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FROM THE EDITOR

Notwithstanding the possibility of a deal soon being reached to revive the JCPOA nuclear deal with Iran, nefarious activity by Iran continues to pose significant counterterrorism and security concerns. In this month's feature article, Matthew Levitt examines trends in Iranian external assassination, surveillance, and abduction plots based on a dataset of 98 Iranian plots from 1979 through 2021. Levitt notes that "perhaps the most important finding to emerge from this study is the fact that Iran pursues international assassination, abduction, terror, and surveillance plots in a very aggressive fashion, even at times and in places that are particularly sensitive. With the exception of a period right after the 9/11 attacks … Iranian operatives and proxies have carried out operations even during periods of key negotiations—including current negotiations over a return to the JCPOA." He adds: "Today, with the revolutionary leadership solidifying control over key elements of power in Iran, and with an eye toward protecting the revolution at a time when the revolutionary leadership sees increasing threat coming from elements both foreign and domestic, operations like these are likely to increase."

Our interview is with Randall Blake, who recently retired from U.S. government service after spending 35 years working in a variety of critical roles in the counterterrorism enterprise, including most recently as National Intelligence Officer for Transnational Threats at the National Intelligence Council.

Charlie Winter and Abdullah Alrhmoun assess the trajectory in Syria of the Islamic State in the wake of its fluctuating fortunes so far this year. The group's multi-day assault on Ghwayran prison in northeastern Syria was "by a significant margin, the highest impact and most complex operation launched by the Islamic State in Syria since its territorial defeat." But just days later, the Islamic State's leader, who had orchestrated the prison attack, was 'removed from the battlefield' during a U.S. raid. Winter and Alrhmoun's analysis of Islamic State attack claims in Syria since the group's territorial defeat in March 2019 "suggests Islamic State cadres in Syria may have been saving their energies to carry out a large strike, cutting through the notion that previous declines in operational activity were a sign of weakening or that the prison attack necessarily portends a resurgence." They add: "In Syria, the Ghwayran prison attack was an example of the latent threat posed by the Islamic State exploding into view. Whatever the monthly ebb and flow of Islamic State operations in Syria, the group is likely to persist as a threat for the foreseeable future."

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

Trends in Iranian External Assassination, Surveillance, and Abduction Plots

By Matthew Levitt

Over the past 40-plus years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has targeted dissidents, Western opponents, Israelis, and Jews in assassination plots, abduction plots, and surveillance operations that facilitate both. Iran has carried out such external operations around the world, in countries with both strong and weak law enforcement agencies, border crossings, and intelligence services. It has done so consistently over the years, including at times and in places where carrying out such operations could undermine key Iranian diplomatic efforts, such as negotiations over the country's nuclear program. This study, based on a dataset of 98 Iranian plots from 1979 through 2021, maps out key trends in Iranian external operations plotting.

In February 2021, a Belgian court convicted Assadollah Assadi, an Iranian diplomat based in Vienna, of organizing a July 2018 plot to bomb the annual convention of the National Council of Resistance of Iran—the political wing of the Mujahedeen-Khlaq, MEK—near Paris. Three accomplices, all Iranian-Belgian dual citizens living in Brussels, were also sentenced for their roles in the plot.[1] According to German and Belgian prosecutors, Assadi was no run-of-the-mill diplomat but rather an Iranian intelligence officer operating under diplomatic cover. In a statement, prosecutors tied Assadi to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), whose tasks "primarily include the intensive observation and combatting of opposition groups inside and outside Iran."[2]

The Paris plot appears especially audacious in its scope. The perpetrators intended to detonate an indiscriminate explosive device instead of carrying out a targeted assassination; Assadi smuggled TATP and a detonator onto a flight from Iran to Austria; the plot line included touch points in at least five European countries; and several prominent current and former government officials from the United States and other countries were present at the annual convention of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI).[3]

Pointing to this case, the United States sought to mobilize its partners to counter Iran's support for terrorism around the world. A senior State Department official summarized Washington's concerns in a briefing for the press:

The most recent example is the plot that the Belgians foiled, and we had an Iranian diplomat out of the Austrian embassy as part of the plot to bomb a meeting of Iranian opposition leaders in Paris. And the United States is urging all nations to carefully examine diplomats in Iranian embassies to ensure their countries' own security. If Iran can plot bomb attacks in Paris, they can plot attacks anywhere in the world, and we

urge all nations to be vigilant about Iran using embassies as diplomatic cover to plot terrorist attacks.[4]

As it happens, the foiled Paris plot was just one in a string of Iranian operations carried out by Iranian operatives or their proxies. In June 2018, the Netherlands expelled two Iranian diplomats based at the Iranian embassy in Amsterdam following an investigation by Dutch intelligence.[5] This move came just months after an Iranian Arab activist was gunned down in Amsterdam.[6] In March 2018, Albanian authorities charged two Iranian operatives with terrorism after they surveilled a venue where Iranian Nowruz (New Year) celebrations were set to begin. In January 2018, German authorities raided several homes after weeks of surveillance confirmed they were tied to Iranian agents. These operatives were reportedly scoping out potential Israeli and Jewish targets in Germany, including the Israeli embassy and a Jewish kindergarten. Ten of the Iranian agents were issued arrest warrants, but none were apprehended.[7]

Weeks earlier, a German court convicted an Iranian agent for spying after he scouted targets in Germany in 2016, including the head of the German-Israeli Association. The German government subsequently issued an official protest to the Iranian ambassador.[8]

Perhaps most disturbing, however, is the fact that Iranian assassination, surveillance, and abduction plots continued unabated despite the negative publicity that accompanied the arrest of Assadi and his accomplices. At least 26 well-documented such plots have occurred in the three years since the Paris plot in places as far afield as Colombia, Cyprus, Denmark, Dubai, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Iraq, Israel, Kenya, the Netherlands, Scotland, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States, according to a dataset maintained by the author. This includes the plot exposed in July 2021 to kidnap New York-based journalist and human rights activist Masih Alinejad, a U.S.-Iranian dual citizen, and forcibly take her to Iran where "the victim's fate would have been uncertain at best," in the words of U.S. Attorney Audrey Strauss.[9]

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Since then, authorities have identified Iranian plots in Colombia (September 2021),[10] Cyprus (October 2021),[11] Kenya (November 2021),[12] Tanzania (November 2021),[13] and Turkey (September 2021, February 2022).[14]

Iranian agents and their proxies have targeted dissidents and perceived enemies for assassination, surveillance, and abduction in plots around the world since the earliest days of the Iranian revolution. The first such case in the United States took place in July 1980 when Iranian agents recruited David Belfied (aka Dawud Salahuddin), an American convert to Shi`a Islam, to assassinate former Iranian diplomat Ali Akbar Tabatabai in Bethesda, Maryland.[15] Later, in a 1997 U.S. State Department briefing, Ambassador Philip Wilcox stated that, "since 1990, we estimate and indeed, we have solid information for, that Iran is responsible for over 50 murders of political dissidents and others overseas."[16]

But while the Islamic Republic of Iran has a long history of engaging in operations such as these, it appears to have picked up the pace over the past decade (2011-2021) and exhibited multiple patterns worth drawing out. Several milestone events in recent years underscore the need to better understand trends in Iranian assassination, surveillance, and abduction operations. Most significantly, the January 2020 targeted assassination of General Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force (IRGC-QF), along with Iraqi Shi`a militia leader and designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, clearly increased the risk of Iranian retaliation or escalation. To date, Iran has primarily responded to this incident through efforts targeting U.S. forces in Iraq. But days after the Soleimani strike, U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies released a joint intelligence bulletin warning of the need "to remain vigilant in the event of a potential [Government of Iran] GOI-directed or violent extremist GOI supporter threat to US-based individuals, facilities, and [computer] networks."[17] Other milestone events making this issue all the more timely include matters such as negotiations over the possible reentry of the United States into a renegotiated nuclear deal with Iran (an updated Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA); the potential for Iran to lash out over the economic consequences of international sanctions; Iran's aggressive regional posture in places such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and the Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf; domestic, political, economic, and environmental tensions within Iran; and the looming prospect of selecting a new Supreme Leader as Ali Khamenei ages.

This study draws on an unclassified and open-source dataset of 98 cases of Iranian external operations from December 1979 through December 2021. The dataset draws on court documents, reports, press releases, and news articles, and is therefore, by definition, limited to what information is publicly available. Some of that information may be misleading or wrong; much of it is likely to be incomplete—such is the nature of compiling open-source datasets—and this is in no way a comprehensive listing of all such Iranian external operations. Additionally, there is significant overlap between different analytical categories in this dataset. For example, a plot may have involved surveillance and abduction, or may have been carried out by a combination of Iranian and non-Iranian operatives.

In an effort to capture a broad array of Iranian foreign operational trends, the dataset includes assassination plots targeting specific persons, indiscriminate attacks targeting groups of people such as dissidents or a foreign embassy, abduction plots aimed at bringing

> **"While Iran is known to exploit less advanced security services in places like Eastern Europe, central Asia, and Africa, it has continued to plot attacks and enhance its surveillance capabilities in Europe and the United States where the operating environment is more difficult."**

an individual to Iran against their will, and surveillance operations aimed at supporting such activities or collecting intelligence for future potential operations. The dataset includes cases involving both Iranian operatives and proxies, but it does not include every case in which an Iranian proxy group—such as Lebanese Hezbollah—carried out an attack unless the attack was carried out jointly with Iran or there is convincing evidence that the proxy specifically carried out the attack at Iran's behest. It also does not include militant attacks such as Hezbollah rocket salvos fired at Israeli civilian communities.

This study looks back at Iranian external operations since the Iranian revolution, but in an effort to provide timely analysis, it then focuses more closely on Iranian external operations over the past decade (2011-2021). The study examines in turn the *who* (targets and perpetrators), the *what* (types of attacks), the *how* (tactics), the *where* (location) and, in more general terms explained later, the *when* and *why* (timing and motives) behind Iranian external operations. The study then forecasts potential future trends in Iranian external operations worthy of consideration. The observations that follow are all drawn from analysis of the author's dataset.

Over the past several decades, Iranian external operations of the kinds described above fall into several functioning subgroups: the targeting of dissidents, the active execution of religious edicts (*fatwas*) against entities perceived as insulting the Islamic faith, the targeting of perceived enemies, and the targeting of Jews. Several of these categories overlap, such as the targeting of Jews and Israeli citizens or diplomats.

Iran has employed a range of actors in its operations, including its own agents, proxies, criminal recruits, and a combination of the above. On occasion, Iran has successfully inspired loyalists from around the world to act on its behalf, such as the attacks following Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* calling for the assassination of Salman Rushdie, predating today's general trend toward lone-offender attacks.[18] Over the decades, Iran has displayed a willingness to employ explosives in its attacks, and in recent years in its assassination plots as well. In the early years after the 1979 revolution, Iran instituted a major crackdown on dissidents and former officials at home and abroad. In the past few years, Iran has intensified a similar campaign targeting dissidents, likely in response to perceived regime instability or threats at home and the success of some dissident groups in carrying out attacks in Iran or publicly exposing elements of the Iranian nuclear program. Over time, Iran has added cyber activities to its operational toolkit, deploying cyber capabilities to spy on dissidents, surveil its

enemies[19] and engage in disinformation campaigns.[20]

Perhaps contrary to conventional wisdom, Iran has conducted external operations around the world, including in countries with advanced law enforcement, border security, and intelligence services. While Iran is known to exploit less advanced security services in places like Eastern Europe, central Asia, and Africa, it has continued to plot attacks and enhance its surveillance capabilities in Europe and the United States where the operating environment is more difficult.[21] At times, the cases in question can be further separated by motive, such as revenge for support of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War or escalation of Iran's shadow war with the West over the Islamic Republic's nuclear program prior to the JCPOA. In other cases, attributing a specific motive is more difficult, particularly when working only with open-source materials. However, careful examination of the perpetrators, targets, methods, locations, timings, and potential motivations of such attacks sheds light on Iran's current operational environment and assists in forecasting its potential future plots.

One theme that stands out is Iran's willingness to carry out such operations, typically in a manner the regime believes will grant it some measure of deniability, even against the backdrop of sensitive negotiations with Western powers such as negotiations over Iran's nuclear program and removal of international sanctions.

WHO? – Targets and Perpetrators of Iranian External Operations

Targets of Iranian External Operations

Of the 98 cases in the dataset, 42 involved the targeting of dissidents, 21 of whom were dual nationals or legal foreign residents. An additional 31 of the 98 cases targeted Jews or Israelis, 24 targeted diplomats, 24 targeted Western interests, seven targeted Gulf state interests, five involved the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie, and two appear to be incidental to the primary target. (For example, in Baku, Azerbaijan, the Israeli embassy was located in the same building as the Japanese embassy.)

Limiting the analysis to the past decade, the numbers remain alarming. Out of 55 cases over the past decade, 22 operations targeted Iranian dissidents, 25 cases targeted Jews or Israelis, 19 targeted diplomats, 12 targeted specifically Western interests, and six targeted Gulf state interests.

Targeting Iranian dissidents has been a constant feature of Iranian external operations. Immediately after the founding of the Islamic Republic, the new Iranian leadership spearheaded an assassination campaign aimed at individuals the regime determined were working against its interest. The CIA found that between 1979 and 1994, Iran "murdered Iranian defectors and dissidents in West Germany, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Turkey."[22] In total, the new regime targeted over 60 individuals in assassination attempts.[23] Often, these plots involved members of Hezbollah, who served as logistics experts or gunmen.

The September 1992 Mykonos restaurant attack in Berlin targeting Iranian-Kurdish opposition leader Dr. Sadegh Sharafkandi may be the most infamous incident, but the one that appears to have most shaken the Iranian expatriate community at the time was the August 1991 assassination of Chapour Bakhtiar, a former Iranian prime minister and secretary-general of the Iranian National Resistance Movement. On August 6, 1991, Iranian operatives stabbed Bakhtiar and an aide to death in Bakhtiar's Paris apartment.[24] In July 1980, another assassination attack targeting

Bakhtiar led by Anis Naccache ended up killing a policeman and Bakhtiar's female neighbor. After Naccache was imprisoned in France for the attempted killing, Hezbollah frequently demanded his release when abducting French citizens in Lebanon.[25] In a 1991 interview, Naccache spoke about his experience conducting external operations for Iran, explaining: "I had no personal feelings against Bakhtiar ... It was purely political. He had been sentenced to death by the Iranian Revolutionary Tribunal. They sent five of us to execute him."[26]

Over the past decade, Iranian agents and proxies continued to target Iranian dissidents. Indeed, 22 out of the 42 Iranian cases targeting dissidents in this dataset occurred within the past decade. Of these 42 cases in the overall data set, 21 (12 in the past decade) targeted dissidents who were dual nationals or legal residents of foreign countries, including U.S. citizens and legal residents. (Some of these occurred in the dissidents' country of residence, others in third countries where the individual was traveling.)

Iranian operations frequently targeted Israeli interests, including 27 incidents in the overall dataset and at least 23 cases over the past decade. Still more disturbing, however, is the prevalence of Iranian external operations apparently targeting Jews, not Israelis. (In several incidents, the operatives were targeting both.) Iranian operatives and their proxies carried out surveillance or operations specifically targeting Jews in places such as Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Germany, India, Nepal, Nigeria, and the United States, including surveillance of Jewish cultural centers, synagogues, and tourists.

Overall, 24 Iranian assassination or attack plots targeted foreign diplomats or diplomatic compounds, including 19 incidents over the past decade. The targeted diplomats represented Israel, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These plots primarily took place in countries with weaker security services, with the notable exceptions of surveillance operations in Israel and the 2011 Arbabsiar plot targeting the Saudi Ambassador to the United States (discussed below). One of the most disturbing of these plots, from an American perspective, was the 2011-2012 plot targeting specific U.S. diplomats and their families in Baku, Azerbaijan, among other targets.[27]

Over the past decade, 12 cases targeted Western interests in the West (the United States, Germany) or in other countries (Bosnia, Kenya, Israel, Colombia, Ethiopia, South Africa, Nigeria, Azerbaijan). Overall, Western interests were targeted in 24 cases.
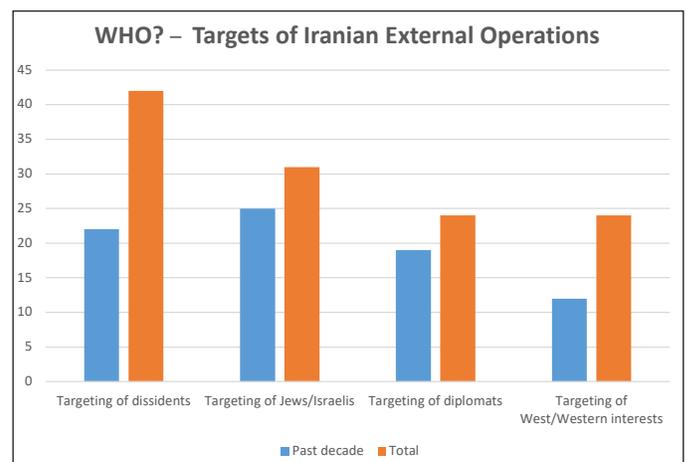

Figure 1: Iranian external operations by target type

Perpetrators of Iranian External Operations

Over the years, Iran had deployed its own operatives—some affiliated with the Quds Force, others with the MOIS—to execute or help carry out international operations, often using diplomats or operatives acting under diplomatic cover—a phenomenon this author explored in detail in a 2018 article in this publication.[28] Iranian diplomats or operatives with diplomatic cover were involved in at least 22 plots overall in the dataset, including 13 over the past decade.

The Assadi case stood out by nature of the plot itself (bombing a massive rally where American and other diplomats were present), but it was only the most recent example of Iranian state-sponsored terrorism in which Tehran has used visiting government officials or accredited diplomats to plot terrorist attacks. Iranian diplomats were deeply involved in the 1992 and 1994 bombings of the Israeli embassy and AMIA Jewish community center, respectively, in Buenos Aires, and have a long track record of just this kind of activity. In 1987, for example, a U.S. intelligence report noted that "Department 210 of the [Iranian] Foreign Ministry serves as a primary operations center for coordination with Iranian intelligence officers abroad, and is often used to instruct intelligence officers about terrorist operations." The report continues, "The Revolutionary Guard, which is the principal agent of Iranian terrorism in Lebanon, uses its own resources as well as diplomatic and intelligence organizations, to support, sponsor, and conduct terrorist operations."[29]

In an effort to carry out attacks with relative deniability, Iran has also deployed operatives who are dual nationals (typically citizens of Iran and another country, but sometimes of two countries other than Iran). Dual national operatives appear in 21 cases, including 15 just in the past decade, marking a significant shift toward this trend. Over the years, these have included citizens of Afghanistan, Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Germany, Iraq, Lebanon, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Tunisia, Turkey, and the United States.

In 38 of the 98 cases in the dataset, non-Iranian citizens carried out the operations in question—24 of these were carried out in the last decade. Five of these non-Iranian perpetrators were dual nationals of other countries, but the remainder were nationals of one country. In 15 cases in the overall data set, the perpetrators were Hezbollah operatives engaged in Iranian operations.

Dual national and non-Iranian operatives would be expected to travel and operate using their non-Iranian travel documents, though in some cases they exhibited poor operational tradecraft and traveled on Iranian documents, used their true Iranian names, carried Iranian currency, used the same SIM card for operations in different countries, or allowed their pictures to be taken with local prostitutes, as discussed below. In some cases, they may have used Iranian travel documents to enter countries, like Malaysia, that do not require a visa for Iranian passport holders.

In a few cases, Iran outsourced some operational activities to criminal organizations, mostly in the past few years. In seven cases—six in the past decade—Iran contracted criminals to carry out surveillance or execute plots. As is often the case, working with criminals negatively affected operational security in some cases.

Iran relied on established proxy groups, like Hezbollah, to assist with some aspect of external operations in 20 cases, nine of which occurred since 2011. Prior to 2011, seven plots were carried out by Iran with assistance from proxies, while four were executed by proxies alone. Over the past decade, proxies carried out two plots

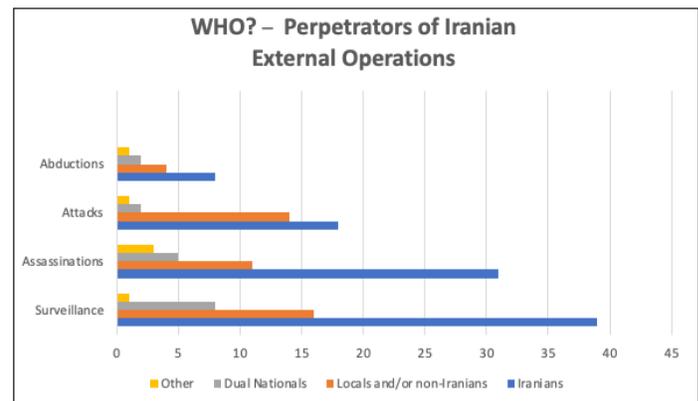on their own and played support roles alongside Iranian operatives in another seven.

Figure 2: Iranian external operations by operation type and perpetrator type

WHAT? – Types of Iranian External Operations

Iranian external operations examined in this study fall into four typologies: (1) targeted assassination plots; (2) abduction plots; (3) indiscriminate attack plots (i.e., bombings); and (4) surveillance operations in support of such plots.

The dataset includes 42 *assassination* plots, not all of which were successful. Of these, 18 occurred within the last decade. The assassination plots that occurred prior to 2011 were typically carried out by Iranian operatives (21 out of 24), but an analysis of the 18 cases executed over the past decade shows that over this more recent time period, Iran has been just as likely to dispatch locals or non-Iranians, dual nationals, or criminals as actual Iranian operatives.

This dataset includes 10 *abduction* plots, seven of which occurred since 2011. Iranian operatives were involved in all these plots, though three also used local, non-Iranian operatives. One recent plot, which targeted Iranian-American human rights activist Masih Alinejad in the New York area and was revealed in July 2021,[30] displayed a combination of effective and outlandish tactics.

This dataset did not aim to include every *indiscriminate attack* tied to Iran and its proxies over the past several decades, but it included 21 key events (plots and attacks) with clear open-source evidence of Iranian involvement. While such attacks have been carried out at a steady pace over the past four decades, over the past decade Iran appears more willing to carry out assassination plots using more indiscriminate tactics such as bombings (consider the 2018 Paris plot targeting MEK and the 2011 Washington, D.C., plot targeting the Saudi Ambassador). In such plots, Iran typically deploys a combination of its own operatives and proxies to execute the attacks.

Each of these operation types typically involves some pre-operational *surveillance*, so it should not surprise that 54 cases in the dataset are listed or cross-listed as surveillance cases. Of these, 36 occurred in the past decade. Iranian operatives were typically involved in surveillance operations, often working together with proxies. Since 2011, surveillance operations appear to also include locals or non-Iranian operatives more frequently.
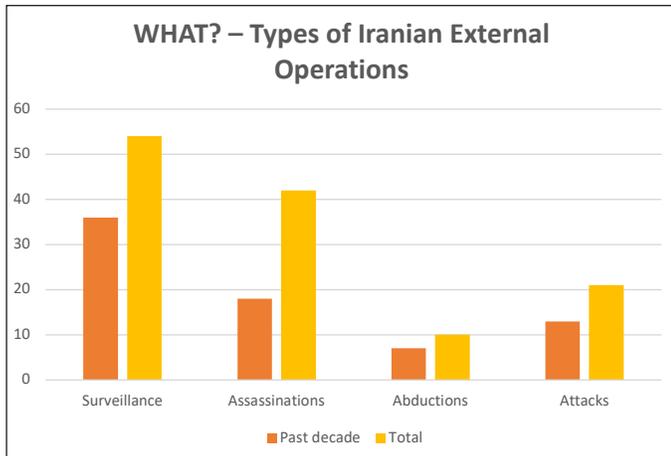
WHAT? – Types of Iranian External Operations

Figure 3: Iranian external operations by operation type

Over the past decade, a number of aggressive Iranian plots in the West have forced U.S. and European security experts to reconsider long-held assessments regarding the assumed limits of Iranian external operations. In the wake of the 2011 Arbabsiar plot, then-Director of National Intelligence James Clapper testified before Congress that the plot "shows that some Iranian officials—probably including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—have changed their calculus and are now more willing to conduct an attack in the United States in response to real or perceived U.S. actions that threaten the regime."[31]

A few years later, FBI agents arrested Hezbollah operatives Ali Kourani and Samer el-Debek in New York. Among other things, Kourani carried out surveillance of U.S. government agencies in New York and airports in New York and Toronto, while el-Debek surveilled U.S. and Israeli interests, as well as the Panama Canal Zone, in Panama. The arrests prompted the U.S. intelligence community to revisit its longstanding assessment that Hezbollah would be unlikely to attack the U.S. homeland unless the group perceived Washington to be taking action directly threating the existence of its patrons in Tehran. In a press conference following their arrest, the director of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center said, "It's our assessment that Hezbollah is determined to give itself a potential homeland option as a critical component of its terrorism playbook."[32] In a meeting with FBI agents, Kourani admitted to being a member of Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization terrorist wing (Unit 910), adding "the unit is Iranian-controlled."[33] He explained that although the unit reports directly to Hezbollah's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, Iran oversees its operations as well. Kourani informed the FBI that "there would be certain scenarios that would require action or conduct by those who belonged to the cell." Kourani said that in the event that the United States and Iran went to war, the U.S.-based sleeper cell would expect to be called upon to act. And if the United States were to take certain unnamed actions targeting Hezbollah, Nasrallah himself, or Iranian interests, Kourani added, "in those scenarios the sleeper cell would also be triggered into action."[34]

In January 2019, the European Union also revisited its assessments of Iranian terrorist activities abroad, designating the Directorate for Internal Security of the MOIS, along with two of its officials, after the Danish, Dutch, and French governments accused it of carrying out assassination plots in Europe.[35] The Danish foreign minister said the "EU just agreed to enact sanctions

against an Iranian Intelligence Service for its assassination plots on European soil," calling the action a "strong signal from the EU that we will not accept such behavior in Europe."[36]

HOW? – Tactics Employed in Iranian External Operations

Iranian external operations have featured a variety of tactics and weapons. A few Iranian plots involved knives—and in one case, an operative considered running over a California-based Iranian dissident with a car[37]—but most cases involved small arms or explosives. Bombs have become somewhat more common in cases over the past decade, and in recent years, there have been a couple of abduction cases involving sedatives.[38]

But the most significant development over the past few years has been the use of cyber tools for surveillance and targeting. For example, in 2019, the U.S. Treasury targeted an Iranian organization that hosted conferences in cooperation with the IRGC-Quds Force to serve as recruitment and intelligence collection platforms. Conference organizers specifically facilitated contact between Quds Force personnel and U.S. persons.[39] In 2012, Monica Witt, a former U.S. Air Force intelligence specialist, allegedly attended one of these conferences in Iran and was recruited by Iranian intelligence. The Department of Justice indicted Witt in 2019, alleging that part of her work involved researching USIC personnel she had known and worked with and using that information to put together "target packages" on them.[40] Witt remains a wanted fugitive and features on the FBI's Most Wanted list.[41] The U.S. Treasury Department targeted an Iran-based cyber company that worked with the IRGC and MOIS and ran a cyber operation to gain access to the computer systems of current and former U.S. counterintelligence agents and implant malware on their computer systems.[42]

HOW? – Tactics Employed in Iranian External Operations

Figure 4: Iranian external operations by type of tactic

A review of travel patterns in Iranian external operations reveals several cases in which operatives used false passports, including six in the past decade. Interestingly, Iranian agents have been caught using forged Israeli passports (as have Iranians who appear to have been economic migrants). The use of dual nationals traveling on their non-Iranian passports is an important and current *modus operandi*.

The dataset includes a wide variety of financial activities, including money laundering to pay a private investigator for work related to an abduction plot in the United States.[43] In other cases, agents carried a few thousand dollars in cash on their person to

pay local agents,[44] an Iranian intelligence agent with diplomatic cover was found with 30,000 euros in Europe,[45] Iranian students were paid to study abroad to collect intelligence,[46] and dual citizens living abroad were promised as much as $1 million to carry out surveillance missions.[47] In one case, an Iranian was paid $300,000 to abduct an Iranian dissident,[48] and a Shi`a imam in Africa was paid around $24,000 to carry out surveillance in Nigeria.[49] In Baku, Azerbaijan, members of a crime gang were reportedly paid $150,000 each to target a Jewish school there,[50] and Arbabsiar sent tens of thousands of dollars in two wire transfers from an overseas bank account to hire someone he believed to be an assassin.[51]

According to a report produced by the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, the MOIS has overall responsibility for covert Iranian operations, but since its founding in 1990, the Quds Force has typically carried out extraterritorial operations like assassinations:

> *According to Iran's constitution, all organizations must share information with the Ministry of Intelligence and Security. The ministry oversees all covert operations. It usually executes internal operations itself, but the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps for the most part handles extraterritorial operations such as sabotage, assassinations, and espionage. Although the Quds Force operates independently, it shares the information it collects with MOIS.[52]*

Over time, the Library of Congress study reports, a division of labor developed between the MOIS and Quds Force regarding international operations. The "MOIS has mostly concentrated on monitoring and assassinating Iranian dissidents inside and outside of the country," while "the Qods Force is in charge of covert military and paramilitary actions outside of Iran's territory, including the assassination of foreign individuals, such as Israeli officials, as well as training of militant groups and gathering of information in regions of interest to Iran."[53]

Typically well-trained, Iranian operatives have demonstrated skillful tradecraft in some cases, but they are not 10 feet tall. To the contrary, Iranian agents have shown exceptionally poor judgment and disregarded basic operational security in other cases. Over several months in 2012, Iranian operatives planned what one investigator described as a "jumble of overlapping plots," including assassinating U.S. diplomats and a local rabbi or striking other Jewish targets.[54] In Thailand, police rushed to the scene of an explosion at a home rented by a group of Iranians. Two barefoot men fled the house, but a third was injured and tried to hail a taxi to escape. When the taxi refused to stop, the injured man threw a bomb at the car, destroying half the vehicle and injuring the driver and four bystanders. Police soon cornered the injured suspect, who tried to throw another explosive at them but was too weak; the resulting explosion blew off both his legs.[55] In this and a series of other operations, Iranian agents reused phone numbers and SIM cards across multiple operations, traveled on Iranian passports, checked in to hotels as Iranians, carried Iranian currency in their wallets, and in at least one instance, took off time from their surveillance to party with prostitutes. A group photo on the cell phone of one of the prostitutes helped identify accomplices, one of whom was arrested at the airport while the other managed to escape.[56]

A trove of leaked Iranian intelligence cables obtained by *The New York Times* and The Intercept in 2019 underscores this point.

The so-called Iran Cables reveal both sophisticated tradecraft and successful operations—including the purported recruitment of a U.S. State Department employee as a source. "By and large," *The New York Times* assessed, "the intelligence ministry operatives portrayed in the documents appear patient, professional, and pragmatic." And yet, the cables also include cases of "bumbling and comical ineptitude" on the part of Iranian agents in Iraq.[57]

These leaked Iranian cables also underscore how internal Iranian politics, competing factions, and interagency rivalries sometimes significantly undermine Iranian tactical capabilities. For example, the MOIS is a very capable organization, but in recent years, it has sometimes been overshadowed by the IRGC and the fairly new IRGC Intelligence Organization, formally established only in 2009 in the wake of the failed "Green Revolution."[58] Several rounds of purges within the MOIS aimed at ridding the ministry of people perceived to be supporters of reformist presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, partially explaining why the MOIS appears to have fallen in standing in the eyes of Iranian revolutionary leaders compared to the Quds Force.[59] The revolutionary leadership appears to have suspected that at least some within the MOIS sympathized with leaders of the Green Movement opposition. The resulting intelligence reorganization reportedly purged the MOIS of hundreds of officials. "This solidified the IRGC's control of Iran's intelligence apparatus and weakened the government's ability to challenge the IRGC's authority and to impede its activities in cracking down on dissenters."[60] Today, senior IRGC officers fill key ambassadorial positions in the Middle East, and with the election of President Raisi, the IRGC is likely to grow more powerful still.[61]

WHERE? – Locations of Iranian External Operations

Iranian agents and their proxies have carried out many operations over the years in places with relatively lax security and border controls, where Iranian influence could secure the release of detained operatives in the case of arrest. They have also focused on places where Iranians can travel without a visa such as Malaysia.

In the post-9/11 world, overall border security enhancements in countries around the world likely led terrorist groups and rogue actors of all kinds to either curtail operations for a period of time and/or operate in nations with comparatively lax security rather than more vigilant Western nations. The dataset suggests there was a gap in Iranian external operational activity for about 23 months after 9/11, and the operations that commenced after that time in the West were all surveillance operations, which may not have been tied to near-term plots but rather were contingency planning for future off-the-shelf operational planning.

Over time, however, Iranian operatives and proxies resumed a wide array of international operations in both Western countries and those with less developed security systems. After a post 9/11-hiatus, plots in the United States increased (seven in the decade after 9/11,[62] and seven more in the decade since 2011[63]), while there were only two plots in Europe in the decade after 9/11.[64] This dramatic drop in attacks in Europe reversed itself over the past decade, however, with 17 plots in Europe since 2011.

Of the 20 cases in which Iranian operatives and proxies targeted U.S. interests, 12 occurred outside the United States in countries with more lax security systems. These most frequently took place in Central Asia, the Gulf, and Africa, but also in other places like Eastern Europe.

Similarly, in several cases in recent years Iranian agents targeted

dissidents living in the West while they traveled to third countries. For example, a dissident living in Sweden was targeted in Turkey,[65] a dissident in the United States was targeted in the UAE,[66] and a dissident in France was targeted in Iraq.[67] Israeli targets (distinct from Jewish targets) were also primarily targeted in third countries.
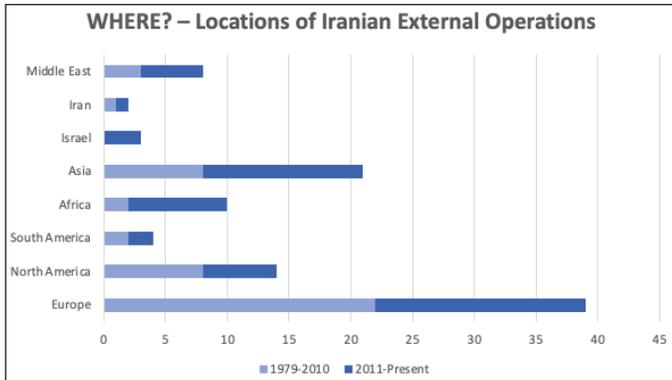

Figure 5: Iranian external operations by location

Effective security measures have also influenced Iranian agents' target selection within countries. For example, on February 13, 2012, twin bombings targeted personnel from the Israeli embassies in New Delhi, India, and Tbilisi, Georgia. In each of these cases, Quds Force operatives encountered more sophisticated security arrangements than anticipated, and so they settled for modest strikes.[68]

And yet, Iranian operatives have also carried out plots in Western countries with sophisticated law enforcement and intelligence services, including the United Kingdom and the United States. Fifty-three cases in the dataset occurred in North America (14) or Europe (39), while 43 occurred in South America (four), Africa (10), Asia (21),[a] and the Middle East (eight). New York and London were frequent locations for operations (eight and six, respectively), and there has been a distinct focus on plotting attacks in the Gulf over the past decade.

Ultimately, the reason Iran targets dissidents and others in one country over another may have as much to do with opportunity—access to the target, agents capable of operating in a specific location—as anything else.

WHEN and WHY? – Examining Motives for Iranian External Operations

Discerning motives for specific Iranian external operations is a tricky business. In some cases, such as Iranian sticky bomb plots in 2012,[b] motive can be rather clear. In that case, Iran was striking back after attacks on its nuclear program, including assassinations of key nuclear scientists, and deterring future attacks.[69] These attacks were carried out by Quds Force Unit 400, which was set up for this specific purpose.[70] Or consider that, according to a declassified July 1992 CIA report, Hezbollah began preparing retaliatory attacks against both the United States and Israel shortly after an Israeli airstrike killed then-Hezbollah leader Abbas al-Musawi in February 1992.[71] Most accounts tie the March 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires to these events.[72]

In other cases, the attack was proposed and the planning begun before the supposedly precipitant event. Consider, for example, the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires. That attack is often tied to the May 1994 capture of Iranian-affiliated Shi`a militant Mustafa Dirani in an Israeli commando raid in Lebanon. But while the Dirani affair certainly gave Iran and Hezbollah reason to carry out a retaliatory attack, the AMIA bombing was more than a year into the planning stages by the time Dirani was snatched.[73] More recently, the 2012 sticky bomb attacks were reportedly planned to take place close to the February 8 anniversary of the assassination of Hezbollah's Imad Mughniyeh. In other words, once they were planned anyway, why not take advantage of the symbolic date?[74]

There are also theories that make sense but cannot be conclusively verified using open-source data alone. Consider the case of Iranian-American used car salesman Mansour Arbabsiar who pleaded guilty in 2012 to plotting with Iranian agents to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States in Washington, D.C. The actual precipitant for this plot remains unclear, but there are some theories. According to one theory, it was the crackdown on the 2011 "Arab Spring" protests in Bahrain that perhaps pushed Iranian security and intelligence services toward a new level of militancy. The deployment of Bahraini Defense Force tanks, backed by Saudi Arabian and UAE forces, caused shock and anger among Bahraini Shi`a and among the Shi`a leadership and people of Iran and of Iraq.[75] There is some indication that the Iranian leaders regretted not being in a position to support the Bahraini Shi`a in what might have been a decisive political action against the Sunni monarchy.[76] It was reportedly right after the 2011 protests that Arbabsiar presented himself to his cousin, a senior Quds Force official, and that the Quds Force began planning the assassination of the Saudi ambassador, Adel al-Jubeir. Gholam Shakuri, the IRGC-Quds Force officer identified by one of the plotters as being in charge of the operation, is believed by Saudi intelligence to have met with a radical Bahraini Shi`a cleric in Beirut in early 2011 before the operation began.[77]

Understanding when and why Iran and its proxies carry out

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a   For the purpose of this study, cases taking place in Turkey are registered under Asia in the regional breakdown.

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b   On February 13, 2021, Quds Force operatives targeted personnel from the Israeli embassies in New Delhi, India, and Tbilisi, Georgia. In India, an assailant on a motorcycle attached a magnetized "sticky bomb" to a car taking the Israeli defense attaché's wife to pick up her children at school; the blast injured the woman, her driver, and a few bystanders. A few hours later, in Georgia, a similar sticky bomb plot targeted a local citizen employed by the embassy, but was discovered and defused before doing any harm. The following day, February 14, police rushed to the scene of an explosion in central Bangkok at a home rented by a group of Iranians. Two men fled the house, but a third was injured and arrested. Matthew Levitt, "Hizbollah and the Qods Force in Iran's Shadow War with the West," *Policy Focus* 123, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2013.

attacks is further complicated by the fact that they do not always coordinate their activities and sometimes appear at cross-purposes for failure to deconflict their operations. So, while the Quds Force, Iran, and its primary proxy group, Hezbollah, have worked together on some plots—Baku in 2012[c] and Istanbul in 2011,[d] among others—in other cases, they failed to deconflict their operational activities and found themselves engaged in completely disparate operations in the same place. When Hezbollah operatives laid the groundwork for a bombing plot in Bangkok in late 2011 and early 2012, the group was apparently unaware that the Quds Force was also preparing for an attack in the same city.[78] Whether the Quds Force was, in turn, ignorant of Hezbollah's activities there is unclear, but the Iranians appear not to have known Hezbollah was using Bangkok as an explosives distribution hub. And even after Hezbollah operative Hussein Atris was arrested in January 2012, the Quds Force operation there was not suspended.[79] Similarly, within days after the July 2012 bombing of a bus carrying Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria—even as the international and very public investigation into the bombing and the search for accomplices was at its height—Bulgarian authorities reportedly caught a Quds Force operative scoping out a synagogue in the country's capital, Sofia.[80]

Iranian operatives have at times been so driven to carry out an attack that they have rushed operations that were not yet ready. In 2012, for example, when the Quds Force established Unit 400 to strike back at countries undermining Iran's nuclear program, the desire to carry out an attack outpaced the new unit's actual capacity to do so.[e] The fact that Iran's intentions were not yet coupled with the capability to act effectively on them gave Western officials only so much comfort. In time, they feared the Quds Force would be capable of carrying out deadly attacks targeting Western interests.[81] The pace of Unit 400's planned attacks underscored just how determined Iran was to attack Western interests. Yet the failure of all these plots pointed to the new unit's still-limited capabilities.

Iranian officials also seem to reward initiative, even aggressive initiatives that are not necessarily sanctioned in advance or ultimately successful. By some accounts, that explains the 2007 detention of British Royal Navy personnel in the Persian Gulf.[82] Moreover, internal bureaucratic tensions within the parallel and sometimes overlapping elements of the Iranian security establishment can also lead to a form of competition that breeds adventurism and may affect Iranian international operations.

Decision-making and operational planning within the Iranian system is opaque. In some cases, officials have definitively linked a plot back to senior Iranian officials. In the Arbabsiar plot, for example, U.S. and British governments traced the conspiracy back

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c   In early 2012, Azeri authorities carried out several raids and arrested local criminals paid by Hezbollah at Iran's behest to carry out attacks targeting a Jewish school in Baku. Levitt, "Hizbollah and the Qods Force in Iran's Shadow War with the West."

d   In May 2011, Quds Force and Hezbollah operatives carried out a failed operation targeting the Israeli consul-general in Istanbul. Quds Force operatives reportedly cased the area, and then Hezbollah operatives placed an explosive along a route the diplomat was known to take. Saviona Mane and Amos Harel, "Italian Newspaper: Istanbul Blast Was Hezbollah Attempt on Israeli Consul's Life," *Haaretz*, July 19, 2011.

e   Note, for example, tradecraft employed in Thailand and elsewhere in 2012. See Levitt, "Hizbollah and the Qods Force in Iran's Shadow War with the West."

> **"Acting through proxies in ways that are either reasonably deniable or at least one step removed, Iran manages risk and projects influence well beyond its borders. And when carrying out acts of violence, Iranian leaders do appear to apply their own sense of proportionality and reciprocity. Iranian use of violence is calculated, often as focused on the psychological effects of an operation as the operation itself."**

to its source in Tehran and blacklisted Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani for his role overseeing the plot.[83] Indeed, with U.S. law enforcement officials listening in, Arbabsiar called his cousin and Quds Force handler, Gholam Shakuri, asking if the plan to blow up a popular Washington, D.C., restaurant should go ahead. Shakuri confirmed that the plot should go forward and as soon as possible, adding, "Just do it quickly. It's late."[84] But for many cases that do not end with a trial or declassified intelligence to support a statement or U.S. Treasury designation, open-source attribution to senior Iranian officials can be difficult to make.

There are a few general themes, however, that help contextualize Iranian external operations.

Iran seeks to undermine and target dissident groups that the revolutionary regime perceives to threaten regime stability. This includes groups accused of carrying out attacks in Iran, such as the Arab Struggle Movement of the Liberation of Ahwaz (ASMLA), and groups that reveal sensitive information about Iran's nuclear program, corruption, or other sensitive matters, such as the NCRI.

Iran seeks to exact revenge for real and perceived acts of aggression against its interests, which is intended to exact a cost for such activities and deter future incidents. This is the case even when the act targeting Iran is carried out to thwart Iranian malign behavior of some kind.

Iran's antipathy toward Israel and its commitment to the destruction of the Jewish state is real, though most typically pursued through proxies. Iranian external operations have targeted not only Israeli diplomats, citizens, and interests, but also Jewish targets with no ties to the state of Israel.

Iran has, from time to time, carried out operations tied to its self-perceived status as the standard-bearer for revolutionary Islam.[85] Iran has for decades competed with Saudi Arabia to be seen as the leader of the Islamic world, and it sees itself as the guardian of oppressed Muslims anywhere.

Acting through proxies in ways that are either reasonably deniable or at least one step removed, Iran manages risk and projects influence well beyond its borders.[86] And when carrying out acts of violence, Iranian leaders do appear to apply their own sense of proportionality and reciprocity. (So, a country that hosts the MEK, for example, should not be surprised if Iran targets

> **"Perhaps the most important finding to emerge from this study is the fact that Iran pursues international assassination, abduction, terror, and surveillance plots in a very aggressive fashion, even at times and in places that are particularly sensitive. With the exception of a period right after the 9/11 attacks ... Iranian operatives and proxies have carried out operations even during periods of key negotiations—including current negotiations over a return to the JCPOA."**

MEK interests there.) Iranian use of violence is calculated, often as focused on the psychological effects of an operation as the operation itself.

Forecasting Possible Future Trends in Iranian External Operations[87]

The election of Ebrahim Raisi—a loyalist and former student of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—as president of Iran represents a significant step in the solidification of the IRGC's place at the center of Iranian power and decision-making. Under his presidency, the IRGC is likely to be expanded and empowered in advance of the day when the Islamic Republic needs to select Khamenei's successor. As a Tony Blair Institute for Global Change report concludes, for Khamenei and Raisi, "the IRGC will play a vital role in smoothing the transition to the next supreme leader."[88] An empowered IRGC will likely be still more aggressive in its efforts to protect the revolution, increasing the likelihood that international targeted assassination, abduction, and surveillance plots, as well as indiscriminate attacks, will continue to be a feature of Iranian operations abroad and may well become more common. In the eyes of Iranian leaders, such plots are a proportionate and reasonable response to support for Iranian dissident groups. As then-Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif retorted after the European Union accused Iran of carrying out assassinations in European countries, "Accusing Iran won't absolve Europe of responsibility for harboring terrorists ... Europeans, incl(uding) Denmark, Holland and France, harbor MEK."[89] And absent a renegotiated Iran Deal, with sanctions denying Iran reintegration into the international financial system, Iran will likely resort to what it considers to be reasonably deniable but proportionate attacks on those seeking to undermine the revolutionary regime in Iran.

Based on the findings of the data collected for this study, there is likely to be significant continuity in Iranian external operational activities. As noted above, Iran has begun to deploy cyber capabilities from its toolkit, typically to spy on dissidents, conduct electronic surveillance, and engage in disinformation campaigns. But as the cases involving this emerging cyber capability demonstrate, Iran and its proxies do learn and develop new tactics. The most significant tactical shift that could come in the months and years ahead involves the deployment of teams of Shi`a militants from around the world—mostly non-Iranian and non-Lebanese—representing a variety of Iranian proxy groups to carry out operations at Iran's behest.[90] As this dataset makes clear, both Hezbollah and the Quds Force have deployed dual-national operatives traveling on their non-Iranian passports.[91]

Perhaps the most important finding to emerge from this study is the fact that Iran pursues international assassination, abduction, terror, and surveillance plots in a very aggressive fashion, even at times and in places that are particularly sensitive. With the exception of a period right after the 9/11 attacks, when Iran did not want to get caught up in the "war on terror," Iranian operatives and proxies have carried out operations even during periods of key negotiations—including current negotiations over a return to the JCPOA.[f] Iranian operatives and proxies carried out plots in Europe even as Iran sought to garner European support for its negotiating positions regarding the nuclear deal.[g] Today, with the revolutionary leadership solidifying control over key elements of power in Iran, and with an eye toward protecting the revolution at a time when the revolutionary leadership sees increasing threat coming from elements both foreign and domestic, operations like these are likely to increase.

The findings presented in this article underscore that the global response to Iran's international terrorist activity cannot be limited to law enforcement action alone. It should include regulatory action, including expanding the E.U. designation of just Hezbollah's military wing to include the organization in its entirety, as well as expanded financial and diplomatic sanctions targeting Iranian actors and institutions involved in these plots. But financial sanctions alone are insufficient and indeed are only truly effective when implemented in tandem with other tools. Western states should designate more Iranian institutions and personnel involved in Tehran's illicit conduct, but they should also ensure that Iran faces consequences, including diplomatic isolation, for abusing diplomatic privilege and sending its representatives abroad to participate in attacks and assassinations on foreign soil.

The only real precedent for such action—and a poor one at that—is what followed the 1997 German court ruling that found Iran to be behind the 1992 attack at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin.[h] Several European countries briefly withdrew their ambassadors from Iran following the court's finding that Iranian officials were

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f　In one plot, Hezbollah plotted to assassinate a former Israeli intelligence official in Colombia around September 2021. In another, assassins believed to be sent by Iran plotted to kill Israeli business people in Cyprus, also around September 2021. See, for example, Ben Caspit, "Cyprus assassination attempt paints picture of emboldened Iran," Al-Monitor, October 5, 2021. See also "Hezbollah planned to murder Israeli in Colombia to avenge Soleimani – report," *Times of Israel*, April 15, 2021.

g　For example, Iranian agents were behind four plots in Europe from 2015 to 2019, according to the Dutch government. See "Iranian stabbed in Netherlands was previously targeted by Tehran, says brother," *National*, June 21, 2021.

h　On September 17, 1992, Iranian and Hezbollah operatives shot and killed Dr. Sadegh Sharafkandi, secretary general of an Iranian Kurdish opposition group, at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin. Alan Cowell, "German Court Says Top Iran Leaders Ordered Killings," *New York Times*, April 11, 1997.

directly involved in the attack. But none of the Iranian leaders implicated in the plot were brought to justice, and several—most notably, Ali Akbar Velayati—went on to play roles in subsequent terrorist plots.[92] Despite repeated Argentinean requests for countries to arrest and extradite Velayati as he traveled the world, he remains free.[93]

Following the more recent Assadi affair, the State Department published timelines and maps documenting open-source incidents of Iran-sponsored operational activities, by both Iranian agents and Iran's proxy, Hezbollah, in Europe from 1979 to 2018.[94] Documenting such plots is important not only to keep an accurate, factual record of Iranian operations but also so they can be put to use as evidence in diplomatic efforts to isolate Iran for its malign activities.

Iran continues to engage in such activities because it can. Experience has taught Iran that the benefits of such actions (as Iran perceives them) outweigh the few and typically temporary consequences. Law enforcement action and financial designations are appropriate but insufficient responses to such activities. They should be complemented by firm diplomatic isolation, travel bans preventing family members of Iranian leaders from studying abroad or going on European shopping sprees, and other actions that would feel truly consequential for Iranian decision makers. CTC

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Randall Blake, Former National Intelligence Officer for Transnational Threats, National Intelligence Council

By Paul Cruickshank, Kristina Hummel, and Don Rassler

Randall Blake joined the Intelligence Community in 1986 where he served 35 years in a variety of leadership, analysis, and policy positions dealing with national security issues focused on terrorism, transnational organized crime, and the foreign illicit drug threat to the United States. He led analytic support to senior policy makers in supervisory and senior analyst positions in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the Defense Department, including the last seven years on the National Intelligence Council serving as the National Intelligence Officer for Transnational Threats.

Mr. Blake earned a bachelor's degree in Political Science and a Certificate in International Relations from the University of Utah and a master's degree in International Management from the American Graduate School of International Management (Thunderbird) in Phoenix, Arizona.

CTC: At the end of last year, you retired after more than three decades of service to the U.S. government, and over the course of your career, you served in a variety of key analytical and leadership roles, with primary emphasis placed on terrorism and counterterrorism for more than two of those decades. You played an important strategic behind-the-scenes role in helping the government to understand the terrorism threat and other related threats. Could you provide a brief overview of the trajectory of your career?

Blake: It's actually 35 years serving in a variety of leadership, analytic, and policy positions almost totally focused on CT support in some manner. I served under seven presidents, from Reagan to Biden; each brought a different perspective to dealing with the issue of terrorism. My career divides almost equally into two halves. The first half was spent in the Department of Defense: the service, command, and national level. I started out with Naval Criminal Investigative Service, spent three and a half years over at EUCOM at the Joint Analysis Center in Molesworth, England, and then back here at the Defense Intelligence Agency, including six years at the Pentagon.

The second half of my career [was] in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI). And that involved work in a couple of different roles: one at the National Counterterrorism Center, as a senior manager focused on al-Qa`ida, and most recently, at the National Intelligence Council as the National Intelligence Officer for Transnational Threats. During that period at ODNI, I had two details that were formative assignments in shaping the latter part of my career. One, I went on assignment to the Brookings Institution as a Federal Executive Fellow in 2011, and then during 2012 and 2013, I served at the National Security Council as President Obama's

Special Assistant and Senior Director for Counterterrorism. In a couple of these positions, at the National Intelligence Council and at the NSC, I also had an expanded focus on the threat from transnational organized crime and foreign illicit drugs.

CTC: On the morning of 9/11, you were serving as the DIA's intelligence terrorism chief, and prior to that, in the mid-1990s, you served as chief of the terrorism analysis shop at U.S. European Command's Joint Analysis Center in Molesworth, England. What are the key things that surprised you about how the counterterrorism fight has evolved over the past couple of decades?

Blake: I think I'd prefer to talk about observations rather than surprises. Surprises were not welcome things in my career. I was already 15 years into my career on 9/11. So, for me, the attack was part of an escalating al-Qa`ida threat continuum rather than a singular event. That said, I recognized immediately that the magnitude of al-Qa`ida's tactical success on 9/11 meant everything was about to change. We went through organizational upheavals, a multi-fold increase in resources and scrutiny. One observation is that CT became an exemplar for other national security issues. By that I mean, if you look at the importance of the whole of government approach, it's an often overused term but not in the CT context. It involves military, intelligence, law enforcement, homeland security, diplomacy, education, international aid, public-private partnerships, and so on. Allies and partners involved in large coalitions, local and regional configurations, and bilateral arrangements have been critical to maintaining the counterterrorism fight over long periods and also in multiple conflicts zones.

Another observation is the remarkable evolution of military and intelligence integration. It changed those organizations, transformed the CT battlefield, and led to many of our greatest successes. But it is important to point out that large-scale military interventions and targeted killings have been necessary, but not sufficient. Counterterrorism has bought us time and space, reduced terrorist capabilities, but hasn't eliminated terrorism.

We've had to simultaneously deal with three types of terrorist threat trajectory—emerging, resurgence, and sustained.

Emerging: In 2003, we were quickly forced to deal with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his lead role in furthering the insurgency in Iraq. In 2009, Nasir al-Wuhayshi combined the Saudi and Yemeni branches of al-Qa`ida into al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, the affiliate that would pose the greatest threat to the U.S. homeland over the next few years.

Resurgence: [The] predecessor to ISIS in Iraq and Syria resurgence post the U.S. military withdrawal in 2011 was followed

by [the] caliphate declaration three years later amidst the arrival of tens of thousands of foreign terrorist fighters, [and fast forward to 2022,] we're now in a period [where] we have to look at another potential resurgence there. And in the West, racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists [REMVEs] have increased attacks, particularly since 2018.

Sustained: [The] threat that we have been dealing with, in some cases over four decades, includes a variety of groups, but I'll just focus on some of the key ones: Haqqani network, Iranian state sponsorship of terrorism, Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi militants, and ISIS' global enterprise and the al-Qa`ida affiliates.

A third observation is that this concept of shifting from a U.S.-led, partner-enabled CT approach—in some areas, but not others—to a partner-led, U.S.-enabled approach is an important risk calculus change. It's one that will put more emphasis on our indications and warning capabilities of emerging threats to U.S. interests, both overseas and here in the United States. Strategic analysis has been at a premium over the last two decades, and it'll take on an even more important role in this type of CT construct in assessing when a local or regional fight [by terrorist actors] has taken on a greater emphasis focused on U.S. targets and transnational plotting.

CTC: You have seen and experienced much, as you've outlined, over the course of your career, with many positions across several administrations. When it comes to terrorism, what would you say has been the most difficult moment, and conversely, what is the moment perhaps that you are proudest of during the course of your career?

Blake: 9/11 was the most difficult moment. I was serving in the Pentagon as DIA's Terrorism Warning Division Current Intelligence Chief. I [and my colleagues] carry the heavy burden of having terrorists fly a plane into our building and kill 184 unsuspecting souls, not to mention the horror in lower Manhattan and the heroism by the passengers on the flight that crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. That's the ultimate mission failure and one that still haunts and motivates me to this day.

The proudest moments—and for me, they're not just moments—was the work of our global CT enterprise to decimate al-Qa`ida's leadership after 9/11 and then degrade ISIS core after it declared the caliphate in 2014. And any small contribution that I made to those CT successes were career highlights.

CTC: You played a key role at the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). How would you characterize the evolution of NCTC?

Blake: I was there at the start up in 2004, so I've been able to see the Center mature from the inside and as a customer when I was down at the NSC in 2012 and 2013, and then as a collaborator while I was at the National Intelligence Council. As a startup, NCTC was challenged by the high-threat environment in which it immediately found itself in, but the fact that we were able to bring together people from multiple agencies, particularly from CIA and FBI, became a real strength. The mission evolved [and] expanded over time. Of course, you have implementation of the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, the additional recommendations out of the WMD Commission, and further mission expansion after the failed 2009 Christmas airliner bombing. NCTC continues to innovate

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and build upon itself. From my perspective, it has become an indispensable part of the CT enterprise and a success story, but one in which there are more chapters yet to be written.

CTC: What is the legacy of the United States' war on terrorism? In your view, what does the score card look like?

Blake: The 9/11 Commission called for a broad political-military strategy that rested on a firm tripod of policies: to attack terrorists and their organizations, prevent the continued growth of Islamist terrorism, and protect against and prepare for terrorist attacks. So, from that standpoint, I would say the scorecard is mixed.

On the positive side, our multilayered homeland defense approach has proven durable for two decades in thwarting large-scale, directed attacks from foreign terrorist organizations. That was unimaginable on September 12th of 2001. We and our allies and partners have decimated successive organizational leadership cadres [and] reduced operating space in key areas while greatly increasing the sophistication and effectiveness of our CT toolkit. 9/11 remains a statistical outlier, and terrorism is not an existential threat to the U.S.

But—and there's always a 'but'— war terminology like 'defeat' doesn't work. Enemies decide when they're defeated by surrendering or ceasing to contest. And describing the threat today as 'less acute,' 'geographically diffuse,' and 'ideologically diverse' does not fit in a nation-state war terminology or a declaration of victory.

And look at the enemies' resilience; there [are] more radicalized individuals over a broader geographic span today than at any point in recent history. They represent a wide array of ideologies that build on and reinforce themselves through their own set of grievances at every level—individual, local, regional, and transnational. Endemic capacity shortfalls by some of our partners, combined with instability and conflict, equate to sufficient operating space [for terrorist actors] to exploit in some of the same parts of the world where we've been engaged for the last 20 years.

We rightfully focus on deterring attacks on U.S. interests and U.S. homeland attacks as measures of success, but it's good to

remember that these terrorist organizations and networks—al-Qa`ida and ISIS in particular—are also involved in insurgency, criminal enterprises, in some cases even humanitarian efforts and governance responsibilities at local and regional levels. Their intent to strike U.S. interests and the U.S. homeland has not changed, but its place on their priority list is calibrated by multiple goals and objectives, often closer to home.

Instead, we're more consistently dealing with a homeland violent extremist threat that has shifted since 9/11 from primarily in-person interaction to online inspiration and peer-to-peer contacts with extremists sometimes thousands of miles away. In an era of shifting priorities, CT partnerships, and risk tolerance, progress is going to remain fragile. Agility and adaptations will be required. Some of the key variables that are going to shape this landscape are the levels of CT pressure that degrades capabilities, homeland defense that mitigates threats, and effective governance that reduces terrorists' operating space. If you gave me just six words for the scorecard, I would say: incredible tactical successes, stubborn strategic stalemate.

CTC: Over the past two decades, the United States has developed innovative ways to leverage and operationalize large amounts of data. Indeed, transformations in how the United States has stored, shared, analyzed, and made use of data have been either a key factor or driver in many counterterrorism successes. From your vantage point, what does the next chapter of data-related advancements, through broader experimentation and adoption of machine-learning and artificial intelligence tools, look like?

Blake: I just spent 35 years in an intelligence community in which there was no question in my mind and my colleagues' that we were global leaders in our craft. If we don't get this right, the day may come when that may no longer be the case. So I think my first point is just how important it is that we operate in this space in a way that keeps us right at the forefront of where technology is taking us. With world data doubling every two years, we can't possibly employ enough humans to deal with it. In 2017, the then Director of NGA [National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency] drove home this point when he estimated that we would need eight million imagery analysts by 2037 to process all imagery data.[1] Instead, we've got to be able to mirror and learn from and improve on the innovations in the tech world and to work with them in that way.

The National Intelligence Council puts out a Global Trends report every four years, timed with new administrations or second terms. There's some CT language in last year's report acknowledging the criticality of this issue where we talked about [the fact] that governments are likely to continue to dramatically expand the amounts and types of information they collect as well as the tools to sort and organize that data. [We] talked about advances in biometric identification, data mining, full-motion video analysis, and metadata analysis [which] can provide governments with improved capabilities to identify terrorists and plotting.

CTC: How do you view the value of open-source information, intelligence, data, and how the intelligence and national security communities have been utilizing it or can utilize it in different ways? Some like Dr. Amy Zegart have described a need for the U.S. government to create an open-source agency[2] given

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the growing importance of open-source data. What is your view on this issue, having an open-source agency, and the relevance specifically of open-source data to the future of U.S. CT?

Blake: It's been interesting over my career to watch open-source data become more and more part of our work. The idea of analysts going into work and spending their entire day poring over intelligence reporting [is] just not [the] reality today. The pendulum swing to increasingly valuing open-source data collection and analysis as a part of analysts' toolkit is coinciding with the exponential growth of open-source data and CT's increased competition with other national security issues for resources. We have to recognize that there's the important guardrails question when we're talking about privacy and civil liberties, so there are challenges there but ones that have to be judiciously worked through.

At the National Intelligence Council, we used open-source data extensively in our strategic analysis. For example, the Director of National Intelligence provides an unclassified annual threat assessment report to the Senate and House intelligence committees. I already mentioned the Quadrennial Global Trends report, which relies on open-source data. In October [2021], we published an unclassified National Intelligence Estimate on climate change[3] and an intelligence assessment on COVID-19's origins.[4]

In relation to your question on establishing an open-source agency, I offer a few cautions from my experience of NCTC as a startup organization. I'm not talking about whether we should or should not create an open-source agency, but just that one must recognize that in the government and the intelligence community, you will have to have a degree of humility and patience in dealing with growing pains and even some sharp elbows. Realistic benchmarks for assessing the relevancy of your work with your policy customers will be important as well as presidential and congressional support that endures well beyond the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

CTC: In 2012, you described the Afghanistan-Pakistan area as the "most dangerous neighborhood on the planet, still."[5] In the September 2021 issue of *CTC Sentinel,* **former acting CIA Director Michael Morell assessed that following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, "the reconstruction of al-Qa`ida's homeland attack capability will happen quickly, in less than a year, if the U.S. does not collect the intelligence and take the military action to prevent it."[6] In light of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, what is your assessment of the terrorism threat environment in that region, the capabilities of key groups like al-Qa`ida and Islamic State Khorasan, and how long it might take those groups to pose more of a threat to the United States? Or are you more concerned about the trajectory of terror threats in other locations in the world?**

Blake: For me, there's a bottom line: Terrorists now have increased operating space in one of the most combustible regions in the world, where CT reach has been dramatically reduced. So, if you start with that premise, everything follows. There are lots of extremist groups there right now; there have been for decades. But for the ones that we're talking about and focusing on here, my assessment is their transnational capability outside of South Asia doesn't match their outsized intent and aspirations right now. There's a much larger global geographic expanse of terrorist operating areas than there was on 9/11 when Afghanistan was the epicenter of global jihad. Al-Qa`ida affiliates in other places are in a stronger position and, along with ISIS branches, networks, and portfolios elsewhere, represent a broader terrorism universe from where terrorists could be deployed to attempt to direct or enable U.S. homeland plotting.

Al-Qa`ida starts from a position of weakness, and its affiliate, al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent, is the weakest of al-Qa`ida's affiliates today. Al-Qa`ida could use the increased operating space in Afghanistan to enhance global interconnectivity, but they're going to want to do it while maintaining positive Taliban public relations. Al-Qa`ida's rebuilding efforts will almost certainly come with conditions and attempted oversight from the Taliban that did not exist pre-9/11.

ISIS-Khorasan is one of the most capable of ISIS' branches, but [it] has to contend with the victorious Taliban at its strongest point since its inception. The Taliban is the key variable in any discussion about ISIS-Khorasan bolstering its current capabilities. The Taliban regime freed from 20 years of fighting the U.S.-led coalition and the former Afghan national security forces almost certainly will continue to disregard human rights and international norms. It almost certainly is going to deploy the same ruthless approach—and we've already seen some examples—in attempting to degrade its ideological rival, ISIS-Khorasan.

So, I think it's important to step back and take a strategic view in calibrating the threat. I'm not talking about inspiring people here in United States to conduct attacks or even some online discussions that enable others in some way, [but] if we're talking about directed, successful homeland attacks of any significance, al-Qa`ida and ISIS have not been able to do that since 9/11. However the threat emanating from Afghanistan develops, our terrorist enemies start with some of the same challenges they have not been able to overcome elsewhere during the last 20 years.

CTC: Shortly after the recent fall of Kabul, President Biden said, "We've developed counterterrorism over-the-horizon

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capability that will allow us to keep our eyes firmly fixed on any direct threats to the United States in the region and to act quickly and decisively if needed."[7] Others have taken a different view. For example, former National Security Advisor Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, speaking to us at *CTC Sentinel,* said "You can't keep your eyes firmly fixed with only technical [means], without augmenting those technical means for surveillance capabilities and without a physical presence and a partner on the ground that allows you to maintain even sustained technical intelligence collection ... the logistics difficulties associated now with the distances, having given up the air bases in Afghanistan preclude the 'firmly fixed' part of that statement" from the president.[8] Is the international terror threat landscape in Afghanistan now a dangerous blind spot for the United States?

Blake: Our starting point is 20 years of captured battlefield material, hundreds of meaningful Afghan relationships, and deep knowledge of the enemy. Our CT approach will be challenging, and it will by necessity look different than what we've been doing for the last 20 years. I look at it on three levels: strategic overview, tactical targeting, and indications and warning of plot development and progression. Strategically, enemy intent is clear. The challenge will be in identifying meaningful changes in how al-Qa`ida or ISIS operate in and from Afghanistan that result in capability enhancements that increase the threat to the West. Tactically, look at the find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate model. That's going to require even more creativity and innovation than has marked the CT successes during the last two decades. We're going to need [to] exploit technological advances and nurture new and enhanced relationships, including transactional ones with former enemies, and greater reliance on others. Indications and warning of plot development and progression will be challenging, and is going to be dependent, in part, on terrorism developments outside of Afghanistan.

CTC: In 2012, you remarked that "in the ongoing next chapter of global jihad, the increasing democratization of science and technology down to the individual level has emerging implications for the have-later terrorist."[9] Looking back, given the rise of the Islamic State and its ability to get supporters to act and conduct acts of terrorism in their home countries in

a remote or more independent type way, that statement was prescient. When you look forward, what concerns do you have about open-source terrorism and/or DIY terrorism?

Blake: DIY has constituted the primary homeland threat for years. One of the things that's remarkable is that as virtual operating space has expanded in our digitized world, it is now feasible for radicalization to occur in weeks rather than months or years. ISIS taught us the importance of peer-to-peer contacts on encrypted apps with an individual on the battlefield to coach, train, and transfer knowledge. That resulted in an upswing in attacks in West by DIYers during ISIS' apex in 2014-15.

If you look at the ISIS 2017 Australia plotting, you had a brother in Syria introduce his brothers in Australia to an operative in Syria who shipped component parts back to Australia for an airline improvised explosive device to be put in a meat grinder and then provided instructions on how to make hydrogen sulfide. Brothers with no battlefield experience were being guided by someone they never met thousands of miles away.

There's also the ideological reinforcement and copycat aspect to DIY terrorism where tactics do not have to be sophisticated to be effective and repeatable. So if you look at REMVEs, they are diffuse with no central global leadership, most value the concept of leaderless resistance, even as many draw inspiration across the globe, where attack manifestos build upon attack manifestos, and attacks are live streamed.

In October 2019, during Yom Kippur, a 27-year-old REMVE in Germany live streamed his DIY attack that killed two people outside a synagogue with a firearm he constructed with components from a 3D printer.[10]

We had the case in New York on Halloween 2017 where an Uber driver rented a flatbed truck and proceeded down the West Side Highway, swerved into a bike path, killed eight people and injured 11. What was remarkable about that tactic was how unremarkable it had become, such a simple tactic, where with ISIS' encouragement, it was then the 15th vehicle-ramming attack in three short years.

One of the things that concerns me going forward is the potential for more creative and sophisticated inspired and enabled homeland plots than individuals simply employing small arms, improvised explosives, or ramming tactics. Generation Z is the first generation to have grown up exclusively in the internet age and is increasingly adept at using technologies, including disruptive technologies, in a way that can translate into increased lethality.

CTC: In your last position in government, you served as the national intelligence officer at ODNI for transnational threats. What near-term or over-the-horizon threats are you most concerned about? Where does the threat or potential threat of bioterrorism factor on that list?

Blake: I [will] offer thoughts in five different areas. One is this question of technology that we've touched on already. While technological advances have consistently led to CT successes, the technological advantage held by governments is being challenged by the ways in which our terrorist adversaries' use of technology is expanding. We're already seeing the use of unmanned systems [by terror groups] to film propaganda videos, conduct attacks, and publicize [their operational] successes. I think about the impact of advances in battery technology on terrorist tactics and capabilities, in allowing unmanned systems to travel farther, faster, and longer

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with bigger payloads, enabling greater standoff distance from the target, be they humans or critical infrastructure. New technologies create detection challenges. The blockchain eliminates the middleman in digital transactions, which makes detection much more difficult, and then [there's] the-end-to-end encryption challenge that we've been dealing with for years. Terrorists are likely to adapt and then exploit emerging technologies unavailable today that become more advanced and then widely available.

A second area is the chemical and biological terrorism threat. It's 27 years since Aum Shinrikyo released sarin gas in the Tokyo subway system. It seems like a lifetime ago. More recently, we had ISIS' repeated battlefield use of toxic industrial chemicals like chlorine, more traditional chemical warfare agents, sulfur mustard, and even the thwarted plan to use hydrogen sulfide in a chemical attack in Australia.[11] The COVID-19 pandemic has opened eyes to how a virus can disrupt society and its potential utility as a bioterrorism weapon, and vaccine development has increased focus on synthetic biology, which is a force for good, but I think it's worth noting that every technology can be as useful to bad actors as good actors. If people say, 'this will change the world,' we have to assume it will change it for bad as well as good.

The third area I would point out is operating space. There will always be insurgencies and conflict zones, but it's the ones with vulnerable populations that terrorists have successfully exploited that have produced our biggest CT challenges. Insurgencies, conflict, instability, often combined with weak governance, injustice, and corruption will continue to serve as incubators for terrorists to exploit. I like to compare the experience of an Afghan or an Iraqi born after 1979 to our own history of conflict on American soil. In the 200-plus years since the War of 1812, there [have been] fewer than 1,500 days of war in the continental United States, almost all during the Civil War, which ended 157 years ago. Afghans and Iraqis born after 1979 have seen more than 15,000 days of war and conflict in their lifetime. It should not be surprising that the operating space that conflicts in those two countries provided extremists played an outsized role for al-Qa`ida and ISIS.

The fourth area is Africa. A decade ago, there were a handful of jihadist terrorist groups [with] an ongoing presence in just a few

African countries. Today, more than 20 jihadist groups are active on that vast continent. The ISIS physical caliphate, at its height in Syria and Iraq, covered an area roughly the equivalent of my own state of Virginia. The countries where jihadists are operating in Africa today could easily encompass the continental United States. The groups are led by Africans, some of whom have been involved in local conflicts for decades but have calculated the benefits of rebranding under the al-Qa`ida or ISIS flag. Relying more on local partners is asking a lot in some of those African countries.

The fifth area would be the question of global discontent. It's on the rise. There are wider audiences embracing more ideologies, and we're seeing a blurring of ideologies. When I began my career, it was a bipolar Cold War world with multiple, active state sponsors [of terrorism], an array of nationalist and separatist terrorist groups and Iran's revolutionary zeal, and its principal export Lebanese Hezbollah. Yet, I ended up spending the vast majority of my career dealing with what was then an emerging threat from global jihadists. The only constant is change; we have to consider what might come next.

CTC: You've had 35 years of experience in the counterterrorism enterprise. There are young counterterrorism professionals embarking on careers now who are going to be spending the next 35 years perhaps focusing on this and other issues. What is your message for them, the new generation of analysts coming in, to help them on their way?

Blake: The enemy gets a vote on where terrorism fits in our crowded national security priorities list. In the last 42 years, there have been key developments in just a few weeks or days during 1979, 2001, and 2014-15 that have had outsized implications for the threat we faced and our CT approach. You will almost certainly deal with similar rapid disruptions that will recalibrate your work during your career.

The nature of the enemy you will face over your career will likely change. It did during mine. Terrorists espousing a wide array of adaptable ideologies will increasingly exploit the rise of global discontent and grievance culture, and levels of political instability at rates we have not seen since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Changes in terrorist leadership models, organizational constructs, primary conflict zones and operating space (virtual and physical), and propaganda and recruitment methods will likely reflect, and be influenced by, broader geopolitical and societal trends, and technological innovations. Your analytic judgments will be most useful to policy makers if they incorporate that same broad-based approach.

CT is a team sport that is part of broader foreign policy objectives in which U.S. actions are not the answer to every question. Terrorism will not solve itself, so it is your job to give policy makers your unvarnished assessments of where our actions or inactions are contributing to making it better or worse.

Technological advances are going to transform the way you engage the enemy, and collect, analyze, and work with your policy customer. Push your bureaucracy to be agile and early adapters of technologies that allow you to keep a step ahead and excel in all those areas.

CTC: On the al-Qa`ida question, you're an expert on the group, you've tracked it for a very long time, if you had to pick one mystery or one misunderstood aspect about AQ, what would that be? What is the al-Qa`ida terror plot that never happened that you were most concerned about and why? And besides bin Ladin, who in your view is the most significant AQ member that's been removed from the battlefield since 9/11?

Blake: One misunderstood [aspect] is continuing to equate today's al-Qa`ida network too closely with Usama bin Ladin's original model. He was the architect of the far-enemy attack strategy. There were others who opposed it before and after 9/11. One of the things that was remarkable was how soon after his demise that his approach lost some of its strategic currency. If you look at Ayman al-Zawahiri's 8 June [2011] eulogy, you start to see a shift in focus to what I've termed a near-enemy-plus approach—one that prioritized local and regional objectives and attacks against non-U.S. targets, which bin Ladin already viewed as a waste of limited resources that did little to advance long-term goals.

The [al-Qa`ida] network moved away from a central leadership model that wasn't feasible. The shift coincided with the rise of the affiliates and their independent mindsets, beginning with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2003. I would argue that his extreme independent streak created a roadmap for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to follow [with] the final severing of ties with al-Qa`ida and declaring himself caliph a decade later in Mosul's Great Mosque of al-Nuri. The [al-Qa`ida] affiliates lease the brand name while maintaining target prioritization and decision-making independence. Yet the [al-Qa`ida] network has maintained some level of cohesion in the face of ISIS' rise and global competition.

It is noteworthy that [the al-Qa`ida network] has failed to repeat a 9/11-style airline success in the United States. You look at the efforts: They were poised right after 9/11, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's planning for a second wave attack on the West Coast; the shoe bomber Richard Reid in December of 2001, in 2006, the U.K. aviation plot; al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula in 2009 and 2010, in 2014, the Khorasan group in Syria; 2016, there's a laptop detonated on a flight leaving Mogadishu by al-Shabaab, and [in 2020, it is announced that] one of their own Cholo Abdi Abdullah [has been] indicted for pilot training in the Philippines.[12] None of these efforts succeeded. The focus on aviation has continued but, at least with respect to al-Qa`ida, with no success.

To your question about the most significant al-Qa`ida member, I'm actually going to give you three, but for different reasons. The first two I mention for their creativity and tenacity. The first is Khalid Sheikh Mohammed for 9/11, his complex operational skills. The second is Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a thug who was arrested 37 times as a young man before he went on [to] lead an insurgency and form a competing organization that we are still dealing with today. And then third, American-born Anwar al-Awlaki, not just because of his leadership role in al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula when he went to Yemen, but also because of his enduring appeal to U.S. homegrown violent extremists, which still shows up in arrest affidavits more than a decade after his death. All three had repeatable and replaceable skill sets, yet no one of their caliber has since emerged in al-Qa`ida's stratosphere. **CTC**

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A Prison Attack and the Death of its Leader: Weighing Up the Islamic State's Trajectory in Syria

By Charlie Winter and Abdullah Alrhmoun

On January 20, 2022, the Islamic State launched a complex assault on Hasakah's Ghwayran prison, a place in which thousands of its fighters had been held since the 'defeat' of its territorial caliphate in March 2019. The attack was the first time that the group had directly targeted a major detention facility in Syria since losing its last significant territorial toehold in Syria, notwithstanding the consistent calls for prison breaks that have been uttered by its leaders during the last three years. Even though, according to the U.S. government, the attack failed to produce a large-scale prison break, it was, by a significant margin, the highest impact and most complex operation launched by the Islamic State in Syria since its territorial defeat. A complete dataset of the operation claims the Islamic State has published relating to Syria since March 2019 suggests Islamic State cadres in Syria may have been saving their energies to carry out a large strike, cutting through the notion that previous declines in operational activity were a sign of weakening or that the prison attack necessarily portends a resurgence. With its leader since 2019, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurashi, removed from the battlefield in a U.S. military operation in Syria in February 2022, it remains to be seen whether the group will return to 'normal' operations syncopated by occasional 'spectaculars,' or escalate its campaign of violence as it attempts to demonstrate any immediate tactical gains it made at Ghwayran and, simultaneously, showcase its ability to weather the storm of leadership decapitation. The data suggests that whatever the monthly ebb and flow of Islamic State operations in Syria, the group remains a latent and persistent threat.

I n the early hours of February 3, 2022, the leader of the Islamic State, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurashi, died during a U.S. military operation in northwest Syria that followed months of surveillance.[1] According to *The Washington Post*, "The picture of Qurayshi that emerged from the surveillance is that of a hands-on commander who was firmly in charge of his organization [...] His intensive involvement in operational planning made Qurayshi especially dangerous,

officials said."[2] [a] However, in the course of his two and a quarter years as caliph, al-Qurashi refrained from making any audio or video appearances, limiting his ability to provide strategic guidance to followers and making it unclear, at least at present, what the impact of his loss will be on the broader Islamic State movement.

For the Islamic State, though, all caliphs are important, and al-Qurashi's death was unequivocally a major symbolic blow.[3] It was not just the fact that U.S. forces had managed to identify and locate the most reclusive leader of the movement to date; it was that the raid came two weeks to the day after what was, as this article demonstrates, easily the Islamic State's most significant and impactful operation in Syria since well before its territorial defeat in 2019, an event that had energized its global cadres and in-country networks in a manner not been seen in years.[4]

The assault—which al-Qurashi was deeply involved in the planning of, per U.S. officials quoted by *The Washington Post*[5]— started when, on January 20, 2022, a vehicle bomb struck the

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a   In the wake of the operation that resulted in the death of al-Qurashi in his residence in Atmeh in Idlib province in northwest Syria, CNN reported that "a top ISIS lieutenant was on the floor beneath Qurayshi, facilitating day-to-day operations of the terrorist organization" and *The New York Times* reported that this lieutenant "along with a network of couriers, carried out his orders to ISIS branches in Iraq and Syria, and elsewhere in the world without using electronic devices." Kevin Liptak, Natasha Bertrand, and Nikki Carvajal, "Tense moments in Situation Room as Biden oversaw raid on ISIS leader that was months in the making," CNN, February 4, 2022; Eric Schmitt and Ben Hubbard, "Raid Targeting ISIS Leader Came After Months of Planning," *New York Times*, February 3, 2022. See also Craig Whiteside, "Shortest tenure of any movement leader and killed before he made a public speech …," Twitter, February 3, 2022.

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An aerial view shows the house in which the leader of the Islamic State, Amir Mohammed Said Abd al-Rahman al-Mawla, aka Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, died during a raid by U.S. special forces in the town of Atme in Syria's northwestern province of Idlib on February 4, 2022. (Aaref Watad/AFP via Getty Images)

gates of Ghwayran prison in the city of Hasakah, a place in which thousands of Islamic State fighters had been detained since March 2019 when the last vestiges of the group's territorial proto-state were routed by the global coalition and its local allies.[6] This attack—which coincided with a multi-pronged assault by Islamic State sleeper cells, an insurrection inside the prison, and a separate bombing at a nearby fuel depot—facilitated the escape of a large (though unconfirmed) number of militants and left hundreds dead and injured, before ultimately descending into a week-long siege.[7] While it was still ongoing, the Islamic State went to painstaking lengths to demonstrate that this was not just 'another' attack in Syria. Rather, it framed it as a new '*malhama*' ('epic battle'), the latest episode in its apocalyptic war against the enemies of Islam and something akin in significance to the pitched battles of Mosul, Raqqa, the Libyan town of Sirte, and Marawi in the Philippines.[8]

As of the time of publication, it remains unclear how many of Ghwayran's Islamic State inmates were able to escape. Autonomous Administration (AA) sources reported minutes after the first bombs went off that 20 had fled the prison, though this claim was walked back later that evening.[9] The following morning, a spokesman for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced that SDF security officials had detained some 110 inmates in the immediate vicinity of the prison and stated that the clean-up operation was ongoing.[10] On February 3, *The Washington Post* reported that by the time the prison was back in the hands of the SDF, "scores, maybe hundreds, of prisoners had escaped, free to raise the Islamic State's black flag and fight again."[11] Meanwhile, Islamic State sources on Telegram

have claimed that hundreds managed to break out, including "three senior leaders," a number that was later revised up to 800 by the Islamic State's Central Media Diwan.[12] However, there is no independent evidence to back the Islamic State's claims that so many escaped, and such claims need to be treated with extreme caution; U.S. national security advisor Jake Sullivan stated on January 30 that the group had "failed in its efforts to conduct a large-scale prison break to reconstitute its ranks."[13]

In the weeks since, the Islamic State has hailed the Ghwayran siege as a major strategic breakthrough for its insurgent prospects in Syria, with some of its supporters even going so far as to claim that it more than outweighed the death of al-Qurashi, the movement's elusive leader.[14 b] This article assesses the extent to which that is the case, considering in detail its operational trajectory in the country to date by drawing on a complete dataset of all Islamic State attack reports published from Syria since March 2019, the month during which the group lost its last significant territorial foothold in the country.

Even though these reports are, by definition, propagandistic in nature, the U.S.-led Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent

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b   On hearing news of al-Qurashi's death, one influential Islamic State supporter in the forum Haqiqat al-Sira wrote that it does not matter because, "thanks be to God, more than 280 prominent leaders of the state of the caliphate were freed [at Ghwayran]," Haqiqat al-Sira, Telegram, February 3, 2022.

Resolve (CJTF-OIR) has itself stated that they are 'largely accurate' as an indicative measure of Islamic State activity.[15] Moreover, separate research by this author and others has determined that, if anything, the Islamic State underreports in Syria, not overreports.[16] An as yet unclaimed bombing near Ghwayran prison on December 19, 2021—that is, almost one month exactly before the January assault—could be one potentially highly relevant example of this deliberate underreporting dynamic.[17] It is conceivable that, if the Islamic State was indeed behind this incident—which was the first explosive device detonated in Hasakah city in 2021—it was testing the waters to see how quickly the SDF was able to respond, but in a manner that did not draw attention to its capability in the city, which, as discussed below, was assumed to be lacking on account of its prolonged inactivity there. On that basis, it would make strategic sense for it to refrain from issuing an official claim regarding the incident.

In any case, this broad indicative accuracy means that, provided that they are only treated as strategic indicators of trends—as they are below—and not as definitive evidence of specific operations, the collective utility of these data points is significant. The analysis proceeds as follows. First, there is an overview of the Ghwayran prison attack itself, which draws on both the Islamic State's own account of the assault and the accounts of several non-Islamic State sources in northeast Syria, including that of the SDF. After that, the authors outline the data collection methodology before then using this data to consider the broader strategic context within which the operation occurred, weighing up just how significant or unusual it was for the Islamic State to conduct an attack of this kind.

When considered in aggregate, the data clearly attests to the fact that the Ghwayran prison attack was not simply 'par for the course' for the Islamic State within Syria. However, the data also cuts through the idea that it was the result (or the beginning) of a new period of resurgence for its network in the country. Instead, the data shows that the Islamic State never went away; rather, it has been a persistent and capable actor in the Syrian security landscape, especially in the northeast, throughout the time that has elapsed since its 'defeat' at Baghuz in 2019, which was wrongly hailed by the SDF at the time as the "total elimination of [the] so-called caliphate."[18] On that basis, the article concludes by discussing what may be next in Syria for the Islamic State, especially now that al-Qurashi—its leader since late 2019—has been killed: either a return to 'normal' operations syncopated by occasional 'spectaculars' or a period of heightened violence as it attempts to demonstrate any immediate tactical gains it made at Ghwayran and, simultaneously, showcase its ability to weather the storm of leadership decapitation.

The Attack

According to the SDF, the Ghwayran attack started when a car bomb struck the main gate of the prison just after 7:00 PM local time on January 20, 2022, which enabled several cells of Islamic State fighters to infiltrate the complex.[19] Simultaneously, thousands of inmates inside Ghwayran rioted, ultimately overpowering the guards and enabling some to barricade themselves in to defend against a counterattack and others to escape. The SDF claimed that these efforts were aided by the arrival of "a large cargo car [sic] loaded with weapons and ammunition" and a tunnel complex that "had been dug inside some houses" in the area.[20]

The Islamic State's account is similar, albeit with some additional details.[21] It held that the prison assault began when two foreign

fighters detonated suicide bombs (or, perhaps, a tandem vehicle bomb; the particular device was not specified) outside its gates, enabling two three-man cells of *inghimasi* operatives—essentially, special forces-style fighters equipped with suicide belts—to enter the prison and facilitate a breakout from within. Simultaneously, another three-man *inghimasi* cell was dispatched to attack an oil depot in the immediate vicinity of the prison to create a smokescreen to obstruct coalition intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, with a fourth assaulting a nearby SDF base to obstruct any immediate attempt at a counterattack. In contrast with the SDF's account, no mention was made of an arms-laden vehicle arriving in support of the insurrectionists, let alone a tunnel complex. Rather, the Islamic State claimed that the siege occurred as it did because its rioting supporters had been able to seize a weapons and ammunition store inside the prison after overpowering its guards, in the process taking dozens of hostages and opening up stable channels of communication with the Islamic State (including its Central Media Diwan, which subsequently went on to publish some six videos from inside the prison complex).[22]

A protracted battle ensued in the days that followed, with hundreds of inmates taking up arms against the SDF and, reportedly, U.S. and British special forces.[23] To try to lighten the pressure those inside the prison complex were facing—as well as to delay or undermine the 'People's Hammer' clean-up operation that was launched by the SDF to recapture escapees—Islamic State cells across northeast Syria, including in both Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor governorates, simultaneously launched dozens of other attacks, some sophisticated and others seemingly more opportunistic.[24] Reportedly, it was not long, however, before food and ammunition stocks ran out for the insurrectionists, which prompted them to open up a line of negotiations with the SDF, using the lives of the hostages they had taken to bargain for medical support and, ultimately, their own lives.[25] On January 26, 2022, after seven days of intensive fighting and dozens of coalition air raids, the siege abruptly broke when hundreds of Ghwayran's inmates surrendered, leaving a few small pockets of resistance to fight to the death in its northern wards.[26]

All in all, the Ghwayran prison attack was totally out of step with what had emerged as the Islamic State's 'normal' style of operations in Syria in the years leading up to it. As the next section demonstrates, the prison attack had significantly more impact, as well as more moving parts, than any other attack or campaign deployed by the group in Syria since March 2019. Notwithstanding the questions that remain regarding its overall impact—above all, how many actually escaped in the end, and who they were—this alone attests to the attack's strategic significance for the movement, which is assessed in more detail below.

Methodology

The dataset on which this assessment is based was collected exclusively from the Islamic State's closed-access feed on Telegram, a social media platform that the group favors for propaganda distribution.[27] In the August 2020 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, this author (Winter) wrote:

> In 2019, two outlets [on Telegram] were charged with distributing all official Islamic State communications [in relation to its activities]: the Nashir network, which was tasked with disseminating materials produced by central and provincial media units; and the Amaq News Agency, which

essentially acted as its newswire service. Operating alongside these was a separate, supporter-run dissemination hub called the Nashir News Agency. (note: despite the name, this entity is distinct from Nashir, which is internal to the Islamic State.) [Throughout 2019,] the Nashir News Agency aggregated all posts from both Nashir and the Amaq News Agency on a minute-by-minute basis.[28]

As of February 2022, this description of the Islamic State's propaganda and attack report distribution network remains true. Accordingly, it was from the Nashir News Agency that the dataset used for the present analysis was drawn, with a handful of additional 'exclusive' reports being collected from Al Naba, the Islamic State's newspaper, which the Nashir News Agency also publishes. Al Naba 'exclusives' are attacks that are not reported elsewhere by the Islamic State.

Once filtered so that it only contained Syria operation claims published since the defeat of the Islamic State at Baghuz in March 2019, this left 1,717 unique official attack reports relating to Islamic State activities in Syria (as of February 8, 2022), with each report corresponding to a single attack. Each of these claims was manually checked to make sure that no duplicate reports had found their way into the dataset. Once this had been done, they were inputted into ExTrac, an artificial intelligence-powered conflict analytics system co-founded by one of the authors (Winter), where they were automatically coded and analyzed according to several criteria, among them:

- Week and date of attack (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4);
- Lethality of attack (i.e., number of kills reported in each claim) (Figures 2, 3); and
- Longitude and latitude of attack location (Figure 5).

The incidents were also coded according to a number of details not visualized below, including weapons used in attack, attack type (i.e., ambush, assault, assassination, bombing, etc.), target (i.e., Syrian Arab Army, Syrian Democratic Forces, etc.), and target type (i.e., military, intelligence, civilian, government, etc.).

Operational Context

When the Islamic State's claimed activities in Syria are considered in aggregate, it is clearly apparent that the Ghwayran attack was a major departure from its 'normal' trajectory in the country.
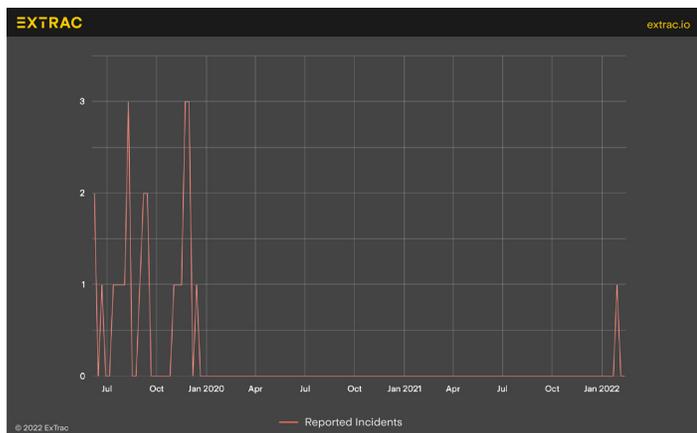

Figure 1: Islamic State self-reported attacks per week in Hasakah city since March 2019. Note that before the Ghwayran operation, the previous claimed attack was in December 2019.

As Figure 1 shows, it was its first self-reported attack in Hasakah city since December 2019, when one of its fighters lobbed a hand grenade at members of the SDF in, incidentally, Ghwayran district.[29]
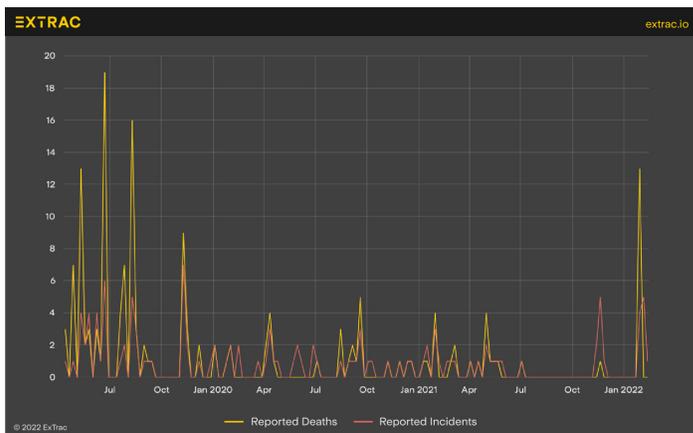

Figure 2: Islamic State self-reported attacks per week and inflicted fatalities per week in Hasakah governorate since March 2019 (red line: claimed attacks; yellow line: deaths the Islamic State claimed it inflicted). Note that the previous attack that caused more than one fatality was in spring 2021.

Figure 2, which visualizes all Islamic State self-reported incidents in Hasakah governorate (not just Hasakah city) since March 2019, further shows that the group had not claimed credit for an operation in the governorate since mid-summer 2021—aside, that is, from a short-lived surge in self-reported attacks in November 2021 that followed the foiling of a previous planned assault on Ghwayran prison (discussed in more detail below).

Figure 3 shows all the deaths the Islamic State claimed it caused across the whole of Syria since March 2019. It indicates that, by the Islamic State's own metrics, the Ghwayran assault was its most deadly attack in Syria by a factor of five.
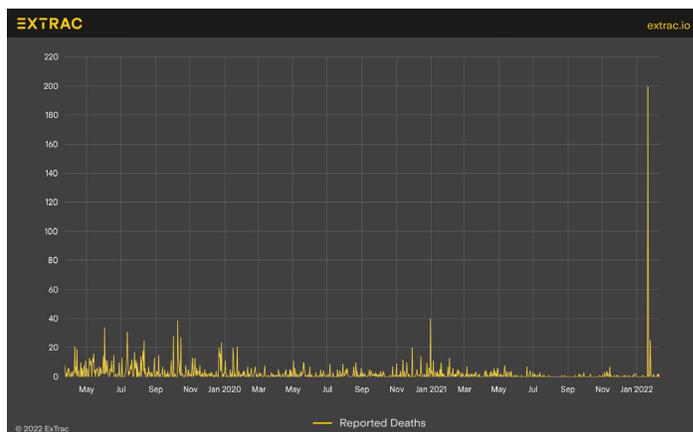

Figure 3: Fatalities caused by Islamic State attacks per day, as claimed by the Islamic State in Syria since March 2019

This data is unambiguous. It shows that the Ghwayran prison attack and the campaign that followed occurred in a part of Syria from which the Islamic State had not reported regular activity in years, let alone months. Moreover, the metrics speak to the unusual scale of the Ghwayran attack, which was far out of step with what the Islamic State has typically been reporting from Syria in previous

years.

The anomalous nature of the incident does not stop there. When all the Islamic State's Syria claims since March 2019 are taken into account (i.e., not just those from Hasakah city or Hasakah governorate), as is the case in Figure 4 below, the data shows that the prison assault occurred after a protracted lull in reported Islamic State activity in Syria. This lull dates back to July 2021, when, halfway through the month, there was a step-change in the number of attacks the Islamic State typically claimed on weekly basis. This saw its average monthly rate of reporting drop from around 50 claims a month to just five claims a month—and sometimes fewer.

At the time that it occurred, the reason for this precipitous and sustained decline was not clear. It could, for example, have simply been an indication that the Islamic State's capabilities were at a low ebb due to sustained SDF security operations. However, in view of the two sophisticated prison break attempts the group staged just weeks apart—with the first, which is discussed below, failing in November 2021 and the second succeeding in January 2022— it seems more likely that it was symptomatic of a decision by the group's leadership to lay low and prepare.[30]
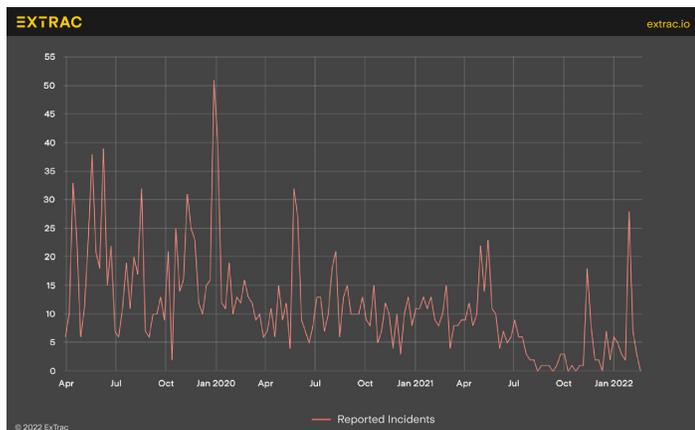

Figure 4: Islamic State self-reported attacks per week in Syria since March 2019. Note the sustained low operational levels in the late summer and early fall of 2021.

The idea that this apparent operational change came about because the Islamic State had opted to lay low so it could stage less regular but more impactful campaigns is even more plausible when the November 2021 surge in self-reported attacks is compared with prevailing trends over the course of the previous four months. (See the second-most recent spike in Figure 4.) As mentioned, this November 2021 surge, which was widely corroborated by non-Islamic State sources at the time,[31] occurred immediately after an SDF operation to dismantle an Islamic State cell in Deir ez-Zor governorate that was believed to be plotting an imminent operation on Ghwayran prison. (Notably, the failed plot—like the successful attempt two months later—would have involved several cells and suicide bombers.[32]) When it was foiled, northeastern Syria lit up with Islamic State activity. Indeed, in the space of a few days in November 2021, the group claimed more attacks than had been reported in the previous three months combined. Almost exactly the same pattern played out after the prison assault in January 2022, which is visualized in the most recent spike in Islamic State self-reported attacks in Figure 4 and also in the heatmap (Figure 5), which shows the geographic distribution of Islamic State self-

reported attacks in Syria while the Ghwayran siege was ongoing. It is notable with regard to this spike in operations that, according to *The Washington Post*, "the flow of messengers" to al-Qurashi's house in Syria increased after the prison attack.[33]

Based on this clear latent capability—which, considering these surges happened twice in quick succession, suggests both robust covert networks and access to significant munitions stockpiles— it is likely that the decline in Islamic State-reported operations witnessed since July 2021 was a strategic decision by the group rather than constraints forced on it. If this is indeed the case, then it is critical that the threat posed by the Islamic State's networks in Syria is not overlooked, no matter how 'quiet' it goes when reporting dries up.
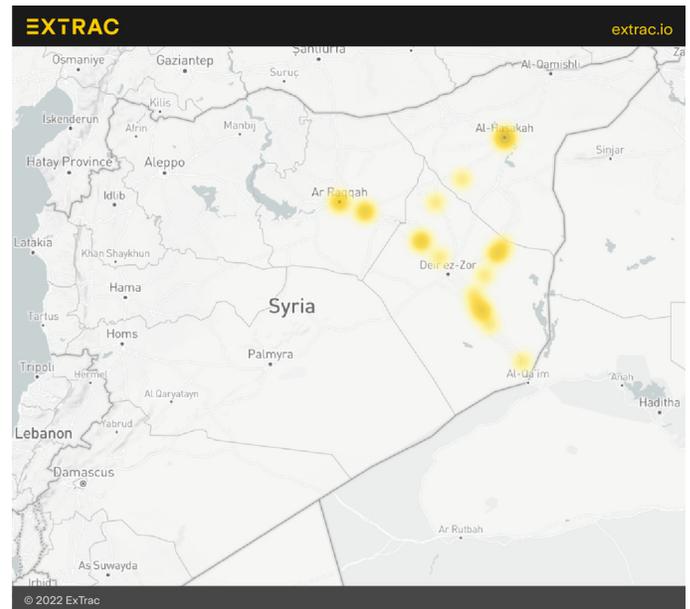

Figure 5: Location of the 29 self-reported Islamic State attacks between January 20 and January 26, 2022, during which time the Ghwayran siege was ongoing. The Islamic State did not self-report any attacks in Syria during the previous week.

Conclusion

The Ghwayran attack was the first time that the Islamic State directly targeted a major detention facility in Syria since it lost its last territorial foothold in Syria in 2019, notwithstanding the consistent calls for such attacks that have been uttered by its leaders in every major policy statement since its defeat at Baghuz three years ago.[c] As previous analysis published in *CTC Sentinel* has shown,[34] Islamic State affiliates elsewhere have targeted prisons a number times in recent years—orchestrating mass prison breaks in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in October 2020[35] and Afghanistan in August 2020[36]—but aside from one assault on October 17, 2019, on a temporary detention facility in western Raqqa governorate, the group had until January 2022 refrained from launching any such attacks in Syria since its territorial defeat.[37] This is likely due to the fact that, in contrast to the eastern DRC or Afghanistan, the prisons in northeastern Syria that hold Islamic State supporters have been

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c   The first such statement came in September 2019. See Richard Spencer, "Isis leader Baghdadi calls for prison camp raids in Syria and Iraq," *Telegraph*, September 17, 2019.

heavily guarded by the SDF with support from the global coalition. Accordingly, any attempted breakout from one of them was always very likely to be met with a protracted, intensive response.

The fact that al-Qurashi—who, per U.S. President Joe Biden, was "responsible" for the prison assault[38]—and his inner circle thought that the time was right for such a high-risk assault to go ahead, not once but twice (after the first plot failed), speaks volumes about their assessment of the insurgency in Syria. The reality is this attack would not have happened unless the Islamic State had been confident that its potential benefits would end up outweighing its potential drawbacks.

That is not to say, however, that the movement is on the cusp of a new period of ascendancy in Syria, especially now that its latest caliph has died. After all, there are several aspects that might have motivated the Ghwayran operation. One, of course, is the material goal of freeing inmates, a goal that served the Islamic State movement well during the 'Breaking the Walls' campaign in Iraq in 2012-2013, ultimately paving the way to its capture of Mosul in 2014.[39] But Syria in 2022 is not Iraq in 2012 (it is not as permissive a security environment for the group), nor is the Islamic State today the Islamic State of Iraq then (its network in Syria is not as well-resourced, nor does it have anywhere near the same degree of freedom of movement). On that basis alone, the Ghwayran prison assault may have been judged unlikely by Islamic State leaders to result in hundreds of successfully exfiltrated escapees. So, some other consideration may have pushed the Islamic State to have calculated that this attack—an operation that was certain to result in numerous deaths within its own ranks as well as a significant tightening of the security cordon in its aftermath—was worth it. Perhaps that calculation was based on its desire, or perceived need, to free a select few senior officials; or perhaps it was driven by a desire, or perceived need, to shake things up and demonstrate that three years after the collapse of its proto-state, it remains a relevant and capable actor in the Syrian war.

Whatever the case, moving forward, with its leader since 2019 now removed from the battlefield, it remains to be seen whether the Islamic State's network in Syria will return to 'normal' operations syncopated by occasional 'spectaculars' or, perhaps in tandem with its network in Iraq, escalate its campaign of violence as it attempts to demonstrate any immediate tactical gains it made at Ghwayran

and, simultaneously, showcase its ability to weather the storm of leadership decapitation.

Any such ramp-up across the two countries will face challenges. Given al-Qurashi's reportedly deep involvement in operations, it is possible his death will, at least in the short term, put a dent in the group's ability to plan major attacks. "This guy was working it," a former senior intelligence official told *The Washington Post*, which also reported that his underground network "included dozens of cells scattered across Syria and Iraq."[40] In light of what *The Washington Post* reported was a "trove of intelligence" collected in the surveillance that preceded the operation against al-Qurashi, "as couriers were tracked and subsequently monitored as they met with contacts in other parts of Iraq and Syria," these cells are now in a far more precarious position than they were before. Whether that means they go to ground for the near-term remains to be seen, but a series of complex Islamic State attacks in Syria during the second week of February 2022—one of which resulted in five SDF deaths[41]—suggests otherwise.

That being said, such momentary surges do not necessarily indicate overall strength and, according to a U.N. report published in February 2022, "In Iraq, ongoing counter-terrorism pressures have yielded positive results in reducing ISIL activities."[42] Recent data analysis of Islamic State attacks in Iraq by Michael Knights and Alex Almeida published in the January 2022 issue of *CTC Sentinel* corroborates this, "showing 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" with the group "increasingly isolated from the population, confined to remote rural backwaters controlled by Iraq's less effective armed forces and militias, and [lacking] reach into urban centers."[43] Yet, the United Nations stressed that the Islamic State "continues to operate as an entrenched rural insurgency" in both Iraq and Syria,[44] and Knights and Almeida noted that "analysts should leave a wide margin that some fraction of the Islamic State's decline in Iraq is, in fact, dormancy or latency that could be reversible under the right conditions."[45]

In Syria, the Ghwayran prison attack was an example of the latent threat posed by the Islamic State exploding into view. Whatever the monthly ebb and flow of Islamic State operations in Syria, the group is likely to persist as a threat for the foreseeable future.   **CTC**

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