is moving in this direction—that you start, particularly when you're talking about AI, with the back office because, first of all, it's desperately needed from what I can understand and, second, it's less controversial. You know the old saying in the Valley: Nail it, then scale it. You gotta nail it in the back-office functions—things like logistics and maintenance, predictive maintenance, things like that [that are] crucial for the effectiveness of the force but you're not getting into the debate about killer robots, right? You don't need to *start* with the debate about killer robots. Let's start with the boring bureaucratic functions where we know AI can create tremendous benefit. And logistics wins wars, as the old saying goes. There, the goal of adopting AI is no friction. You should be able to do a lot: travel more easily, communicate more easily, do all your HR stuff more easily without friction, and if it's one chorus I always hear is how much friction there is in doing even the simplest things within DoD. So think about the efficiency gains you get if you actually adopt AI usefully in that area.

"There's a lot of concern about, are machines going to replace humans? And the answer is no. Machines should be augmenting humans, so that pattern matching, searching for surface-to-air missile sites is done by an AI algorithm [and] the analyst can focus on, what is Kim Jong-un's intention here with what he's doing? Machines can't do that nearly as well as humans, but machines can do pattern recognition better than humans can."

But when you get to the warfighter, you want some friction. When I think about 'how do we adopt AI in a useful way?' I want productive friction between the speed of dealing in a warfighting environment and the pause to think about the ethical and legal implications of what we're doing. I actually want more friction with AI and the warfighter, at least as we're ironing out what the norms should be and how ethics should apply.

With intelligence, I think about AI as augmenting the human in a serious way. So I think there's a lot of concern about, are machines going to replace humans? And the answer is no. Machines should be augmenting humans, so that pattern matching, searching for surface-to-air missile sites is done by an AI algorithm [and] the analyst can focus on, what is Kim Jong-un's intention here with what he's doing? Machines can't do that nearly as well as humans, but machines can do pattern recognition better than humans can. So [it's] figuring out the division of labor so we free up human thinking for the kind of analysis that humans are much better at doing.

CTC: As we all appreciate, sometimes the near-term solution of government is to dedicate a variety of resources to a problem. There's a lot of money and investment going into AI. I think DoD recognizes that it needs to accelerate and more effectively compete with countries like China given what they've achieved in the AI sphere. Any thoughts about how we think about, with all that money and investment, AI's return on investment

b Editor's Note: "Kessel Run is the operational name for Air Force Life Cycle Management Center (AFLCMC)'s Detachment 12. Its mission is to deliver combat capabilities warfighters love and revolutionize the Air Force software acquisition process." "The Kessel Run Mission," Kessel Run website at kesselrun.af.mil

(ROI), particularly as the DoD and the intelligence community is trying to scale?

Zegart: I'd say a couple of things. One is in the grand scheme of things, the money going to AI is not very much. We're talking about spending half a billion to a billion dollars per plane, on the next bomber. A *plane*. What is AI spending compared to that? Not very much, right? So in the grand scheme of things, I think we're not actually spending nearly enough on AI and other foundational emerging technologies. Second, I'd say there's a lot of stupid spending on AI. I'm not being very diplomatic here, but I think that's the reality. And so where is the money going? Because I hear earfuls from really amazing startup AI companies about how they can't get into the DoD. It's too hard. The money is too small. They take too long. And I think part of the problem here is the defense industrial base is consolidating. Because of mergers and acquisitions, there are now only a handful of big primes, there's less competition, they're locking up a lot of money, and it's not creating enough space for actual innovation. So who's getting the AI funding is a key question.

And then there's also a different definition of speed. [Recently], we held a Tech Track II dialogue at the Hoover Institution[6] [on] the idea that we need the Valley and DoD to actually communicate better together. We had venture capitalists and industry leaders and not just big companies, but startup companies and folks from the Pentagon and White House and others, and one of the key takeaways for me was that they had different definitions of what's fast. In the Pentagon, there's a lot of talk and I think a lot of genuine interest in moving fast, but fast in Pentagon speak is a decade. Fast in Silicon Valley is a month. And fast for venture capitalists is a year. That disconnect means that DoD may think it's moving fast in AI, but not fast enough to make the return on investment for venture capitalists investing in startup AI companies to make it worthwhile. I heard a lot of concern from the venture capital community that there's been a lot of forward investment in defense-first companies, including AI companies, and the Pentagon's got a year to show that that investment is worth it in terms of actual production or actual contracts, or that money is going to go where the returns are better. So I'm really worried about this moment in terms of speed, and the Pentagon's moving fast, but not fast enough.

I think ultimately the ROI on AI is the government actually adopting AI from the right places that can improve effectiveness fast enough. And I don't see enough evidence that we're anywhere close to being where we need to be.

CTC: Is the implication there, though, that we need to be spreading those dollars more widely outside of the traditional defense industrial base and get to cutting-edge companies that are not tied to Lockheed or Raytheon or BAE or some of the big companies that are already in this space because some of the innovation is happening outside of those realms?

Zegart: Absolutely. We need more money. We need it to go to more players. We need what we call actual competition in the United States, as opposed to having two companies that make airplanes, one company that makes ships. Oh, by the way, the primes are not software companies first; they're hardware companies first. I liken it to asking an artillery officer to fly a plane or a pilot to do land warfare. Their sweet spot is not software. Their sweet spot is hardware. So why are we thinking that primes are good at software, when *software* companies are good at software?

"In the Pentagon, there's a lot of talk and I think a lot of genuine interest in moving fast, but fast in Pentagon speak is a decade. Fast in Silicon Valley is a month. And fast for venture capitalists is a year. That disconnect means that DoD may think it's moving fast in AI, but not fast enough to make the return on investment for venture capitalists investing in startup AI companies to make it worthwhile."

CTC: This also seems to circle back to the point you made about human capital, where in government, with the investment, are there enough people who have the skills to understand what good AI looks like and to evaluate value based upon what's being pitched to them, select good vendors or products, and so forth?

Zegart: I am concerned that AI is [viewed] like sort of magic fairy dust where people sprinkle a little AI and suddenly good things happen and no one really knows when it works or what its risks are. Before the budget debt ceiling intervened, we were going to have the first-ever congressional forum for bipartisan members of Congress to come to Stanford, where we were doing a tech bootcamp to educate members of Congress about a range of emerging technologies, including AI. I think it's desperately needed. I actually counted the number of engineers in Congress, and it's something like two dozen, and there are more than 200 lawyers in Congress. Not that I have anything against lawyers, but you can't understand the technology just by reading a little bit about it. You actually need a little bit more of an understanding to know what it can and can't do, and that's true not just in DoD, but Congress has to learn more about it, too.

CTC: I don't think we can go through this conversation without talking about killer robots at least a little bit. How do we set the ethical guidelines for the use of AI in not just combat environments, but broader defense? And I do worry about trying to turn these considerations over to government completely, I'm wondering how we come to agreement about the ethical and appropriate uses of AI. And over time, because this is a competitive space, is this a place where, however difficult it may be, we're going to need international treaties and some kind of verification?

Zegart: These are such thorny and good questions, and they're not limited to just government: How do we think about ethical uses of fill-in-the-blank? Engineers often think that their products are agnostic, and they don't think about the potential downside uses of their products. I think ethics needs to be baked into engineering

at the front end where the creators of technologies are thinking about ethics and potential downside uses of those technologies *in the process of* creating them. Right now, I can't tell you how many engineers come to me and say, 'Well, policy and ethics is what you guys do. We just create stuff.' That's not how it should work, right? So ethics needs to be baked into academia. It needs to be baked into industry. It needs to be baked into the government.

Killer robots is not just a government problem. When Google says things like, 'We don't want to be involved in anything involved in making weapons.' Google *is* a weapon. The platform is a weapon for nefarious actors to do bad things, and we need to realize that. I think it's a much broader question than just, what are the ethical guidelines of the Pentagon? But let's put that aside for a second. How do we move forward? I think people outside the military would be surprised to know how much thought is going into ethical guidelines and AI, and the use of autonomous weapons. And those discussions need to be more explicit, and they need to be more public and transparent to reassure, in particular, in the United States that our policy makers are really thinking about, even if we could use autonomous systems for certain capabilities, we won't and why. You think about the use of law enforcement and algorithms for facial recognition and how algorithmic bias is leading to a lot of false identification, particularly of African Americans, because we know algorithms are better at identifying facial recognition of lighter-skin faces than darker-skin faces.[7] So we need to think at all levels of society about how to have those conversations in an open way, and it starts with understanding what the inherent limitations of the technology [are]. Where can the technology go wrong? If you start by understanding where the technology can go wrong, you can have better ethical guidelines moving forward.

You asked, should we have an autonomous weapons treaty? I think the answer is no. And the answer is no for me for a couple of reasons. Number one, how do you define an autonomous weapon? That's a pretty tricky thing. Is a nuclear missile an autonomous weapon? Is something [that] once you launch it, you can't recall it an autonomous weapon? We might imagine a lot of disagreement about what is autonomous and how autonomous it is. Number two, there's no incentive for other states to actually adhere to such a treaty, so it would be aspirational, but not operational. And I worry then it gives lip service to ethical guidelines without actually implementing them. If you think about cyber norms, for example, there's a lot of discussion about the free and open internet. Well, the internet is not free and open, and we need to get over that. So if you talk about having a treaty to foster a free and open internet, aren't we better off talking about the Balkanized internet we currently have? How China and Russia are taking advantage of it, and how we need to actually have like-minded countries with democratic principles banding more together? I think the surge for virtue signaling and feeling good about all signing on to something can get in the way of real progress in terms of figuring out where we agree with like-minded countries about what we will and will not do, and actually developing norms among the like-minded first and then expanding that circle outward. So I really worry about a treaty that just gives lip service to it and lets the bad guys off—the ones that don't think about ethics at all.

CTC: In relation to this discussion, how concerned are you about the messy reality of conflict and future conflict related to the development of ethical principles for the United States and Allied partners when other competitors or adversaries may have different ethical guidelines and adhere to different ethical principles in relation to autonomous weapons? That those differences actually might be an advantage to a competitor, which they could leverage in the future; it seems like that might be a future that's not that far away necessarily, either for a state actor or non-state actor, or a proxy because of the different boundaries and guidelines that govern different actors' behavior.

"Should we have an autonomous weapons treaty? I think the answer is no ... Number one, how do you define an autonomous weapon? That's a pretty tricky thing ... Number two, there's no incentive for other states to actually adhere to such a treaty, so it would be aspirational, but not operational. And I worry then it gives lip service to ethical guidelines without actually implementing them."

Zegart: It's such a great question. I think on that front, our history with nuclear security gives us some good guidance about how to proceed. We developed a lot of confidence-building measures and mutual understandings about how nuclear war could emerge, even when neither side wants it, during the Cold War. And as I think about autonomous weapons, where is the mutual self-interest in restricting our use of these weapons? And I think the mutual self-interest lies in crisis escalation. With autonomous weapons, I think crisis escalation becomes much more likely and more fraught. Crisis management when humans are against humans is hard enough, where we're trying to predict what the other side is going to do. Now you think about crisis escalation where autonomous systems are collecting information, analyzing information, and making decisions about how to use that information and what kinetic effects there will be, and each side is not operating with the same algorithms and with the same use of autonomy. Now the chances of miscalculation rise exponentially. I think in that risk of escalation lies a silver lining, which is called talking to our adversaries about the mutual dangers that arise from an increasingly autonomous world. So it's not just that the U.S. is fighting with one hand behind our back and China isn't, it's that we are *all* worse off when one side uses autonomy in certain ways that are not well understood, that have lots of reasons for failure, and that crises can escalate out of control pretty easily.

I have this one example that really alarmed and has intrigued me since I saw it, and it has to do with AlphaGo [and the board

game Go].[c] There was this moment when the machine is playing Lee Sedol, where AlphaGo makes this—I call it the move 37 problem—the machine makes a move that is just so crazy that the best Go player in the world has to leave the room. He's freaked out. He leaves for 15 minutes, and commentators are saying, 'That's just not a human move.' And the general reaction was, 'Isn't that amazing what the machine can do, is not a human move?' and I thought, 'Isn't it alarming it's not a human move?' So imagine in a crisis, your opponent is using this algorithmic decision-making tool, and you can't understand it because it's not a human move. Can you imagine the escalation risks when one side is doing things you can't imagine in your wildest dreams they would do? We think about all the crises that escalated into war when humans were doing their best to understand other humans. That not-a-human move component to autonomous capabilities scares the pants off me when it comes to crisis escalation. And I think if it scares the pants off of other people, then we have the opportunity to actually have real conversations about self-limiting autonomy.

CTC: As we become more dependent on technology, that dependence creates new surfaces for attack, for adversaries. And the inverse is obviously true: As our adversaries become more dependent on technology, that creates new surfaces for us to attack. How do we think about resilience in that environment? Because you know the first answer among most folks will be, 'Hey, we're going to defend those surfaces.' But we're not going to defend them perfectly over time. How do we prepare a workforce and an organization to deal with the loss of these technologies, if that happens in critical moments?

Zegart: You've raised such a critical question. I have a lot of thoughts about resilience. The first is, we're not going to be able to deter our way out of this. I completely agree with your premise, which is that bad things are going to happen. So now we have to think about how do we defend against them happening? How do we recover once they do happen? A couple of things I think about are, number one, technical problems often don't have technical solutions. They have non-technical solutions. Like learning how to use a paper map instead of relying on your GPS, for example. So that resilience often has to be in a non-technical way.

Number two, avoid the temptation to concentrate. You hear a lot about 'we need to concentrate our communications capabilities.' That to me is, 'Oh no, we don't want to do that.' We want to distribute, not concentrate. That, in itself, empowers resilience. It makes coordination harder, but distributed capabilities, not concentrated capabilities are going to be really important. And we haven't talked about it so far, but there's a really important psychological dimension to resilience. Resilience is a frame of mind, too. It's not just about capabilities and regulations and what you do. It's about your attitude, and that comes, in part, from communicating with people so they know what is likely to happen and they know the plan if something bad happens. I don't think we've thought enough about the human dimension of all of these kinds of threats. I'm really struck by, we're sitting here during COVID, and how many health officials are saying we didn't really understand why so many people might resist vaccination or resist masking or feel the way they do. This is about human behavior, and we have to take human behavior fundamentally into account when we think about policy, including resilience.

"I really worry that our biggest national security threat is the lack of trust and the polarization of our society, and the undermining of our foundational democracy. We cannot outcompete China if we can't work in unity as a country, and I think if we *can* work in unity as a country, we can handle any challenge."

CTC: I [Brian Fishman] was doing research for you at UCLA as an undergraduate student. One of the questions that you asked then [centered on how] the public tends to focus on the intelligence community when they get something big wrong. And you were trying to understand whether or not they were actually wrong more than the private sector essentially. Did they fail more than the private sector? What are your thoughts are about that today, the IC versus the private sector? You've spent a lot of time now in and around Silicon Valley; you've seen successes and failures there. And a lot of time around the IC and you've seen successes and failures there. How do you think about that?

Zegart: I have been beaten up a lot by my friends inside the community because I focus on failures and not on successes. Fair criticism. But of course, I say, 'Your successes are silent, and your failures are public, so how can I get a representative sample? Hard for me to do from the outside.' I did spend a lot of time in my new book on the bin Ladin operation because I felt like as a researcher, I'm sampling on the dependent variable too much. I'm looking only at failures and what leads to failures. I didn't have the ability to look enough at successes and what led to success so that I can actually examine the two in context. In the book, I spent a lot of time on the bin Ladin operation and what led to success in that case because we have a lot that's in the public domain about it. I think it's a remarkable story, actually. And I think the hero of the story in the bin Ladin operation is the ability of the intelligence community to jettison its analytic assumptions. To find him—and Leon Panetta and Jeremy Bash have written about this[8]—the analysts had to actually throw out every assumption they'd been working under about bin Ladin: that he would likely be in a rural area holed up in the mountains somewhere, that he would be surrounded by lots of security, that he wouldn't be with his family. All of those things turned out not to be true. There were good reasons to have those assumptions, but they had to then throw them away. Think about how hard it is for us to get rid of our confirmation bias and all the things that normally focus us on analytic success. They had to throw them out to actually find him. I think that's a remarkable

c Editor's Note: "AlphaGo is the first computer program to defeat a professional human Go player, the first to defeat a Go world champion, and is arguably the strongest Go player in history." See the AlphaGo page on DeepMind's website at deepmind.com

accomplishment. So that tells me that the analytic ingenuity inside the community is really something. It doesn't always work, but there's a real self-analysis there.

To get to your question, Brian—is the private sector better than the intelligence community—I don't know the answer, but I am absolutely certain of the fact that the intelligence community is more reflective about its successes and failures, lessons learned, and causal inference than the private sector is. Absolutely more reflective, systematically reflective, willing to acknowledge failure because that's part of the business, whereas I think in the private sector, it tends to be either 'I'm only going to selectively look at my successes and talk about what led to them,' or I'm going to say, 'Failure is a part of being successful. I'm going to kind of discount the failure as the price of admission.' So I couldn't say what the hit rate is, but I think the process of examining the hit rate is light years better in the intelligence community in general than it is in the private sector.

CTC: When you look out over the near- to mid-term horizon, what are the primary threats that have the potential to intersect with terrorism topics that you're most concerned about and why?

Zegart: As I think about national security threats to the country, the biggest concern I have is us. Our polarization, our division, the threat for violence in our country because 68 percent of Republicans actually believe that Joe Biden is not legitimately elected the president,[9] the use of violence on January 6th, I really worry that our biggest national security threat is the lack of trust and the polarization of our society, and the undermining of our foundational democracy. We cannot outcompete China if we can't work in unity as a country, and I think if we *can* work in unity as a country, we can handle any challenge. CTC

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The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: Tracing the Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan

By Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed, and Andrew Mines

Although the Islamic State's official affiliate in Afghanistan, Islamic State Khorasan (ISK), first emerged as a threat in 2015, its global notoriety was heightened when it struck the Kabul airport during the Taliban takeover of the city in August 2021, leading to questions about the future stability of the country and the Taliban's ability to contain the revived terrorist threat. The Taliban's takeover of Kabul, combined with an unconditional U.S. withdrawal and a collapsed Afghan government, generated new opportunities for ISK to reinvigorate its violent campaign following years of significant manpower and territorial losses. Given the absence of multilateral counterterrorism pressure, the Taliban's limited capacity to govern, and a worsening humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, ISK now finds itself perhaps in the most permissive environment yet to rebuild, rally, and expand. As the Taliban continue to struggle with their transition to a state actor, ISK enjoys unprecedented opportunities to forge opportunistic ties with local militant groups in need of jihadi alliances and to recruit from communities dissatisfied with the Taliban's rule. If regional powers do not engage in a coordinated security strategy with the Taliban, they may bear the consequences of the growing ISK-Taliban conflict.

The suicide bombing that struck the Kabul airport in August 2021 not only shocked the world due to the hundreds it left dead or wounded,[1] it also refocused attention on the threat of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (often abbreviated to ISIS-K or ISK). The attack ushered in urgent questions about the implications of the ISK threat on the remainder of U.S. withdrawal efforts, the stability of a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, and the security of the country's neighbors. While the spectacular nature of the Kabul airport attack led many to view ISK as a renewed threat in the country, warning signs of a resurgent ISK had actually started to permeate in the preceding year. The Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan, along with an abysmal collapse of the Afghan government,[2] created new opportunities for ISK to undermine the legitimacy and control of an internationally isolated Taliban. ISK is now present in almost every province of Afghanistan, according to the United Nations,[3] as Taliban forces engage in a deadly counterinsurgency campaign against their jihadi rivals with limited measurable success reported thus far.[4] Understanding the future trajectory of ISK, its rivalry with the Taliban, and the regional security risks it poses requires tracing the adaptation of the group's violent strategies in various periods of its existence: the early period of its emergence, years of intense U.S. and Afghan forces-led military operations, and finally, the period of its intensified battle with the Taliban after the U.S. withdrawal.

In 2015, while U.S. and Afghan forces were still battling the Taliban insurgency, Islamic State-Khorasan, the Islamic State's official affiliate in the Afghanistan region, began to create space for itself by adopting a strategy that focused on coopting opportunistic militant organizations,[5] while differentiating itself from the other dominant groups.[6] On one hand, cooption of groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan provided ISK with expanded expertise and regional geographical knowledge, and curtailed competition for recruits. On the other hand, differentiation from other groups, most prominently the Afghan Taliban—but also groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba—created opportunities for ISK to persuade militants to switch allegiances for both practical and ideological reasons.

In early 2022, only three years away from marking a decade of formal existence in the region, ISK has shown itself to be a persistent threat to the stability of Afghanistan and its neighbors. In this article, the authors draw on original data on ISK-claimed attacks; propaganda releases by ISK and its competitors (including radio broadcasts); captured internal documents, which reveal communication between Islamic State-Central (ISC) and ISK; and finally, the authors' discussions with former Afghan government members, Taliban officials, and tribal elders in Nangarhar and Kunar.[7] To trace ISK's pathway to its present state, this article unfolds in four main parts. The first traces the evolution of the group from 2015 to 2019, including the nature of ISC's engagement with ISK during its earlier years.[8] The second focuses on ISK's resurgence in 2020 and 2021, and highlights its efforts to rebuild its militant base through multiple channels. The third section outlines

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ISK's relationship with three groups in the region that are likely to remain its key challengers—Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, al-Qa`ida, and the Afghan Taliban. Finally, the authors conclude the article by highlighting some of the regional security implications associated with a resurgent ISK.

The Evolution of Islamic State Khorasan (2015-2019)

The official announcement of ISK's formation was made in January 2015 via an audio recording by the Islamic State's then spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani. However, efforts to set up the affiliate materialized prior to this announcement. Early defections to ISK through public pledges to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi included nine former members of al-Qa`ida in March 2014,[9] as well as six Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) commanders joining the nascent Islamic State Khorasan in October 2014.[10] Hafiz Saeed Khan's (a former TTP commander) appointment to the top leadership position of the group in 2015 was an early indication that the affiliate was going to draw heavily from the local militant infrastructure.

Since ISK's emergence in 2015, the group's operational activity has spanned virtually every province in Afghanistan and Pakistan. At various points, this included the consolidation and governing of territory in parts of northern and northeast Afghanistan, especially in Nangarhar province. Elsewhere in Afghanistan in 2015, fledgling ISK nodes, mostly the product of breakaway Taliban or Taliban-aligned groups, were contained by the Taliban and/or U.S. airstrikes and Afghan ground force interventions.[11] But it was in Nangarhar's southern districts that ISK enjoyed numerous advantages to support its initial territorial project.[12] Reporting on the group's early expansion efforts indicated that ISK, at its height, controlled eight districts across southern Nangarhar,[13] amassing operational resources and personnel around its de facto headquarters in the valleys of Achin district. It was not until 2016 that a number of convening factors initiated the gradual decline in ISK's territorial control: The Taliban mobilized ground forces to limit ISK's expansion in and around Nangarhar;[14] the Obama White House granted expanded ISK targeting authorization authorities to the Pentagon;[15] a U.S. and Afghan-allied coalition ground offensive backed by U.S. airpower killed or captured hundreds of ISK rank-and-file and leadership;[16] and additional Afghan units arrived to help clear and hold territory regained from ISK control.[17]

From 2015 to 2019, state-led operations captured, killed, or forced the surrender of over 10,000 of the group's affiliated members in Afghanistan and Pakistan combined, including hundreds of upper- and lower-level leadership.[18] As the end of the decade approached, ISK's territorial holdings in Nangarhar were depleted, and the group's remaining forces had either surrendered en masse to the previous government or relocated north to neighboring Kunar province or into major urban areas.[19]

Over the same period from 2015 to 2019, ISK's attack operations followed a trajectory of rise and decline. As Figure 1 shows,[a] the total number of ISK's attacks (in Afghanistan and Pakistan combined) rose each year from 2015 to 2017 before falling from 2017 to 2019, and as Figure 2 shows, its average casualty count (the number it killed and wounded per attack) rose from 2015 to 2018 before declining in 2019. ISK conducted attacks in over 25 provinces across Afghanistan and Pakistan from 2015 to 2019, inflicting almost 6,800 casualties (killed and wounded) in the former and 2,073 casualties in the latter. By far, the hardest hit city during this period was Kabul (nearly 3,900 casualties), followed by Jalalabad (over 1,000 casualties) in Afghanistan and Quetta in Pakistan (over 750 casualties). In both countries, the majority of ISK's attacks have targeted the state, including infrastructure and/or security and government personnel, but especially police forces.[20] Prior to 2020, various soft targets, such as religious institutions and public spaces, had also consistently been targeted, with Afghanistan's Shi`a and Pakistan's Sufi communities frequently attacked, including with suicide attacks.[21]

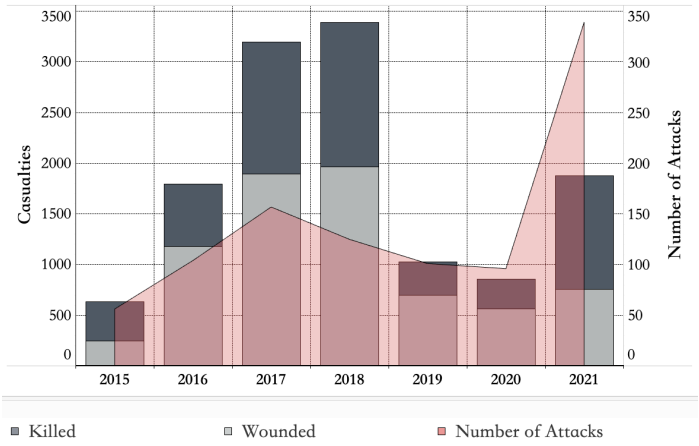

Figure 1: ISK Attacks (2015-2021)

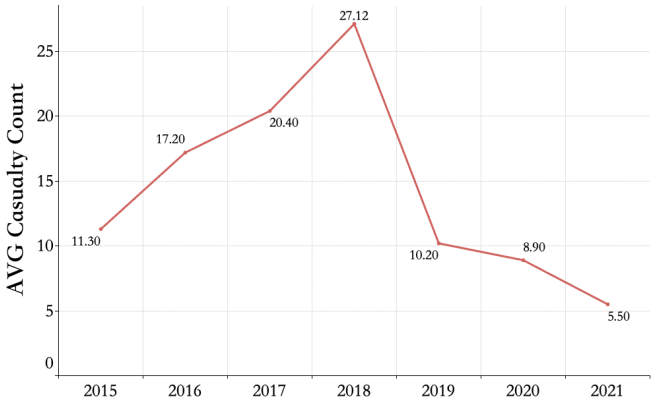

Figure 2: Average Casualty Count Per ISK Attack (2015-2021)

The ISK Relationship with Islamic State Central

Despite periods of intense targeting pressure, however, internal ISK documents[22] reveal an organization very much dedicated to the method of Islamic State Central (ISC) in Iraq and Syria. The documents also shed light on ISK's initial goals. For example, the authors reviewed a memo dated July 2016 from ISK that appeared to be penned after the death of ISK's first emir,[23] Hafiz Saeed Khan. The memo presented a status update from ISK, appearing to be intended for ISC. The letter states:

a The authors compiled ISK attacks data from January 2015 to December 2021 into an original database sourced from open source-news articles and attack claims issued by the Islamic State in its official weekly magazine, Al Naba, as well as through its central media channel, Amaq. Each attack is coded for date, location, casualties, and target.

> *We appointed an Emir of War for the Khurasan province, and we formed a military shura for the province as well … The brothers of the Khurasan province were relieved by the establishment of a Sharia committee for disputed issues, and for that reason, application of the Islamic State's methodology has been much easier.*

Even in the face of reported significant manpower and leadership losses in the first half of 2016, ISK appeared to have prioritized multiple lines of organizational development and administrative expansions. Various reports about ISK's losses provide details about the wide-ranging activities of its members; these reports indicate that targeted ISK members were performing duties across several administrative bodies with comparative structures in ISC's bureaucratic protostate.[24] These included military training, battlefield operations, and martyrdom operations; judicial and religious matters; media, proselytization, and recruitment; and logistics, information technologies, and financial bodies.[25]

While there is much uncertainty surrounding the links between ISC and ISK, open-source reports as well as captured materials from Afghanistan indicate that ISC played an important role in facilitating the establishment of ISK, at least in its early years. Ranging from facilitation of meetings to provision of general guidance on governance, as well as dispute resolution, ISC helped ISK build its roots in the region.

To understand the level of engagement between ISK and ISC in its early years, the authors reviewed a sample of captured materials from Afghanistan (in Dari, Pashto, and Urdu) to highlight the nature of guidance provided to ISK as well as the types of communication between the two entities. From the set of documents that appear to be intended to provide the Islamic State's provinces with advice,[b] one document stamped with an "Al-Hisbah" logo, which refers to the Islamic State's religious enforcement police, outlines a request to all emirs to report Al-Hisbah activities conducted between October 2014 and January 2015, and then on a monthly basis thereafter. The memo requests information regarding the settlement of issues, cases forwarded to courts, propaganda distributed to the public, lectures delivered, material possessions confiscated, and disciplinary measures taken. Other documents with the Islamic State's Al-Hisbah logo outline general rules on various other topics, including the sharing and publishing of photos of female 'sex slaves' on social media, use of satellite receivers, and dealing with 'inappropriate' books, audio, and video. While these documents appear to be generic guidance by ISC for its 'provinces' around the world rather than for ISK specifically, their existence indicates that ISC generally had an interest in shaping ISK's behavior on the ground.[26]

ISK also appears to have had strict requirements on the frequency of communication with ISC, especially in reporting their military operations and achievements. A collection of documents suggest that ISC was regularly requesting military reports, and evidence of ISK's achievements. Details within the documents reveal that ISK was reporting figures on membership, factions that had pledged allegiance, appointment of leaders, outcomes of clashes with the Taliban, and operations in Pakistan. While these documents are not explicitly addressed to anyone by name, they appear to be updates intended for ISC. In addition to general guidance documents, and ISK's status updates, the documents also indicate that ISK was relaying their problems to ISC during times of difficulty, especially when the group suffered losses or needed money. Related documents suggest that ISC was indeed transferring funds to ISK, at least during its earlier years.

Collectively, the sample of documents reviewed sheds light on how ISC was involved in various ways in the set-up of ISK in its early years, possibly channeling funds and also monitoring ISK's strategy and tactics to some extent. While today these links between ISC and ISK remain unclear, more recently, ISK has been regularly featured as a high-performing province in ISC's propaganda and received direct praise for some of its high-profile attacks, such as its prison siege in Jalalabad City in 2020 and the attack on Kabul airport in August 2021.[27]

By the end of 2019, declines in territory, manpower, and overall capacity left ISK significantly weakened and forced it to focus operations predominantly in urban centers.[28] Although the group's broader operational activity was markedly declined in 2019 from previous years, its continued dedication to intermittently launch attacks signaled the potential for a resurgence in 2020, especially in the absence of multilateral counterterrorism efforts.

A Resurgent ISK (2020-2021)

This section focuses on ISK's resurgence starting in 2020 and carrying into 2021. Leveraging an original database that captures ISK-claimed attacks, as well as the group's own propaganda, this section traces changes in ISK's operational behavior, the role of its new leader in its revival, and finally the group's attempts to rebuild its militant base.

Revamping Operations

Warning signs of ISK's resurgence began to surface around mid-2020, while the United States continued to engage in peace talks with the Taliban. Starting in June 2020, ISK attacks in Afghanistan steadily rose month after month all the way through to June 2021, surging from just three attacks in June 2020 to 41 attacks in June 2021.[29] Highly lethal, sectarian attacks against vulnerable minorities such as Afghanistan's Hazara communities continued throughout, including a horrific attack against a Hazara girls' school in Kabul in May 2021 that killed or wounded well over 200 girls and teachers.[30] After the devastating August 2021 attack at the Kabul airport killed or wounded hundreds of Afghan civilians—in addition to 13 U.S. service members[31]—ISK showed no signs of halting its campaign of violence. Attacks targeting houses of worship in Kunduz and Kandahar in October 2021 left hundreds more dead or wounded,[32] and additional attacks have since hit Kabul.[33]

Overall, however, ISK's average casualty per attack is dramatically lower than in previous years. As Figure 2 shows, in 2021 the group averaged around 5.5 casualties per attack; however, the lower number is the result of a massive surge in the volume of attacks perpetrated by ISK in the year 2021. Including clashes initiated against the Taliban in years past, ISK's total number of attacks in 2021 is more than double that of the next highest year on record since its formation in 2015, surpassing 340 attacks by the end of

b These documents were not specifically addressed to ISK, but appeared to be generic guidelines for Al-Hisbah members, which could potentially be based in Iraq and Syria or in other Islamic State's provinces.

December.[c] The nature of ISK's attack strategy has shifted, too. In addition to more complex attacks such as the Jalalabad prison break operation in 2020,[34] ISK also began attacking infrastructure targets in the spring and summer of 2021, claiming responsibility for three-dozen attacks on electricity pylons and oil tankers,[35] advancing a strategy of "economic warfare" designed to challenge the former government and the Taliban's legitimacy as a state actor.[36]

During the period of peace negotiations and intra-Afghan talks, ISK's attacks served to create general chaos and confusion among various political entities, intended to stall political progress. However, in the post-Taliban takeover era, ISK shifted its focus squarely on undermining the Taliban's legitimacy. Without any external counterterrorism efforts against ISK and given the Taliban's limited resources and its tenuous control in some parts of the country, ISK has never been better positioned to challenge the Taliban and exploit vulnerable communities. As such, the most significant shift in ISK's attack strategy over the past year has been its concerted effort to destabilize the Taliban's weak control over ISK's former strongholds in Nangarhar province. Since around mid-September 2021, ISK claimed responsibility for 127 attacks in Afghanistan, nearly 100 of which (79 percent) targeted the Taliban alone. Just under 60 percent of ISK's attacks on the Taliban occurred in Nangarhar (see Figure 3).[37] The group has targeted Taliban checkpoints, security convoys, and personnel, but they have also carried out targeted assassinations against members of the former government, media personnel, civil society activists, community elders, and prominent voices in local salafi communities that have spoken out against ISK.[38] ISK's efforts to destabilize the Taliban's control have forced the latter to expose its hand at counterinsurgency, which has included crackdowns and reprisals against local civilian populations deemed to be supportive of ISK. To date, even declared efforts at mediation with local communities,[39] as well as the mobilization of over 1,000 additional Taliban security personnel to assist in securing Nangarhar province,[40] have done little to conceal the Taliban's heavy-handed approach to counterinsurgency,[41] one that continues to alienate locals and will likely see the ISK-Taliban conflict persist for the foreseeable future.

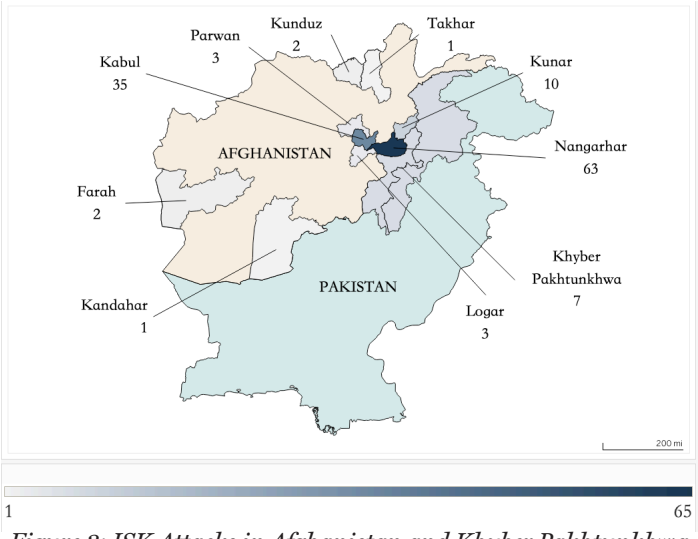

Figure 3: ISK Attacks in Afghanistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan) (September 18-December 31, 2021)

Rallying Under New Leadership

ISK credits its current governor or top leader, Shahab al-Muhajir, for the group's resurgence.[42] Al-Muhajir, whose real name is Sanaullah Ghafari, hails from the district of Shakardara just north of Kabul and holds an engineering degree from Kabul University.[43] He adhered to the salafi ideology in Kabul University under the influence of faculty member and Afghan salafi scholar Abu Obaidullah Mutawakil.[44] Al-Muhajir's[d] family belonged to a major Afghan jihadi party—Hizbi Islami Gulbadin Hekmatyar (HIG)[e]—that formed during the pre-Taliban era and participated in fighting the U.S.-allied forces in Afghanistan.[45] Al-Muhajir joined the jihadi war in Afghanistan through the same party platform, later joining Taliban factions affiliated with the Haqqani network.[46] He had close links to the Haqqani network's senior commanders, Taj Mir Jawad and Qari Baryal, who ran terrorist networks in the capital. When ISK emerged in Afghanistan, al-Muhajir switched loyalties and eventually rose to the position of deputy head of ISK's Kabul network.[47] Upon his appointment as the new ISK governor in 2020, al-Muhajir was touted as an urban warfare expert, who would avenge "group martyrs" by targeting the Afghan government in urban areas and also pursue the release of ISK imprisoned members.[48] According to two senior security officials of the former Afghan government,[49] al-Muhajir had an extensive social network

c It is possible that in later years, due to the growing attention on ISK's operations, there was a greater level of reporting of all ISK-linked activity than in prior years, resulting in higher numbers. However, it could also be argued that reduced access and visibility by news organizations under the new Taliban regime may be leading to a slight under-reporting in ISK operations. Despite the possibility of over- and under-reporting, the authors do not believe that the increase in attacks can be entirely explained by the increased attention on ISK as ISK's attacks claimed through the Amaq News Agency and Al Naba (the Islamic State's weekly newsletter) reflect a similar pattern.

d The lack of details surrounding al-Muhajir's appointment in 2020 and ISK's internal operational challenges led to speculation initially that al-Muhajir was likely a foreign fighter formerly affiliated with al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but originally from the Middle East. This perception was compounded by the alias "al-Muhajir," which literally means an emigrant in Arabic. However, it was revealed later when Afghan security forces arrested and interrogated his close family members and friends that al-Muhajir hailed from northern Kabul. In May 2021, al-Muhajir's background was also confirmed when ISK published two large books of hundreds of pages authored by al-Muhajir in one of Afghanistan's official Dari languages. For details on the earlier mystery over al-Muhajir's identity, see Abdul Sayed, "Who Is the New Leader of Islamic State-Khorasan Province?" Lawfare, September 2, 2020.

e HIG is a Taliban political rival and a major Afghan jihadi party of the past. For details on HIG, see Chris Sands and Fazelminallah Qazizai, *Night Letters* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2019).

in Kabul city that helped his recruitment pipeline. This included young individuals from influential political and warlord families who facilitated ISK activities, at times unknowingly.[50] Such personal networks helped al-Muhajir logistically, such as acquiring special security cards and weaponry licenses from senior Afghan government officials, including one issued by the office of the former Afghan vice president Abdul Rashid Dostum.[51]

ISK's propaganda generally praises al-Muhajir for three major contributions to the organization.[52] First, he is credited with reinvigorating ISK when it was struggling to survive post-2019 after major territorial, leadership, and rank-and-file losses. Secondly, the August 2020 Jalalabad prison break and ISK's new economic warfare strategy, alluded to above, are attributed to al-Muhajir's leadership skills.[f] Finally, al-Muhajir is credited with the high-profile attack in August 2021 on the Kabul airport, which was conducted by Abdul Rahman al-Logari, a member of ISK's Kabul cell, who had been released from a high-security prison after the Taliban seized control in August 2021.[53]

Reuniting, Reinforcing, and Diversifying the Ranks

One of al-Muhajir's major challenges at the helm of an organization faced with territorial and manpower losses was reuniting ISK's dispersed members and reinforcing and diversifying the group's ranks to help kick-start its new strategy of urban warfare. To do so, he led ISK on a three-pronged strategy: planned prison breaks, providing amnesty to the more than 1,400 members who surrendered to the previous government,[54] and advertising a diverse militant base to cast a wide recruitment net.

In his first public communication to ISK members in early July 2020,[55] al-Muhajir called on dispersed members to participate in ISK's new strategy: guerrilla warfare and urban terrorism. Group members languishing in prisons were also promised rescue. A month later, ISK conducted a highly sophisticated attack on Nangarhar central prisons in Jalalabad city, resulting in the release of over 1,000 prisoners, including 280 ISK inmates. This coordinated assault—the first of its kind for ISK—greatly bolstered al-Muhajir's burgeoning reputation, as noted above.[56]

Similarly, other prison breaks that followed soon after the collapse of the former Afghan government allowed hundreds of freed prisoners to rejoin ISK's ranks. According to various estimates,[57] around 2,000-3,000 ISK inmates escaped during and after the fall of the former government, which included senior leaders, commanders, and media propagandists. For example, al-Muhajir's predecessor, Aslam Farooqi, influential senior ideologue Abu Yazid Abdul Qahir Khurasani,[58] [g] and the Islamic State Jammu and Kashmir branch founder, Aijaz Ahmad Ahangar,[59] [h] were among those freed. A critical aspect of these prison breaks was the release of foreign fighters. The former Afghan government held 400-plus ISK members from 14 countries who escaped during the jailbreaks a day prior to the Taliban's takeover.[60] [i] Given that these fighters would have been unlikely to return to their home countries (where they would likely be prosecuted), their release from prison has likely provided a boost to ISK's cadres.

To attract those who had previously surrendered to the government, ISK also announced an amnesty policy that may have lured hundreds of militants back into the ISK fold.[61] The issue of the 1,400-plus ISK members who surrendered to the previous government in Kunar in early 2020 was discussed in ISK's radio broadcasts; according to ISK's religious edict, some ISK commanders betrayed their fighters, and compelled them to surrender.[62] ISK encouraged such fighters to appear before ISK courts and renew their pledges of loyalty to the group.[63]

Before discussing the third prong of the strategy, it is worth discussing potential sources of recruits for ISK. One source of

f ISK's attacks on infrastructure, such as electricity transmission lines and oil tankers, are categorized as economic warfare, used to inflict damage and pressure on the government. ISK warned the former Afghan government of such economic attacks after a news report emerged about the government attempting to repatriate ISK-affiliated foreign fighters to their respective countries. See Sultan Aziz Azzam, "Warning," al-Azaim Foundation, April-May 2021. See also "Lead Inspector General for Operation Freedom's Sentinel, Quarterly Report, July 1, 2021 – September 30, 2021 to the United States Congress, released November 15, 2021.

g Khurasani hails from the northeastern Afghanistan province of Kunar and is a famous salafi-jihadi scholar in the Afghanistan and Pakistan Pashtun belt. He first publicly pledged allegiance to then Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on July 1, 2014, and became a founding member of ISK. However, due to his arrest by Afghan security forces soon after ISK's inception, he was held in Kabul prisons for the last five years. For details of his pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi, see Zahidullah Zahid, "A group of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan led by Shaikh Abu Yazid Abdul Qahir Khurasani with mujahideen of the training camps in Khurasan pledged to the emir of the Faithfull, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," July 1, 2014.

h According to the authors' interviews in September-November 2021, both Khurasani and Ahangar were held at Afghan intelligence special prisons in Kabul until the former government collapse after which they escaped with thousands of other prisoners.

i Several sources confirmed all 400-plus ISK-affiliated foreign fighters escaped in prison breaks hours before the Taliban took over on August 15, 2021. These sources include Taliban and former Afghan government officials, as well as relatives and friends of released Afghan prisoners.

potential recruits for ISK has been Afghan salafi communities[j] in and around Kabul and Nangarhar, where ISK has attempted to exploit the lack of trust between the Taliban and salafi communities.[64] Tensions between the salafi communities and the Taliban were heightened when the aforementioned senior salafi scholar, Abu Obaidullah Mutawakil, was mysteriously abducted and killed in the Afghan capital shortly after the Taliban's ascent to power.[65] Mutawakil had been imprisoned for about two years for alleged links with ISK, but had escaped in the prison breaks during the Taliban takeover in August 2021. After ISK claimed attacks in the wake of Mutawakil's killing, the Taliban reacted by imposing harsh security measures in salafi communities, closing down mosques, conducting night raids, and abducting and publicly executing dozens of salafi youths.[66] Such actions have exacerbated fears among the salafi community of persecution by the Taliban. And ISK has sought to exploit anti-Taliban salafi sentiments, and mobilize individuals against the Taliban.[67] By emphasizing that the Taliban are targeting salafis, and often exaggerating or falsely making such claims, ISK has positioned itself to serve as the protector of the salafi community.

Another segment of population for whom joining ISK may appear to be the only feasible way to survive are former Afghan security force members at risk of being persecuted by the Taliban; although reported numbers remain small, developments in late 2021 indicated that some former Afghan forces members had joined ISK in order to resist the Taliban, bringing with them useful intelligence-gathering and fighting techniques.[68] As long as the Taliban fail to devise an effective mechanism to reconcile with former Afghan forces, the pool of thousands of former Afghan security officers, fearful and without any future prospects, represents an untapped opportunity for ISK to rebuild itself stronger than ever before.

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The third-prong of al-Mujahir's strategy to potentially attract more recruits, ISK appears to be intentionally advertising the diverse nature of its membership over the last two years. For example, the attack on a Sikh gurudwara in Kabul in March 2020,[69] as well as the August 2020 Jalalabad prison break, both involved Indian nationals as perpetrators, according to ISK.[70] The perpetrator of the Kunduz attack in October 2021 was claimed by ISK to be a Uighur Muslim.[71] By showcasing these attacks as being led by militants of varying backgrounds, ISK may be attempting to appeal to an eclectic pool of militants, which includes Central Asians, Indians, Chinese, as well as Kashmir-based militants.[72] The potential for foreign fighters to join the ranks of ISK is worrisome as research indicates that foreign fighters can increase a group's longevity, its use of suicide operations, and its geographic reach.[73] Taken together, ISK appears to be actively boosting its ranks to continue its fight against the Taliban and state actors through a multi-pronged recruitment strategy of prison breaks, amnesty drives, posing as the protector of the salafi community, and recruiting regional militants.

ISK's Relationship with its Local Competitors

ISK's relationships, to include both alliances and rivalries, have been key in its emergence and survival. While much research has examined how ISK's alliances facilitated its upward trajectory,[74] this section focuses on ISK's competitors in the region, which serve as its direct or indirect challengers: the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), al-Qa`ida and its South Asian affiliate (al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent, or AQIS), and the Afghan Taliban.[k] Understanding ISK's relationships with these three organizations can provide insights into ISK's current and future behavior.

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

Upon its formation, ISK labeled all other Islamist groups religiously illegitimate and declared itself to be the sole legitimate leader of the global *ummah* and caliphate movement.[75] One of ISK's main target audiences has been the TTP, given TTP's anti-Pakistan agenda and ISK founding leadership's strong ties with various TTP groups.[76] ISK formed at a time when TTP was splintered and suffering from

j Salafism started to spread in Afghanistan in the early 1980s with the arrival of foreign fighters in Afghanistan, and donations by wealthy Middle Easterners, particularly from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, to support the fight against the Soviet invasion. The northeastern province of Kunar in Afghanistan became the first stronghold of the salafis under the leadership of Shaikh Jameel-ur-Rehman aka Mulawi Hussain who hailed from Kunar. The salafi community gradually spread into the adjacent Nuristan, Nangarhar, and Badakhshan provinces, and further into northern Afghanistan, particularly after the political liberalization in Afghanistan post-9/11. Although there are no official reported numbers on the salafi population in Afghanistan, it is widely understood that the salafis constitute a majority of the population in Kunar province, and have a sizable presence in Nangarhar and Nuristan provinces. The salafis also have considerable strength in Kabul and presence in its adjacent northern provinces—for example, in Parwan, Takhar, and Kunduz provinces. It is significant to add here that the senior most Afghanistan-based Afghan salafi scholar Shaikh Abu Obaidullah Mutawakil hailed from Parwan province, which borders Kabul. See Abdul Sayed, "The killing of pro-ISKP Salafist Shaikh Abu Obaidullah Mutawakil in Kabul," BBC Urdu, September 7, 2021. For further readings on the historical role and influence of salafism in Afghanistan, especially in Kunar, see Vahid Brown, "The Salafi Emirate of Kunar: Between South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula" in *Pan-Islamic Connections* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 91-116 and Kevin Bell, "The First Islamic State: A Look Back at the Islamic Emirate of Kunar," *CTC Sentinel* 9:2 (2016): pp. 9-14. For contemporary readings on the role of salafism and its connections to ISK, see Borhan Osman, "Bourgeois Jihad: Why Young, Middle-Class Afghans Join the Islamic State," United State Institute of Peace, June 1, 2020, and Abdul Sayed, "The Taliban's Persistent War on Salafists in Afghanistan," *Terrorism Monitor* 19:8 (2021): pp. 9-13. For more on ISK's relationship with the salafi communities in Nangarhar and Kunar, see Borhan Osman, "Descent into chaos: Why did Nangarhar turn into an IS hub?" Afghan Analysts Network, September 27, 2016, and Obaid Ali and Khalid Gharanai, "Hit from Many Sides (2): The demise of ISKP in Kunar," Afghan Analysts Network, March 3, 2021.

k In addition to challenging local militant groups, ISK also threatens local regional state actors to include the Pakistani state. However, the authors focus their discussion here on ISK's militant group competitors.

The ISK founding emir, Hafiz Saeed Khan (second from the left), pledging bay`a *to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Source: "Bayah from the leaders of the Mujahideen in Khurasan to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," Land of Khurasan Media, January 2015)*

several internal disputes; this resulted in the defection of TTP members to ISK, including the entire TTP Orakzai chapter and part of its Bajaur chapter (according to the TTP itself).[77] ISK founding governor and former TTP commander, Hafiz Saeed Khan, was optimistic of TTP being subsumed by ISK, as evident from a letter from Khan to ISC, dated June 22, 2016, that the TTP would not be able to survive the rise of ISK.[78] In his words:

> *As for the TTP, headed by Mulla Fadlallah [Fadlullah], it is on the verge of collapsing because of the conflicts that have taken place within it. Praise to Allah. We know that it had tried to smooth out some conflicts inside the governorate, but the state of its personnel became such that they are accusing one another of being spies and agents. This is a victory Allah granted the soldiers of the Caliphate.*

While ISK's strong anti-Pakistan narrative appealed to TTP fighters, its brutal war with the Afghan Taliban became an obstacle for TTP to cooperate with ISK, given TTP's loyalty to the Afghan Taliban. To stem the flow of member defections to ISK, the TTP published a detailed religious edict in 2015 criticizing and nullifying the Islamic State's caliphate.[79] Interestingly, although the TTP maintained bases in ISK's strongholds in Kunar and Nangarhar, reports about ISK-TTP clashes have been largely nonexistent. ISK's decline in 2019, however, was paralleled by TTP's own resurgence,[80] and for the first time, in July 2020, the TTP declared ISK to be a tool of the Pakistani establishment, set out to destroy jihadi movements.[81] Overall, given the Afghan Taliban's ascendancy to power and the TTP's reinvigorated operations and celebration of the former's victory, it is possible that the relationship between the TTP and ISK becomes more hostile in the future.

As ISK intensified its battle with the Afghan Taliban in 2020 and the TTP publicly renewed its pledge of allegiance to the Afghan Taliban,[82] ISK turned to disparaging the TTP as well. In August 2021, ISK published a book authored by ideologue Abu Saad Muhammad al-Khurasani in which he declared the TTP leadership to be apostates.[83] Within the publication, he accused the TTP of being a puppet of the former Afghan government and seeking external support from Indian intelligence agencies.[84] The book discussed the potential of the TTP striking a deal with the Pakistani state for their own worldly interests, and encouraged TTP fighters to join ISK's "true" jihad. A similar publication was released by the Islamic State's Pakistani chapter in December 2021,[85] which urged TTP fighters to revolt against their leadership in light of the group's recent but no longer ongoing negotiations with the Pakistani state. These changing dynamics between ISK and the TTP suggest rising tensions between the two groups in the future, as ISK seems intent on luring TTP members to its own fold for its long war against Afghan Taliban rule.

The Afghan Taliban, however, have been proactive in their efforts to prevent ISK or any other rival group from exploiting fractures within the regional jihadi landscape. For example, according to sources within Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban held a secret meeting of all allied jihadis near Kandahar to discuss ISK shortly before its February 2020 Doha deal with the United States.[86] The Afghan Taliban asked all gathered militants to join one of the Afghan Taliban's vetted groups if they wanted to remain in Afghanistan. Later that year, a series of mergers saw 10 anti-state Pakistani militant groups, including all TTP splinters, rejoining the TTP to merge into a single entity.[87] What remains unclear, however, is the extent to which such efforts will garner success in the long-term in containing ISK's recruitment drive.

Al-Qa`ida

The formation of an Islamic State province in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region extended the Islamic State-al-Qa`ida rivalry into South and Central Asia. Yet that rivalry is a nuanced one given the presence of the Taliban and its status as ISK's primary local adversary. One of ISK's justifications for its war with the Taliban is the latter's professed attempts to distance themselves from al-Qa`ida and terrorist groups in general.[88] An examination of ISK's published propaganda shows criticism largely directed toward al-Qa`ida's current emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who is labeled an apostate for his obedience to the Afghan Taliban.[89] At the same time, in a fashion similar to ISC, ISK propaganda frequently praises al-Qa`ida's previous head and founder, Usama bin Ladin, and paints the Islamic State as the rightful inheritor of bin Ladin's jihadi legacy and al-Zawahiri as an errant and illegitimate successor.[90] Like ISC, the focus of ISK's propaganda on al-Zawahiri in particular could partially be the result of the influence of Afghanistan-Pakistan region-based Arab leaders of al-Qa`ida who pledged allegiance to ISK, in addition to the fact that al-Zawahiri is the leader of ISC's main rival group that has been in an open conflict with ISC since its early years. Several of the initial al-Qa`ida defectors to ISK swapped alliances due to differences over ideological and organizational matters with al-Zawahiri and his son-in-law, Abu Dujjana al-Basha, who held an influential position in the al-Qa`ida central leadership.[l]

Intense counterterrorism pressure against al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan since 9/11 resulted in the death of bin Ladin[91] and the appointment of al-Zawahiri as al-Qa`ida's leader. Subsequently, senior al-Qa`ida defectors to the Islamic State encouraged hundreds of local Afghan and Pakistani cadres to also join ISK to continue their global jihad.[92] According to former Afghan government senior security officials,[93 m] a large number of ISK's founding cadres were former al-Qa`ida members, which provided ISK with highly skilled trainers and experts.[94 n]

AQIS' founding leaders, Ahmad Farooq and Usama Mahmood,[95] have attributed the loss of al-Qa`ida members to ISK to the Islamic State's flashy, 'Hollywood-style' propaganda and territorial captures in Iraq and Syria, among other factors.[96] Against the backdrop of al-Qa`ida members joining ISK, al-Zawahiri announced the establishment of AQIS around September 2014.[o] While some view the formation of AQIS as a reaction to the Islamic State's announcement of a caliphate, especially due to defections of al-Qa`ida members in early 2014, in its first edition of its Resurgence magazine, al-Qa`ida relayed the message that the "establishment of this organization is a direct result of the merger of several groups that have been engaged in Jihad in this region for several years."[97] In another edition of the magazine released the following year (mid-2015), a well-known al-Qa`ida member—Adam Yahiye Gadahn—directly refuted accusations that AQIS had been created to counter the growing influence of the Islamic State. Per Gadahn, plans for AQIS were long in the making and finalized in mid-2013, and as such, "the founding of the new branch [AQIS] had absolutely nothing to do with any perceived or presumed rivalry between al-Qa`ida and Islamic State."[98 p]

With the U.S. operation that resulted in the death of al-Baghdadi and ISK's territorial collapse in 2019, AQIS announced an amnesty for al-Qa`ida cadres who joined ISK,[99] although it remains unclear how many reverted back. Looking forward, AQIS and ISK are likely to continue their rivalry in South and Central Asia, which may intensify as the two compete for recruits and their parent organizations (ISC and al-Qa`ida) compete to be the legitimate leaders of global jihad. On one hand, given al-Qa`ida and AQIS' limited observable reach and activity in the current environment, ISK may continue to dominate the regional militant landscape as the ascendent transnational jihadi brand. On the other hand, given al-Qa`ida's close historical relationship with the Taliban, the latter's takeover in Afghanistan may allow AQIS greater opportunities to increase its own influence. How the rivalry between the two groups

l According to the researcher Don Rassler, this group included: Abu `Ubayda al-Lubnani, Abu al-Muhannad al-Urduni, Abu Jarir al-Shimali (Abu Tha'ir), Abu al-Huda al-Sudani, `Abd-al-`Aziz al-Maqdisi, `Abdullah al-Banjabi, Abu Younis al-Kurdim, Abu `A'isha al-Qurtubi, and Abu Mus`ab al-Tadamuni. See Don Rassler, "Situating the Emergence of the Islamic State of Khorasan," *CTC Sentinel* 8:3 (2015). Abu Jarir al-Shimali wrote a detailed account of these differences with Ayman al-Zawahiri and his son-in-law, Abu Dujjana al-Basha, in Islamic State Central's Dabiq magazine, which according to him resulted in defections to the Islamic State. For details, see Abu Jarir ash-Shamali, "Al-Qa`idah of Waziristan," Dabiq 6 (2015): pp. 40-55.

m According to these interviewees, al-Qa`ida members' defections to ISK provided it with highly skilled trainers and experts who constituted a significant proportion (estimated to be one-third by the interviewees) of ISK's founding military, explosive, media, and administrative officials and commanders.

n Pakistani journalist Faizullah Khan is an expert on the Pakistani militant landscape and al-Qa`ida in Pakistan, and has been reporting on the group since 9/11. Khan confirmed that a large number of al-Qa`ida members in Pakistan joined ISK at its founding. Based on several interactions with al-Qa`ida members, Khan claims that Pakistani cadres who witnessed these internal defections informed him that several influential Pakistani leaders in al-Qa`ida's central council in the Khurasan region suggested to al-Qa`ida top leadership to pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi and merge with the Islamic State. Based on these interactions, Khan claims that around 30-40 percent of al-Qa`ida Pakistani cadres defected to ISK when it emerged. According to Khan, this list included al-Qa`ida senior Pakistani commander Tahir Hussain Minhas (alias Sain) who planned ISK's first-ever high-profile attack that massacred around four dozen people from the Shi`a Ismaili minority in Karachi in May 2015. For details, see Imtiaz Ali, "From poultry business to militancy: Safoora mastermind Tahir Minhas," *Dawn*, May 14, 2016.

o Ayman al-Zawahiri announced the establishment of AQIS in September 2014 through a video released by al-Qa`ida's official media arm, As-Sahab. Asim Umar was introduced as the AQIS emir, with Usama Mahmood as its spokesperson. Both individuals provided details about the process that resulted in the formation of AQIS. For more details, see "Unity of Ranks: Announcement of establishment of al-Qa`ida in the Indian Sub-continent," As-Sahab, 2014.

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plays out will ultimately be influenced by the Taliban's ability to constrain ISK and reinforce their control within Afghanistan.

The Afghan Taliban

Since its inception, ISK has viewed the Afghan Taliban as its main strategic rival in the region.[100] In a quest to outbid and outcompete its rival, ISK has not only attacked Afghan Taliban targets regularly since 2015, but also recruited heavily from the organization's ranks and leadership, which ISK has categorized into three general groups: first, the 'sincere Taliban jihadis' who defected to join ISK; second, those who kept a neutral stance toward ISK; and third, the ones who are the puppets of regional governments and motivated by personal interests.[101] ISK has made delegitimizing the Afghan Taliban's purity as a jihadi movement one of its main messaging priorities. This is reflected in ISK's media campaigns for the last several years, which consistently highlight idolatrous Afghan Taliban-supported or tacitly approved religious and cultural practices, as well as relationships with foreign states that ISK views as heretical. Undermining the Afghan Taliban's legitimacy as a jihadi movement is a key pillar to ISK's organizational identity that is unlikely to change.[102] Since the former took power, ISK's strategy has evolved not only to challenge the Afghan Taliban's legitimacy as the predominant jihadi force in the region (given their negotiations with the United States, and links to Pakistan, China, and Iran), but also their competency as a governing actor.[103]

ISK's two-pronged attack on the Afghan Taliban's legitimacy[104] is likely to persist as long as the Taliban remain in power. Early assessments of the Taliban's governance efforts suggest ISK's strategy is paying dividends, as the Taliban remain more preoccupied with maintaining the organization's internal cohesion, reverting to their "default wartime style and operational mode," and relying on harsh restrictions, extrajudicial raids, and violence to establish some semblance of control.[105] Such oppressive tactics, and a failure to provide human security, are likely to increase discontent with the Taliban's rule, which can play into ISK's hands, given the latter's anti-Taliban stance.

Initially, the Taliban leadership approached ISC leadership in Syria, requesting that al-Baghdadi avoid establishing a parallel jihadi network in Afghanistan, which was openly rejected by the Islamic State's spokesman at the time, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani.[106] By the time of the Afghan government's fall in 2021, ISK and the Afghan Taliban had clashed in at least 16 provinces across Afghanistan.[107] Both organizations inflicted hundreds of casualties upon the other, leaving tens of thousands of civilians either killed or displaced as a result of their fighting.[108] After 2015, the majority of the ISK-Taliban rivalry became concentrated in or around ISK's territorial holdings in Nangarhar and Kunar in the northeast, and Jowzjan in the north.[109] The Taliban organized multiple mobilizations of fighters to counter ISK around these main pockets of ISK territorial control, which coincided with U.S. and Afghan airstrikes and ground offensives, including significant targeting of ISK leadership.[110]

Within the ISK-Taliban rivalry, ISK's strategy to poach Taliban members and gain recruits in Afghanistan has centered on exploiting the Taliban's tense relationship with salafis, a factor often overlooked.[111] Tensions between ISK and the Taliban intensified after the salafis rose to key leadership positions within ISK in the wake of the killing of ISK's founding governor.[112] Abdul Haseeb Logari, ISK's second governor, was a salafi scholar, and Sheikh Jalaluddin, an influential salafi scholar in the Pashtun belt of Afghanistan and Pakistan, became the group's chief ideologue.[q] This framed ISK's battle with the Taliban more than before as a fight between the salafis' version of the sharia and that of the "ideologically corrupt Hanfists Muslims."[113][r] As Logari implemented a salafi-interpreted, sharia-based system in ISK-controlled territories in Afghanistan, a large number of Afghan salafis joined ISK's ranks.[114] As such, whether opportunistically or by design, ISK became an armed platform for salafi supremacy, which has now developed into a core vector of ISK's insurgency efforts in northeastern Afghanistan as outlined above.[115]

"On one hand, given al-Qa`ida and AQIS' limited observable reach and activity in the current environment, ISK may continue to dominate the regional militant landscape as the ascendent transnational jihadi brand. On the other hand, given al-Qa`ida's close historical relationship with the Taliban, the latter's takeover in Afghanistan may allow AQIS greater opportunities to increase its own influence."

Since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, ISK has remained relentlessly committed to targeting the Afghan Taliban, highlighting the latter's inability to protect civilians at home or contain terrorism. Unlike during their previous years of rule, the Taliban are faced with tackling an enemy that has poached the Taliban's own members as well as those of their allies, and that follows an even more radical interpretation of Islam for justifying its violence. Although many argue that ISK's salafi ideology has a limited audience in Afghanistan, the Taliban do have a long list of enemies in Afghanistan, and some of them may be willing to cooperate with ISK to counter the Taliban's influence, due to lack of other organized resistance efforts. While this is not a given, as opponents of the Taliban may seek out alternative courses of action, Afghan political history provides several instances of such pragmatism guiding cooperation and alliances, such as in the case of Gulbadin Hekmatyar, emir of Hizb-i-Islami (HIG). In a public statement issued in 2015, Hekmatyar urged his fighters to

q Other Afghan salafi scholars who rose to prominent positions in the ISK ranks include Shaikh Maqbool, aka Shahidullah Shahid (ISK founding spokesperson), Shaikh Abu Saeed al-Muhajir (ISK third governor), Shaikh Abu Umar Khurasani (ISK's fourth governor), Shaikh Abu Yazid Abdul Qahir Khurasani, Shaikh Qasim, and Shaikh Matiullah. For details, see Abu Saad Muhammad al-Khurasani, "Bright pages for understanding the nationalists Taliban," al-Azaim Foundation, August 2021, pp. 757-759. See also Abu Saad al-Khurasani, "Khorasan: a graveyard for the crusades and a province of jihadists," al-Azaim Foundation, August 29, 2021.

r The Taliban have links to the Hanafi school of thought.

support ISK in the Taliban-ISK war, arguing that ISK had never transgressed against the HIG while the Taliban had oppressed HIG members on several occasions.[116 s] Similarly, at a public gathering hosted in September 2021 in Paris by exiled Northern Resistance Front Afghan supporters, a speaker suggested to party members that ISK may be the best mechanism to counter the Taliban.[117]

As noted above, the Taliban continue to be engaged in a counterinsurgency campaign against ISK, particularly in ISK's former stronghold of Nangarhar. ISK's attacks against Taliban checkpoints, security convoys, and personnel, designed to destabilize Taliban control, have exposed the weaknesses in the latter's counterinsurgency approach, which Colin Clarke and Jonathan Schroden recently labeled "brutally ineffective."[118] As they rightly point out, night raids,[119] extrajudicial killings of suspected ISK members,[120] and indiscriminate crackdowns on locals,[121] among other tactics, contribute to a broader strategy of counterinsurgency via brute force that empirically has been shown to be ill-suited to defeat insurgent groups.[122] The combination of ISK's history of resilience against immense targeting pressure (including airstrikes and ground operations),[123] its ability to create pockets of territorial control in Afghanistan,[124] and the Taliban's oppressive counterinsurgency strategy bodes poorly for the security situation going forward. And a resurgent ISK not only challenges the Taliban's legitimacy, it also depletes the group's limited resources as the latter struggles to grapple with the growing humanitarian catastrophe at home.[125] As Clarke and Schroden also contend, the resurgence of ISK also has the potential to multiply the number of armed resistance groups in Afghanistan, who may conclude that armed resistance is not only viable, but also necessary.[126]

"The combination of ISK's history of resilience against immense targeting pressure (including airstrikes and ground operations), its ability to create pockets of territorial control in Afghanistan, and the Taliban's oppressive counterinsurgency strategy bodes poorly for the security situation going forward."

In sum, ISK and the Taliban's rivalry is likely to intensify into the future given the divergence in their goals and ideologies, and competition for influence. For ISK, targeting the Taliban serves multiple goals, but perhaps most importantly, it allows ISK to simultaneously demonstrate its own resolve and operational capacity while undermining the Taliban's reputation—allowing it to position itself as the dominant militant player in the region and the partner of choice for local groups seeking allies.

Regional Security Implications of a Resurgent ISK

With the Afghan Taliban now in power, the question that has come to be highly debated is whether they are capable of constraining ISK. But two associated issues are perhaps equally critical to consider; the first is the cost associated with the Taliban diverting resources to tackle a resurgent ISK rather than establishing basic governance, and the second is the implications for the broader region if the Taliban and ISK remain engaged in a prolonged battle that could potentially last for several years.

The debilitating human costs of a prolonged battle between ISK and the Taliban have been felt through the thousands of civilian casualties and tens of thousands more displaced over the past seven years.[127] Additionally, the recent wave of attacks conducted by ISK, including the Kabul airport attack and attacks against the region's Shi`a communities, have highlighted the severe implications of ISK's resurgence and continued survival on the Taliban's ability to govern as a state actor. But ISK is not just the Taliban's problem. The group's strategy of delegitimizing the Taliban, merging its transnational agenda with experienced regionally oriented groups, and building a diverse militant base of members with over a dozen nationalities and terrorist group affiliations creates a threat for all of Afghanistan's neighbors.[128]

One of the main manifestations of that threat is ISK's ability to align its own agenda with the interests of numerous regionally oriented groups—something that nationalistic groups like the Afghan Taliban are growing increasingly ill-equipped to offer. Given the Taliban's desire to be recognized as a legitimate entity by the international community and their professed inclination to distance themselves from terrorist groups, coupled with al-Qa`ida's relatively weakened status, ISK has positioned itself as the most viable option for anti-state groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan[129] and East Turkistan Islamic Movement/Turkistan

s Former Afghan Taliban spokesperson Abdul Hai Mutmain provided details about Hekmatyar's party members facilitating ISK's efforts against the Taliban in his book on the Taliban's history: *Mullah Umar, Taliban and Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghan Publishing Association, 2017), pp. 361-362. Mutmain's statements were confirmed by senior HIG cadres based in Kabul in interviews conducted in September-November 2021 by author Abdul Sayed. According to the interviewees, the Taliban's actions forced Hekmatyar to support ISK in its war against the Taliban because the Taliban had restricted HIG members from running a parallel jihadi network against the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan since 2007. The interviewees added that Hekmatyar had advised his fighters to side with ISK in the Taliban-ISK war only if circumstances forced them to choose one of the two parties. See also Tahir Khan, "Enemy of enemy: Hikmatyar support for IS stuns observers," *Express Tribune*, July 7, 2015. Overall, though, Hekmatyar's stance toward the Taliban has remained unclear. Initially, Hekmatyar supported peace talks with the Taliban when he returned to Afghanistan in 2017; he remained a supporter when the United States and the Taliban signed a peace deal in February 2020, blaming the former Afghan government for any stalemates in the peace process. See Hamid Shalizi, "Former warlord Hekmatyar calls for peace with Afghan Taliban," Reuters, May 4, 2017, and Massoud Ansar, "Hekmatyar Blames Afghan Govt, US for Talks Stalemate," Tolo News, February 14, 2021. Hekmatyar was one of the first to welcome the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, declaring it to be one of the most peaceful regime changes in Afghanistan in the last few decades. However, this positive stance ended when Hekmatyar accused the Taliban of arresting, harassing, and killing his party members in different parts of the country. Perhaps the most prominent case was the abduction and killing of one of HIG's party leaders in Nangarhar, Ezatullah Mohib, who mysteriously disappeared in late October 2021. Mohib's body was found on a roadside a few days later. See Majeed Qarar, "Ezatullah Mohib was kidnappd on Kabul-Jalalabad highway …," Twitter, October 29, 2021. Although the Taliban never claimed Mohib's killing, an HIG member told author Abdul Sayed that a handwritten letter was found with Mohib's dead body, which stated that he had been killed due to his links with ISK. The same interviewee claimed that, subsequently, Hekmatyar criticized the Taliban publicly for Mohib's assassination in the following Friday sermon, which he delivered at his party's central office in Kabul.

Islamic Party,[130] which have suffered losses from counterterrorism operations and may be seeking to join an ascendant jihadi group that also meets their fundamental goals. Whether local groups' primary motivations are to target the governments of Pakistan, India, China, Central Asian countries, and/or Muslim and non-Muslim minority populations, ISK has something to offer all of them.

ISK's initial upward trajectory of violence was derived in part from operational cooperation with other groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and suspected links with Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) operatives.[131] LeJ, for example, has played a critical role in facilitating recruitment for ISK, specifically from the Brahui ethnic community in Pakistan's Baluchistan province.[132] But ISK's emergence in the region also appeared to influence LeJ and JuA's own operations within Pakistan; after suspected links with ISK emerged, both groups expanded their areas of operations beyond their traditional strongholds, and their targeting priorities seemed to align with ISK's priorities.[133] JuA's return to the Pakistani Taliban's fold highlights another risk that exists across the region: militants switching allegiances and/or having inter-group relations makes membership fluid and difficult to distinguish between groups.[134] Such problems are likely to be compounded as militants relocate to Afghanistan and affiliate themselves with the Islamic State,[135] but also maintain their self-serving agendas.

ISK's sources of strength are drawn from across the region, and its survival is likely to exacerbate violence across the region and disrupt any plans for Afghanistan's stability rooted in geo-economics.[136] It also opens up the country for renewed proxy warfare.[137] Given that the Taliban have so far been incapable of delivering proper security to Afghan citizens and have yet to receive necessary levels of foreign assistance to stem the growing humanitarian crisis, the Taliban's control and power may erode quickly.

In short, ISK's survival poses significant risks, which regional players will be ill-advised to tolerate. Instead of watching the Taliban continue to clash with ISK, countries looking to counter ISK may need to proactively develop a joint security mechanism that addresses ISK's key sources of strength and ultimately help the Taliban constrain the group within Afghanistan. For example, identifying and sharing intelligence regarding inter-group activity related to ISK and its cross-border alliances could help dismantle ISK's operational alliances, which are an important source of the group's strength. Another area of coordination could be dismantling supply chains of smuggling and inter-group linkages within each country's shadow economy, which facilitate ISK financing. Finally, sharing intelligence on the profiles of captured ISK militants, including their prior affiliations, could help identify channels of ISK recruitment. Such cooperation could go far to ensure that any kinetic counterterrorism measures against ISK contribute to undermining the group rather than simply resulting in its decentralization and dispersion across the region. CTC

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Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a "Banditization" of Jihad?

By James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz

With the explosive growth of banditry in northwestern Nigeria in recent years, there has been growing speculation among Nigerian and international observers that these criminal insurgents are receiving support from or otherwise converging with jihadis based in the country's northeast. However, a lack of open-source data on the inner workings of both banditry and Nigeria's jihadi insurgencies have precluded detailed analysis of this potential "crime-terror nexus." Drawing on the authors' extensive fieldwork across Nigeria's northern conflict zones in 2021 and early 2022, including exclusive interviews with both bandits and jihadi defectors, this article provides the first in-depth examination of the links between Nigeria's bandits and jihadi organizations. While there are many reasons to expect that Nigeria's bandits and jihadis would cooperate and that jihadis would recruit bandits to their cause, the authors show how this has not been the case. The authors argue that Nigeria's bandits are too fractious and too powerful for jihadis to easily coopt them and that the bandits' lack of ambitious political objectives—and the significant differences in the *modus operandi* of bandits and jihadis—means that jihadism holds little intrinsic appeal for them. However, jihadi groups have taken advantage of instability in the northwest enabled by the bandits to establish small enclaves in the region that they are likely to sustain as long as they can maintain a *modus vivendi* with local bandit gangs.

Northern Nigeria is presently suffering from two devastating conflicts. In the Lake Chad basin in the country's northeast, a 13-year jihadi insurgency that has killed nearly 350,000[1] and displaced several million rages with no end in sight.[2] The faction of "Boko Haram" known as Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li-Da'wa wal-Jihad (JAS) is in disarray after the killing of its longtime leader Abubakar Shekau in May 2021, but it is not yet a totally spent force. The rival Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) faction, meanwhile, remains strong and controls large swathes of rural Borno on all sides of the capital, Maiduguri.[3]

In northwestern Nigeria,[a] a complex and volatile insurgency is roiling a region the size of the United Kingdom, leading, shockingly, to more civilian deaths in 2021 than the conflict in the northeast.[4] Well-armed bandits are terrorizing communities and wearing down overstretched security forces, getting rich through criminal activity such as kidnapping for ransom, and assuming de facto sovereignty over swathes of the region. Most of the militants are Fulani herdsmen who claim to be fighting to redress the government's neglect of pastoralist communities.[5] But their insurgency, to the extent the violence can be classified as such, is fractured into dozens of competing bandit groups loosely organized around warlords of varying power.[6]

Though these two conflicts are distinct, Nigerians fear that the insurgencies will overlap and jihadis will cooperate with bandits in

a The states most affected by banditry are Zamfara foremost followed by Sokoto, Katsina, Kaduna, Kebbi, and Niger (not to be confused with the country, the Republic of Niger). While Niger state is part of what Nigerians refer to as the North-Central Geopolitical Zone, for the purposes of this article, the authors refer to Niger as part of the northwest, especially as the regions of the state most afflicted by banditry are close to neighboring states in the North-West Geopolitical Zone.

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a classic example of a "crime-terror nexus" or possibly convert the bandits (who are mostly Sunni Muslim) into jihadis themselves.[b] While there is a voluminous academic literature on the jihadi landscape in Nigeria, far less has been written about Nigeria's banditry crisis, which contributes to a hazy understanding of this potential crime-terror nexus.[c] What has been written on the bandits (including by these authors) has generally included only a few details regarding how bandits and jihadis interact. With such limited data to draw on, analysts have been left to speculate about the interactions between bandits and jihadis. For example, in a recent article, Jacob Zenn and Caleb Weiss suggest that the "Boko Haram" splinter group Ansaru is liable to integrate into conflict-torn communities, as al-Qa`ida franchises have elsewhere in West Africa, in order to expand throughout the northwest, potentially producing an "arc of insurgency" in West Africa.[7] As Zenn and Weiss note, jihadis have successfully coopted bandits in other West African countries such as Burkina Faso, a process Héni Nsaibia of the Armed Conflict Location Event Database (ACLED) dubbed "a jihadization of banditry." Nsaibia argues that jihadis may provide more than just money or weapons to criminals: "From the perspective of armed bandits, rallying militant Islamist groups could also serve as a means to 'morally' justify plundering and pillaging as part of a greater cause."[8]

Concerns of a crime-terror nexus in Nigeria are logical and merit serious consideration. This study aims to begin filling the data gaps that have so far hindered such consideration by offering detailed insights into the overlapping worlds of banditry and jihadism based on the authors' extensive fieldwork. Each of the authors has traveled widely across northern Nigeria, accessing conflict zones that have otherwise been off-limits to researchers and gaining exclusive interviews throughout 2021 and early 2022 with some of the most powerful bandits, former jihadi commanders, and residents of jihadi enclaves, among others.

In assessing bandit-jihadi relations, the authors use the framework of Erik Alda and Joseph L. Sala,[9] who lay out three stages of potential nexus between criminals and terrorists:

Coexistence, in which criminals and terrorists "coincidentally occupy and operate in the same geographic space at the same time."[10]

Cooperation, in which criminals and terrorists "decide that their mutual interests are both served, or at not least severely threatened, by temporarily working together."[11]

Convergence, in which "each [ie criminals and terrorists] begins to engage in behavior(s) that is/are more commonly associated with the other."[12]

The authors find that jihadis have *coexisted* and intermittently *cooperated* with bandits in the northwest, with cooperation being limited to short-term, mutually beneficial exchanges of material or skills (for example, jihadis offering training in explosives or advice on negotiating kidnap ransoms). However, there has not been a *convergence* of banditry and jihadism in a manner analysts might expect. Bandits have begun conducting certain types of operations, namely mass kidnappings, that are generally associated with Nigerian jihadi groups, but this is not necessarily a result of sustained cooperation between bandits and jihadis (as discussed later in the article). With regard to a larger strategic and/or ideological convergence, the authors find evidence that jihadis have converted to bandits, but they have not seen the process work in the opposite direction, with no major bandit ever electing to become a jihadi and remaining one.[d] The authors assess there are several reasons behind jihadis' failure to coopt bandits:

- Nigeria's bandits have grown so powerful that they are not in desperate need of cooperation with jihadis (let alone a need to convert to jihadism).
- The bandits' gangs are so numerous and loosely organized, and bandits fight among each other so frequently over parochial issues, that jihadis would have difficulty coopting more than a handful of gangs at a time.
- Additionally, differences in the *modus operandi* and objectives of bandits and jihadis render jihadism unappealing to bandits: While bandits have no coherent political agenda and have managed to grow rich and powerful by plundering Muslim communities in the northwest, jihadis are deeply committed to a revolutionary political project and, particularly in the case of ISWAP and Ansaru, seek to gain popular support from the sorts of vulnerable Muslim communities that bandits prey on.

Nevertheless, the uncommon conversion of bandits to jihadis has not precluded jihadis from benefiting from operating alongside the bandits. Jihadis have established sanctuaries in the northwest—Ansaru has an enclave in Kaduna state, and JAS and possibly ISWAP are regrouping in Niger state. However, these benefits are

"The uncommon conversion of bandits to jihadis has not precluded jihadis from benefiting from operating alongside the bandits. Jihadis have established sanctuaries in the northwest ... though these benefits are not without challenges. Jihadis must navigate complex relationships with powerful bandit gangs that are disinterested if not outright averse to jihadi ideology."

b For example, a report commissioned by the Nigerian non-profit Goodluck Jonathan Foundation that synthesizes existing open-source information states that "the preliminary evidence points to the existence of both environmental and operational convergence between bandits and Islamist fundamentalist groups." See "Terrorism and Banditry in Nigeria: The Nexus," Goodluck Jonathan Foundation, September 2021.

c Ethnoreligious divides also fuel misinformation within the public discourse on banditry in Nigeria. It is common to hear sensationalist anti-Fulani rhetoric that treats all herdsmen as radical Islamists, reflecting decades of popular anxiety regarding northern Islamization of the south. For more on the history of "Fulanization" discourses in Nigeria, see Michael Nwankpa, "The North-South Divide: Nigerian Discourses on Boko Haram, the Fulani, and Islamization," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 29 (2021): pp. 47-62.

d The exception is a handful of minor bandits mentioned in the case study of Ansaru.

Nigeria (Rowan Technology)

not without challenges. Jihadis must navigate complex relationships with powerful bandit gangs that are disinterested if not outright averse to jihadi ideology.

This article will attempt to address the question of bandit-jihadi relations through the perspectives of both bandits and jihadis. To this end, the article begins with a general overview of both Nigeria's jihadis and bandits. Then, the authors explain the factors that would, theoretically, push bandits and jihadis to cooperate if not converge. In the subsequent section, the authors analyze why such convergence has, in fact, been lacking, focusing on four primary factors that hinder greater bandit-jihadi cooperation. In the next two sections, the authors offer case studies: first from the perspective of bandits, examining several powerful warlords as a way of adding nuance to the question of what bandits do (and do not) hope to gain from working with jihadis; and second from the perspective of jihadis, assessing the degree to which Nigeria's three primary jihadi outfits (JAS, ISWAP, and Ansaru) have cooperated with and coopted bandits in their attempted efforts at expansion in the northwest. The article concludes with a call for greater nuance in discussions of the crime-terror nexus, both within West Africa and globally, while the authors also caution Nigerian and international policymakers not to rely heavily on counterterrorism paradigms in approaching the escalating crisis in Nigeria's northwest.

Conflict Actors in Northern Nigeria: Jihadis and Bandits

Jihadis

The three primary jihadi outfits that operate in Nigeria today—JAS, ISWAP, and Ansaru—each emerged from the original JAS or "Boko Haram" that gradually evolved from a mass political preaching movement into a jihadi insurgency between approximately 2002 and 2009. At no point in history have the insurgents officially called themselves "Boko Haram." This name, which translates loosely from Hausa (the lingua franca of northern Nigeria) into English as "Western education is *haram* (forbidden)," was initially a pejorative used by the movement's detractors[13] and has since become the popular name among Nigerians and many analysts for Shekau's JAS faction if not all jihadis in Nigeria.[e] For purposes of this article, "Boko Haram" is used to refer to the movement—first a salafi preaching movement and then a violent jihadi organization

e This was indeed a major challenge the authors faced in conducting this research insofar as most interview subjects in the northwest refer to all jihadis as "Boko Haram" without specifying the faction. Very often, sources would have to be pressed to specify (if they knew) whether a given group of "Boko Haram" was "Shekau" (JAS), "Barnawi" or "Nur" (ISWAP), or "Abba" (Ansaru).

Fighters from the gang of Halilu Sububu are pictured during an interview visit to Halilu's camp in Zamfara state by one of the authors in February 2021. (Abdulaziz Abdulaziz)

starting in 2009—up to the point of its splintering in 2015-2016.[f] By 2016, two distinct factions had emerged that remain active today: the faction of the now late Abubakar Shekau, referred to as JAS (the official name for the "Boko Haram" group since 2009) and now led by one "Bakura" as described below; and the ISWAP faction, officially recognized by the Islamic State and originally led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi (who himself likely died in late 2021, only a few months after Shekau).[g] A third faction that split from "Boko Haram" back in 2012, Ansaru, will also be discussed in detail toward the end of this article.

Jihadi violence in Nigeria has historically been concentrated in the country's northeast, particularly Borno state. The "Boko Haram" movement formed in the Borno state capital, Maiduguri, in the early 2000s and built its strongest networks and popular base in that city and elsewhere in Borno.[14] As a salafi preaching movement and later salafi-jihadi insurgency, "Boko Haram" naturally disavowed any ethnonationalist or regionalist agenda and saw itself as a vehicle for Muslims across Nigeria and West Africa broadly to advance an Islamic revolution. The group's founder, Muhammad Yusuf, gained admirers across Nigeria and in neighboring countries thanks to the

f The split between JAS and ISWAP was formally recognized in August 2016 by the Islamic State, insofar as official Islamic State media publicly shifted recognition to Abu Musab al-Barnawi as *wali* or governor of the West Africa Province, dropping recognition of Shekau as holding this title. However, the split between al-Barnawi's faction and Shekau's faction had already begun to emerge in 2015 amid a multinational military offensive against the "Boko Haram" insurgents in northeastern Nigeria and thus the Islamic State was merely recognizing a *fait accompli* in its August 2016 pronouncement. Given the gradual nature of "Boko Haram's" splintering, the authors refer to the JAS-ISWAP split as occurring between 2015 and 2016. For more, see Vincent Foucher, "The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad," International Crisis Group, October 29, 2020, and James Barnett, "Remaining Without Expanding? Examining Jihadist Insurgency in Northeastern Nigeria," *Caravan* 2132, September 21, 2021.

g The authors assess that al-Barnawi is dead, as has been rumored since September 2021, despite the lack of any official ISWAP or Islamic State statement on the matter. Rumors of al-Barnawi's death began circulating in September 2021. At the time, a senior military official stated to one of the authors that al-Barnawi was "presumed dead." See Barnett, "Remaining Without Expanding?" In October 2021, Nigeria's Chief of Defence Staff, General Lucky Irabor, stated he could "authoritatively confirm" al-Barnawi's death, although the lack of any announcement from ISWAP, and the fact that the Nigerian military had on several occasions in the past erroneously declared the death of other senior terrorists like Abubakar Shekau, led some analysts to continue doubting the rumors. Ruth Maclean and Ismail Alfa, "Key Leader of West African Terrorist Group Is Dead, Nigerian Army Says," *New York Times*, October 15, 2021. In January 2022, the researcher Jacob Zenn published an audio excerpt purportedly from September 2021 in which an unnamed ISWAP militant mentions the recent death of al-Barnawi and the succession of one Mallam Bako to the position of *wali* (governor). The audio can be found at "Unmasking Boko Haram," an invaluable web archive maintained by Jacob Zenn.

distribution of his sermons via cassette and mobile phone.[h] While both JAS and ISWAP are to this day believed to be largely Kanuri (the majority ethnic group in Borno, though a minority elsewhere in the north), each group's commanders and rank-and-file alike include other ethnicities such as Hausa, Fulani, and Buduma.[15]

In the first years after the launch of the group's violent jihad in 2009, "Boko Haram" maintained attack cells in various parts of northern and central Nigeria. Most notably, the group conducted a suicide vehicle-borne IED attack against the U.N. headquarters building in the federal capital, Abuja, in August 2011 and coordinated bombings in the northern metropolis of Kano in January 2012. However, by 2014, the group was confined to its strongholds in the northeast, in part due to security operations and infighting.[16] Since 2014, nearly all claimed jihadi activity in Nigeria has occurred in the northeast, mostly in Borno state as well as in parts of neighboring Yobe and Adamawa and in adjacent communities in Cameroon, Chad, and the Republic of Niger, a region often referred to as the Lake Chad basin. Consequently, any sustained jihadi operations in northwestern Nigeria would represent the most notable expansion of the original "Boko Haram" conflict since the mid-2010s.

Bandits

Banditry is a loosely defined concept, but generally speaking, Nigeria's bandits are rural gangs that engage in criminal activities such as cattle rustling, looting of villages, extortion of local communities, and kidnapping for ransom. Banditry has been widespread throughout the country but has grown most acute in the northwest, particularly Zamfara state, in the past decade.

There are as many as 30,000 bandits[i] spread over 100 gangs operating in northwestern Nigeria, the largest likely not fielding much more than 2,000 fighters.[j] Bandits' alliances shift frequently as new feuds erupt and short-term interests drive erstwhile rivals to cooperate.[17] The most powerful gang leaders operate as warlords, exercising de facto sovereignty over swathes of the countryside.[18] Even the largest gangs are loosely organized, however, and gangs frequently fracture, either by mutual agreement or violent conflict.[19]

Many bandits are Fulani herdsmen who claim to be fighting in protest of the government's mistreatment of herders, though members of other ethnic groups are also present in the gangs.[20] While many bandits took up arms with genuine grievances against the state, they have since developed a more criminal *modus operandi*.[21] Rather than channel their grievances into a rebellion against the government, the bandits primarily attack ordinary villagers and travelers and feud with rival gangs.[k] That said, notions of ethnic solidarity or chauvinism sometimes drive bandits' behavior, with some bandits conducting retaliatory attacks against Hausa communities that have killed Fulani herders.[22] The ethnic dimension of banditry fluctuates in salience, with bandits making more of an effort to assume the mantle of ethnic militants at times of heightened Hausa-Fulani tensions but otherwise operating as profit-maximizing militants.[23] Religion, however, is not the most salient dimension of banditry in the northwest, as both the bandits and the large majority of their victims in the northwestern states are Sunni Muslim.

Theories of Bandit-Jihadi Cooperation and Convergence

Northwestern Nigeria—the domain of Nigeria's bandits—seems, superficially, vulnerable to jihadi expansionism. The northwest is neither geographically nor socially isolated from the country's northeast or other jihadi hotspots in West Africa, and the region lacks robust state institutions or adequate security forces that might serve as a bulwark against jihadis. The northwestern states are geographically proximate to northeastern Nigeria and share a long, under-policed border with the Republic of Niger, where the al-Qa`ida-linked Jama'at Nasr al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State's West Africa Province Greater Sahara branch (ISWAP-Greater Sahara), colloquially known as the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS), operate.[l] The northwest's terrain is conducive to insurgency owing to its vast forests, some of which stretch to the northeast.[24] Further, the northwest's population is mostly Sunni and the region shares many of the socioeconomic and cultural factors that contributed to "Boko Haram's" rise in the northeast such as widespread poverty, low levels of education, a corrupt political elite, and a strong salafi movement.[25] Nigeria's security forces are largely absent in the northwestern countryside while government institutions, infrastructure, and services ranging

h Yusuf's sermons often touched on the pre-colonial Islamic history of northern Nigeria and the postcolonial religious tensions of the country. These topics would have resonated with a wider Nigerian Muslim audience and not merely Kanuri in the northeast. For examples of sermons, see Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa, *The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

i Estimates of the number of bandits are highly imprecise. The Zamfara governor has given an estimate of more than 30,000 bandits. See "Matawalle: There are over 30,000 bandits in the north," Cable, April 2, 2021.

j The precise number of bandit gangs is hard to estimate due to the loosely organized nature of the gangs and the vassal-like status smaller gangs often have vis-à-vis their more powerful counterparts. That is to say, powerful warlords often call on smaller, mostly autonomous gangs to join in certain operations (often in return for a share of the spoils), which allows the warlords to inflate their strength. The gangs do not usually have formal names either, but are simply referred to colloquially as "[X bandit's] boys." For more, see Murtala Rufa'i, *I Am a Bandit: A Decade of Research in Zamfara State Bandit's Den* (Sokoto, Nigeria: Usman Danfodiyo University Sokoto, 2021); James Barnett, "The Bandit Warlords of Nigeria," Newlines, December 1, 2021; and "Criminal Gangs Destabilizing Nigeria's North West," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies Spotlight*, December 14, 2021.

k To the extent that they discuss politics, the bandits mostly criticize the government of current President Muhammadu Buhari, which often leads them to wax nostalgic about previous governments. In interviews with one of the authors, one powerful bandit, Shehu Rekeb, expressed his admiration for the military regime of Sani Abacha (1993-1998) and lamented the imposition of sharia law and subsequent efforts to curb drug and alcohol use (bandits are prolific consumers of marijuana and tramadol). Several other bandits interviewed by two of the authors fondly recalled the presidencies of the Christian southerners Olusegun Obasanjo and Goodluck Jonathan (1999-2007 and 2010-2015, respectively) because "Fulani could live in peace." Abdulaziz phone interview, Shehu Rekeb, September 2021; Barnett and Rufa'i interview, bandits, Birnin Magaji (Zamfara), August 2021.

l Since March 2019, Islamic State media has referred to the group colloquially known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara as part of the broader "West Africa Province" as a result of the Islamic State's reorganization of its provinces. It is referred to in this article as ISWAP-Greater Sahara. The original branch of ISWAP, which has mainly been based in the Lake Chad border region in the far northeast corner of Nigeria and adjacent districts in Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, is referred to simply as ISWAP. For more, see Jason Warner, Ryan O'Farrell, Héni Nsaibia, and Ryan Cummings, "Outlasting the Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State Threat in Africa," *CTC Sentinel* 13:11 (2020): pp. 18-33.

Shehu Rekeb, a longstanding bandit in the northwest, is photographed during an interview in Shinkafi, Zamfara state, by one of the authors in February 2021. (Abdulaziz Abdulaziz)

from schools to tarmacked roads also tend to be concentrated in urban areas, leaving many villages without a tangible state presence. Additionally, trade, migration, and conquest have connected communities in the northwest with those in the northeast, and the broader Sahel, since the pre-colonial era, such that a good number of bandits and jihadis share a common ethnicity.[m]

Given these factors, northwestern Nigeria would seem a likely spot for bandits and jihadis to work together as the latter seek to establish a presence outside of the northeast. Theoretically, both jihadis and bandits could see it in their interests to seek a *convergence* that leads bandits to more closely resemble jihadis, as seen elsewhere in the Sahel. For jihadis, the benefits of recruiting bandits into their fold are obvious: Coopting existing militant networks is one way for jihadi organizations to expand. ISWAP, the strongest jihadi group in Nigeria today, no doubt seeks to eventually expand beyond its stronghold in the northeast to wage an insurgency across northern Nigeria, where most of the country's roughly 100 million Muslims live. Ansaru, meanwhile, has been based in the northwest since at least the mid-2010s while JAS is now likely also regrouping in the region (described in the subsequent section on JAS). For both of these groups, then, coopting bandits would be a means of securing their base of operations by becoming the dominant local militant group.

For bandits, *convergence* into jihadism also seems like a logical evolution in some ways. The bandits are Sunni Muslims who harbor grievances against the state (like jihadis). Unlike those recruited from "civilian" life into the ranks of jihadi organizations, bandits are already living in the bush as wanted militants, thus presumably removing many of the disincentives to joining a jihadi organization. Finally, as Nsaibia notes, jihadism offers bandits the chance to justify their militant activity as part of a "higher cause" that is religiously ordained—indeed obligatory.[26]

However, in reality, jihadis have mostly failed to coopt bandits in Nigeria. Bandits and jihadis have *coexisted* in the northwest, as the experience of Ansaru and more recently JAS attest. Bandits and jihadis have also occasionally *cooperated*, as the subsequent sections will show; such cooperation has included jihadis providing bandits with weapons,[27] training bandits in the use of certain weaponry, or (most notably) providing manpower to certain gangs to conduct kidnappings or attack rival bandits. However, not only have jihadis largely failed to coopt bandits, but, as will be outlined, on several occasions jihadis have abandoned their jihad to become bandits themselves. Hence, there has been a degree of convergence between bandits and jihadis in Nigeria, but in a manner that strengthens bandits more than jihadis.

The next section lays out the structural impediments to greater bandit-jihadi cooperation and convergence. Subsequent sections add detail and nuance to this analysis of limited bandit-jihadi cooperation by profiling individual bandit commanders and their complex relationships with jihadis as well as the efforts of Nigeria's three primary jihadi factions to expand into the bandit-dominated northwest.

m In addition to the presence of Fulani in the northeast, multiple extended families of Kanuri and Tuareg pastoralists have lived in the northwest for generations, with many assimilating into Fulani pastoral culture. For more on this, see Garba Nadama, *A Struggle for Survival: Zamfara in the Eighteenth Century* (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University, 1978).

Impediments to Jihadi Expansion in Northwestern Nigeria

The Challenges of Jihadis' Cooperation with Bandits

In broad terms, there are four primary impediments to jihadis' cooperation with and/or cooptation of bandits:

- The fractiousness of the bandits
- The power of the bandits
- Differing political objectives among bandits and jihadis
- Differences in the *modus operandi* of jihadis and bandits

Fractiousness of bandits: There cannot be an alliance between "Boko Haram and the bandits," as one often hears fears of in Nigeria, because "the bandits" are not a coherent or unified bloc (nor is "Boko Haram," for that matter). As noted earlier, the bandits are loosely organized and divided into dozens of gangs, many of which clash with each other regularly. Alliances between bandits can be volatile, and compared to jihadis, bandits are quite parochial, clashing over non-ideological issues as minor as one gang stealing cattle from another or erecting its camp too close to that of a rival.[28] Consequently, if jihadis were to align closely with one set of bandits, it would likely entail making enemies with a sizable bloc of other bandits or, at best, entail the additional burden of having to constantly mediate between fractious gangs. Additionally, given how frequently gangs break apart, top-down cooptation is no guarantee of the long-term loyalty of a gang: In other words, jihadis might win the loyalty of an individual bandit kingpin, but some of his lieutenants might soon split, depriving the jihadis of foot soldiers they can rely on.

Power of bandits: A second challenge to jihadi cooperation or cooptation of bandits is the benefit to bandits: In sum, jihadis offer little to bandits that they do not already possess. The bandits are more numerous than jihadis,[n] and the most powerful gangs control large swathes of the countryside. Materially, bandits already receive weaponry from diverse sources, and many gangs are battle-hardened.[29] Yet jihadis do appear to offer some benefits: Some bandits seem happy to accept instruction in areas where jihadis have a comparative advantage, such as the use of anti-aircraft guns or IEDs.[30] [o] Similarly, it has been reported that U.S. officials have intercepts of jihadis (suspected to be either ISWAP or JAS) offering bandits advice on staging mass kidnappings and negotiating ransoms.[31] But bandits' need for long-term cooperation with jihadis remains limited; such cooperation may cease as bandits master jihadis' techniques and no longer need jihadis as teachers. Bandits have outpaced Nigeria's jihadis in carrying out mass kidnappings, for example, with bandits staging 11 such operations targeting schools since December 2020.[p]

Different political objectives: A third impediment to jihadis' cooperation with bandits is that, in contrast to jihadis, bandits are less interested in unifying to overthrow the government than in maximizing their own wealth and influence. Many bandits seek to position themselves for government amnesties, which have historically included financial incentives and legitimated some gangs as state-sanctioned militias.[32] This approach stands in stark contrast to jihadis' deeply ideological projects and the repeated refusal of Nigeria's jihadis since 2009 to engage in serious negotiations with the government.

Different modus operandi: The fourth and largest impediment to jihadi cooperation with bandits is that the *modus operandi* of the bandits differs significantly from those of jihadis. Banditry in northern Nigeria requires no substantive ideological justifications and carries no constraints. Bandits rob, kill, and abduct Muslims and Christians; men, women, and children; Hausa, Fulani, and other ethnicities. While some bandits adopt a softer approach of "social banditry" in which they deliver some basic goods and services to the communities they extort, such arrangements are restricted to only those communities that willingly pay levies and accept bandits' demands.[33] Any communities that resist, or those outside a gang's area of influence that host tempting targets (e.g., a market or school), are fair game. Consequently, the large majority of bandits' victims in the northwest are Muslim civilians, often those in rural communities who are most neglected by the state.

This is precisely the demographic in which ISWAP and Ansaru seek to build popular support (JAS is a slight exception, to be discussed in the group's case study). ISWAP attempts to win Muslim "hearts and minds" in the northeast and refrain from harming civilians in the process of collecting revenue.[q] As the International Crisis Group notes, "[ISWAP] digs wells, *polices cattle rustling* [emphasis added], provides a modicum of health care and sometimes disciplines its own personnel whom it judges to have unacceptably abused civilians. In the communities it controls, its taxation is generally accepted by civilians."[34] A veteran security official in Borno echoed this, stating to one of the authors that "ISWAP is more dangerous [than JAS] because it treats the villagers well so long as they are Muslim and do not work with the security forces."[35] Ansaru has not yet erected any proto-state, though it similarly tends to avoid harming Muslim civilians and discourages banditry as a means of building popular support.[36] In sum, ISWAP and Ansaru have dramatically different approaches toward treatment of Muslim civilians than bandits.

n While the bandits of northwestern Nigeria are estimated to number as high as 30,000 or more, the U.S. Department of Defense estimated in 2020 that JAS and ISWAP together fielded at most 7,000 fighters, primarily based in the broader Lake Chad basin area. See "Boko Haram and Islamic State's West Africa Province," Congressional Research Service, March 26, 2021. JAS may presently have only a few hundred fighters in the northeast after the death of Shekau, however, according to local sources in Borno.

o Nigerian immigration authorities warned in July 2021 of a movement of bandits to the northeast to train in "Boko Haram" camps but offered no specific details. "Nigeria warns kidnap gangs train with jihadists as cooperation grows," AFP, August 6, 2021.

p In contrast, jihadis have not staged a mass kidnapping of schoolchildren since ISWAP's abduction of schoolgirls in Dapchi, Yobe, in February 2018.

q ISWAP's attack trends generally fit within this model premised on building popular support by reducing harm to Muslim civilians in the northeast. In the first two years after the split between ISWAP and JAS, ISWAP conducted 76 percent of all its attacks (both in Nigeria and other Lake Chad basin countries) against hard targets. In contrast, 54 percent of all attacks by Shekau's JAS in these countries were directed at civilians. See Jason Warner and Stephanie Lizzo, "The 'Boko Haram Disaggregation Problem' and Comparative Profiles of Factional Violence: Challenges, Impacts, and Solutions in the Study of Africa's Deadliest Terror Group(s)," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, published online May 27, 2021.

Is Banditry More Appealing Than Jihadism?

If anything, jihadis seem to have had an easier time transitioning into banditry than bandits have had transitioning into jihadism. This seems to be because banditry grants greater autonomy—and greater prospects for accumulating personal wealth—to individual militants than hierarchical jihadi groups that maintain relatively strict (and often unequal) guidelines for dividing war spoils.[37] Thus, banditry may be an appealing alternative for militants who grow disaffected with jihad but are unable, or disinterested, in returning to 'civilian' life. Indeed, a former commander in JAS and later ISWAP claimed that many jihadis travel to the northwest to become bandits when they fall out with their superiors or grow disillusioned. "They come [to the northwest] with some money and weapons, but once they run out of money, they take up banditry to make ends meet, then become invested in banditry."[38] The journalist Obi Anyadike has likewise reported that out of a group of 21 senior ISWAP defectors, three joined bandit gangs rather than enroll in the government's amnesty program.[39] Separately, one bandit also told two of the authors that in 2018 some JAS fighters arrived in Zamfara who had been sent by Shekau to start operations there. These jihadis drifted into banditry instead because, in the words of the bandit, "there is bountiful wealth in banditry."[40]

Scrutinizing Bandits' Links to Jihadis

With the previous section having laid out just why jihadis have a more difficult time working with bandits, and why jihadis often become bandits but not vice versa, this section offers detailed insights into the nature of bandit-jihadi relations from the perspective of bandits. The authors briefly examine the relations between four of the most powerful bandits operating in the northwest today (Alhaji Shehu Shingi, Halilu Sububu, Turji, and Dogo Gide) and different Nigerian jihadis. These bandits were selected both because the authors have gained reliable information on their activities (drawn in some instances from interviews conducted in 2021 with the bandits in question) and because it has been suggested or speculated, either in Nigerian media or by Nigerian officials, that each of these bandits is working in some way or another with jihadis or has become a jihadi himself. As the authors show, the reality is more nuanced, and in the case of two bandits in particular, Turji and Dogo Gide, behavior or rhetoric that might appear, at a glance, to reflect jihadi leanings might instead require other explanations.

Alhaji Shehu Shingi

Alhaji Shingi embodies a transactional relationship between bandits and jihadis. Shingi has been a bandit in Zamfara since 2011 and identifies his gang as a Fulani self-defense militia.[41] In an interview with two of the authors, Shingi denied having any ideological affinity with jihadis but admitted to having intermittent contact with individuals in JAS for several years.[42] Shingi stated in August 2021 that he was in touch with JAS lieutenants who were fleeing the northeast amid the ongoing onslaught from ISWAP. Shingi was eager to help these lieutenants reach Zamfara because they would bring significant skills and contacts to his gang.[43]

Notably, Shingi said that if he did not help these ex-JAS members reach his camps, they might end up in another part of the northwest teaming up with one of his rivals, which he could not allow.[44] This points to a commodification of jihadis and ex-jihadis in the northwest in which bandits compete for the loyalty of these skilled fighters. Further research should determine to what extent ex-jihadis have taken advantage of their market value by positioning themselves as soldiers of fortune.

"Banditry may be an appealing alternative for militants who grow disaffected with jihad but are unable, or disinterested, in returning to 'civilian' life."

Turji and Halilu

Kachalla Turji and Halilu Sububu are the two bandit kingpins in the Shinkafi Local Government of Zamfara and the adjacent local governments of Sabon Birni and Isa in Sokoto. The two have been rivals ever since Turji, Halilu's protégé, split from his mentor, though they recently began cooperating again.[45] As of early 2022, Turji is one of the most powerful and notorious bandits in the northwest.[r]

Around 2014, Halilu received an emissary from "Boko Haram" who was looking to cement a partnership between his gang and "Boko Haram."[46] Halilu sent the emissary away out of disinterest.[47] However, Turji split from Halilu not long after this delegation arrived, and by 2021 (if not earlier), he had received overtures over the phone from ISWAP, which was looking to cement some form of cooperation.[48] Beginning in 2021, Turji implemented elements of sharia law in villages under his control, including mandatory prayer times and a narcotics ban,[49] which some Nigerian officials have suggested could be an indicator of ISWAP's guidance being implemented.[50]

However, these assumptions seem to be erroneous. A bandit close to Turji denied any ISWAP presence where Turji operates.[51] In an interview, Turji himself strongly denied having any relationship with jihadis and denied any presence of "Boko Haram" in his area, saying of his gang, "we are not a religious movement."[52] More notably, in the interview Turji demonstrated little knowledge of Islam or political happenings outside of the northwest, which suggests his worldview has not been seriously shaped by jihadi contacts.[53] Some of Turji's lieutenants said that in 2021, Turji participated in celebrations for *mawlud* (the Prophet Mohammad's birthday), a holiday that salafi-jihadis deem *haram*.[54] A former bandit close to Turji also claims it was not ISWAP but a visit by the prominent salafi cleric Sheikh Ahmad Abubakar Gumi, who has made several trips to the bush to hear bandits' grievances, that had

r The activities of Turji and his gang have generated a significant amount of media coverage in late 2021 relative to other bandits in the northwest. A local artist even released a widely discussed song in praise of Turji in late 2021 (Turji is the only contemporary bandit to have such a song written in his honor). Abubakar Ahmad Maishanu, "Musician releases song in praise of bandit kingpin Turji," *Premium Times*, December 16, 2021. Turji was also the public face of the latest semi-coordinated effort by multiple gangs, in December 2021, to broker a ceasefire with the government. Mohammed Babangida, "Banditry: Experts authenticate Turji's letter, say notorious kingpin troubled, frustrated," *Premium Times*, December 19, 2021. Turji's overtures to the government in December 2021 followed a series of Nigerian military operations that, by the authors' count, disproportionately targeted Turji's gang relative to other bandits in the northwest. See, for example, "Nigerian Military Raids Bandit Kingpin, Turji's Hideout, Kills Scores Of Bandits in Zamfara, Sokoto Forests," Sahara Reporters, December 20, 2021.

Halilu Sububu poses for a photograph in his Sububu Forest enclave, Zamfara state, February 2021. (Abdulaziz Abdulaziz)

the greatest impact on Turji.[55] Gumi appears to have a missionary purpose as he believes that having bandits submit to sharia will make them better Muslims and thus lead them out of criminality.[56] Gumi subsequently seconded clerics to the bandits and donated Islamic texts to villagers under Turji's control.[57] Since Gumi's visit, Turji has gone further than many of his peers in attempting to build legitimacy as a warlord in local communities.[58] Employing elements of sharia law (which has been implemented in the north for 20 years, as it was prior to colonialism) can be a useful means of control and may bolster Turji's image as a community leader. Similarly, Halilu, among other bandits, has built mosques in villages under their control as a form of public works.[59]

In sum, while jihadism might give bandits a means to morally justify their actions as part of a 'higher cause,' it is by no means the only way for a bandit to legitimize themselves. When trying to build influence in a religiously conservative society, a bandit may present himself as a pious community leader but stop short of affiliating with more controversial jihadis. Manifestations of piety from bandits are therefore not the clear proof of jihadi leanings that some might assume.

Dogo Gide

Dogo Gide is an important bandit to study in the context of bandit-jihadi relations. He is the bandit most often referred to by Nigerian officials and in Nigerian media as being linked to jihadis,[60] and he has indeed sought to present himself as a jihadi at various points. While the authors have found that Gide cooperates with jihadis, particularly Ansaru (described more in the Ansaru case study), he is, in fact, a highly autonomous bandit who shows little understanding of jihadi ideology. This suggests that even one of the bandits who cooperates most closely with jihadis has not been meaningfully coopted by a jihadi organization.

Dogo Gide is an enigmatic figure,[s] and the authors have heard several versions of how he first came into contact with jihadis. These narratives are worth considering precisely because each is plausible and, if true, would underscore some of the limits of jihadi efforts to coopt bandits, though in different ways.

The first narrative suggests that Gide formally joined "Boko Haram" sometime after becoming involved in banditry and traveled to the northeast around 2014 along with three other bandits—Dogo Yale, Saidu Jandiga, and Sani Buta.[61] Sometime in 2015 or 2016, when "Boko Haram" was facing setbacks at the hands of a multinational military force in the northeast, Gide, Jandiga, and Buta grew disenchanted and decided to return to the northwest and resume banditry.[t] According to this narrative, Gide's "Boko Haram" superiors agreed to let them leave and even sent them weapons. As "Boko Haram" splintered, Gide subsequently drifted close to al-Barnawi's ISWAP even as he resumed banditry in Zamfara, receiving weapons or money from ISWAP.[62] If this narrative is accurate, then it is likely that Gide and his associates were part of a group of "Boko Haram" commanders dispatched to the northwest amid military setbacks in the northeast to establish jihadi cells by Shekau's then-lieutenant, Abu Musab al-Barnawi (who would

s His real name is believed to be Abubakar Abdullahi. See "Criminal Gangs Destabilizing Nigeria's North West." Sources in the northwest do not even agree on his age, with some claiming he is in his mid-20s and others saying he is middle-aged.

t In this telling, Dogo Yale stayed in the northeast and was killed in combat.

soon form the breakaway ISWAP faction and maintain contact with these commanders-turned-bandits all the while). (More details on this plan of al-Barnawi's are provided in the section on ISWAP).

However, other sources place Gide's first contact with jihadis more recently, particularly after his killing of one-time associate and Zamfara bandit kingpin Buharin Daji (often referred to just as Buharin) in March 2018. In this telling, Gide never joined "Boko Haram" in the northeast but instead began seeking alliances with jihadis, particularly Ansaru, out of pragmatism-cum-desperation after falling out with the late Buhari's lieutenants.[u] A similar story suggests that Gide began hosting Ansaru while he was still a lieutenant of Buhari's, which was a source of friction that may have helped fuel their rift, and that Gide grew closer to ISWAP out of pragmatism after killing Buhari even as he continued cooperation with Ansaru.[v] In a leaked private communication from 2020, Gide offers a similarly pragmatic explanation for his cooperation with "terror groups" (presumably Ansaru), claiming that by allowing their presence in his area of operations, he keeps the military distracted from pursuing his own gang.[63]

In sum, the second narrative would suggest that Gide is a pure opportunist with only relatively recent, transactional ties to jihadis. This would support the thesis that bandits are not interested in adopting a jihadi *modus operandi*. The first narrative, meanwhile, would suggest that Gide has jihadi connections stretching back years and that he may have even originally returned to the northwest as part of a "Boko Haram" plan to recruit supporters among Fulani (described subsequently in the ISWAP section). If this narrative is true, it would reveal a different limitation of bandit cooptation of jihadis: that even a bandit who formally joins a jihadi organization and travels to fight under the command of said organization might quickly return to being an autonomous bandit when conditions change.

This is because, at present, Gide pursues his own interest and does not appear to take orders from anyone. His occasional attempts to portray himself as a well-connected jihadi are not convincing and are likely intended to give him greater prestige and legitimacy as an 'international' militant. For example, in a video filmed after masterminding the kidnapping of 90 schoolchildren from Kebbi state in July 2021, Gide begins with the *bismillah*, then mentions the "*khalifah*" in an apparent nod to the Islamic State.[64] However, in one private communication after the kidnapping, Gide boasted of being a "commander of [Abu Bakr al-]Baghdadi," seemingly unaware that the Islamic State leader had been dead for nearly two years.[65][w] In other communications with intermediaries, Gide makes no mention of any jihadi motivation for the Kebbi operation, which he claims was retaliation for the arrest of some of his associates.[66] Gide also says that he exclusively kidnaps foreigners (which is untrue) because it is Islamically acceptable to "take from white men," which suggests a crude knowledge of jihadi theories of *ghanima* and *fey'u* (war spoils and confiscations).[67] Gide also seems to lack basic Arabic literacy: In late 2021, he circulated a photograph to other bandits of some of his gang's hostages with a nonsensical Arabic caption that is likely a gross misspelling of the JAS name.[68] All of this suggests that if Gide did indeed fight with "Boko Haram" in the northeast in the mid-2010s, he did not seriously imbibe the group's teachings and has not maintained sufficient contact with jihadis since then to know who is who in today's global jihadi landscape.

"Bandits might theoretically seek greater partnerships with jihadis and even find appeal in the ideological dimensions of jihad as a justification for their militancy. In practice, however, this has not been the case."

More pertinently, Gide may hold out the possibility of cooperating with jihadis as leverage. After receiving a visit from Sheikh Gumi, the salafi cleric, Gide informed Gumi that Ansaru had warned him against speaking to "pro-democracy" clerics in the future.[69] Gide suggested that unless Gumi could convince the government to agree to his demands, he would have to heed Ansaru's advice.[70] Whether or not this is his primary intention in working with jihadis, and regardless of whenever he first made contact with jihadis, it seems that Gide believes his flirtations will help him raise the stakes in any negotiations with the government.

The Limits of Jihadi Cooptation of Bandits

As noted in a previous section, bandits might theoretically seek greater partnerships with jihadis and even find appeal in the ideological dimensions of jihad as a justification for their militancy. In practice, however, this has not been the case. Alhaji Shingi's experience suggests that bandits are more successful in coopting veteran jihadis than jihadis are in recruiting bandits to their cause. The case of Turji shows that bandits may implement elements of sharia as a means of legitimating their authority but stop short of adopting a full jihadi *modus operandi*. And the most powerful bandit who can be said to have concrete ties to jihadis, Dogo Gide, does not operate like much of a jihadi himself, even if he may have, for a time, been a subordinate member of "Boko Haram." In sum,

u For example, Yusuf Anka, a Zamfaran journalist with many contacts in Gide's area of operations, suggests that Dogo Gide first aligned with Ansaru after killing Buharin Daji because Ansaru had supported Buhari's opponents during a major intra-bandit conflict in 2018 known colloquially as the "Katsina war." Some security officials have offered a similar explanation for Gide's jihadi ties. Barnett interviews, Yusuf Anka, October and November 2021; Barnett interviews, security officials in northwestern states, April and May 2021.

v According to the former bandit "Alhaji Abdu," Gide has sent fighters to train with ISWAP, and ISWAP has sent advisors to the northwest to work with his gang. Rufa'i interviews, "Alhaji Abdu" (pseudonym), November 2021.

w Gide never states Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's full name or title, and in one instance, he struggles to remember al-Baghdadi's name. The context in which Gide first mentions al-Baghdadi is also intriguing: Gide is justifying his ransom demands to the intermediary, saying that his gang are not criminals but the "government of the forest" and that they have "relationships with foreigners, links with leaders like Baghdadi." This suggests that Gide is trying to gain prestige and legitimacy for his actions by invoking a connection to the Islamic State.

The black flags of "Boko Haram" are still visible on this building (pictured August 2021), which "Boko Haram" used as a prison and execution grounds during its occupation of Gwoza town in Borno state from 2014 to 2015. (James Barnett)

the experiences of the bandits the authors have profiled add weight to the argument that jihadis have largely failed in durably coopting bandits.

The following section shifts the focus to the perspectives of the three primary jihadi factions in Nigeria, showing how their various designs to cooperate with and/or coopt bandits have largely fallen short, though this has not stopped some jihadis from coexisting alongside bandits in recent years.

Jihadi Efforts to Cooperate with and Coopt Bandits—Case Studies

JAS: Inconsistent Cooperation with Bandits

JAS, which emerged as a distinct faction in 2015-2016 amid the split with ISWAP and was led by Abubakar Shekau until his death in May 2021, has enjoyed tactical cooperation with some bandits, and its commanders have historically moved with ease throughout the northwest; but the available evidence suggests that it has not developed durable or ideologically driven partnerships with any bandits. Theoretically, JAS' *modus operandi* should be the most accommodating of bandits, but it has, in fact, taken an inconsistent approach toward accepting bandits into its fold, as the authors demonstrate through their examination below of JAS' fraught ties to the bandit who orchestrated a mass kidnapping in Kankara, Katsina state in December 2020. And though there are allegations made by jihadi defectors, outlined below, that JAS has "cells" in the region, the available evidence suggests this descriptor overstates the ties between bandits or Fulani militias and JAS in most of the northwest and north-central regions. The exception, however, is in Shiroro Local Government in Niger state, where JAS has successfully established a base of operations and presently coexists alongside and probably cooperates with local bandit gangs.

JAS 'Cells' Across Northwest and North-Central Nigeria?

After six years in which there was no significant indication of a jihadi presence outside the northeast, JAS released two videos in 2020 that made reference to fighters in Zamfara and Niger states, including footage of one fighter who claimed to be in Niger (no such footage of Zamfara was shown).[x] After ISWAP killed Shekau in May 2021 and began absorbing some of his fighters into its faction, the then-ISWAP leader, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, also mentioned JAS fighters in Niger and Zamfara states in one of his speeches as among those who should "reunite" with ISWAP (which considers itself the rightful successor of the original "Boko Haram").[71]

Defectors of both JAS and ISWAP suggest that between the two factions, JAS was the more successful in maintaining what they

x In June 2020, a video was released showing JAS fighters in an unknown location greeting their "brothers" in Zamfara and Niger states. The following month, JAS published a video that purported to show a JAS fighter in Niger state returning the tidings and sending greetings to, among others, the aforementioned "brothers" in Zamfara. Then, in August 2020, the annual JAS Eid video featured a small group of militants and civilians praying in a location purported to be Niger state. Videos can be accessed at "Unmasking Boko Haram," a web archive maintained by the researcher Jacob Zenn.

refer to as "cells" outside the northeast from 2016 onward. A senior ISWAP defector claimed that Shekau had maintained "loyalists" in the Kafanchan area in the southern part of Kaduna state, Shendam in Plateau state (in north-central Nigeria), and Shiroro in Niger state.[72] Separately, a JAS defector claimed that around early 2017, Shekau cemented a relationship with powerful Fulani militias in the north-central state of Nasarawa who helped Shekau funnel motorcycles to his stronghold in Sambisa Forest. These militias pledged *bay`a* (a religious oath of allegiance) to Shekau in a video that the defector claimed to have seen but was never publicly released.[y] While the JAS defector claimed that "all the [herdsmen's] attacks in Nasarawa in 2017" were the work of Shekau loyalists, he could not specify the numbers of these herders and he was not aware if JAS still maintained contact.[73]

These claims are intriguing, but additional evidence to support the notion of a meaningful JAS presence outside the northeast is lacking with the exception of Shiroro in Niger state, discussed below. While Nasarawa and Plateau states have both experienced heightened religious tensions and, relatedly, conflict between Fulani herders and local farmers in recent years, there is little evidence that JAS has had a meaningful hand in this violence.[z] It is necessary to consider what a JAS "cell" might entail in the context of north-central and northwestern Nigeria, even though this requires a degree of speculation.

One possibility is that Shekau was liberal in his criteria for accepting *bay`a* and that he employed limited if any control over most of these "cells" outside the northeast. Of the three jihadi groups in Nigeria, JAS has historically operated the most like bandits. It has been far more indiscriminate in its violence against Muslim civilians than either ISWAP or Ansaru[74] and has sustained itself through the wanton raiding of Muslim communities.[aa] Indeed, JAS has likely gained funds by conducting kidnappings in the northwest alongside bandits.[75] Per an ex-JAS member interviewed by the researcher Vincent Foucher, Shekau dispatched a Fulani JAS commander named Sadiku to the northwest "a long time ago" to raise money through kidnappings.[76] Another senior JAS-turned-ISWAP commander, Adam Bitri, was reportedly involved in kidnappings with bandits in Kaduna, although it is unclear if he engaged in such kidnappings when he was a JAS commander or after he pivoted to ISWAP.[ab]

A key difference between the *modus operandi* of the bandits and that of JAS is that the latter justifies these tactics based on an ultra-exclusivist interpretation of *takfir* (declaring a Muslim apostate) that encompasses virtually any Muslim who chooses not to live under JAS' 'caliphate.' It is possible then that the requirements for a bandit gang to become a JAS "cell" are relatively minimal: Continue with banditry, but simply claim it in the name of religion. Theoretically, bandits could operate independently on a day-to-day basis and only occasionally conduct operations *qua* jihadis to satisfy the conditions of their partnership with JAS (with any benefits to the bandits that entails).

Consider the case of the Fulani in Nasarawa who allegedly swore *bay`a* to Shekau: While such oaths are not taken lightly in jihadi circles, they do not necessarily carry much weight to the uninitiated, including relatively non-ideological (for lack of a better word) herders. If the bandits of the northwest are any indicator, then any pledges of *bay`a* should not be seen as absolutely binding from the perspective of the pledger. As part of previous amnesty agreements, many bandits have sworn on the Qur'an that they have repented from banditry,[77] only to quickly resume their armed activities.[ac] It is quite possible then that bandits or Fulani militias have pledged allegiance to Shekau as part of some *quid pro quo* without meaningfully adopting a jihadi ideology or subordinating themselves to JAS. Such an arrangement would facilitate transactional relations between bandits and JAS, such as the aforementioned smuggling of motorcycles, without entailing a larger strategic or ideological convergence.

However, the theory that JAS would accept any bandit who pledged a meaningless oath is complicated by the authors' findings

y This claim is plausible as JAS is known to have produced media that was only shared internally. See Vincent Foucher, "Last Words of Abubakar Shekau: A Testament in the Politics of Jihadi Extraversion," *Sources, Materials & Fieldwork in African Studies* 3 (2021): pp. 1-27.

z The conflicts in north-central Nigeria, often referred to as the "Middle Belt" states, are beyond the scope of this article. Ethnicity, land-use, distribution of political patronage, and indeed religion are all salient factors in these conflicts, yet there is a tendency in Nigerian media (which is dominated by southerners) and among certain international commentators to reduce these factors to a narrative of Islamist extremists or jihadis committing ethnoreligious cleansing of Christians. Evidence that JAS is driving the conflict(s) in the Middle Belt is generally weak aside from a series of bombings in Plateau state in 2010 that may have been conducted by the group. Similarly, while Ansaru referenced the killing of Muslims by Christians in Kaduna as one rationale for its formation in 2012, the authors have not found any evidence of Ansaru participation in Middle Belt violence, although Ansaru could have been covertly involved. For more on the conflicts in the Middle Belt, see "Stopping Nigeria's Spiraling Farmer-Herder Violence," *International Crisis Group Report No. 262*, July 26, 2018.

aa JAS' reliance on bandit-like raiding and looting for survival was evidenced most starkly by the unprecedented number of JAS members who surrendered to government forces after ISWAP killed Shekau in May 2021 and imposed its restrictions on stealing from Muslim civilians in JAS' traditional area of operations. Surrendering JAS fighters reported that they had run out of food due to these prohibitions on raiding Muslim civilians. See Obi Anyadike, "Quit while you're ahead: Why Boko Haram fighters are surrendering," New Humanitarian, August 12, 2021. The Emir of Gwoza in Borno state, a traditional JAS stronghold, also told one of the authors in August 2021 that ever since ISWAP had expelled JAS from the surrounding areas, they (ISWAP) began taxing rather than raiding. Barnett interview, Emir of Gwoza, Gwoza (Borno), August 2021.

ab Bitri was arrested in Niger state in 2017 after which he entered a government deradicalization program before escaping back to the bush. Around 2019, he teamed up with kidnappers in Birnin Gwari and Zaria in Kaduna state before reportedly being killed by Sadiku's men for betraying Shekau. At some point while he was in the northwest Bitri defected to ISWAP and attempted to forge relations between ISWAP and Ansaru, an alliance that ultimately failed to materialize. For more, see Malik Samuel, "Boko Haram teams up with bandits in Nigeria," *Institute of Security Studies ISS Today*, March 3, 2021, and Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's Expansionary Project in Northwestern Nigeria: Can Shekau Outflank Ansaru and Islamic State in West Africa Province?" *Terrorism Monitor*, July 28, 2020. Two former JAS fighters who fought under Bitri prior to 2017 described him as a *qaid* (commander) close to Shekau and an indigene of Borno. Barnett interviews, former JAS members, July 2021.

ac The bandits generally claim that amnesties have merely been "deals" rather than binding treaties and claim that they only leave such deals when the state reneges on its promises. Nonetheless, the high levels of recidivism among bandits following oath-swearing ceremonies suggest that they take a flexible approach to even the most sacred of pledges. One repentant bandit interviewed by two of the authors, for example, stated that out of the dozens of bandits he had accepted an amnesty with in 2019, he was the only one to have not subsequently returned to the bush. Barnett and Rufa'i interview, repentant bandit, Gusau (Zamfara), August 2021.

Auwal Daudawa (deceased) masterminded the abduction of over 200 schoolchildren in Kankara, Katsina state, in a December 2020 operation claimed by JAS. He is photographed by one of the authors in Gusau, Zamfara state, in February 2021 after accepting a state government amnesty. (Abdulaziz Abdulaziz)

regarding the December 2020 abduction of 300 schoolchildren from Kankara in Katsina state. As it was the first school mass kidnapping outside the northeast, suspicion quickly fell on JAS, which gained notoriety through its 2014 kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls.[78] Two days after the kidnapping, Shekau claimed credit for the operation, which seemed to be bolstered two days thereafter with a video released by JAS showing one of the kidnapped boys saying he had been abducted by Shekau.[79]

It soon became clear, however, that the abduction was conducted by the gang of the bandit Auwal Daudawa, who released the boys later that December. An official who debriefed the boys said they claimed that none of their abductors had identified themselves as "Boko Haram."[80] For his part, Daudawa later insisted that he acted alone and was unaware of how the video ended up with JAS.[81]

Daudawa's claim is implausible and contradicted by a former associate who was an intermediary in the Kankara negotiations. According to this source, Daudawa made overtures to JAS "long before" the Kankara abduction but failed to cement a formal relationship with the jihadis due to the "stealing and rustling that Auwal [Daudawa] and his team were engaged in. "Boko Haram" did not like people stealing and those engaging in vices such as drugs."[82] At one point, Daudawa sent three associates to Borno to discuss an arrangement, but JAS killed them when they were discovered smoking marijuana. Per this source, no alliance materialized, and Daudawa went ahead and kidnapped the Kankara children on his own accord.[83]

Shortly after the operation, Daudawa filmed the video of the boy claiming he was Shekau's captive and sent it to JAS. Daudawa's likely thinking was that he could up the ante in ransom negotiations with the government, while JAS was happy to create the impression it was expanding outside the northeast.[84] Regarding Daudawa's likely logic, one senior government official with knowledge of the negotiations explained, "If you say you are a kidnapper, the government knows so many kidnappers. If you say you are Boko Haram, there is only one Boko Haram … the government is much more disturbed."[85] This approach seems to have worked, resulting in Daudawa receiving a hefty ransom.[ad]

It appears then that JAS' stance on banditry has been inconsistent, possibly as a result of Shekau's well-documented mercuriality.[86] On the one hand, JAS has been more than happy to engage in banditry, both the *de facto* banditry of its raiding in the northeast as well as its indirect role in kidnapping for ransom in the northwest by the likes of Sadiku. Such tolerance for cattle rustling and kidnapping could have conceivably allowed Shekau to claim "cells" across the north that were, in fact, independent gangs that occasionally cooperated with JAS. On the other hand, Shekau was a genuine jihadi, not a mere criminal, and he could selectively enforce puritanical values, even to the detriment of his group's expansion.

ad While both the government and Daudawa deny that any ransom was paid, the intermediary in the Kankara ransom negotiations claims that Daudawa received roughly 20 million naira (roughly $40,000) in ransom. Per his former associate "Alhaji Abdu" (pseudonym), Daudawa released the children before JAS could "take charge" of them, suggesting that Shekau intended to either send men to the northwest or have Daudawa deliver the captives to the northeast. After releasing the children, Daudawa accepted a government amnesty that he soon walked out of, telling "Abdu" that he was going to now formally team up with "Boko Haram" and that he had stopped smoking marijuana in order to do so. However, Daudawa was killed by a rival bandit in April 2021 before he could make good on his pledge, if it was in fact genuine. For news of Daudawa's death, see "Bandits' Leader Behind Kankara Schoolboys Abduction, Auwalun Daudawa Shot Dead," Sahara Reporters, April 30, 2021.

In sum, outside of the northeast it is questionable whether JAS operates "cells" in the true meaning of the word. Nevertheless, as will be outlined below, it appears that JAS cells have migrated from the northeast to the Shiroro Local Government in Niger state, and that a notable cadre of JAS fighters have regrouped there following setbacks in the northeast, although even here the picture remains somewhat unclear.

The Shiroro Cell

There have been two types of migration of JAS fighters, possibly in the low hundreds,[ae] into the northwest since Shekau's death at the hands of ISWAP in May 2021. Some have fled the northeast on their own initiative, eschewing ISWAP and its restrictions on raiding in favor of bandits who will welcome the jihadis, as mentioned in the discussion of Alhaji Shingi. As will be outlined below, others, however, are reported to have relocated as part of an organized effort by Shekau's successor(s) to regroup in the northwest.

JAS has an advantage in this regard. Whereas evidence of JAS cells in much of the northwest, including Zamfara state, is ambiguous,[af] Shiroro Local Government in Niger state has become a refuge for JAS for roughly two years. Shiroro is one of the larger of the 25 local governments in Niger, comprising 5,558 square kilometers out of the state's 76,469 square kilometers,[87] and JAS is estimated to be present in five of Shiroro's 15 wards.[88]

The jihadis first arrived in Shiroro in late 2019 or early 2020.[89] [ag] After months in the bush, the jihadis made their presence widely known in April 2021, when militants stormed several villages, erected a jihadi flag, and burned one church and other buildings before praying in a local mosque.[90] [ah] Niger state's governor responded by warning that "Boko Haram" was now just two hours from Abuja.[91] The indiscriminate nature of the April 2021 jihadi attacks in Shiroro was more in line with a JAS-style assault than the work of Ansaru, which is based in nearby Kuyambana forest, or ISWAP, which is based in the northeast. Several sources, including the aforementioned ISWAP defector and government officials, have also corroborated the theory that it is a JAS rather than Ansaru cell in Shiroro.[92] Interestingly, the April 2021 attacks in Shiroro occurred simultaneously with a series of raids by suspected bandits in the neighboring local government, which could indicate a degree of coordination and/or cooperation between the Shiroro JAS cell and local bandits.[93]

Since September 2021, the jihadis have become emboldened, taking advantage of the withdrawal of security forces in the region.[ai] The militants act as de facto authorities in over a dozen villages, implementing their strict interpretation of sharia while ordering families to take their children out of government schools and marry off their daughters.[94] No JAS or other propaganda has emerged in recent months claiming a presence in Niger state, suggesting that the jihadis either hope to retain some anonymity or presently lack the capacity to produce and disseminate high-quality propaganda.

It is not known how many jihadis are presently in Shiroro, but the cell there reportedly overpowered the gang of the influential bandit Dogo Gide, which would suggest they constitute a significant fighting force.[95] The JAS fighters in Shiroro are likely a mix of the initial group that arrived in 2019 or 2020 as well as more recent fighters who have fled the northeast since Shekau's death.[96] [aj] It is unclear to what extent the jihadis operate under the command of the so-called Bakura faction, the self-annointed successor to Shekau in the northeast, whose strength is presently hard to gauge.[ak] The Shiroro jihadis are reportedly led by "Mallam Sadiku,"[97] likely the aforementioned lieutenant of Shekau involved in kidnappings in the northwest. Relatedly, according to local media, quoting unnamed Nigerian military sources, an estimated 250 fighters loyal to Bakura have left Sambisa and linked up with Sadiku in Rijana forest in Kaduna state, which is not far from Shiroro.[al] Assuming both these reports are correct, then it seems that Bakura's JAS has succeeded in establishing a meaningful presence along the internal

ae Two security sources told Sahara Reporters that 250 JAS fighters had relocated to the northwest. See "Boko Haram Fighters Training Bandits In Northern Nigeria To Use Anti-Aircraft Guns, Explosives—Report," Sahara Reporters, September 26, 2021. Aside from this, no government estimate has been made public of the number of JAS fighters relocating to the northwest. In his interview with Rufa'i and Barnett, Alhaji Shingi, for his part, did not specify how many JAS fighters had joined his gang since Shekau's death.

af Much of the "Boko Haram" activity that the authors have heard rumor of in Zamfara can be traced to the activities of Ansaru and the bandit Dogo Gide, who are in fact based in neighboring states. One source in Zamfara, "Alhaji Mustapha," stated that several bandits in Dansadau emirate, including the powerful bandit Ali Kawaje, had worked with "Boko Haram" and possibly received weapons from jihadis, but his account did not suggest full subordination of these bandits to JAS or any other faction.

ag It is not clear what prompted JAS fighters to move into Shiroro in late 2019/early 2020. One possibility is that Shekau was looking to offset the overall decline of his fortunes in the northeast—where his faction had, by 2019, become significantly weaker than ISWAP—by establishing a sanctuary for fighters to regroup and raise funds in the northwest.

ah The International Crisis Group spoke to local sources who mentioned an attack in Shiroro that also bore jihadi characteristics as far back as February 2020, although the jihadis did not occupy any villages permanently in the aftermath of this attack. See "Violence in Nigeria's Northwest: Rolling Back the Mayhem," International Crisis Group, *Africa Report No. 288*, May 18, 2020.

ai The military and other security forces reportedly withdrew from the Lakpma ward in Shiroro in April following the killing of several soldiers. See Ibrahim Adeyemi, "Niger Communities Where Boko Haram Rules and Security Agents Watch," Foundation for Investigative Journalism, November 21, 2021.

aj One cannot rule out the possibility that some locals from the Shiroro area, whether bandits or ordinary civilians, have also joined in with the jihadis.

ak Little is known about the Bakura faction, but it seems the original leader, Bakura Doron, has been a relatively autonomous commander based in the Lake Chad islands. Having previously been aligned with ISWAP, he shifted his allegiance to JAS in 2019 and since Shekau's death has assumed the mantle of JAS. For more, see Jacob Zenn, "Is the 'Bakura Faction' Boko Haram's New Force Enhancer Around Lake Chad?" *Terrorism Monitor*, January 28, 2020; "IntelBrief: Jihadist Groups Continue to Consolidate Territory Throughout West Africa," Soufan Center IntelBrief, October 4, 2021. However, the researcher Vincent Foucher, who has strong contacts in the Lake Chad regions of Borno, noted to one of the authors in December 2021 that Bakura Doron may have been replaced as leader of the Bakura faction by a more credentialed Islamic scholar, Bakura Sahalaba.

al An image of what is reported to be a memo from one paramilitary agency (the Nigeria Civil Security and Defence Corps) pursuant to a memo the agency had received from the State Security Service (Nigeria's primary domestic intelligence agency) can be seen in Justina Mboho, "Boko Haram leaders have relocated to Southern Kaduna from Sambisa: SSS," *People's Gazette*, September 14, 2021. The memo does not mention that the fighters are 250 in number or are loyal to Bakura. This estimate of 250 fighters was reported by Sahara Reporters, which quotes two unnamed Nigerian military officials. See "Boko Haram Fighters Training Bandits In Northern Nigeria To Use Anti-Aircraft Guns, Explosives—Report."

state borders of Niger and Kaduna under Sadiku's command in which to potentially regroup following significant setbacks in the northeast.

ISWAP's Failed Efforts to Recruit Bandits

Although presently the most dominant jihadi faction in the northeast and, by extension, Nigeria, ISWAP historically has struggled to make inroads into the northwest. This is not for lack of trying. Prior to the split between ISWAP and JAS in early 2016, the future ISWAP *wali* Abu Musab al-Barnawi (son of "Boko Haram" founder Muhammed Yusuf) took the initiative to dispatch commanders to the northwest with the goal of having them recruit bandits and establish jihadi cells, according to the aforementioned ISWAP defector. Per this defector, who was a close associate of Shekau's before helping form the breakaway faction, al-Barnawi sought to expand into the northwest amid the heavy losses "Boko Haram" had incurred from an offensive in Borno by a multinational military force in 2015-2016.[98] According to the defector, al-Barnawi was still a deputy of Shekau at the time he dispatched these commanders, but he maintained contact with them following the ISWAP-JAS split and his ascension to top of ISWAP.[99]

Once they reached the northwest, these jihadis drifted into banditry and al-Barnawi lost influence over them, according to the senior ISWAP defector. (As noted earlier, Dogo Gide might have been among these "Boko Haram" commanders who turned to banditry after leaving the northeast.[100]) Some of these jihadis-turned-bandits reportedly sought to pledge *bay `a* to al-Barnawi in the aftermath of Shekau's death in May 2021.[101] It is not known if al-Barnawi ever accepted these pledges (if they were ever even given), however, and the lack of any ISWAP propaganda regarding *bay `a* raises the possibility that al-Barnawi assessed these individuals—assuming they indeed pledged *bay `a*—to have been insufficiently committed to jihad. Per the ISWAP defector, who claims to have known some of these jihadis-turned-bandits, the recent pledges to al-Barnawi were a cynical ploy to get money and weapons rather than an expression of ideological affinity. The defector claimed, "[These men] could not even recite al-Fatiha,"[102] referring to the first passage of the Qur'an.[103]

ISWAP faces a challenge in recruiting bandits that JAS theoretically should not: ISWAP must either convince bandits to radically alter their *modus operandi* to fall in line with its restrictions on raiding Muslim civilians—which essentially prohibits cattle rustling and all other activities associated with banditry—and agree to receive orders from distant Lake Chad; or it must accept the bandits as they are—independent marauders who mostly harm Muslim civilians—and thus dilute its brand as the 'softer' jihadi faction focused on winning Muslim 'hearts and minds.' It seems likely then that any ISWAP support for bandits is, for the time being, limited to tactical exchanges with individual gangs—perhaps of money, weapons, training, or the sorts of guidance mentioned in a previous section. There does not seem to be any bandit who adheres to the standard rules of engagement and *modus operandi* of ISWAP, and it would presumably not be in ISWAP's interest to let a renegade criminal outfit operate under its name.

It is not surprising then that ISWAP, known for its frequent media output, has not released any material relating to activity in the northwest. Only two "ISWAP" attacks have been claimed or alleged in the northwest region. The first was an unconfirmed 2019 attack in Sokoto state along the Nigerien border claimed by Islamic State media, though the claim noted the assault was conducted by fighters based in the neighboring Republic of Niger, suggesting it was an ISWAP-Greater Sahara operation.[104] The second was a September 2021 assault on security forces in Sokoto, which the Nigerian Army claimed was conducted by bandits and ISWAP.[105] ISWAP made no claim, and one of the bandits involved staunchly denied any jihadi participation, claiming it was "the Fulani boys" and noting that the military would recognize their voices when they call to negotiate ransoms for abducted soldiers.[106] (ISWAP, for its part, tends to kill any soldiers it captures rather than ransoming them.)[107]

"Although presently the most dominant jihadi faction in the northeast and, by extension, Nigeria, ISWAP historically has struggled to make inroads into the northwest. This is not for lack of trying."

Granted, ISWAP seems to have a new leader since credible reports allege that Abu Musab al-Barnawi died sometime around September 2021.[108] It is conceivable then that the new ISWAP *wali*, Mallam Bako,[am] might adopt a new, laxer approach to bestowing affiliation to bandit gangs than al-Barnawi did. However, this seems unlikely given that ISWAP's *modus operandi* in the northeast vis-à-vis its treatment of Muslim civilians, restrictions on raiding, and focus on attacking hard targets has not changed in the months since al-Barnawi's death.[an]

A Sanctuary in Niger State?

In addition to the aforementioned alleged attacks by ISWAP in the northwest in 2019 and 2021, officials in Niger state claim that ISWAP has established a base in the western part of the state around Kainji National Park near the Benin border.[109] Officials have offered few details, however, other than that these militants were responsible for the kidnapping of a local traditional ruler in September 2021.[ao] One source told one of the authors that terrorists (the faction of which he could not identify) have taken over government facilities in the game reserve after troops withdrew from the area in October 2021.[110] It is possible that the militants are members of ISWAP-Greater Sahara, which, as of 2019, was reportedly trying to open up

am The Nigerian Army's spokesman claimed in late October 2021 that Mallam Bako had been killed in a military operation, but this claim has not been independently verified. "Nigerian army says Islamic State West Africa's new leader killed in military operation," Reuters, October 29, 2021.

an It is also notable that al-Barnawi was not ISWAP wali for a period from roughly 2019 to early 2021, and yet the group did not fundamentally alter its *modus operandi* in this time. For more on historical succession matters within ISWAP, see Stig Jarle Hansen, "The Fractious Future of the Islamic State in West Africa," War on the Rocks, November 3, 2021.

ao Much confusion surrounds this kidnapping, which was originally pinned on bandits. Niger state officials did not respond to the authors' requests for more details on these abductions. Priscilla Dennis, "Drama, confusion over bandits' abduction, release of Dodo of Wawa in Niger State," *Daily Post*, October 24, 2021.

a transit area to northwestern Nigeria through Benin;[111][ap] or they may be other jihadis, such as JAS members who have yet to link up with the Shiroro cell and whom locals have mistaken for ISWAP.

While it is unclear whether ISWAP has a cell in Kainji, the group may see success in Niger state if it can woo the JAS fighters in Shiroro into its fold as al-Barnawi attempted in a speech following Shekau's death.[112] Given Niger state's large size and limited presence of security forces,[aq] as well as the fact that the bandits' presence is mostly limited to the state's northern border,[113] it may be an attractive area for jihadis looking to quietly establish a base of operations.

"Given Niger state's large size and limited presence of security forces, as well as the fact that the bandits' presence is mostly limited to the state's northern border, it may be an attractive area for jihadis looking to quietly establish a base of operations."

Ansaru: An Uneasy Coexistence with Bandits in the Northwest

Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan ("Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa"), better known as Ansaru, formed as a more internationally oriented splinter of "Boko Haram" in 2012. The group has been the subject of much debate among analysts regarding its ties to al-Qa`ida, its relations with the rest of "Boko Haram," and its operational status (though these doubts about Ansaru's status have largely vanished since late 2021 with the resumption of Ansaru media operations).[ar]

The authors' research shows there is indeed a jihadi group based in Kaduna that calls itself Ansaru, claims to have split from "Boko Haram," and preaches globally oriented al-Qa`ida-like sermons. Unfortunately, due to the group's reclusive nature, it is difficult to discern Ansaru's leadership and, by extension, the degree of continuity between the original Ansaru faction of 2012 and today's Kaduna state-based insurgents. The Kaduna-based Ansaru has been resilient but also struggled to reconcile its ideological commitment to defending vulnerable Muslim communities from banditry with the exigencies of operating in a bandit-dominated northwest. As demonstrated below in the case study of the "Lakurawa," a jihadi group that likely contained members of Ansaru and JNIM, Ansaru has had to oscillate between fighting on behalf of bandits and on behalf of their victims. It seems then that Ansaru could be difficult to uproot from the northwest but that it faces more challenges in expanding than many analysts have assumed.

Ansaru in Kaduna

Ansaru announced its formation as a splinter of "Boko Haram" in January 2012 but did not consistently release media thereafter. Per the United Nations, the group "shares ideological similarities with the Organization of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) … and maintains operational connections with AQIM, including training and attack planning."[114] The group's early membership reportedly consisted of Hausa and Fulani from across northern Nigeria as well as preachers from Kogi state in central Nigeria[115][as] who were frustrated with Shekau's excessive application of *takfir* and seemingly parochial focus on the northeast. Ansaru made headlines for kidnapping several foreigners in northern Nigeria between 2012 and 2013,[116] a tactic that may show the imprint of AQIM. Rather than waging a rural insurgency, the group operated through an urban cell system, notably in Kano and Kaduna, until it was rolled up by security forces in 2014.[117]

Ansaru "reactivated" in October 2019, per the United Nations, and claimed an attack on a traditional ruler's caravan in Kaduna in January 2020 through an al-Qa`ida-linked social media channel.[118] Following this attack, Nigerian security forces claimed to have conducted military operations against the group in Birnin Gwari,[119] confirming local rumors that this local government in Kaduna is Ansaru's new base of operations.

The group that is presently based in Birnin Gwari may have a somewhat more complicated origin story than the Ansaru of 2012, however, one that suggests that the group has coexisted with bandits in the northwest—albeit with more than an occasional confrontation—for more than half a decade. The insurgents are reclusive, but local residents agree their leader is one "Mallam Abba," though this could be a *nom de guerre* assumed by successive commanders.[at] Residents say the group arrived in Birnin Gwari around 2015 and the fighters came from the northeast.[120] Given the timing of their arrival amid the multinational offensive against "Boko Haram," this could suggest that they were part of a cohort of "Boko Haram" fighters sent by Shekau and/or al-Barnawi to

ap Relatedly, one source claimed that jihadis had traveled from the Republic of Niger and Mali into Niger state and Zamfara via Benin as recently as the summer of 2021. Barnett and Rufa'i interview, "Alhaji Mustapha" (pseudonym), August 2021.

aq Niger state is Nigeria's largest state in terms of landmass but has only 4,000 police officers, with 10 divisions concentrated in the state capital, and limited military forces. Security officials in the state told one of the authors that certain communities are hours away from the nearest police or military outpost. For more, see James Barnett, "Boko Haram Isn't Nigeria's Biggest Problem," *Foreign Policy*, June 4, 2021.

ar Analysts have disagreed over Ansaru's relative strength, the significance of its AQIM connections, and its possible reintegration into JAS. For one example, see Adam Higazi et al., "A Response to Jacob Zenn on Boko Haram and al-Qa'ida," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12:2 (2018): pp. 200-210; Jacob Zenn, "A Primer on Boko Haram Sources and Three Heuristics on al-Qaida and Boko Haram in Response to Adam Higazi, Brandon Kendhammer, Kyari Mohammed, Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos, and Alex Thurston," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12:3 (2018): pp. 74-91.

as The leader of Ansaru was arrested in Kogi state in 2016. "Leader of Ansaru Islamist militant group arrested in Nigeria," France 24, April 3, 2016.

at A senior security official separately told two of the authors in May 2021 that Abba had recently been arrested in Kano. The official noted that security forces had captured a man they believed to be Abba in January 2021, but it later turned out he was not the Ansaru leader. Abdulaziz and Barnett interviews, security official, May 2021. Despite the ostensible arrest of Abba in May 2021, sources in the northwest reported on several instances in the subsequent months that Abba was still active. Barnett and Rufa'i interviews, "Alhaji Mustapha" (pseudonym), August 2021; Barnett and Rufa'i interviews, Zamfaran vigilantes, Gusau (Zamfara), August 2021. This could suggest that security forces either arrested the wrong individual on multiple occasions or that the commander of Ansaru was indeed arrested while his successor assumed his *nom de guerre*.

establish cells outside Borno. This theory is bolstered by the fact that the JAS defector interviewed by Foucher claimed that the JAS commander Sadiku whom Shekau sent to the northwest was initially welcomed by another commander named Abba.[121] This could indicate that the critical mass of today's "Ansaru" was actually formed by "Boko Haram" members who split from Shekau after repositioning from the northeast in 2015-2016 and linked up with and/or assumed the mantle of the old dissident faction. This remains only a theory, however.[au] (For its part, Ansaru reiterated in a recent statement that it was founded in 2012 as a splinter of "Boko Haram."[122])

The jihadis began preaching in local villages not long after their arrival in Birnin Gwari and identified themselves early on as members of "Boko Haram" who had left the group over Shekau's transgressions against Muslims.[123] Ansaru has preached in local mosques, delivering sermons against the Nigerian government, which it says oppresses Muslims, and democracy.[124] Ansaru's preaching is also heavily anti-American in focus, in keeping with an al-Qa`ida-like 'global' view. One villager who attended Ansaru sermons said, "They blame problems on America; after the preaching ends, they close with a chant saying may Allah punish America."[125] [av]

One interesting discrepancy between the original Ansaru and today's group in Kaduna is that while Ansaru originally claimed the defense of Muslim civilians from Nigerian Christians (particularly in the Middle Belt)[aw] as part of its *raison d'etre*,[126] the Ansaru in Kaduna does not seem to preach against Nigerian Christians or attack them.[ax] This is in spite of the fact that southern Kaduna is a longstanding hotspot of religious riots and intercommunal clashes, meaning such messaging could presumably resonate with at least some Muslim communities.

Ansaru's relationship with bandits—and by extension, its relations with Hausa and Fulani communities (the latter constituting the largest portion of the bandits and the former primarily raising anti-bandit/anti-Fulani militias)—has been complicated. On the one hand, locals believe that Dogo Gide was the first to welcome Ansaru into the Birnin Gwari forests and that his uncle, a now-repentant bandit named Baushi, hosted the jihadis on his land.[127] As noted earlier, a former bandit said that Gide had hosted Ansaru in Birnin Gwari for at least three years, overriding the objections of the then-top bandit in the area, the late Buharin Daji.[128] Gide has cooperated with Ansaru by, for example, jointly erecting a cell phone booster mast in 2019 in the Kuyambana forest that stretches across Zamfara, Niger, and Kaduna states.[129] Ansaru also lent fighters to Gide's gang in an aborted assault against Gide's rival, Turji.[ay] Ansaru has also attempted to woo bandits by selling them weapons (reportedly acquired through JNIM) at below-market rates.[130] In addition, Ansaru released a rare public statement in 2019 in Fulfulde (the Fulani language) urging Fulani to join its movement.[131]

On the other hand, Ansaru has consistently been critical of banditry,[132] and its relationship with Dogo Gide has even been tense at times.[az] While Ansaru has tried to convince bandits to repent and join its jihad, only three small-time bandits are known to have

au The authors cannot rule out the possibility that the fighters who appeared in Birnin Gwari in 2015-2016 were of the original Ansaru that had dispersed across West Africa and were simply mistaken by locals for a "Boko Haram" cell from the northeast given that many Nigerians assume all jihadis are "Boko Haram." However, the fact that the ex-JAS member identified Abba as the man who brought Sadiku to the northwest lends weight to the theory that some of the "Ansaru" jihadis who appeared in Birnin Gwari in 2015-2016 were linked to Shekau at that time and split from JAS later. In any case, there is reason to believe that Abba's crew, after arriving in Birnin Gwari, may have linked up with urban Ansaru sleeper cells that were already present in northwestern Nigeria. The retired Nigerian general who led operations against Ansaru in 2013-2014, as well as a Nigerian security analyst who wished to remain anonymous, both stated that even after Ansaru cells were rolled up by security forces in 2013-2014, some Ansaru cells likely went dormant but remained in urban centers in the northwest such as Kaduna city and Kano. Barnett interviews, retired Nigerian general and security analyst, Abuja, April and May 2021.

av Ansaru's recent media releases in late 2021, which constitute the group's most sophisticated media production to date, also reflect the al-Qa`ida 'global' view. The group released one video in November 2021 for Eid al-Fitr that featured footage of Usama bin Ladin, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the 9/11 attacks. See Markaz al-Yaqout Media Center, "Eid al-Fitr Greetings," November 29, 2021, video available at "Unmasking Boko Haram." Subsequently, in December 2021, Ansaru released a video praising the Taliban's recent victory in Afghanistan. See "A Statement of Congratulations and Blessings for the Victory of the Brothers in Afghanistan," Markaz al-Yaqout Media Center, December 18, 2021, video available at "Unmasking Boko Haram." Later in December, Ansaru released a text statement reaffirming its pledge to al-Qa`ida and particularly AQIM. See Caleb Weiss, "Ansaru reaffirms its allegiance to al Qaeda," FDD's Long War Journal, January 2, 2022.

aw The Middle Belt is a vaguely defined region that stretches across the latitudinal center of Nigeria. It is generally understood as consisting of those states that were historically part of the Muslim-majority colony of northern Nigeria yet have large Christian minorities. While there is disagreement as to which states constitute the Middle Belt and the term's meaning has changed over time, the states of Plateau, Benue, and Kaduna are generally considered to be part of the Middle Belt. For more, see Jonah Changwak Emmanual and Vahyala Adamu Tari, "The Myth and Reality of Middle Belt Geo-Politics in Nigeria: A Discourse," *Journal of Culture, Society and Development* 10 (2015): pp. 1-8.

ax Residents of Birnin Gwari interviewed in a focus group discussion led by Barnett and Rufa'i, including multiple individuals who had witnessed multiple Ansaru preaching sessions, could not recall an instance in which Ansaru made mention of Kaduna Christians.

ay In early 2021, Gide sought to attack Turji after some of Turji's fighters rustled cattle from some of Gide's relatives. Ansaru sent fighters along with Gide's forces to Birnin Magaji in Zamfara, from where they were planning to launch an attack on Turji's stronghold. However, Alhaji Shingi, one of the most powerful bandits in Birnin Magaji, convinced Gide that the operation was too risky, and so Gide's fighters and Ansaru returned to Kuyumbana. Barnett and Rufa'i interview, Alhaji Shingi, August 2021; Barnett and Rufa'i interviews, "Alhaji Mustapha" (pseudonym), August 2021; Rufa'i interview, "Alhaji Abdu," January 2022.

az A source in contact with Dogo Gide claimed in August 2021 that Gide and Ansaru had clashed on several occasions in 2021 but had recently come to an arrangement. Barnett and Rufa'i interviews, "Alhaji Mustapha" (pseudonym), August 2021.

fully joined the group.[133] [ba] Ansaru has instead sought to present itself as a source of protection against bandits and a defender of vulnerable Muslim civilians more broadly.[bb] This has the effect of pushing Ansaru to align more closely with Hausa communities against Fulani herders, since banditry has resulted in Hausa militias increasing their ethnic profiling of Fulani (the ethnic group from which most bandits hail) and killing innocent herders as retaliation for bandit attacks. Ansaru members have sometimes spread explicitly anti-Fulani messages in the villages.[134]

Ansaru has clashed with bandits on several occasions, including with Dogo Gide and the powerful gangs of Ali Kawaje (aka Ali Kachalla) and Isa Boka, among others.[135] In October 2021, clashes erupted near the village of Damari in Birnin Gwari after Ansaru issued a decree restricting bandits from abducting travelers, which local gangs ignored.[136] Ansaru seems to recognize that it cannot be in perpetual conflict with the bandits if it hopes to retain its sanctuary in Birnin Gwari. According to local sources, a tense balance of power exists in the area and Dogo Gide often intercedes when Ansaru has a dispute with local bandits, convincing the jihadis not to attack the bandits in order to maintain peace.[137] That Ansaru often heeds Gide's calls for restraint (though clearly not in every instance) suggests the jihadis recognize they are not presently the dominant force. The bandits of Birnin Gwari, for their part, are said to be intimidated by Ansaru's ideological rigidity and highly secretive nature while many local community leaders are suspicious of both the bandits and Ansaru.[138] As one Birnin Gwari resident told two of the authors, community leaders fear that even if Ansaru were to end banditry in Birnin Gwari, the cure could be worse than the disease: "If these Ansaru finish with bandits," he said, "what will they do? Look at what happened in the northeast."[139]

Al-Qa`ida in Sokoto? Examining Lakurawa

The brief emergence of jihadis near the Nigerien border in Sokoto in 2018 helps highlight some of the challenges jihadi groups face in balancing their desire to be seen as a protector of Muslim civilians with the exigencies of operating within an ethnically divided region dominated by criminals.

Around October 2018, approximately 200 jihadis arrived in Gudu and Tangaza Local Governments in Sokoto from across the border in Niger.[140] According to eyewitnesses, the militants rejected the "Boko Haram" label and alternatively referred to themselves as *mujahideen*, al-Qa`ida, or Ansaru, and spoke of connections to AQIM.[141] Other eyewitnesses said the militants were a mix of Nigerians and foreigners, including "light-skinned" or "Arab" fighters believed to be from Mali. Locals referred to the militants as *Lakurawa*, which could be a Hausa-ization of the French word for "the recruits" (*les recrues*).[142] Based on the descriptions of the fighters, the authors assess that the militants were likely a mix of JNIM and Ansaru members.

"The security situation in northwestern Nigeria is highly volatile and unpredictable. The presence of jihadis in the northwest and the instances of tactical cooperation between bandits and jihadis the authors have documented constitute an unfortunate dynamic in an already complex region."

The militants patronized local markets, preached in public squares, intimidated clerics, and flogged villagers for playing music or dancing.[143] The militants followed informal, roving Fulani settlements (*ruga*), forcing the herders to pay levies on their cattle under the guise of *zakat* (religiously obligatory almsgiving) and chastising them for "un-Islamic" activities.[144] The militants conducted several attacks on local security forces, ransacking at least one military base. This prompted the Nigerian and Nigerien militaries to conduct a joint offensive toward the end of 2018.[145] However, locals report that they still saw Lakurawa members in the area after the military operations but that the jihadis refrained from conducting any attacks.[146] All this time, the presence of jihadis in Sokoto only generated a few media reports, which officials quickly denied.[147]

Local sources say that Lakurawa first arrived in the Gudu and Tangaza Local Governments at the request of the Tangaza district head and local traditional rulers.[148] At the time, Tangaza and Gudu were suffering from an influx of bandits fleeing military operations in Zamfara, which led community leaders to seek protection from Niger-based jihadis who promised to fight the bandits and impose order.[149] This likely explains the militants' harassment of Fulani herders, who have become popularly associated with banditry. This approach backfired, however: The herders acquired weapons to resist Lakurawa's efforts to raise levies on cattle, with some herders, now armed, subsequently turning to banditry.[150] Locals also say that Lakurawa's attempts at 'Islamizing' villages were unpopular and that even the community leaders who first invited the jihadis soon sought to expel them. A dispute also erupted over an inheritance that resulted in Lakurawa killing the district head.[151]

Most interestingly, Lakurawa reemerged in Sokoto in September 2021 amid increased conflict between bandits and the vigilante groups known as Yan Sakai. This time, however, the jihadis have been called in by the bandits and local Fulani communities in an effort to defeat newly raised Yan Sakai militias that have been increasingly attacking Fulani herders.[152]

The Lakurawa offer a fascinating example in which jihadis fail to form genuine affinities with the communities they swear to protect and instead become something like soldiers of fortune. However, the fact that Lakurawa failed in building genuine popular support is no guarantee that Ansaru or JNIM will never succeed in expanding within northwestern Nigeria. Indeed, Tangaza community leaders

ba These bandits joined Ansaru in early 2020 after engaging in a dialogue with community members who were able to convince the bandits to refrain from criminal activities, overtures that the rest of the bandits in the area rejected. Barnett and Rufa'i, focus group discussion, Birnin Gwari residents, October 2021.

bb It is notable, for example, that Ansaru's first two claimed attacks in 2022 (two of only a handful of operations it has claimed since January 2020) refer to the killing of bandits in Birnin Gwari. See Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, "#Ansaru is opening a battle it can't win …," Twitter, January 17, 2022, and Caleb Weiss, "Ansaru, al Qaeda's franchise in #Nigeria, claims another attack …," Twitter, January 20, 2022.

worry that some of the radical ideas Lakurawa preached have taken hold among segments of the youth, portending trouble down the road.[153]

But the experience of Lakurawa does underscore how jihadi expansion is not a straight-forward process. Consider the question of ethnicity: Fulani have been stigmatized as jihadis and radicals across West Africa in recent years, in part due to jihadis' successful recruitment of Fulani in Mali and Burkina Faso.[bc] But as seen in the cases of Lakurawa and Ansaru, Fulani communities are just as likely to fight jihadism as they are to embrace it, and the intercommunal dynamics that exist in Sahelian countries are not necessarily analogous to those in Nigeria. Additionally, Lakurawa's trajectory, like Ansaru's, underscores that jihadis do not necessarily have any permanent allies or enemies. Reputational considerations and genuine religious conviction may mean that jihadis prefer to act as the defender of Muslim communities against criminals, but the exigencies of war can make partnering with criminals more attractive.

Conclusion

The security situation in northwestern Nigeria is highly volatile and unpredictable. The presence of jihadis in the northwest and the instances of tactical cooperation between bandits and jihadis the authors have documented constitute an unfortunate dynamic in an already complex region. For this reason, the jihadi presence in the northwest requires further study and continued monitoring.

However, jihadism remains a minor dimension within the overall conflict in the northwest, and the authors predict this will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future for the reasons explained throughout this article. Most notably, the bandits are very powerful and have little to gain—and much to lose—by subordinating themselves to a jihadi organization and its rules. The bandits' fractiousness also leads the authors to doubt that any significant portion will rally under one flag for a sustained period of time. If the bandits begin to reconsolidate under a smaller set of kingpins (as was the case in the early 2010s)[154] and adopt more coherent political objectives, then avenues for a serious partnership with jihadis may grow. But despite some increased inter-gang cooperation in response to recent military pressure,[155] it is unlikely that the fractured and criminal nature of the bandits' insurgency will fundamentally change anytime soon.

With this in mind, analysts and stakeholders should beware overhyping the jihadi angle in the northwest, as this could have significant policy implications. Many of the standard counterterrorism and preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) approaches developed over the past 20 years of the "War on Terror" are unlikely to have much effect against bandits. Leadership decapitation, a tactic that has had mixed results against jihadis,[156] is unlikely to meaningfully degrade loosely organized militants whose gangs already undergo high rates of fragmentation.[bd] While Nigeria has made progress in developing P/CVE approaches for jihadism in the northeast, any such strategic communications and deradicalization programing would need to be significantly retooled for a context in which most militants are not motivated by religious ideas. And in contrast to the jihadi insurgency in the northeast that pits rebels against the state, insecurity in the northwest is rooted to a large extent in conflict *between* communities in which the state is either absent or complicit. This has significant implications for any DDR (demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration) effort as bandits are unlikely to "repent" en masse unless the militias that fight bandits and Fulani, namely the Yan Sakai, likewise stand down.

In addition to shedding light on Nigeria's myriad security crises, the authors hope this article will add nuance to analysts' understanding of the oft-hyped "crime-terror nexus." As Stig Jarle Hansen has recently argued, analysts must be wary of assuming that criminality and jihadism naturally converge simply because both are "bad."[157] While Hansen argues that jihadis generally remain committed to their ideology and do not converge with criminals to the extent that much of the nexus literature suggests, the authors' research shows the inverse is also true: Criminals can be a stubborn lot who do not necessarily turn to jihadism simply because they are Muslim and dislike their government. Similarly, the failures of jihadi efforts to expand into northwestern Nigeria are just as worthy of study as jihadi successes. These failures are a reminder that the trajectories of jihadi insurgencies are contingent on unquantifiable and multivariate factors that cannot be reduced to a few buzzwords such as "ungoverned spaces."

With this in mind, the authors conclude with a call for analysts and policymakers to see the situation in northwestern Nigeria for what is: a massive and complex conflict in its own right, not simply a potential arena for jihadi expansion. CTC

bc Katiba Macina, for example, is a Fulani-dominated branch of JNIM named after one of the pre-colonial Fulani empires of West Africa. Jihadis in Burkina Faso, to take another example, have exploited Fulani grievances over the targeting of Fulani by security forces to boost their recruitment among that community. See Emily Estelle, "How Ansar al Islam Gains Popular Support in Burkina Faso," Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, May 9, 2019.

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147 "Armed 'Lakurawa' group: Situation calm in Sokoto's Gudu and Tangaza LGs – Police," *Daily Trust*, December 1, 2018.
148 Olakunle Maruf, "More Controversies Trail Emergence Of Suspected New Militia," *Nigerian Tribune*, December 2, 2018.
149 Rufa'i interviews and Rufa'i focus group discussions, Tangaza and Gudu Local Governments, October 2021.
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153 Rufa'i interviews and Rufa'i focus group discussions, Tangaza and Gudu Local Governments, October 2021.
154 Rufa'i, *I Am a Bandit*.
155 See Barnett and Rufa'i, "The Other Insurgency."
156 To take a few examples, Jenna Jordan's 2019 book examines the multiple factors that impact the effectiveness of leadership decapitation, making the case that leadership decapitation is no panacea. See *Leadership Decapitation: Strategic Targeting of Terrorist Organizations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019). Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill, and Molly Dunigan in their 2013 RAND study on counterinsurgency find that disrupting terrorist and insurgent logistic networks is more effective than leadership decapitation. See *Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013). Haroro J. Ingram and Craig Whiteside use the case study of the 2006 killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to show that leadership decapitation can have unintended consequences detrimental to counterinsurgency, a finding echoed in Gbemisola Animasawun's study of al-Qa`ida and Boko Haram. See "Unexamined Consequences: Leadership Decapitation and the Rise of ISIL," *On Track* 21:1 (2016): pp. 38-43 and "Leadership Targeting as a Counterterrorism Strategy: The Nigerian Experience," *African Peacebuilding Network Working Paper No. 22* (2018), respectively.
157 Stig Jarle Hansen, "Into Darkness: Scrutinizing Economic Explanations for African Jihad," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 29 (2021): pp. 23-46.