



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

CTC SENTINEL

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THE COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT 20 YEARS



FEATURE ARTICLE

Reflections from the CTC's Directors

PAUL CRUICKSHANK

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Omer Bar Lev

FORMER MINISTER OF PUBLIC
SECURITY OF ISRAEL

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Thanks to Editor-in-Chief Paul Cruickshank for allowing me to take over this space this month as we commemorate the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Combating Terrorism Center, established at West Point in February 2003. Originally the vision of Mr. Vinnie Viola, Brigadier General (Retired) Russ Howard, and General Wayne Downing, the CTC has evolved into a trusted global hub for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. At the heart of what we do are the Cadets of West Point, who have made the Terrorism Studies Minor the number-one choice of minors at West Point over the last 10 years and who graduate to lead our nation’s Soldiers in complex times. This mission is empowered by 20 years of teammates, donors, partners, and stakeholders around the world who ensure the CTC is delivering cutting-edge research and insight in the fight against terrorism. While the CTC has been a mainstay of the CT fight for the last two decades, I posit that the most important time for this team is now. As national security priorities and resources rebalance toward strategic competition, the CTC will maintain its focus on understanding current and future terrorism threats to our nation and to the world, ready to assist our nation and our allies wherever we are called. To all who have made this possible, thank you.

In this issue, the directors of the Combating Terrorism Center over the past 20 years—Brigadier General (Retired) Russell Howard, Colonel (Retired) Kip McCormick, Colonel (Retired) Joseph H. Felter, Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Reid L. Sawyer, Colonel (Retired) Liam Collins, Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Bryan C. Price, Brian Dodwell and myself—provide our reflections on the contribution the Center has made to the counterterrorism enterprise.

In our interview Col. (Res.) Omer Bar Lev, the former Minister of Public Security of Israel, discusses recent security challenges in Israel and warns that a potential third intifada is “getting closer and closer.” Aaron Zelin examines Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s ‘counterterrorism’ campaign against the Islamic State in northwestern Syria. As concern rises over the threat posed by older far-right terrorists, David Wells examines relevant data in the United Kingdom.

Colonel Sean Morrow, Director, Combating Terrorism Center

Over 20 years, the CTC has had more teammates, partners, Cadets, and donors than we could ever hope to thank in one space. However, there is one teammate who has been doing the work with the CTC for the entire 20 years. Congratulations and thank you to Dr. Bruce Hoffman on two decades of service with the Center. Dr. Hoffman is the CTC’s only Senior Fellow who has been in the trenches with the Center since day one and continues to this day. From all of us at the CTC, thank you for your leadership, insight, wisdom, partnership, and friendship.



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

Cover: Cadets are pictured at the United States Military Academy at West Point (U.S. Army)

The Combating Terrorism Center Turns 20: Reflections from its Directors

By Paul Cruickshank

Brigadier General (Retired) Russell Howard served as the director of the CTC between 2003 and 2005. He also served as the Head of the Department of Social Sciences at West Point. He later served as the director of the Jebson Center for Counter Terrorism Studies at the Fletcher School at Tufts University and directed the terrorism research program of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey. He is currently the President of Howard Consulting Services and a distinguished senior fellow at Joint Special Operations University.

Colonel (Retired) Kip McCormick served as the director of the CTC from 2005 till the beginning of 2006. He subsequently served as Defense Attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Seoul, South Korea. His prior service in the U.S. Army included working as Chief of Staff, United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission in Seoul. He is currently the Associate Pastor of Cornwall Church and the Chaplain for Whatcom County's Sheriff Office in Bellingham in Washington State.

Colonel (Retired) Joseph H. Felter, PhD served as the director of the CTC from the end of 2005 till 2008. He later served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia between July 2017 and September 2019. He is currently the Director of the Gordian Knot Center for National Security Innovation at Stanford University. His prior roles at Stanford included serving as Co-Director of the Empirical Studies of Conflict Project and Director of the Hacking for Defense Project.

Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Reid L. Sawyer served as executive director of the CTC between 2003 and 2008 and director between 2008 and 2012. Between 2013 and 2015, he served at U.S. Central Command, including as the Chief of the Operational Assessments Group. He previously served as a senior advisor to the FDNY from 2003 to 2015 and as an Advisory Board Member at University of Chicago's Project on Security and Threats. He is currently a Managing Director at Marsh McLennan, where he heads the Emerging Risks Group, and leads U.S. Cyber Risk Consulting.

Colonel (Retired) Liam Collins, PhD served in leadership roles at CTC between 2009 and 2012, first as executive director then director. He is currently the executive director of the Viola Foundation and the Madison Policy Forum. Between 2015 and 2019, he served as Director of the Modern War Institute at West Point. Among his previous roles, between 2016 and 2018 he served as executive officer for the then U.S. Senior Defense Advisor to Ukraine for Defense Reform, General (Retired) John Abizaid.

Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Bryan C. Price, PhD served as the director of the CTC between 2012 and 2018. He previously served

as an Apache helicopter pilot, with combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, and as an Academy Professor at West Point. He was Founding Executive Director of the Buccino Leadership Institute at Seton Hall University from 2018 to 2022. Today, he is the founder of Top Mental Game.

Brian Dodwell served as the director of the CTC between 2018 and January 2021, and has served as executive director since January 2021. Previously, he served as deputy director between 2014 and 2018. Prior to that, he served as Operations Branch Chief at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security National Exercise Division.

Colonel Sean Morrow has served as the CTC's director since January 2021. He has served in a variety of roles in the U.S. military including as Battalion Commander in the United Nations Command in Korea and a Battalion Operations officer and a Brigade Executive Officer for the 10th Mountain Division in southeastern Afghanistan.

CTC: What in your view has been the overall contribution of the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) to the CT enterprise?

Howard: Educating cadets for what they will encounter in their future careers has been the Combating Terrorism Center's most important contribution. Providing newly minted counterterrorism specialists an opportunity to teach, learn, and conduct research while beginning their careers is a close second. Enabling the CT community a publication platform to share research has also been an important CTC contribution.

McCormick: I agree with Russ. One of the things I love most about the contribution of the CTC to the CT enterprise is how it plants seeds about CT in the lives of the cadets. We have no idea how those seeds will be nurtured over the years. However, we can be sure that there will be a group of young women and men who become experts in this field because of what they learned through the CTC. We tend to focus on the big muscle movement projects that move forward the CTC vision and mission. But in reality, it's those day-to-day actions with the cadets that have the long-term impact on the CT enterprise.

Felter: I believe one of the most significant contributions of the Combating Terrorism Center to the CT enterprise is a fundamental appreciation of the importance of understanding the hostile ideology driving violent terrorist attacks against the U.S. and her allies and partners, and that the best way to discredit and delegitimize this ideology is through the words and discourse of individuals (e.g., scholars and thought leaders) whose opinion and ideas resonate with these extremists. In my first Senate testimony as CTC Director, for example, I argued that "You can't capture, kill, or incarcerate an idea" to underscore the importance the CTC placed

“Educating cadets for what they will encounter in their future careers has been the Combating Terrorism Center’s most important contribution. Providing newly minted counterterrorism specialists an opportunity to teach, learn, and conduct research while beginning their careers is a close second.”

- Brigadier General (Retired) Russell Howard



Brigadier General (Retired) Russell Howard

on effectively addressing the root causes—not only the symptoms—of terrorist attacks.

A second important contribution of the CTC is the role it has and continues to play in identifying and making important information on terrorist threats available to the broader scholarly and policy community given its unique position and trusted relationships.

Sawyer: The Combating Terrorism Center’s contribution to the overall CT enterprise was and remains significant in three ways, starting, as has already been pointed out, with the first part of the mission we designed: educating cadets. For a generation, the CTC has educated future leaders on the complexities of the evolving threat environment, challenging their thinking about critical issues relating to CT, homeland security, and more broadly understanding the world around them.

The second dimension, equally tied to the original vision of the Center, speaks to the intrinsic value of the CTC and that is its ability to remain focused on the longer-term issues, its rigorous research, and its willingness to challenge convention. Prior to 9/11, there was a dearth of institutional CT knowledge, let alone an independent institution, that was focused on the deeper currents rather than the surface turbulence. Finally, the CTC occupies a unique position sitting at the intersection of academia, policy, and operations, which enables it to inform and shape thinking for each of these audiences.

Collins: I became the director towards the end of the Center’s first decade. By this time, my predecessors had already built the CTC into a powerhouse that was well integrated across the CT enterprise. They had created a Terrorism Studies Program for the cadets at West Point that include a minor, and the CTC was teaching counterterrorism to the FBI and other government agencies around the United States. The *CTC Sentinel* had been around for three years and was a “must read” for CTC professionals around the world.

In 2009, we established the General Wayne A. Downing Scholarship Program to provide U.S. Army officers with graduate school education. We felt it was important to invest in the intellectual capital of our very best, and often our most deployed, officers. We started with only two the first year, but it has been so successful that we now select up to eight each year. As a testament to the program’s success, 100 percent of Downing alumni have been selected for battalion command, and JD Keirse, the current commander of the 75th Ranger Regiment, was a Downing scholar.

Price: I’m not sure there’s another entity as unique as the CTC. First, I don’t know of another organization that has the CTC’s three-pronged mission of teaching cadets and CT practitioners, publishing original research, and briefing CT professionals both at the tip of the spear and at the most senior levels of our government.

Some think-tanks in the CT world would call it a successful year if they hosted a 4-star general, an ambassador, and a SEAL Team commander. That’s a regular week at the CTC. That access provides a comprehensive insight into the threat that no other organization has in the CT space.

Additionally, most of the CTC’s faculty have top secret clearance, which provides researchers the ability to engage with material, operators, and policymakers on the classified side. Finally, you have the fact that the CTC is financially independent from DoD and privately funded through donations via the Academy’s 501(c)(3). It doesn’t have the constraints placed on other DoD think-tanks that limit their creativity and their research agenda.

This special combination creates the conditions for an unparalleled understanding of the terrorism threat. In my opinion, that’s the CTC’s special sauce.

Dodwell: It’s difficult to add to the excellent comments from my friends and colleagues above, and I wholeheartedly agree, especially with the emphasis on the mission of training and inspiring the next generation of CT leaders, a mission that continues to be the beating heart of the CTC. Without the grounding experience of walking into a classroom of this nation’s best and brightest every day, we would not be as effective in all the other things we do.

In terms of the CTC’s research mission, the genius of Russ [Howard] and his team was that, from its foundation, they structured the CTC in such a way that we could maintain our focus on those larger, strategic questions that continue to challenge the terrorism studies field—the kind of deep research that Reid [Sawyer] discusses above. Over the past several years, the U.S. national security architecture has undergone a shift away from what was likely an over-emphasis on the counterterrorism mission. While a rebalancing across a wider range of missions is healthy, we as a community tend to struggle with doing multiple things at

“One of the things I love most about the contribution of the CTC to the CT enterprise is how it plants seeds about CT in the lives of the cadets. We have no idea how those seeds will be nurtured over the years. However, we can be sure that there will be a group of young women and men who become experts in this field because of what they learned through the CTC.”

- Colonel (Retired) Kip McCormick



Colonel (Retired) Kip McCormick

once. And so, if history is any guide, we now run the risk of over-correcting, and turning a blind eye to the very significant threat that remains from terrorism and violent extremism.

The CTC has experienced pressure during this period to deviate from its original CT-focused mission. Thankfully, given the structure created by our founders and the generosity of our donors and partners (providing the independence that BP [Bryan Price] described), the CTC has remained committed to maintaining an unblinking eye on the terrorism problem set, while also demonstrating an ability to adapt and explain how this problem set is inextricably linked to broader strategic competition.

Our core operational partners, those who never deviated from the CT mission, have consistently expressed to us how much they value our persistent focus. So, in addition to helping to prepare future Army leaders to think critically about terrorism and counterterrorism, the CTC's enduring contribution to the CT enterprise is going to continue to be original research that meets the needs of the operational community.

Morrow: CTC continues to make three key contributions to the CT enterprise. First are the cadets and Downing Scholars we educate every year and the impact they have at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of our national security enterprise. Second, CTC is the people who have served here and who have built a global reputation as independent, rigorous, and trusted partners. Not only do CTC teammates make a lasting impact while at West Point, but they continue on to even more impactful roles in government, business, and academia. Last, CTC serves as a crucial bridge across stakeholders in the CT enterprise. CTC never takes for granted the tremendous access we have, and CTC understands the responsibility to judiciously share that access and the insights that it holds so that the counterterrorism enterprise can maintain and increase pressure on the threats.

CTC: Looking back, what was the key work done by the Combating Terrorism Center during your tenure as director? What are you most proud of? What are your favorite anecdotes?

Howard: Imagining the early design and securing the funding for the Center from Vincent Viola were the two most important things I did as the first CTC director. Vinnie's original financial contribution

gave the CTC the “capitalization” required to make an early and sustained impact on combating terrorism. Hiring General Wayne Downing and Bruce Hoffman was a close second. Having General Downing on the CTC letterhead gave the CTC instant access to the halls of Congress and the White House. Having Bruce's name on the letterhead gave the CTC instant credibility in the halls of academia, think-tanks, and the research establishment.

Key work during my tenure included publishing the “West Point” series of CT-related textbooks (seven altogether) and providing CT policy guidance to DoD, DoS, and other government agencies.

With regards to policy guidance, most people don't know but the CTC's early, personal discussions with Governor Tom Ridge had some influence on what was to become the Department of Homeland Security.

Reid Sawyer deserves credit for the early “West Point” series of “Terrorism/Counterterrorism” textbooks published by McGraw Hill. He oversaw the publication efforts, which entailed a lot of work. However, the efforts were valuable not just to students and the general public but also the CTC. The books were edited volumes featuring articles by the best terrorism and counterterrorism experts of the time. We, Reid and I, had to read all of the submitted articles for publication, which made both of us better informed subject matter experts and also acquainted us with the authors, many of whom became important friends and contacts for the CTC.

McCormick: My tenure at the CTC was short but a total blast (2005-2006). Department Head Colonel Russ Howard asked me to lead it after my good friend Reid Sawyer was selected for the PhD program at Columbia. I could barely spell “terrorism,” being a Northeast Asia/Russia/Balkans Foreign Area Officer. The good news is that Reid had formed a solid team with a firm foundation that was ready to expand the CTC's footprint.

Jarret Bachman was a CTC employee and, at that time, a PhD candidate with an entrepreneurial spirit and a sharp mind to go with it. He introduced me to William McCants, a brilliant scholar



Colonel (Retired) Joseph Felter

with that same entrepreneurial spirit. He had done some work with us in the past. Jarret and Will had this bizarre idea to look at, in their eyes, what really fueled al-Qa`ida. Without going into details, we got the green light to go to SOCOM and brief the project to get some funding for it.

During that SOCOM briefing, things were a little testy (read, “not favorable”) in the room until, midway through the presentation, Will pointed out a hole in the al-Qa`ida link analysis diagram the SOCOM folks had hanging on a wall in the room. It was a stroke of genius. He and Jarret spoke their magic of how we could help fix holes like that in their analysis and the rest was history. We received a significant funding grant that would give us the means to shift gears at the CTC. With that, we were able to lay down the roots for what would become the Harmony Project.

We brought on Clint Watts, poured into the then recent hires Lianne Kennedy-Boudali and Thalia Tzanetti, and made Will McCants a fellow at the CTC. We leveraged other SOSH [West Point Department of Social Sciences] faculty to help us do the work. We started doing some projects we felt would move the needle forward in the war. Colonel Joe Felter would step into the fray (he could spell “terrorism”) and after I’d leave, he’d lead the CTC to the next level. These guys would remind me of that great leadership lesson: Surround yourself with people of character who have the expertise, give them right and left limits, and then let them do their job. I was so fortunate to be surrounded by such heroes.

Felter: I came to SOSH from a Stanford PhD program in summer of 2005. Brigadier General Russ Howard was transitioning out with Mike Meese as SOSH Head. Russ was my former SF Group Commander, and I will be forever indebted to him for his support as an SF company commander in Okinawa through my selection for SOSH and tenure as CTC Director. Kip McCormick followed Russ Howard as CTC Director that summer, and I had the privilege of taking the reins from Kip in December 2005 when he was promoted to Colonel and PCS’d [permanent change of station] from USMA.

“One of the most significant contributions of the Combating Terrorism Center to the CT enterprise is a fundamental appreciation of the importance of understanding the hostile ideology driving violent terrorist attacks against the U.S. and her allies and partners, and that the best way to discredit and delegitimize this ideology is through the words and discourse of individuals (e.g., scholars and thought leaders) whose opinion and ideas resonate with these extremists.”

- Colonel (Retired) Joseph Felter

I stayed on as Director from December 2005 until PCS’ing to my War College Fellowship at Stanford in August 2008.

I felt like my tenure spanned the transition of the CTC from a “startup” that was somewhat internally focused on our priority mission to educate cadets (James Forest, [our] Director of Education, was doing an extraordinary job) to a more established center with an expanded emphasis on its research and policy outreach. My farewell plaque presented by General Abizaid and the team at the time remarked that we had finally “come out of the garage” as a nod to the center moving beyond its startup phase at last!

To be clear, everything we accomplished during my tenure is a tribute to the extraordinary drive, selflessness, and commitment to excellence of our center members, Distinguished Chairs, and SOSH/USMA leadership. It was a privilege to work with and lean in with this amazing team.

The things I am most proud to be associated with during my time as director include two broad areas:

- 1) Helping build and empower an amazing team of “insurgents” as our Chair General Wayne Downing described us (to list a few would mean leaving out many others; they know who they are!) and
- 2) Leveraging this team and the unique position and access we enjoyed as a quasi-independent center at West Point to (a) prepare cadets for the extraordinary challenges that they would face when commissioned at the height of the GWOT [Global War on Terror] and (b) supporting practitioners engaged in the CT fight with insights gleaned from our research that helped them understand and address real terrorist threats.

When it comes to specifics, I’m proud of the work we did on CTC’s Harmony project. Taking a hand-off from Russ Howard and Kip McCormick and ensuring that we further established, operationalized, and exploited the Harmony Project with SOCOM—e.g., taking the first limited tranche of cleared documents



Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Reid Sawyer

and making them publicly available via the CTC through our first publication using *Harmony* (*Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting Al-Qa`ida's Organizational Vulnerabilities*¹) as well as completing and publishing the Militant Ideology Atlas, an intensive project led by Will McCants and coordinated by Jarret Brachman to map ideological influence using a citation analysis. Follow on *Harmony* reports included *Al-Qa`ida's (Mis)adventures in the Horn of Africa*.² CTC XO [executive officer] Clint Watts led that effort.

I'm also proud of our launch of CTC's flagship publication *CTC Sentinel* in late 2007. The CTC was hitting hard with its education mission, and we believed we could expand the impact of the center and develop a regularized "battle rhythm" if we published a periodic journal that would help position the center as a thought leader in the field that we knew we could be. We dedicated the *Sentinel* to our recently passed Chair General Wayne Downing in the lead article of that first issue. Jarret Brachman and Director of Research Brian Fishman were on point for this, but all leaned in to get this off the ground.

During my time as director, the work the CTC did on the Sinjar Records³ was another standout contribution. We were provided a trove of information from recently captured documents from the Iraqi border town of Sinjar describing the background and experiences of foreign fighters entering Iraq from abroad. I set up an "in house" data coding effort where we coded key fields of information from the foreign fighter dossiers into a database and used statistical analysis tools to paint a picture of where these foreign fighters were coming from, why they joined, how they joined.

CTC also did important work on Iranian influence in Iraq during my time at the helm. Brian Fishman and I deployed to Iraq with the 75th Ranger Regiment and then RCO Colonel Richard Clark to support a JSOC task force charged with addressing malign Iranian influence in Iraq. I can't go into much more detail than that, but the experience provided extraordinary access to information on the

“While terrorism will continue to evolve and be centered in the physical dimensions, the evolving technological dimensions of the threat will certainly manifest in ways we have not seen to date ... We will face new challenges. This is the strength of the Center—that it is an enduring institution, committed to focusing on near-term and over-the-horizon challenges.”

- Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Reid Sawyer

activities of Iraqi Shi`a militia members that trained in Iran and returned to Iraq to conduct deadly attacks on U.S. and coalition forces—e.g., employing the devastating milled shaped-charged IEDs known as EFPs (explosively formed penetrators)—and IRAM [Improvised Rocket Assisted Munition] rockets. Drawing on primary sources and declassified *Harmony* documents, we authored a report⁴ that revealed for the first time the depth and degree of Iranian penetration into the Iraqi government and the details of how the Shi`a militias were recruited, moved to Iran for training, and supported when they returned to Iraq to attack U.S. and coalition forces.

There are so many good anecdotes. Hours after publishing *Harmony* and *Disharmony*, I received calls from multiple USG sources telling me that we had violated classification rules. Fortunately, our SOCOM sponsors backed us up. I naively put my email address as a POC for the report and got well over 1,000 emails!

Then there was the time Ayman al-Zawahiri put out a tape that featured the CTC—with its crest!—and specifically the work of Jarret Brachman and Will McCants claiming that the CTC publications were misguided and should not be believed!^a

We liked to aim for the skies at CTC, sometimes literally. I remember when CTC's then Executive Officer Clint Watts and I met with Ross Perot on his private jet to update him on CTC progress and secure his continued support on a flight from D.C. to Chicago. He loved the CTC, and it was well worth the trip to join him—it was the only window free he had.

Then there was the time Brian Fishman and I pulled an all-nighter to complete the Sinjar Records report. I was the data guy crunching the numbers and sending Brian findings and Brian putting all into context. It was like Elton John and Bernie Taupin in "Between 2 Rooms"! At another time, Brian and I deployed to Iraq to support JSOC. The helicopter we were flying from Balad to

a Editor's Note: At another point, Usama bin Ladin wrote, "Please send all that is issued from the combating terrorism center of the American military." See "Request for Documents from CTC," Declassified Material – May 20, 2015, Bin Laden's Bookshelf, Office of the Director of National Intelligence.



Colonel (Retired) Liam Collins

Baghdad unexpectedly “tested” its machine guns over the Euphrates River. Needless to say, this more than got Brian’s attention!

Sawyer: I am most proud of the relationship we developed with the New York City Fire Department. The Center was barely established when FDNY leadership approached West Point to assist with its rebuilding efforts and the development of its post-9/11 strategy. What started with a simple meeting in Lincoln Hall at West Point led to a 20-year relationship, beginning with the development of a graduate course taught first to the most senior leaders of the [Fire] Department and over time now includes company grade officers accelerating the learning opportunity afforded by the partnership. First conceived by Ms. Kate Frucher, then Special Assistant to the Fire Commissioner; First Deputy Commission (then Chief) Joseph Pfeifer; Chief Peter Hayden; Chief (and later Commissioner) Salvatore Cassano; Chief John Norman; and Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta, the Counterterrorism Leadership Program proved transformational, impacting a generation of officers and assisted the Department in defining its strategy. Moreover, the CTC assisted the FDNY in establishing its own center, the FDNY Center for Terrorism and Disaster Preparedness, which has made immeasurable contributions to the Department, New York City, and the broader Fire Service.

The hallmark of a great partnership is the investment made by each party, and the FDNY has done a great deal for West Point and the Army, including hosting the CTC’s Homeland Security Course (first established by Alex Gallo) teaching the cadets about crisis management, providing internships for the likes of now Congressman Pat Ryan (NY-19th), CTC alum such as LTC Adam Scher (White House Fellow), and Mr. Kyle Brengel (former 10th SFG(A)). It is hard to overstate the impact these two storied institutions have had on one another and will continue to do so into the future.

Collins: We released many great reports during my time as director, but two stand out. On May 3, 2012, we released *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?*⁵ This was the first report to analyze some of the documents that were captured during

“History has shown that terrorism constantly evolves. Therefore, we must constantly study it so that we do not underreact or overreact to terrorist threats, because when we do, we often exacerbate the challenge and the threat. What guides our scholarship over the next 20 years should be the same thing that has guided our scholarship over the past 20 years: rigorous academic research that is designed to inform good policy decisions.”

- Colonel (Retired) Liam Collins

the Abbottabad raid in which bin Ladin was killed. We worked extremely hard to complete the report after receiving the first batch of declassified documents. I did not anticipate the demand for the report nor the inability for our server to handle it, so our website crashed when we released it. People had to go to other news media outlets, who had posted our report before our system crashed, to read and download the report. The report was the lead news story around the world on the day we released it.

We also released *Challengers from the Sidelines: Understanding America’s Violent Far-Right*.⁶ While the violent far-right has featured much more prominently in the media in recent years, back in 2013, it was not getting the attention it deserved and our understanding of these groups was not where it needed to be given the threat these groups posed to the United States. The report generated a lot of pushback, but it was clear that many of those who criticized the report had not read the executive summary, let alone the report. Ultimately, it was an important contribution to the literature that helped practitioners better understand the threat.

Price: Without hesitation, I’m most proud of our people. Being an Army officer, it was the first time in my career that I had the opportunity to hire people and build a team, and that team was special.

We made the deputy director a civilian post and created the director of research position. We revamped the *CTC Sentinel* and created the “A View from the CT Foxhole” series. We also revamped our website, making it easier than ever to search, sort, and display the vast research the CTC has done over the years.

For the first time in our history, we created a special course called Combating Terrorism and hired subject matter experts in Africa and South Asia. On the research side, we established the CTC Perspectives line. I was also proud of our work on ISIS, foreign fighters, hostages, terror group designations, and the prescient work done on extremist right-wing terrorism.

We quadrupled the number of internships for our cadets, including new placements on the National Security Council,



Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Bryan Price

JSOC, and the State Department. We bolstered the Downing Scholar program and executed Senior Conference in 2015 for the Department of Social Sciences, which was focused on innovative approaches to the CT threat.

Finally, testifying in front of Congress in 2016 on the CT lessons learned since 9/11 remains one of my most cherished personal and professional highlights.

Dodwell: I think I probably had a bit of a different experience than my predecessors. I came into the Director role as the first civilian to hold the position, having been asked to take on this role during a two-and-a-half-year gap between military leadership. It's important to emphasize how grateful I am that Colonel Suzanne Nielsen (SOSH Head) told me I was the Director, not the Interim Director, and gave me her full support to lead our amazing team accordingly (something I couldn't have done, by the way, without Rachel Yon, the CTC XO and my deputy in all but name). In addition, I came into the position having served in the Center for eight years prior to taking on the role (and continue to serve today). So in terms of discussing the things I'm most proud of from my tenure as Director, it's difficult for me to disaggregate all the amazing things that happened over the full 13 years that the CTC has been my home. I feel an attachment to all of it.

Having served as BP's deputy for four years, I was extremely lucky to have learned from one of the best leaders out there (and someone who's now made a whole second career out of leadership education!), so my goal when I took the job was to not only maintain the amazing momentum we had built up, but also to live up to BP's mantra of relentless improvement. As he mentioned earlier, it's all about the people and the team, so one of the things I'm most proud of is how we were able to expand an already amazing group of researchers by adding expertise in some areas of critical importance for the future of the CTC, to include the Iran Threat Network and terrorist innovation and use of technology.

Also in the category of relentless improvement was the work

“Some think-tanks in the CT world would call it a successful year if they hosted a 4-star general, an ambassador, and a SEAL Team commander. That's a regular week at the CTC. That access provides a comprehensive insight into the threat that no other organization has in the CT space.”

- Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Bryan Price

we did to reinvigorate our research with the special operations community on captured material. After the early successes of the Harmony Program, there had been a lull in the release of this material. It took a persistent effort by our team, in cooperation with a core group of innovative thinkers on the operational side, but we gradually got the spigot reopened. We started this effort during my time as deputy, and by the time I was director, the CTC was again producing innovative research using primary source materials to better understand our adversaries. Importantly, these projects were directly tied to requests from our operational partners, who were generous with their time and resources, to include supporting multiple deployments of CTC team members overseas to collect data and better understand the needs of the force. This high level of engagement helped to ensure the relevance and impact of our work. None of this happens without the brilliance and hard work of my partners in crime on this effort: Daniel Milton, Don Rassler, and Muhammad al-`Ubaydi.

The ultimate demonstration of the CTC's impact at the nexus of academia and operations was the so-called al-Mawla Project. This effort, which resulted in the publication in 2020 of several articles and the release of 56 Tactical Interrogation Reports⁷ of the then-leader of ISIS from his time in custody a decade earlier, was the perfect marriage between operators, academics, and journalists. Each group brought their unique skills to bear, resulting in an end product that had demonstrable impact.

Morrow: I inherited an organization that was extremely well led by Brian Dodwell and stands on the shoulders of giants before him. In just two short years, I already have a book full of favorite anecdotes. Last fall while briefing foreign military attachés, one raised his hand to let us know that in his attaché training, they are explicitly told to read the *CTC Sentinel*. I asked the room if any other attaches read *CTC Sentinel*. Of the 40 senior officers in the room, all but a few said they do. On another occasion, Brian Dodwell and I were overseas at a major CT conference. The director of a foreign national counterterrorism center said hello and made small talk. She only seemed mildly interested in what we did until she heard we publish CTC reports and the *Sentinel*. She then made the connection and enthusiastically said that they read everything that CTC publishes. In late December 2022, as-Sahab, the media wing of al-Qa`ida, referred to “research by the Combating terrorism center issued by the US military academy in West Point which is considered the most advanced in America.”⁸ When your adversaries are reading



Brian Dodwell

your output, you know it must be valuable.

At this stage of my tenure, however, it's not the research and accomplishments of the team that I am most proud of, but rather how the team is evolving in the face of change. The nation placed many demands on the Combating Terrorism Center during what CTC senior fellow and former Acting Director of the CIA Michael Morell called "the great war of our time,"⁹ and CTC exceeded those expectations.

As attention, priorities, and resources turn away from the CT fight, I offer that the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point might be more valuable to America in the next 20 years than it was in the previous 20 years. As others turn attention elsewhere, we will continue to educate cadets, officers, scholars, and practitioners to think through the complex challenges posed by terrorism. CTC will never succumb to the zeitgeist. We won't yield to the pressure to be everything to everyone. I borrow something Ruth Bader Ginsburg quoted in her description of the law through the eyes of the Supreme Court, because it applies perfectly to the current study of terrorism and counterterrorism: "the Court should never be influenced by the weather of the day but inevitably they will be influenced by the climate of the era."^b

Our nation's national security priorities must ebb and flow to meet the world where it is, and where it will be. Terrorism might not present the same existential threat that other actors pose. However, terrorism will also never go away. CTC's value to the nation is that we will continuously prepare cadets, scholars, and practitioners with the tools to face the threat now and in whatever form or shape it may re-emerge. To summarize it, although I am early in my tenure, I am most proud to be on a team that somehow evolves constantly

"In addition to helping to prepare future Army leaders to think critically about terrorism and counterterrorism, the CTC's enduring contribution to the CT enterprise is going to continue to be original research that meets the needs of the operational community."

- Brian Dodwell

without ever forgetting our enduring purpose.

CTC: How do you see the evolution of the terror threat landscape and counterterrorism challenges? How do you see the evolution of efforts by the scholarly and practitioner community to understand the problem set? What needs to guide our scholarship over the next 20 years?

Howard: I worry that present-day emphasis on Great Power Competition will take our collective eyes off the terrorist/counterterrorism ball. The United States is not in an either-or situation. Instead, it is all of the above. The CTC will make sure we (nationally and internationally) keep our eyes on the ball.

McCormick: We tend to discount the precise nuts and bolts of religion in this CT landscape. Our fear of offending, especially when it comes to religious ideologies and naming the specific issue, can be *the* issue. All religions have specific areas that can be exploited and twisted by people bent on doing damage and wreaking havoc. Those exploited areas don't necessarily represent the complete ideology of that given religion. We have to be able to step into those areas and not sugarcoat what is happening and how these bad actors are using their twisted interpretation of a given religion to achieve their ends.

Felter: America must maintain a disciplined commitment to understanding the nature of the prevailing terrorist threats and investing in sufficient CT capabilities despite competing threats and budget priorities. Counterterrorism scholarship, including by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, should help us to remain vigilant in this commitment to continuously strive to identify, understand, and provide insights and recommendations to help practitioners interdict these threats.

Difficult decisions and compromises lie ahead for policymakers in determining the appropriate allocation of resources to defend against terrorist threats concurrent with prevailing in the competition with strategic rivals and addressing other threats to U.S. vital and important interests. Counterterrorism scholarship, including by the CTC, can help us make appropriate compromises and tradeoffs based on the real and enduring nature of the threat of terrorism.

No president or political leader can unilaterally declare that our war against terrorist threats like those responsible for catastrophic events like the 9/11 attacks is over—our enemies get a vote!

^b Editor's Note: Justice Ginsburg stated: "A great constitutional scholar Paul Freund once said, 'the Court should never be influenced by the weather of the day but inevitably they will be influenced by the climate of the era.'" Transcript: Interview with Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, New York Public Radio, September 16, 2013.



Colonel Sean Morrow

Sawyer: While terrorism will continue to evolve and be centered in the physical dimensions, the evolving technological dimensions of the threat will certainly manifest in ways we have not seen to date. Whether from further exploitation of commercial UAS [unmanned aircraft systems] platforms or leveraging dimensions of the forthcoming metaverse, we will face new challenges. This is the strength of the Center—that it is an enduring institution, committed to focusing on near-term and over-the-horizon challenges.

Collins: History has shown that terrorism constantly evolves. Therefore, we must constantly study it so that we do not underreact or overreact to terrorist threats, because when we do, we often exacerbate the challenge and the threat. Thus, what guides our scholarship over the next 20 years should be the same thing that has guided our scholarship over the past 20 years: rigorous academic research that is designed to inform good policy decisions.

Price: Not surprisingly, one of the few constants in the field of terrorism is change. Who could've predicted the pace and scope of ascendance of ISIS?

Our national security strategy documents provide one interesting medium from which to observe the evolution of the threat landscape. Almost two years after 9/11, the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism stated that the enemy was not one person or a single regime, nor a religion. Instead, it stated “the enemy is terrorism,”¹⁰ which in hindsight seems a very broad and unrealistic mandate given that terrorism is a tactic. In 2006, an updated CT strategy declared the new focus was a “transnational movement of extremist organizations, networks, and individuals.”¹¹ In 2011, the focus changed yet again, this time on “al-Qa’ida and the defeat of its affiliates, adherents, and ideology.”¹² The 2018 version declared our principal threat was radical Islamist terrorist groups.¹³

What should be the CT focus in the next couple of years? For me, three topics come to mind. First, how will the combination of technology, AI, and misinformation contribute to political

“As attention, priorities, and resources turn away from the CT fight, I offer that the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point might be more valuable to America in the next 20 years than it was in the previous 20 years. As others turn attention elsewhere, we will continue to educate cadets, officers, scholars, and practitioners to think through the complex challenges posed by terrorism.”

- Colonel Sean Morrow

radicalization? Second, how will climate change and the resulting energy, water, and food shortages accelerate terrorist threats? Third, how will transnational groups use drone technology to conduct terrorist attacks against the U.S. and our allies?

Dodwell: Again, my predecessors have done an excellent job covering the key challenges we will face moving forward. Keeping pace with the change and evolution highlighted by Liam [Collins] and BP [Bryan Price] will be one of our prime challenges, especially in an era of reduced funding for CT activities. One of the key evolutions is the continued diversification of the terrorism threat. It's not as simple as highlighting, as many have, the increased threat posed by domestic terrorism. Many of the new threat actors we face (and even some of the old ones) do not neatly fit into one of the traditional buckets the terrorism studies field has historically used to categorize threats. Our research efforts must grapple with this nuance to help inform tailored CT policies to combat specific threats.

I would also double-down on BP's mention of the impact of technology on violent extremism. I agree that we need to tackle the important questions he raised regarding AI, misinformation/disinformation, and Unmanned Aircraft Systems. To those, I would add the challenges posed by developments in the chemistry and biology fields that impact the availability and potential use of chemical and biological weapons by a wider range of actors. The CTC tackled this topic in a recent pair of special issues¹⁴ that we hope added value to the field and will prompt further scholarship and policy discussion.

Morrow: The challenges of countering terrorism over the next 20 years will likely be characterized by speed, the intersections and alliances of states and non-state actors, and the challenges of information and disinformation. A concern I have is that studying terrorism is no longer in vogue. Those in the field across academia and in policy and practice continue to do critical work at the cutting edge of scholarship, technology, and practice. While I don't have data at hand to support this, it seems that it is harder and harder to find young people choosing to focus their studies and their life's work on terrorism. However, the good news is that the challenges I

listed in the first sentence above lend themselves to attract brilliant minds. Those who study the complexities of political violence, international relations, technology, and disinformation will be well suited to quickly adapt those skills to the challenges imposed by the threats of terrorism. Much like terrorism is a tactic, so are the skills which can detect, deter, disrupt, and in some cases defeat those who use terrorism to challenge our nation and the world. It is up to practitioners, scholars, and policymakers to leverage assets and organizations like the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point

to ensure a small cadre of professionals and future officers maintain the knowledge and networks to integrate historical CT experts with the up-and-coming talent to face the future challenges posed by terrorism. The CTC will serve as a trusted global hub inside and outside of government, continuously monitoring and understanding current and evolving VEO [violent extremist organization] threats, and ready to bring our knowledge and network to scale as threats emerge. **CTC**

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CTC-ICT Focus on Israel: A View from the CT Foxhole: Omer Bar Lev, Former Minister of Public Security of Israel

By Stevie Weinberg

Col. (Res.) Omer Bar Lev served as Israel's Minister of Public Security in Israel's previous government between 2021 and 2022. Bar Lev began his Knesset career in February 2013 when he represented the Labor Party in the 19th Knesset. Prior to entering politics, Minister Bar Lev enjoyed a long career as an entrepreneur and CEO of several Israeli high-tech companies, primarily in the medical and defense fields. Before that period of his life, he served as the commander of the IDF's Special Forces. Early in the 1990s, Bar Lev served as a member of the IDF's delegation for negotiations between Israel and the PLO and took part in the negotiation of the 1994 peace agreement with Jordan. He is currently a senior fellow at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at Reichman University.

Editor's Note: This interview is the third in a series of articles and interviews examining the terrorist threat landscape in Israel and the lessons other countries can learn from Israel's counterterrorism efforts. The series, launched in June 2022, is a joint effort between the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC) and the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at Reichman University in Israel.

CTC/ICT: You served as Minister of Public Security until late 2022. What were the main challenges you faced? More specifically, considering the late January 2023 terrorist attacks in Jerusalem, including the shooting attack outside a synagogue,¹ and the volatile situation in the north of the West Bank,² what is your assessment of the current situation, and what are the lessons learned from the spring 2022 terror wave in Israel,³ if any?

Bar Lev: I took office a little over a month after Operation Guardian of the Walls.^a I do not want to make any generalization, but at that time, the violence on the 'Arab street' was my number-one challenge. First to stop its expansion and second to reduce it. Simultaneously, I also had to deal with Arab riots in mixed cities and the south of Israel (and to a much lower degree, riots by Jewish extreme right-wingers).^b These, a by-product of Guardian of the Walls, were a strategic surprise for all of Israel's law enforcement and

intelligence agencies as well as the government and the public at large. Therefore, my equally important challenge was to prepare to prevent [another wave of] such violence in case a similar situation were to develop in the future (i.e., a round of hostilities that spills into internal riots in Israel), so that we would be in a position to suppress it in a shorter time frame than it took us in 2021 (between 72-100 hours). A third and ever-present challenge was contending with the series of terrorist attacks that intensified.

It should be noted, all of the above dynamics influence and feed one another. In hindsight and given the short time frame I was in office, I am happy that we were effective in contending with these challenges. In addition, the crime statistics in the Arab society are a testament to that. The number of murders dropped from 126 in 2021 to 106 in 2022; the number of confiscated illegal weapons increased by 50 percent for handguns and 80 percent for long barrel guns. This represents a loss of tens of millions of ILS [Israeli new shekels] to the criminals who trade in illegal guns. The number of indictments also rose by dozens of percentage points, etc. The last year shows clearly measurable, quantifiable improvement on all fronts and in all sectors of the Israeli society.

That said, restoring the sense of personal security for Israeli citizens is a long process that must start with demonstrating that we are restoring security on the streets, and the first to feel the positive effect of what we did were the Israeli Arabs. In addition to what we did on the ground, we also initiated legislation changes (e.g., minimum sentence for illegal weapons offenses).

Another part of the equation shows that creating deterrence and restoring governability is not the sole domain of the Ministry of Public Security. We need legislation (minimum sentencing) and actual court sentencing because a sentence that does not deter the criminal is ineffective. Regarding the riot scenario that materialized during Operation Guardian of the Walls, it was clear to me that the Border Patrol is and should be the National Guard. Unlike the U.S., in Israel the Border Patrol is integrated into Israeli Police and therefore having the police commissioner as the commander of the Border Patrol makes a lot of sense. To contend with riots such as the ones that occurred during Operation Guardian of the Walls, we need two elements: assuming the riots erupt without a prior warning, the "blue" cops provide first response, and every police district will do that within the borders of its sector and for that we built an orderly plan wherein the field officers will be reinforced by officers currently in office/admin positions. While they are holding the line, the Border Patrol will mobilize and step in.

That said, it should be noted, the Border Patrol has three "legs" (active-duty officers, reserve officers, and volunteers). In the 2022 budget, we added 300 active-duty officer positions, and during the year, we added another 200 positions to a total increase of 17 percent of the active-duty troops. Further, on the eve of Guardian of the Walls, we had 16 Border Patrol companies of which eight were equipped and eight did not have enough equipment. During

a Editor's Note: Operation Guardian of the Walls was an IDF military operation launched in May 2021. The IDF stated that it destroyed 1,500 terror targets and that more than 4,400 rockets were launched from Gaza toward Israel by Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) during this cycle of hostilities. For more information, see "Operation Guardian of the Wall," IDF, June 14, 2021.

b Editor's Note: In May 2021, "a wave of mob violence between Jews and Arabs spread across several Israeli cities, leading to riots and attacks in the street." Patrick Kingsley, "As Gaza War Escalates, New Front Opens in Israeli Cities," *New York Times*, May 12, 2021.



Omer Bar Lev

2022, we built and budgeted a plan to first equip the above eight companies and add over three years another 26 companies. The third “leg” is the Border Patrol volunteers, which are active mostly in the rural parts of the country and currently stand at about 7,000-strong. These volunteers will have their full gear at home so that within six hours they can be with their company where they are needed. We were able to accomplish that as well.

With the above reorganization, we were able to cut down dramatically on the time it should take the Border Patrol to intervene and quash riots that erupt without prior warning.

The example for the success of the above strategy was during Operation Breaking Dawn^c that started just before Tisha B’Av.^d In preparation for the holiday, which usually sees a large number of Jews going to the Temple Mount, I deployed the “blue” police to prevent potential riots and activated 10 Border Patrol Reserves companies.

c Editor’s Note: On August 1, 2022, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) arrested the head of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the West Bank. PIJ threatened to retaliate, and the Israelis identified a direct threat from the terrorist group in Gaza. In response, the IDF launched Operation Breaking Dawn targeting the PIJ in Gaza. During the hostilities, PIJ fired hundreds of missiles toward Israel. After mediation from Egypt, a truce was reached between the two sides after three days of clashes. For more, see “Everything You Missed On Operation ‘Breaking Dawn,’” IDF, August 7, 2022, and Nidal Al-Mughrabi and Maayan Lubell, “Israel and Palestinian militants declare Gaza truce,” Reuters, August 9, 2022.

d Editor’s Note: Tisha B’Av is a fast day in the Jewish calendar that represents the destructions of the Temple in Jerusalem.

CTC/ICT: In early February 2023, the CIA Director William Burns stated, “I was a senior US diplomat 20 years ago during the Second Intifada, and I’m concerned — as are my colleagues in the intelligence community — that a lot of what we’re seeing today has a very unhappy resemblance to some of those realities that we saw then too.”⁴ What is your assessment of the risk of a third intifada?

Bar Lev: Each intifada has its own characteristics. The First Intifada was very different from the Second Intifada and probably the third intifada will be different from the previous ones. As such, it will take some time before it is recognized and acknowledged.

Some are saying that we are already in the beginning of the third intifada, and maybe they are not mistaken. Whether or not it’s obvious that we’re there yet, we are getting closer and closer to it, and it is only a question of when we will be there and recognize it.

CTC/ICT: What is your view on the role of technology in today’s policing and counterterrorism?

Bar Lev: In essence, the role of technology is to have a more efficient use of manpower (e.g., sending out a drone to monitor a territory is far more efficient than to send a police officer to do the same work; sophisticated traffic cams are better solution than posting a police officer 24/7). In the case of cameras, a major concern is of course the invasion of privacy (either with the photograph itself or the storage and use of the information on it within the police databases, as is evidenced by several court cases); however, the

issue of privacy and human rights applies to other technological means such as wiretapping, etc. As technology moves at a much faster pace than legislation, there should also be clear guidelines as to the implementation of the technology in a manner that will not infringe on human rights even if the legislation is not yet in place.

Another technological advancement of concern is connected to the struggle for perception—for example, the rapid spread of fake news on social media that can incite or disrupt public order. To contend with that, we established a “Perception Center” in Jerusalem whose job is to identify such cases and respond to them in real time, which is the key here. For example, a Palestinian terrorist tried to kill an innocent person in Jerusalem and was killed by police rushing to the scene. Some Palestinian social media groups tried to establish a narrative that Israeli police killed an innocent Palestinian (even though the entire terrorist attack was videotaped). In this case, the perception center identified the full video showing the entire attack (from CCTV and other sources) and posted the entire attack on social media to refute the claims from those Palestinian social media groups. Another example was when Hamas posted there were riots in the Damascus Gate vicinity, but in reality, nothing was happening so the center posted a live stream from the area to social media to refute the claim.

Other systems are monitoring open-source information to identify and isolate potential terror attackers and/or public order disruptions, etc.

CTC/ICT: How has the relationship between the Ministry of Public Security and other security agencies, such as the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the Israel Security Agency ([ISA, aka Shin Bet], evolved during your tenure?

Bar Lev: The more relevant relationship for the Ministry is with the ISA, and in this case, I am happy to say the relationship has greatly improved both on the tactic and strategic levels, especially the latter. Here too, the question is, how do we work together while respecting human rights? For example, I was scheduled to visit a certain Arab town, and during the preparation of the visit, the district commander had informed me that the mayor had ties to an organized crime family. The crime family was instrumental in discouraging potential political rivals from putting their names up for election, and this helped a particular candidate win the election. Now, in my eyes, this was a matter for the ISA as well because part of the ISA’s job is to protect Israel’s democracy and democratic state institutions. Such cases are not just criminal cases but also threaten the Israeli democratic institutions, and so I got them involved.

The relationship improved dramatically after the riots that occurred at the time of Guardian of the Walls because we all realized that we need to work closely with one another to avoid another surprise like we had. On a personal level, it also helped that the head of the ISA was one of my soldiers in the IDF, but the

important thing is the institutional realization on both sides that a deeper cooperation is needed, all within the mandate of the ISA, the police, and [the] confines of the law.

Regarding the IDF, cooperation was very good but more technical in nature. For example, to add the Border Patrol companies I mentioned above, I needed the cooperation of the Minister of Defense because without his signoff, this could not have happened as he is the one authorized under the law to mobilize reserve troops. Also, we had a few waves of terrorist attacks, so I asked and received IDF troops to assist (not replace) police officers. And during that secondment, I insisted (and the Minister of Defense agreed) that the troops be under the command of and report to police officers. There is also close cooperation with regard to controlling the demarcation of the “green line”^e in the sense that the police is in charge of law enforcement within the “green line” and the IDF is in charge of this within Judea and Samaria [the West Bank]. We also formed joint task forces on ad hoc projects (e.g., there is a Border Patrol company whose job is to handle weapons and ammunition thefts from IDF bases).

CTC/ICT: What is your assessment of the threat to Israel and Israelis posed by the Iran threat network (Hezbollah/pro-Tehran Iraqi Shi`a militias/Houthis)?

Bar Lev: Israel does not have any external existential threat, but the closest to one is the Iranian nuclear threat. At the time, I thought that the American withdrawal from the nuclear agreement was a mistake, and I still think so, as now the Iranians are a few months away from achieving nuclear capabilities. That said, going back to the original agreement would be another mistake in light of Iranian activities, and I am happy that the U.S. now realizes that as well. If we return to an agreement, it needs to be a stronger and more comprehensive one. I also would like to add that there is no doubt that the IRGC should be labeled as a terrorist organization.

We cannot predict what actions Iran will take with regard to its nuclear program, but what we do know is that strong cooperation with the U.S. is a key component in countering the Iranian threat network. There is a very positive aspect to the military cooperation with the U.S. as it serves two goals: first, we train together and prepare for a scenario that if and when it arises, we will be able to accomplish the mission together, and second, it serves as a deterrent to Iran. **CTC**

e Editor’s Note: “The Green Line is a term used to delineate the demarcation line between Israel, Jordan, Egypt and Syria from the period following Israel’s 1948 Independence War until the 1967 Six Day War when Israel captured the West Bank, and East Jerusalem from Jordan, the Gaza Strip from Egypt, and the Golan Heights from Syria. It is reportedly named for the green pen used by officers negotiating the armistice in 1949 to delineate the borders between the countries.” “Glossary Term: The Green Line,” Anti-Defamation League, May 3, 2022.

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Jihadi ‘Counterterrorism’: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Versus the Islamic State

By Aaron Y. Zelin

Once allies in the same organization, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Islamic State have an interesting history that turned them into ‘frenemies’ from April 2013 to February 2014 and then outright enemies over the past nine years. This led to a broader global fight between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. Yet, HTS continued to tread its own path by breaking from al-Qa`ida in 2016. From the spring of 2014 to the summer of 2017, the main avenue by which HTS and its predecessor group, Jabhat al-Nusra, dealt with the Islamic State was insurgent infighting. Yet since the summer of 2017, as HTS consolidated control over areas in northwest Syria and developed a governance apparatus, HTS has favored a lawfare approach to dealing with Islamic State cells in the territory it controls. Surveying the data on its arrest campaign against the Islamic State over the past half decade suggests HTS has been successful in countering the Islamic State. Yet, even if its fight against the Islamic State is deemed a net positive, HTS’ continued support for terrorism abroad and the authoritarian nature of its governance make it difficult for the West to countenance removing the group from the list of designated terrorist groups or engage with it.

Since Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) broke from al-Qa`ida in the period July 2016-July 2017,¹ it has sought to build up different forms of legitimacy.² One way it has attempted to show its bona fides as a legitimate actor and local government has been to conduct a form of ‘counterterrorism’ against the Islamic State. This is distinguished from the overt military fighting between the two groups in 2014. Unlike battlefield fighting, this is in the context of a governance structure that ostensibly has monopoly on violence over a particular territory. This effort is mainly being conducted not by HTS’ military apparatus but by HTS’ General Security Service (GSS),³ one of many administrative and security bodies set up in northwest Syria and portrayed as independent of HTS, but in reality closely

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connected with it. Essentially, the GSS is HTS’ version of the FBI, though existing in an authoritarian framework and with far less sophisticated means of forensic investigation.

While this article will only focus on the case of HTS, it is worth noting that this sort of ‘counterterrorism’ has also been happening in Afghanistan since the Taliban’s seizure of power in mid-August 2021. The Taliban’s General Directorate of Intelligence has also gone after various Islamic State cells.⁴ Of course, in both cases, there are limitations to these so-called ‘counterterrorism’ efforts. In the case of the Taliban, for example, there is no effort against al-Qa`ida or other regional jihadi groups. Not much has changed on this front since the Taliban’s first state in the 1990s. The Taliban have been gaslighting the international community about al-Qa`ida by repeatedly denying its presence in Taliban-controlled territories. Following the U.S. killing of al-Qa`ida’s leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in late July 2022, for example, the Taliban put out a statement claiming “the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has no information about Ayman al-Zawahiri’s arrival and stay in Kabul.”⁵ They issued this denial despite the fact that it has been reported that al-Zawahiri was living at a home owned by a top aide of the Taliban’s interior minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani, and that subsequently the Haqqanis⁶ covered up evidence of the airstrike.⁷

This article will explore various checkpoints in the history of HTS’ relations with the Islamic State. First, it will provide background on the early relations between the two groups. Then it will explore the Islamic State’s former ‘Wilayat Idlib’ in 2013 to better highlight that the group’s interests in the area are not new. This will lead to showing how the Islamic State transitioned from attempted territorial control over the area to a terrorism campaign before looking into how HTS’ GSS then combated the Islamic State’s campaign. It will then assess what this all means in the context of HTS’ push for international legitimacy over the past few years.

Early Relations Between HTS and the Islamic State

Abu Muhammad al-Julani originally led Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), a predecessor group of HTS, as a project of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), a predecessor group of the Islamic State.⁸ Unlike the typical *modus operandi* of jihadis at the time, when JN built itself up in Syria over the course of 2012, it increasingly did so not as some isolated, clandestine organization, but rather in open collaboration with other insurgents fighting against the Assad regime. Through providing basic social services and not targeting ideological rivals in the early years of the civil war, JN was able to become more embedded within the social fabric of the population. The initial fruits of this labor were seen after the United States designated JN as a foreign terrorist organization and an extension of ISI in December 2012. In response, the Syrian opposition and rebels backed JN.⁹

While JN’s success grew, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi likely became concerned that JN would break off from him completely, as al-

Julani was reportedly ignoring al-Baghdadi's requests to begin liquidating opposition activists and rebel factions that were deemed 'un-Islamic' (meaning most, if not all, from ISI's perspective).¹⁰ In all likelihood, al-Baghdadi had intended for the subsumption of JN under ISI and ISI's formal expansion into Syria anyway, but al-Julani seemed reluctant to go along with this move. Thus, without al-Julani's agreement, al-Baghdadi announced the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (also called the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, ISIL) in April 2013, asserting that JN was a mere extension of ISI and the time had come for it to be formally subsumed under ISI to form ISIL.¹¹ It seems al-Baghdadi partly intended to force al-Julani to make a public decision on his relation with ISI: Either he would be cowed into the merger, or he would make clear his real agenda. Rather than accepting al-Baghdadi's authority, al-Julani pivoted and pledged *bay`a* (a religious oath of allegiance) to Ayman al-Zawahiri, moving JN outside the ISIL orbit.¹² In doing so, al-Julani had also likely intended to have al-Zawahiri intervene in the dispute in his favor. While al-Zawahiri did so in ordering ISIL to return to Iraq as ISI while nonetheless cooperating with JN, ISIL rejected this order, which constituted a de facto confirmation of ISIL's having left the al-Qa`ida network. A number of JN's foreign fighters and more hardline members accepted al-Baghdadi's side of the dispute and defected to ISIL. ISIL's attempts to expand its power in insurgent-held territories in Syria at the expense of other factions led to outright fighting between it and those other factions, with JN eventually siding actively with the latter in Syria by spring 2014, thus cementing the splintering of the jihadi movement.¹³

It took a while for the relationship between JN and ISIL to break down. Even when al-Julani rebuffed al-Baghdadi's announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham in April 2013, al-Julani praised him for the help in providing essential resources when JN was created:¹⁴ "that honorable Shaykh who gave the people of al-Sham their right ... he aided us ... despite the hard days that [ISI] was enduring."¹⁵ Similarly, the two groups continued to conduct joint operations together alongside other jihadi and more mainstream insurgent groups. The most notorious of these incidents was the 'A'isha Umm al-Mu'minin"¹⁶ campaign against Alawi territories in rural Latakia in August 2013. While JN and other groups described it as the "Battle to Liberate the Coast in Rural Latakia," ISIL called it "Cleansing of the Coast Operations."¹⁷ Human Rights Watch later concluded that "the killings, hostage taking, and other abuses committed [from this operation] ... rise to the level of crimes against humanity."¹⁸

Even in mid-December 2013, just before ISIL was ejected from many Syrian rebel enclaves in Idlib and Aleppo provinces in late December and early January 2014, al-Julani explained in an interview with Al Jazeera that the situation between JN and ISIL was "a conflict between individuals within the same house."¹⁹ This illustrated the frame within which al-Julani at the time still viewed ISIL.

While JN, on the whole, initially tried to stay out of the rebel infighting with ISIL, the situation became more irreconcilable once al-Qa`ida released a statement on February 2, 2014, disaffiliating itself with ISIL and after ISIL's assassination of key al-Qa`ida liaison and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyah (HASI) senior leader Abu Khalid al-Suri on February 23, 2014.²⁰ Regarding the latter, al-Julani called ISIL out for hypocrisy stating that Abu Khalid's killers are just like the *sahawat* (Awakening Councils) in Iraq that turned away from ISI in favor of the United States: "Oh



Members of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra together during Eid al-Adha in mid-October 2013 (Photo provided by author)

you disgraced people, have you not known the meaning of 'Sahawat' and who they are? The *sahawat* in Iraq are those who abandoned fighting America and the *rafidhah* [derogatory term for Shi'a], and began fighting the mujahidin alongside the enemy. As for in al-Sham, who are those who have abandoned fighting the *nusayri* [derogatory word for Alawis], and started fighting those that the *nusayris* fought?"²¹

Al-Julani was willing to concede some validity to ISIL's stance on certain factions, saying: "We don't deny that among those fighting you are groups who have fallen into apostasy and disbelief, as is the case with the General Staff [of the Free Syrian Army (FSA)], the coalition [the political opposition in exile] and those who undertake the project of the 'National Army' through which they strive to establish a secular government and destroy the sound Islamic project." However, he then added that "it has not been proven that the majority of the groups that fight you have fallen into apostasy or disbelief," likely referring to the "Islamic Front" factions that had become involved in the infighting with ISIL.²²

After Abu Khalid's assassination, JN took increasing steps to distinguish its approach and methodology from that of ISIL. JN released an essay clarifying its *manhaj* (methodology), partly in response to claims by ISIL that it had 'deviated' but also aimed at refuting claims that it (JN) was an "extremist takfiri group," clearly trying to distance itself from the idea that it was somehow indistinguishable from ISIL.²³ In April 2014, JN released a video explicitly condemning ISIL's *manhaj* by showcasing an ISIL assassination operation that targeted a JN official and also killed members of his family and relatives.²⁴

History of the Islamic State in Idlib Region

The Idlib region is where HTS controls much of its territory today, alongside small parts of western Aleppo province. However, at one time prior to its aforementioned ejection, ISIL exerted varying degrees of control in a number of cities and villages in 2013. It is worth understanding this history since it provides crucial backdrop to the fact that while the Islamic State no longer controls areas in the region that HTS governs now, it does have a history there, which is why it is not surprising that the Islamic State continues to have cells there, likely supported by historical networks that established their roots 10 years ago. When one triangulates data on the ISIL presence in 2013 with its attack claims in the region and HTS' campaigns against Islamic State

personnel and cells since HTS began to consolidate its control over the area in the 2016-2017 timeframe, one can gain a better picture on the hot spots of the Islamic State activity in the areas that HTS now controls. Before synthesizing the relevant data, it is helpful to look at ISIL's so-called Wilayat Idlib in 2013-2014.

Wilayat Idlib

The case of Wilayat Idlib in Syria is an interesting one, insofar as ISIL never truly had full control over the entire area that was supposed to encompass the province. Furthermore, the events described below took place before the *fitna* (discord) between ISIL and the revolutionary, Islamist, and other jihadi forces in northern Syria in January 2014. As a result of that infighting, a thinly stretched ISIL decided to consolidate its presence around Raqqa, effectively giving up on the idea of territorial control of Idlib for the foreseeable future.

Figure 1 shows 25 cities and villages in ISIL's self-styled Wilayat Idlib where it can be determined with reasonable confidence that the group had been in full control (dark blue), had taken a dominant position vis-à-vis other insurgents (medium blue), and/or, at the very least, was one group among other insurgent factions (light blue) before being ejected in January 2014.^a

In June or July 2013, around the time ISIL began to make its presence known by starting to take over pieces of territory in Idlib governorate, its relations with other insurgent factions were different and more complex than they are now. Since January 2014, clear lines have been drawn between the Islamic State and the other insurgent groups. Ultimately, given the Islamic State's conception of itself as the only true Islamic state in this day and age (something that was already very apparent in 2013), the group ultimately had a coercive agenda vis-à-vis other factions: Either those factions would need to willingly join it or be subjugated. Nonetheless, for various reasons, these other factions were willing to tolerate ISIL at the time. Among the rationales was that fighting the group would distract from fighting the Assad regime, the belief that ISIL was ultimately part of the same 'team' in the sense of the ultimate end goal of an 'Islamic' project and/or caliphate, and appreciation for some of ISIL's contributions on the fighting fronts. Effectively, there was some unwillingness to recognize ISIL's self-conception and agenda for what they were, which gave the group time to build its strength in a way that it likely could not have done if other groups had decisively militarily confronted it from the get-go.

Even before ISIL made its caliphate announcement, rallies calling for the caliphate to be restored were staged in cities under JN control, like Binnish, where the Islamic State would gain full control.²⁵ There are also numerous reports that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself went from Iraq into Syria (Aleppo and Idlib) in February-March 2013 to drum up support among foreign fighters in the lead-up to the ISIL announcement.²⁶ This gave ISIL a foothold in some of these areas, as well as elsewhere in northern Syria. It also facilitated the group's efforts to gather intelligence on its opponents, whom it would later attack and kill. A local source

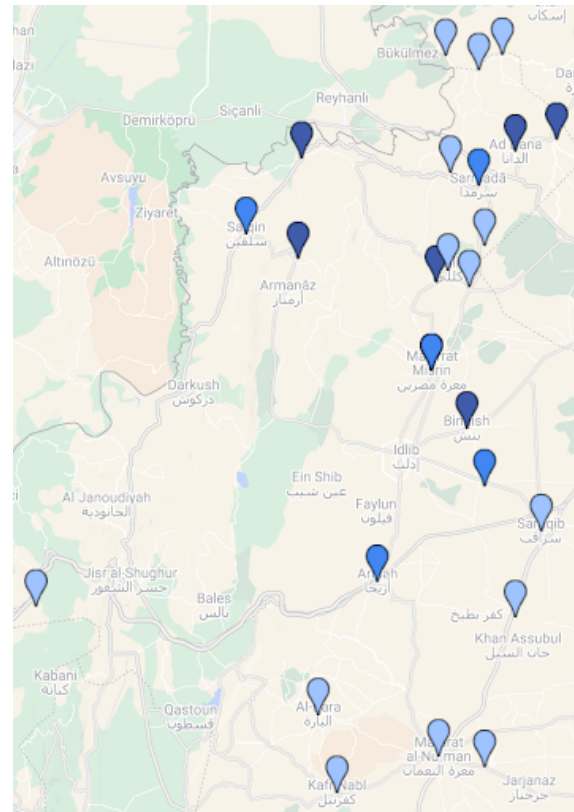


Figure 1: Pre-January 2014 ISIL presence in its Wilayat Idlib

at the time suggests ISIL created a network of informants to find weak targets.²⁷ Reports also surfaced at the time that ISIL was buying up land and property in the area to improve its foothold.²⁸ It also sought, as it did in other areas, repentances and pledges of *bay`a* from individuals and factions.²⁹ In one case, it publicized on November 20, 2013, a group of individuals giving an oath of allegiance to al-Baghdadi.³⁰

One of ISIL's main strategies at the time for bending some of these cities and villages to its will was to gain control of key resources people needed for their day-to-day survival, while assassinating or kidnapping those it determined to be rivals. Thus, one tactic was to occupy grain silos and other agricultural facilities to dictate the terms in a particular area. In the town of Termanin, for example, ISIL fighters in pickup trucks took over the agricultural ministry building, with help and information provided by a local preacher.³¹ In the meantime, the group beheaded a sniper from a rival group, putting his head on display in the main square.³² Similarly, in another city in Idlib governorate, ISIL killed, wounded, or imprisoned members of Itihad Shabab Idlib al-Ahrar.³³

As it would elsewhere, ISIL began conducting *dawa* activities in the areas it entered in Syria, passing out literature, staging events, or starting basic religious courses. As early as July 17, 2013, it set up a Qur'anic memorization competition for individuals in Silwah, while a week later it opened up a sharia institute in al-Dana, one of its main strongholds in its self-styled Wilayat Idlib.³⁴ An example of the *dawa* literature the group passed out at the time was a booklet entitled, "On Rulings for Those Who Curse God."³⁵

ISIL conducted *dawa* forums in several locations, such as al-Dana, al-Qah, Atme Refugee Camp, Kafr Takharim, Killi, Ma'arat Dabsi, and Ma'arat Nu'man, among others.³⁶ They were potent

a Dark blue: al-Dana, Binnish, Harim, Kafr Takharim, Kaftin, and Termanin; medium blue: Ariha, Ma'arat Misrin, Salqin, Sarmada, and Sarmin; and light blue: al-Bara, al-Najeya, Atme, Babisqa, Batabo, Hazano, Kafr Nabl, Killi, Ma'arat Dibsah, Ma'arat al-Nu'man, Qah, Salwah, Saraqib, and Talmenes. It is plausible there were other locations where ISIL was active, but this is what could be found based on open sources.

tools for promotion, as one observer explained: “I sat in the sermon when one of their sheikhs came to my village in Idlib. He blamed this war on the kafirs [sic], accusing Alawites and the West. But his speech was eloquent and powerful. When he came back the following week, a bigger crowd had come to the mosque, and by the next week, he had won followers.”³⁷ This illustrates how ISIL was able to ingratiate itself with the local population at the time, especially since it was not involved in the systematic moral policing (*hisba*) for which it would become notorious in parts of Syria where it would exert complete territorial control over the next few years.

The *hisba* efforts of ISIL at this point were not as fully developed as would be the case after the group’s consolidation of territory around Raqqa and the subsequent caliphate announcement in June 2014. No burning of cigarettes and the like took place, shops were not generally forced to close during prayer time, and food and medicine were not monitored to see if they had spoiled or were expired (although ISIL did warn in a September 19, 2013, statement in Talmenes that individuals selling cigarettes and tobacco had 15 days to close their shops if they wished to avoid confiscation).³⁸ The group would also distribute niqabs for women to wear in public in areas where it had control or influence.³⁹ There were also numerous reports of ISIL putting individuals on trial for corruption and executing people linked to the Assad regime.⁴⁰ A remnant cell of the group allegedly kidnapped a “sorcerer” on March 1, 2014; ISIL was not fully defeated from all areas of Idlib until mid-March 2014.⁴¹

When it came to governance, ISIL provided basic services, although evidence suggests they were less sophisticated in Idlib as compared to provinces such as Raqqa and Aleppo. Still, at the very least, ISIL controlled the bread factory in al-Dana and provided relief aid to people in Batabo.⁴² ISIL also reportedly distributed 15,000 liters of diesel for the bread ovens in Saraqeb.⁴³ Similar efforts were likely made in other parts of Idlib governorate as well. During the time that ISIL was in control of areas in its Wilayah Idlib, it pushed to project an image of statehood by opening a number of offices. In many cases though, these offices were probably far less functional than the formalization of processes and structures put into place elsewhere in Syria following its caliphate announcement. The offices ISIL initially showed off were its sharia committee headquarters, municipal headquarters, and a court in al-Dana; a *dawa* office in al-Karama Refugee Camp; a police station and court in Atme; and a women’s *dawa* outreach office.⁴⁴ Similar administrative structures likely were established in other areas, too, though their presence was not publicly disclosed. In addition, custom entrances and road signs began to be adopted in the ISIL-held areas. For example, it erected a sign at the entrance to al-Dana on October 7, 2013, and one at the entrance of the town of al-Najiya on December 7, 2013.⁴⁵ Likewise, on December 8, 2013, ISIL highlighted its painting of Qur’anic verses on walls within its territory.^b There were, however, no indications the group carried out public works projects or attempted to run local industries, as occurred elsewhere in Syria after the Islamic State’s caliphate announcement.

Once ISIL took control of certain villages and cities in Wilayah Idlib, it began seeking out its enemies and executing them. This was a key reason for the eventual backlash and uprising against the group. Unlike the failed tribal uprisings in eastern Syria (Sheitat), western Iraq (Nimr), and central Libya (Firjan), a coalition of revolutionary and Islamist actors would, in January 2014, band together to push ISIL out of Idlib governorate as well as western Aleppo governorate. This success demonstrated the degree of strength and firepower necessary to sustain a successful uprising against the group.

Yet, as has been noted, rather than being a coordinated plan from the beginning against ISIL, the rebels’ concerted action only came after multiple instances of transgression by ISIL against other factions. The first signs of ISIL’s coercive behavior became evident in June and July 2013, when it began taking over areas in Idlib, Aleppo, and other regions. The group’s coercive actions became more serious in September 2013 when it detonated a car bomb outside HASI’s headquarters in Sarmada and then a few days later killed Abu Ubaydah al-Binnishi, HASI’s chief of relief operations.⁴⁶ This led to major grumbles, but the issue was resolved internally. The last straw was when in early January 2014, ISIL kidnapped and tortured to death Hussein al-Suleiman (Abu Rayyan), a doctor and HASI commander who had criticized the group.⁴⁷ This act finally prompted a number of insurgent factions to decisively militarily confront ISIL, thus leading to the group’s removal from Idlib and western Aleppo, and even to HASI’s burning down of ISIL’s infamous sharia court in al-Dana.⁴⁸

From Limited Territorial Control to Terrorism

Despite its loss of territory in Idlib, the Islamic State may never have formally ‘canceled’ its Wilayah Idlib. Yet, it did go for a more typical terrorist approach as it began trying to insert and/or activate sleeper cells inside the province and conduct attacks, besides securing allegiance from some local factions. The most notable defection to the (newly declared) caliphate of the Islamic State from the Idlib region came in early July 2014, when the group Liwa Dawud, which had been based in Idlib, pledged *bay`a* to al-Baghdadi and headed to Raqqa, taking with it a substantial number of fighters and vehicles.⁴⁹ Elements of the jihadi group Jund al-Aqsa also became aligned with the Islamic State, with those elements becoming known as “Liwa al-Aqsa” and eventually leaving the Idlib and Hama countryside for Raqqa in February 2017 after an agreement with HTS.⁵⁰

Notable attempted terrorist attacks started to occur not long after the caliphate was announced. In September 2014, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, a nationalist rebel group, apprehended a pair of Islamic State suicide bombers before they could conduct their attack.⁵¹ A month later came further reports of Islamic State re-infiltration into Idlib governorate, though not until June 2015 would a spate of attacks occur.⁵² During July 2015, a number of HASI and JN leaders were targeted by the Islamic State in Idlib.⁵³ While some survived, HASI did arrest a few Islamic State cells.⁵⁴ In August 2015, the Islamic State was able to carry out bombings in both Harim and Kansafra; no other attacks happened for another eight months.⁵⁵ This suggests that JN and other rebel groups had at least deterred Islamic State activity for a period, until a late April 2016 suicide attack in Binnish at an HASI headquarters and nearby soccer match that killed an HASI military leader named Islam Abu Husayn.⁵⁶

b For example, it painted parts of Qur’anic verse 4:84 (the parts that were painted are bolded): “**So fight, [Oh Muhammad], in the cause of God; you are not held responsible except for yourself. And encourage the believers [to join you]** that perhaps God will restrain the [military] might of those who disbelieve. And God is greater in might and stronger in [exemplary] punishment.”

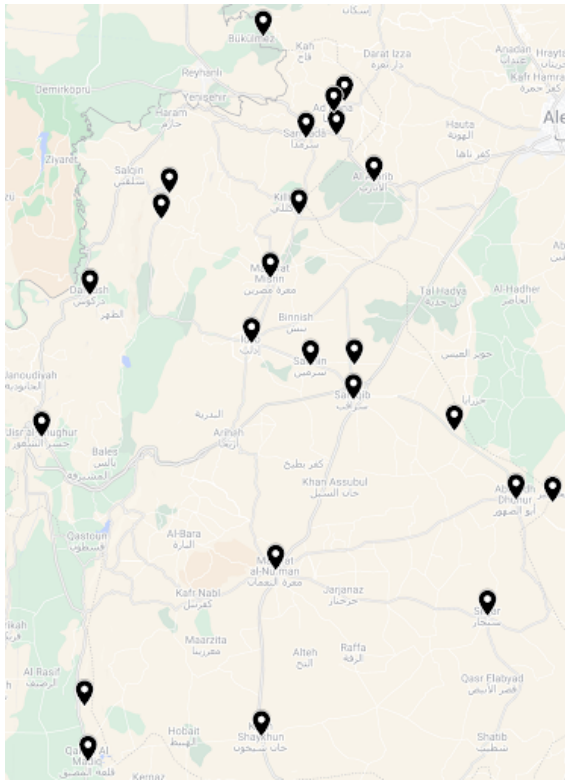


Figure 2: Locations of Islamic State officially claimed attacks in the greater Idlib region after the 2015 Jaysh al-Fatah takeover through the present

This wave of suspected Islamic State activity came on the heels of the establishment of the Jaysh al-Fatah operations room in late March 2015 by JN, HASI, and allies. Jaysh al-Fatah, whose name translates as the “Army of Conquest,” quickly conquered almost all of Idlib governorate including the provincial capital from the Assad regime. One idea behind Jaysh al-Fatah was to create a unified military and political administration that would do away with factional differences. The Jaysh al-Fatah alliance, however, ultimately broke down after HTS was formed and the northwest arena became primarily split between HTS and HASI. Over a year period from July 2016 to July 2017, JN evolved into HTS,⁵⁷ broke ties with al-Qa’ida, and moved away from forming broader factional coalitions to a determination to impose its hegemony, effectively subjugating HASI into a junior position by July 2017.⁵⁸

During this struggle for supremacy in the area, the Islamic State once again tried to conduct a campaign against its various enemies in the Idlib region. Twice it hit the Atme border crossing, in mid-August and early October 2016. In the first attack, Islamic State member Abu al-Yaman al-Shami conducted a suicide attack against dozens of members of Faylaq al-Sham, HASI, and Harakat Nur al-Din Zinqi—all of whom had been a part of the JN successor group Jabhat Fatah al-Sham-led operations room.⁵⁹ The second operation saw Abu Qudamah al-Shami conduct a car bomb attack, which killed, among others, HASI commander Hisham Khalifa, Aleppo Supreme Judicial Council head Khalid al-Sayid, and Muhammad al-Faraj, who was the Attorney General of the Supreme Judicial Council.⁶⁰ Thirdly, in late May 2017, the Islamic State attacked and killed dozens of HASI members when an Islamic State suicide bomber wearing an explosive belt parked and detonated his bomb-rigged motorcycle in front of the HASI

headquarters in the town of Tal Tuqan.⁶¹ This operation, it should be noted, was claimed in the group’s newsletter Al Naba under the moniker of “Wilayat Idlib,” whereas the previous two were only reported under the name of “Idlib.” Finally in this period, as HTS consolidated its monopolization of violence in Idlib governorate, an Islamic State suicide bomber attacked a Qur’anic school for orphans in Hafasarja in early July 2017, killing the headmaster and a number of students.⁶²

As a consequence of this attack and HTS’ growing strength over the territory in Idlib, it began to create a lawfare response to the Islamic State beyond typical insurgent infighting. Thus, what was described originally at the time as a “security apparatus” of HTS would become more formalized into the GSS in early June 2020.⁶³ Between July 7-10, 2017, HTS rolled up a number of Islamic State cells in the towns and cities of Basnia, al-Dana, Harim, Htan, Idlib, Isqat, Nayrab, Salqin, Sarmin, and Qurqaniyah.⁶⁴ According to an HTS press release, HTS had monitored these cells for three months before arresting more than 130 individuals involved.⁶⁵ Overall, including these arrests, HTS has announced publicly that it has conducted 59 law enforcement operations against Islamic State cells as of this writing. The scope of these operations will be discussed further in a section below exploring the GSS more specifically.

Perhaps as a consequence of this large-scale crackdown, the period between July 2017 and June 2018 did not see any known or suspected Islamic State attacks in Idlib against HTS. However, on account of infighting between HTS and the Islamic State elsewhere in Syria in northwest Hama governorate in late 2017,⁶⁶ the Assad regime tried to take advantage and began an offensive against both, trying to push north. In so doing, the regime eventually took back the Abu al-Dhuhur Military Airbase from HTS.⁶⁷ The latter had taken it from the regime back in 2015 during the Jaysh al-Fatah campaign.⁶⁸ As a result of this regime offensive, a number of Islamic State elements were pushed into Idlib governorate, which HTS would have to contend with later on. During the fighting for the Abu al-Dhuhur Military Airbase, the Islamic State claimed six attacks between January 10-14, 2018, against Assad regime soldiers.⁶⁹ After being defeated there by the regime, the Islamic State became surrounded and in a last ditch effort conducted four attacks against the regime in Sinjar, a village 12 miles south of the airbase in Idlib governorate, between January 16 and February 5 of that year.⁷⁰ As a consequence of the regime’s offensive, new opportunities likely arose for remnant Islamic State members to undermine security in HTS territory and hinder the law enforcement efforts that HTS had attempted to build over the latter half of 2017 and early 2018.

The first sign that the Islamic State was able to push through HTS’ intelligence and law enforcement dragnet occurred in mid-June 2018 when seemingly unofficial Islamic State “Wilayat Idlib” content showed pictures of its fighters beheading a number of HTS fighters, reportedly carried out in retaliation for an HTS assault on a covert Islamic State base in the countryside town of Kafr Hind.⁷¹

Then the Islamic State launched an all-out blitz against HTS and other rebel factions with an assassination campaign from July 6-14, 2018.⁷² Within those eight days, the Islamic State claimed 18 attacks, which is more than it had previously claimed since the Jaysh al-Fatah coalition took over the Idlib region three-plus years earlier. This wave was not concentrated in a specific part of Idlib, but was rather widespread throughout the area of Idlib and its immediate environs that HTS controlled or had influence in: Afis,

Armanaz, al-Atarib, al-Dana, Darkush, Hazanu, Hizrah, Idlib City, Jisr al-Shughur, Kafr Takharim, Khan Shaykhun, al-Kirkat, Ma'arat Misrin, Ma'arat Nu'man, al-Nayrab, Qala'at al-Madhiq, Saraqib, Sarmada, Sarmin, and Tal al-Karamah.

These attacks resulted in the killing of 19 HTS and other anti-Assad rebel group members and the injuring of 15 others.⁷³ The Islamic State named one of those it killed as Ahmad al-Dhafir,⁷⁴ the head of the security committee in Hama countryside on the Idlib border with Hama between Kirkat and Qala'at al-Madhiq.⁷⁵ More prominently, the Islamic State also attempted to kill HTS leader Anas Ayrut,⁷⁶ who was and remains part of the HTS-backed civilian-led Salvation Government's Supreme Fatwa Council and Ministry of Endowments, Dawa, and Guidance,⁷⁷ by detonating an IED on a vehicle carrying Ayrut. The attack failed to kill him, but it did lead to the death of one of the passengers and the loss of one of the driver's legs, while Ayrut and another were lightly wounded.⁷⁸

These incidents in July 2018 were the last time the Islamic State officially claimed a successful attack in Idlib region. This is not to say that Islamic State activity has ceased over the past four and a half years; rather, HTS has been able to interdict Islamic State attack plotting.

It should be noted that in December 2022, HTS demonstrated that an independent group active in carrying out attacks in the period that followed called Sariyat Ansar Abu Bakr al-Sadiq had been in touch with the Islamic State,⁷⁹ though in a previous video from July 2022, HTS notes that it did not believe the group or its sister front organization Jama'at 'Abd Allah Bin Anis were Islamic State front groups.⁸⁰ From August 2020 to October 2021, Sariyat Ansar Abu Bakr al-Sadiq targeted the Turkish military checkpoints that divided HTS territory from the Assad regime 16 times, while Jama'at 'Abd Allah Bin Anis attacked HTS directly three times between January 2021 and March 2021.⁸¹ Even though these two groups had been in contact with the Islamic State about the possibility of broader coordination, according to analyst Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "it did not quite reach that level in the end. Ideologically there was some sympathy for IS, but Khayal al-Manhaj stopped short of calling for *bay`a*."^{82c}

Comparing the Islamic State's Previous Territorial Control to its Subsequently Claimed Attacks

There were 25 locales where the Islamic State had varying levels of control in the greater Idlib region in 2013 and 24 places where the Islamic State has claimed attacks in the greater Idlib region since 2015. Nine of those spots overlapped: al-Dana, Atme, Hazano, Kfar



Figure 3: Areas in Idlib the Islamic State had prior territorial control in 2013 and where it also claimed attacks since 2015 in the greater Idlib region

Takharim, Ma'arat Misrin, Ma'arat al-Nu'man, Saraqib, Sarmada, and Sarmin. (See Figure 3.) Yet, it does not appear that there is much correlation between the degree of prior control in a particular area and where attacks later occurred. The only villages that the Islamic State fully controlled in 2013 and then conducted an attack in since 2015 were al-Dana and Kfar Takharim. Sarmada and Sarmin were the only ones where the Islamic State was the strongest group among other insurgents, and in the rest of the five places the Islamic State was equal with or just one among multiple other insurgent actors: namely, in Atme, Hazano, Ma'arat Misrin, Ma'arat al-Nu'man, and Saraqib. This could suggest that the Islamic State's successful attacks from 2015-2018 were more based on clandestine networks than deep-rooted connections to local communities.

Broadening the aperture, when one compares HTS' operations against the Islamic State (36 locations) to where the Islamic State used to have a territorial presence in 2013, the overlap of villages begins to expand slightly to 11: al-Dana, Atme, Hazano, Kfar Takharim, Kaftin, Qah, Salqin, Sarmada, Sarmin, and Tal Manis. Again, it does not appear that there is much correlation between the level of the Islamic State's prior control in a particular area and where HTS operations against the Islamic State later occurred. There were HTS operations against the Islamic State in four villages that were previously controlled by the Islamic State (al-Dana, Harim, Kfar Takharim, and Kaftin), three locales where the Islamic State was the dominant insurgent actor (Salqin, Sarmada, and Sarmin), and four villages where the Islamic State was equal/one among multiple insurgent factions (Atme, Hazano, Qah, and Tal Manis).

c Khayal al-Manhaj (aka Wadah al-Hamawi/Abu Alqama), who is in HTS custody, was the key intellectual figure behind Sariyat Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq and Jama'at Abd Allah bin Unais, which were essentially two faces of one network focused on targeting the Turkish army, HTS, and other factions. While Khayal had claimed to be independent of these groups, he was in fact intimately connected with them—as illustrated, for example, by how these groups' statements used his particular turns of phrase, suggesting that he in fact wrote those statements. As for his relationship with the Islamic State, in the GSS documentary on Khayal and his network, a certain Abu Omar al-Masri said Khayal asked him to track four members of HTS and a farm in which he believed leaders of the group were staying, and then apparently the relevant data was referred to Islamic State. However, no other apparent coordinated work beyond this is mentioned. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, "The Extremists: The Poisoned Dagger," General Security Service, December 2022.

When one zeroes in on HTS' operations compared to where the Islamic State claimed attacks since 2015, the number of overlapping places increases again, this time to 12: al-Dana, al-Nayrab, Atarib, Atme, Darkush, Hazano, Idlib, Jisr al-Shughur, Kfar Takharmin, Khan Shaykhun, Sarmada, and Sarmin. This means half of the places where HTS has directed its operations have been locations where the Islamic State has claimed an attack, which is not all that surprising considering they would want to follow-up on or prevent something in the future from happening in a spot where the Islamic State might have a broader cell network. Thus, in many ways, HTS' campaign seems more linked to the specifics of the Islamic State's attack network than the Islamic State's prior territorial control in different parts of the greater Idlib region.

HTS' Campaign Against the Islamic State

Even though the Islamic State has not claimed a successful attack in HTS areas since July 2018, the Islamic State threat has not vanished. Various factors have allowed the Islamic State to continue to operate and plot to attack HTS, its allies, and civilian populations in the past half-decade. Not least was the fact that in mid-March 2019, Russia conducted an airstrike on the outskirts of Idlib that hit a prison where HTS had been holding Islamic State and other prisoners.⁸³ Dozens of Islamic State militants reportedly escaped,⁸⁴ and to this day, it would seem that not all those individuals have been rearrested. Not long after the jail escape, there was also an influx of Islamic State operatives into HTS-controlled areas of northwest Syria caused by the final territorial defeat of the group. On March 23, 2019, the Islamic State lost its last territorial holding in Syria and Iraq with the liberation of the Syrian town of Baghuz on March 23, 2019. Although many Islamic State members were killed in that battle or arrested and placed in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) prisons in northeast Syria, others fled first through Turkish-controlled areas in northern Syria nominally led by the Syrian Interim Government and its Syrian National Army (SNA) and then on to HTS-controlled territory in northwest Syria.⁸⁵

The Islamic State has seen Idlib as not only a potential safe haven, but also a place to restart activity. Regarding the former, two of the Islamic State's so-called caliphs—Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi—were located in Idlib and died there during U.S. special forces operations against them in October 2019 and February 2022, respectively.⁸⁶ Additionally, it is important to remember that about two-thirds of the population in HTS-controlled areas are made up of internally displaced people (IDPs),⁸⁷ meaning they are not actually from the area originally. This makes it easier for individuals from the Islamic State to blend into the population. Further complicating matters is the transient nature of these IDP populations between HTS-controlled areas and SNA-controlled areas in northern Syria, which is in part why HTS' Salvation Government began a campaign in 2022 to provide ID cards for everyone in the areas it controls.⁸⁸ Thus, the continued movement of many people makes intelligence gathering more difficult. Nevertheless, if the lack of claimed attacks is judged as the metric of success, HTS' campaign against the Islamic State over the last four-and-a-half years can be seen as having been successful.

Background on the General Security Service

Before delving into the data on HTS' campaign against the Islamic State, it is important to better understand HTS' General Security Service (GSS), which is its law enforcement/intelligence body that



Figure 4: Locations where HTS conducted 'counterterrorism' raids against Islamic State cells in the greater Idlib region (July 2017-January 2023)

has been involved in arresting Islamic State cells over the past few years. As noted above, the GSS was formalized in June 2020, yet a proto-version of it had been operating since HTS began its arrest campaigns against the Islamic State in July 2017. Therefore, HTS' security apparatus has actually been working against the Islamic State for more than five and a half years now.

When the GSS was formalized in 2020, it released a video providing details on its writ within HTS-controlled areas as well as a breakdown of its structure. The purpose of the GSS, according to the video, is to protect the people of the "liberated" areas (how HTS describes its territory) and to prevent any type of crime.⁸⁹ To do this, the GSS asserted in the video that it will arrest any person who is "working to destroy life and sow chaos" and then use any intelligence garnered from that arrest to go after others in a broader criminal network.⁹⁰

Five key components of the GSS are the regional information office, the internal security division, the organized crime portfolio, the regime portfolio, and the "Khawarij" ("Kharijites"/"extremists") portfolio.⁹¹ With regard to the extremist portfolio, the Islamic State is not named specifically, but it is undoubtedly included under this portfolio. According to the GSS video, the process for the system starts with an investigations officer providing detailed reasons for why someone should be arrested.⁹² Once the investigation

is completed, GSS security officials will arrest the individuals and then they will supposedly be brought in front of a public prosecutor to face a trial.⁹³ Details about the latter aspect within the judicial system have not been shared publicly by HTS. It seems to be a very opaque process. The GSS claims to be following HTS' interpretations of sharia in bringing the arrested to justice.⁹⁴

Many residents in HTS territory have criticized the judicial processes for lacking transparency, failing to provide reasons for arrests, holding alleged “kangaroo” trials, and the bad treatment of prisoners.⁹⁵ According to a lawyer in Idlib, “death sentences are carried out in secret prisons without any trial ... Detainees don't get to have a public trial or to know the evidence on which the decision was made against them.”⁹⁶ While these details about the system are primarily about activists in HTS-controlled territory and not specially about Islamic State members, it still highlights an authoritarian approach in HTS-controlled territory that is starkly different to a modern liberal understanding of the rule of law.⁹⁷

Statistics and Details on HTS' Arrest Campaign Against the Islamic State

Over the past five and a half years, HTS has publicly claimed 59 discreet operations to arrest members of Islamic State cells in 36 towns and villages throughout the greater Idlib region.^d Of the 59 discreet raids, five occurred in 2017, 22 in 2018, eight in 2019, eight in 2020, 10 in 2021, and six in 2022. It is important to remember that the data on 2017 is only for the second half of the year when the proto-GSS began to start operating. Therefore, seen together, 2018 is an outlier with a record number of HTS raids against the Islamic State. Assuming there is a correlation between the number of raids conducted against it and the degree to which the Islamic State poses a threat, the data suggests that in the years since 2018, the Islamic State threat in Idlib has remained at a low level, with a drop last year.

The most common places where HTS rolled up Islamic State cells were as follows: six in Sarmin, five in Idlib, five in al-Dana, five in Salqin, four in Harim, and four in Jisr al-Shughur. All of these locations are areas where the Islamic State conducted attacks between 2015 and 2018 or were spots where the Islamic State used to have a presence when it had its so-called Wilayat Idlib exerting territorial control in 2013. This suggests that in the places where HTS has most frequently gone after the Islamic State, it is likely the Islamic State has some small attack networks or residual roots within the local population, which has allowed it to continue to operate even after all of HTS' efforts against it.

HTS has arrested 279 individuals in the 59 counter-Islamic State operations. During these raids, another 40 individuals have been killed while HTS attempted to arrest them, either because HTS shot them or an Islamic State fighter blew himself up before he could be caught. Among those arrested, 20 were executed after going through HTS' court process. HTS has claimed that of the 279 Islamic State members it arrested, 51 were leaders in the Islamic State. HTS named and provided the alleged position within the Islamic State organization of 44 of those it arrested. Some of these individuals had high-level regional leadership positions within the Islamic State, according to HTS' investigations. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Prominent Islamic State leaders that HTS arrested⁹⁸

Date of Arrest	Name	Position in the Islamic State According to HTS	Location of Arrest
6/22/2018	Sa'ad al-Hunayti	Leader of the Islamic State in Idlib	al-Dana
7/14/2018	Abu al-Bara' al-Sahili	Islamic State General official for northern Syria	Harim
7/16/2018	Abu Ayham al-Himsi	Islamic State administrator for Homs, Hamah, and HTS-held territories	Sarmin
7/16/2018	Abu Yunis	Islamic State General administrator of Idlib and coordinator of foreign fighters	Sarmin
9/3/2018	Abu Muhammad al-Adari	Islamic State General administrator of the “liberated areas”	Sarmada
9/11/2018	Abu Hamzah al-Masri	Islamic State Wali [governor] of Wilayat Hamah	Not listed
8/11/2020	Muhammad Ahmad Jumrah (aka Abu Yusuf Wasim)	Islamic State Wali of Wilayat Idlib	Not listed

There is no detail on these individuals' backgrounds beyond the position they held in the Islamic State's command and details that can be deduced from their *kunya* (*noms de guerre*). Yet, the data suggests that HTS is not only apprehending low-level foot soldiers, but also higher-level regional leaders for the Islamic State's broader operations. Another significant finding among the 44 names shared by HTS is that 25 percent of these Islamic State individuals are foreign fighters—assuming their *noms de guerre* reflect their actual origins, which may not always be the case.^e

d Since some of these operations have involved multiple locations where cells were connected, the number of overall events by location add up to 70.

e For example, Abu 'Umar al-Masri, who was part of Khayal's network, was also known by another *nom de guerre* in his contact with the Islamic State: namely, Abu 'Umar al-Hindi—a name that would suggest he was Indian, whereas al-Masri suggests he is Egyptian.

Table 2: Foreign fighter nationalities of identified Islamic State members that HTS arrested

Nationality	Count
Egypt	2
Iraq	2
Uzbekistan	2
Chechnya	1
Dagestan	1
Russia	1
Turkey	1
Unidentified	1

Among this foreign fighter cohort, it does not appear there is any dominant cluster from any particular country. (See Table 2). The unidentified individual's *kunya* included the designation al-Muhajir (the emigrant), making it impossible to identify his country of origin. The highest ranked foreigner was an individual who went by the name of Abu Hamzah al-Masri, who is, as noted in Table 1, was the Islamic State *wali* of Wilayat Hamah.

As noted earlier, two other Islamic State foreign leaders (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi)⁹⁹ were based in Idlib before they blew themselves up when the United States conducted special operations forces raids against them in Barisha and Atme in October 2019 and February 2022, respectively. This fact, that two of the Islamic State's leaders were able to use HTS territory as a safe haven, illustrates that as good as HTS has been at thwarting attacks, it does not necessarily have the resources to completely identify and root out the Islamic State from its territory. There is also no evidence that there was some conspiracy related to HTS hiding Islamic State leaders; rather HTS just did not know they were there. If HTS had, they would almost certainly have arrested or killed them. It is interesting to note that the Islamic State's third so-called caliph, Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, decided to use southern Syria as his base before being killed in Jasim in mid-October 2022 instead of basing himself in Idlib.¹⁰⁰ It is plausible that Abu al-Hasan and the Islamic State leadership figured that since he was embedded within Assad regime territory, the United States would not be able to reach him there in the same way it did Abu Bakr and Abu Ibrahim. Of course, in the end, Abu al-Hasan was killed, too, this time by former anti-Assad regime insurgents who had been forced to reconcile with the regime in 2018.¹⁰¹

It is important to stress that, unlike the Taliban who were discussed at the beginning of the article, HTS has actually gone after and dismantled al-Qa`ida's Syrian branch, Huras al-Din, which was created after HTS left al-Qa`ida between July 2016-January 2017.¹⁰² Furthermore, there are many foreign fighters currently sitting within HTS' prison system beyond those who are members of the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida.¹⁰³ HTS' apparent effectiveness in going after harder-line jihadis could lead some to wonder whether Abu Muhammad al-Julani's call for his group to be taken off the terrorism list merits consideration or even if HTS could be seen as a potential partner given the organization seems to be no longer interested in external operations against the West,¹⁰⁴ but rather seeks to focus its energies on its local struggle against the Assad regime.

The Terrorism Designation Question in Light of HTS' 'Counterterrorism' Campaign

The case for keeping HTS on the terrorism designation list is not as clear cut as when the group first was designated as Jabhat al-Nusra more than 10 years ago.¹⁰⁵ It is even plausible that had HTS been formed out of nothing when it was announced in 2017, it may never have been designated based on its actions over the subsequent six years. Yet, due to its historical baggage and its continued espousal of extremist beliefs that glamorize terrorism abroad, HTS still likely meets the legal threshold for designation.

For instance, HTS has recently backed the terrorism of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) against Israel as well as terrorism in the West against purported blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad. In the Hamas-Israel hostilities in May 2021, senior HTS ideologue Abu Mariya al-Qahtani posted on Twitter a video of rockets launched by Hamas from Gaza and shot into civilian areas in Israel, attaching the following note: "These scenes delight the believers and make the hypocrites sad ... Today, the lions of Gaza are turning the night of the Zionists into day. May God bless the lions of Qassem in bombing them."¹⁰⁶ More recently in the hostilities between Israel and PIJ in August 2022, HTS' Manarat al-Huda Dawa Center posted moral support a number of times for PIJ's rocket campaign against Israeli civilian targets, in one case, putting out a graphic with the slogan, "We are all Gaza's arrows on the Jews."¹⁰⁷

HTS' civilian governing body, the Salvation Government, released a statement "calling on everyone to shoulder their responsibilities in defending Muhammad" in relation to France and President Emmanuel Macron in the aftermath of the beheading of French school teacher Samuel Paty in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, France, on October 16, 2020.¹⁰⁸ Paty had shown the Charlie Hebdo issue with the cartoons of Muhammad in his moral and civic education class about freedom of speech, yet before showing them, he allowed any Muslim student to leave if they wanted to.¹⁰⁹ The last contact of the perpetrator of this attack, Abdoullakh Abouyedovich Anzorov, an 18-year-old Chechen immigrant, was allegedly Farouk al-Shami, a Tajik member of HTS based in Idlib. French investigators believe he may have influenced Anzorov to conduct the attack.¹¹⁰ It is unlikely that HTS as an organization had anything to do with the attack, yet it illustrates that individuals living in its territory could entrepreneurially link up with those abroad and incite them to act.

This is another reason why the international community finds it problematic that HTS territory hosts other smaller designated foreign terrorist organizations and more broadly foreign fighters affiliated or allied with HTS. Among this cohort are Jama'at Ansar al-Islam, Katibat Imam al-Bukhari, and Katibat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, as well as other non-designated foreign fighter groups.¹¹¹

In essence, it appears that HTS goes after al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State because it considers going after them to be in its interests, and does not do so as some sort of major concession to Western governments. While it has gone after the two big global jihadi groups, HTS is in principle committed to protecting the other foreign fighters in Idlib, and thus, it is unlikely for now that a *quid pro quo* arrangement can be struck that would amount to a concession from HTS and its removal from the terrorist designation list.

Moreover, if one looks at the history of U.S. terrorism designations related to jihadi groups, the only time jihadi groups have been removed has been when the organizations have become

defunct.¹¹² And even then, there was a large lag time between a group no longer being active and the United States' decision to take the organization off the list. So even if HTS ceased to meet the legal threshold for designation, delisting could take years. In addition, even if HTS were removed from the U.S. terrorism designation, it is likely to remain on the U.N. list for the foreseeable future, primarily because of Russia's position on the Security Council in support of its ally in Syria—the Assad regime—and its concerns about Caucasian jihadis in the northwest. As a consequence, the issue is moot in some ways, on account of factors that have more to do with the strategic, political, and institutional calculations of governments than with the actions of HTS itself.

Conclusion

HTS' counterterrorism operations might be a welcome development from a Western counterterrorism perspective, but it does not appear HTS is going to be taken off the designation list anytime soon and there are strong reasons, including its recent support for other terrorist groups, it should not be. Furthermore, any Western

engagement with the group does not touch upon other problematic issues such as the authoritarian nature of HTS' rule. This is the group's conundrum. For until it demonstrates a pronounced shift away from sympathies with foreign fighter and Islamist militant causes inside and outside of Syria and a willingness to open up its political system, it will remain in its current predicament, unable to realize its lofty long-term plans to make its territory a sustainable and vibrant entity.

Nevertheless, based on the data marshaled in this study, it is clear, at least over the past four and a half years, that HTS' campaign against the Islamic State has been successful on the whole. Of course, this could change with the potential rapid fluctuations in the state of play within Syria itself. For example, a potential future normalization of relations between Turkey and the Assad regime or a U.S. withdrawal from Syria could alter the status quo the group has benefited from in recent years. But it is quite stunning that in a little more than a decade, HTS has changed from an Islamic State branch to an al-Qa`ida branch to a nascent polity that conducts 'counterterrorism' against the global jihadis. **CTC**

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The Growing Concern Over Older Far-Right Terrorists: Data from the United Kingdom

By David Wells

Recent attacks, disrupted plots, and arrests in Europe and the United States have suggested that the terrorist threat posed by older extreme far-right individuals might be increasing. A deep dive into the United Kingdom, which has seen five attacks by extreme far-right men over the age of 47 since June 2016, indicates that most attackers had limited direct connections to the organized extreme far-right, conducted attacks involving limited but rapid planning, and—perhaps as a result—had relatively limited impact in terms of casualties. These attacks coincided with (and likely led to) significant increases in the number of extreme far-right-linked men aged 51 and over being referred to the U.K.’s Prevent program and discussed within its Channel program. The U.K. case study and data raise important policy questions regarding the likely effectiveness of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) interventions for older demographics in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

As 2022 came to a close, a series of attacks and arrests in Europe appeared to hint at the emergence of a possible new trend: older (and even geriatric) far-right terrorists.^a In mid-October, a 75-year-old woman was one of five arrested in Germany for plotting to kidnap the country’s health minister and bring down its power grid.¹ Two weeks later, a 66-year-old U.K. man firebombed a migrant center in Dover,² and in early December, those arrested for plotting to overthrow the German government included several individuals over the age of 60.³ Finally, on December 23, a 69-year-

a In this article, “older” is used as a relative term, to contrast with the traditional counterterrorism focus on threats posed by young people and the primary extreme far-right threat identified by U.K. authorities (individuals in their teens and early 20s). Although different datasets explored through the article include different age ranges, the article’s primary focus is on individuals aged 45 and over. Geriatric is used to refer to individuals over the age of 65.

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old man attacked a Kurdish cultural center in Paris, killing three.⁴

Although terrorism is typically seen as the preserve of the young, terrorist attackers over the age of 45 are not a new phenomenon in either the Islamist or far-right context,⁵ with the oldest known attacker an 88-year-old white supremacist who attacked the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., in 2009.⁶ In November 2022, the United Kingdom’s Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation noted that “the most recent completed extreme right-wing terrorist ... attacks [had] all [been] carried out by older men,”⁷ with the last attack by anyone younger than 47 in 2015.

Despite this reality, U.K. authorities—and others facing a far-right terrorism problem⁸—have characterized the threat as originating from a “technologically aware demographic of predominantly young men, many of them still in their teens,”⁹ with disrupted plots since 2017 featuring two individuals in their late teens and one in their early 20s.^b Given this discrepancy between the age of the primary source of the extreme far-right threat identified by U.K. authorities and the age of those successfully conducting far-right terrorist attacks, this article will use the United Kingdom as a case study to better understand the terrorist threat posed by older individuals motivated by extreme far-right ideology.

This article starts with a comparative analysis of the backgrounds of and methodologies used by the recent U.K. attackers, seeking to identify any key commonalities and inconsistencies. It then explores U.K. government data to help understand whether these attacks are reflective of any change in the threat posed by older extreme far-right individuals in the United Kingdom. Finally, it identifies some implications from this analysis for policymakers and responses to far-right terrorism in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

U.K. Case Study: Recent Attacks and Attackers

There were five completed far-right terrorist attacks perpetrated in the United Kingdom since 2015. The following short case studies

b Ethan Stables was sentenced to an indefinite hospital order for planning to attack a pub hosting an LGBT+ night in June 2017 when he was 19 years old. For more information, see “Ethan Stables sentenced over gay pride attack plot,” BBC, May 30, 2018. Jack Renshaw was jailed for life for planning to murder a local MP and policewoman in July 2017, when he was aged 22. For more information, see “Jack Renshaw: MP death plot neo-Nazi jailed for life,” BBC, May 17, 2019. Eighteen-year-old Luke Skelton was charged in November 2021 with having carried out “hostile reconnaissance” of three police stations. In May 2022, the jury in Skelton’s case failed to reach a verdict. For more information, see “Luke Skelton: Jury fails to reach verdict on Wearside student accused of terror plot,” BBC, May 13, 2022.

examine each of the perpetrators.^c

Case 1: Thomas Mair

Fifty-two-year-old Thomas Mair, who killed Jo Cox MP in June 2016, was described as a recluse and a “loner in the truest sense of the word” who had never had a job or a girlfriend, had no friends, and had lived alone since 1996.¹⁰ Mair had a long-standing interest in the extreme far-right, sharing his hope that “the white race would prevail” in a letter to the editor of a South African far-right magazine in 1991.¹¹ Following a series of far-right bombings in London in 1999, Mair purchased extreme far-right instructional material and subscribed to a variety of American neo-Nazi magazines.¹²

Although there is limited data on Mair’s activities until 2016, police found newspaper clippings related to Anders Breivik’s 2011 attack in Norway in Mair’s home. His online research into previous attacks against politicians and his target indicates that the febrile nature of the Brexit referendum campaign finally prompted Mair into action. Of the five attacks, his was the only one in which a firearm was used.¹³ Mair was jailed for life in November 2016, having been found guilty of murdering of Jo Cox, two weapons offenses, and stabbing a bystander who tried to intervene.¹⁴

Case 2: Darren Osborne

On June 19, 2017, 47-year-old Darren Osborne drove a rented van into worshippers outside Finsbury Park Mosque in London, causing the death of one person. He is now serving life in prison for what the judge sentencing him described as a “terrorist attack.”¹⁵ Like Mair, Osborne was long-term unemployed and described as a loner, although he had a long-term partner and four children. Osborne, who had a history of substance abuse and had recently threatened suicide, also had a 30-year criminal record, including for theft, burglary, and assault.¹⁶

In contrast to Mair, Osborne’s radicalization was rapid, driven by his disgust at a May 2017 BBC drama-documentary about the sexual abuse of children by a group of British-Pakistani men. He joined Twitter in early June 2017, following far-right accounts including that of Tommy Robinson^d and Britain First^e and engaging with material from those “determined to spread hatred of Muslims.”¹⁷

Osborne had initially sought to conduct a mass-casualty attack against the annual Al-Quds Day march in central London, targeting both Muslims and senior Labour Party politicians who he believed would be in attendance.¹⁸ Having driven from Wales that morning (June 18, 2017), Osborne failed to get close to the march and subsequently drove for hours before finding the mosque in the early hours of June 19. Despite his chaotic targeting approach, the attack

was not entirely spontaneous, with Osborne having inquired about renting the van on June 16. The following day, he was evicted from a pub for ranting about “killing Muslims.”¹⁹

Case 3: Tristan Morgan

On July 21, 2018, Tristan Morgan, a 51-year-old X-ray technician, set fire to a synagogue in Exeter on the Jewish holiday of Tisha B’Av.²⁰ Morgan also set himself on fire and was quickly arrested after police identified his van using the synagogue’s CCTV. Morgan was described as having a “deep-rooted anti-Semitic belief, embodied in a desire to do harm to the Jewish community.” He was convicted of arson and two terrorism-related offenses for possessing “The White Resistance” manual and publishing a song encouraging terrorism. Morgan, who had no history of violence, was reportedly “psychotic” during the attack and was handed an indefinite hospital order.²¹

Case 4: Vincent Fuller

On March 16, 2019, 50-year-old father of four Vincent Fuller threatened passers-by near his home in Surrey with a baseball bat, shouting “All Muslims must die. White Supremacists rule.” When Fuller broke the bat damaging a vehicle, he took a knife from his home and slashed a 19-year-old sitting in a parked car.²²

There is limited information about Fuller’s background, although like Osborne, he had an extensive criminal record with 24 convictions and had served a six-year prison sentence. A video of the previous day’s far-right attack on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand,²³ was found on Fuller’s phone. In a Facebook post less than two hours before the attack, Fuller stated, “I agree with what the man did in New Zealand,” adding “Kill all the non-English and get them all out of our England.”²⁴ Fuller was convicted of attempted murder, carrying a weapon, affray, and racially aggravated harassment, and sentenced to 18 years and nine months in prison, with a further five-year extended sentence. The judge sentencing Fuller described his offense as a “terrorist attack.”²⁵

Case 5: Andrew Leak

Lastly, on October 30, 2022, 66-year-old Andrew Leak threw three petrol bombs at a migrant center in Dover. The fire caused minor injuries to two staff members, and Leak was found dead in his car just minutes later. Leak, a twice-married grandfather and pensioner, was reportedly suffering from cancer and claimed online that he had spent time in prison. Like Osborne, Leak admired Tommy Robinson, sharing posts by him and other extreme far-right actors, engaging with racist and anti-immigrant content, and promoting COVID-19 conspiracy theories.²⁶ As a result of his racist, inflammatory posts, Leak had reportedly been banned from Twitter the week prior to the attack and suspended from Facebook on multiple occasions.²⁷

Leak was the only attacker who used explosives, although his devices were described as ‘crude’ and had minimal impact. Like Osborne, he traveled to his chosen target, driving 120 miles from his home in High Wycombe to Dover. Like Fuller, he also shared his intentions online, posting a video one hour before the attack threatening to “obliterate” Muslim children.²⁸ At the inquest, the senior national coordinator for counterterrorism policing in the United Kingdom stated that although mental health was likely a factor, “I am satisfied that the suspect’s actions were primarily driven by an extremist ideology.”²⁹

c In addition to these completed attacks, U.K. authorities have disrupted 37 “late stage” attacks since 2017, with around one-third linked to the extreme far-right. For more information, see David Parsley, “Terror investigations at record high as threat of extreme right wing ‘lone actors’ rises,” *The i*, December 28, 2022.

d Tommy Robinson (born Stephen Yaxley-Lennon) is the founder and former leader of the extreme far-right group the English Defence League, and remains a high-profile U.K. far-right activist. See the Counter-Extremism Project’s profile and other news reporting (e.g., *The Guardian* archive) for more information.

e Britain First is an extreme far-right, anti-Muslim, anti-immigration group founded in 2011 by former members of the British National Party. Multiple party members have been convicted of terrorism offenses. See Hope Not Hate’s website for further information.

Key Findings: Commonalities and Inconsistencies

What then can be learned from these five attacks and attackers? Each had an individual pathway toward violence, despite sharing a similar age range, gender, and ideology. There are, of course, commonalities. Osborne and Fuller had long criminal records, while Leak claimed to have served prison time. Loneliness, substance abuse, and unemployment recur, as does the role of the internet and an increasingly febrile U.K. political atmosphere as radicalizing or catalyzing factors. But as a group, what is striking is how unremarkable the perpetrators are.

There is also no consistent attack method or targeting methodology. The only common threads across all five attacks are their relative failure in terms of impact—none were mass- or even multiple-casualty attacks (though not all aimed to be)—and their relatively limited planning time. Several appear to have been spontaneous in their timing and targets, with only Mair, Morgan, and Leak exhibiting any degree of successful planning. Their spontaneity and relative failure are no doubt connected.

Finally, although several attackers had some online or offline connectivity with extreme far-right groups and individuals, they appear to have been largely passive recipients of narratives and propaganda. All acted alone, with some ‘leaking’ their intentions in the hours prior to their attack.

Individuals with limited or no connection to the organized extreme far-right, conducting low-tech attacks with limited or no lead-in times are difficult for authorities to identify and disrupt, regardless of age. However, this is not the only type of threat posed by this age demographic. The aforementioned December 2022 plot to overthrow the government in Germany and the attack that month on the Kurdish cultural center in Paris demonstrate that older far-right terrorists can be more connected, more organized, and more deadly than those seen so far in the United Kingdom.

Additional U.K. Data Sources and Findings

To better characterize the threat posed by older and geriatric extreme far-right individuals in the United Kingdom, it would be useful to understand trends relating to terrorism-related arrests since 2016. However, the upper age category in U.K. data on terrorism-related arrests is “over 30,”^f making it impossible from this official data alone to determine if arrests for individuals 45 and above specifically are on the rise.^g

The other potential source of data is the United Kingdom’s Prevent program. Under this construct, law enforcement, other public entities, and the community at large refer individuals they identify as at risk of being drawn into terrorism. Although total Prevent referrals for individuals of all ages relating to the extreme

far-right increased by 35% between April 2016 and March 2022,^h referrals among the 51-60 and 61+ age groups for individuals linked to extreme far-right increased by 109% and 58%, respectively. However, extreme far-right referrals for these age groups—and the 41-50 age group—peaked in 2020-21, declining in 2021-22.

Table 1: Prevent referrals of older individuals with connections to the extreme far-right, 2016-2022ⁱ

Prevent Referrals	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Aged 41-50	92	125	110	120	131	97
Aged 51-60	44	88	82	112	107	92
Aged 61+	17	17	32	37	49	27

Following an initial triage of the Prevent referrals, those individuals who are assessed as vulnerable to being drawn toward committing terrorism offenses (but who do not pose an imminent threat^j) are then reviewed by a multi-sectoral Channel Panel, made up of representatives from these public bodies. Although the total number of Channel Panel discussions for individuals linked to the extreme far-right increased by 121%, the figures for individuals above the age of 51 with connections to the extreme far-right outstripped this increase. However, figures for 2021-22 again showed a decline across all three age groups from the previous year.

Table 2: Channel Panel discussions of older individuals with connections to the extreme far-right, 2016-2022

Channel Panel Discussions	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Aged 41-50	26	27	44	36	47	31
Aged 51-60	6	24	28	43	42	31
Aged 61+	1	3	12	9	19	10

Through these discussions, the Channel Panels decide whether individuals require interventions or support to prevent them from committing terrorism-related offenses. If so, individuals can be adopted as Channel cases, although as involvement within Channel is voluntary, older individuals assessed as requiring support may choose to reject it. Although the total number of Channel cases for individuals linked to the extreme far-right increased by 173%, the figures for individuals above the age of 51 outstripped this increase. Again, the number of cases peaked (in 2019-20) before

f The most recent statistics for the period ending September 2022 are available at “National statistics: Operation of police powers under the Terrorism Act 2000 and subsequent legislation: Arrests, outcomes, and stop and search, Great Britain, quarterly update to September 2022,” UK Home Office, December 8, 2022.

g Given that U.K. authorities already have access to this data, it is recommended that further granularity is included in these statistics moving forward, allowing for an easily accessible understanding of trends relating to age and terrorism-related arrests across all ideological persuasions.

h All Prevent-related data in the tables presented in this article and included in the broader analysis is taken from UK Home Office statistics. See “Official Statistics: Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, April 2021 to March 2022,” UK Home Office, January 26, 2023.

i All Prevent and Channel data in this section and included in Tables 1-4 is collected on a 12-month basis between April 1 and March 31. Thus, the data for 2016-17 is from April 1, 2016, to March 31, 2017, and so on.

j Depending on the type and level of risk identified by police in this initial assessment, these cases may be escalated from the Prevent space into the ‘Pursue space,’ requiring more immediate investigative or disruptive action. See “Channel Duty Guidance: Protecting people vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism,” 2020, for more information.

subsequently declining.

Table 3: Channel cases of older individuals with connections to the extreme far-right, 2016-2022

Adopted as Channel Case	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Aged 41-50	7	9	19	22	19	12
Aged 51-60	3	12	7	23	18	10
Aged 61+	0	0	3	4	8	2

It is important to note that for the 2021-22 dataset, the UK Home Office introduced additional granularity to its characterization of ideological connections (referred to as “type of concern”), increasing the number of categories from four to 11. Given the significant drop-off in the number of extreme right-wing older individuals across all three datasets in 2021-22, it is possible that some of the individuals who would previously have been categorized as extreme right-wing now sit in one of these new categories.^k

Despite this recent drop-off, the data still shows a marked shift in the primary ideological connection of individuals aged 51 and over referred through Prevent during the period 2016/17 to 2021/22, with nearly three times as many individuals referred for far-right-related concerns as Islamist from 2018/19 to 2021/22 (see the first table in the appendix). Individuals discussed at Channel Panels and adopted as Channel cases in that age group were also more likely to be affiliated with the far-right than any other ideology from 2017/18 onward (see the second and third tables in the appendix).³⁰

Prevent data is, of course, an imperfect tool for determining whether there has been an increase in radicalization among this (or any) age group. As the UK Intelligence and Security Committee noted in a recent report, an increase in Prevent referrals “does not necessarily indicate an increase in the extreme right-wing threat, but rather indicates a greater awareness of the potential risk and the greater focus being placed on this issue.”³¹

So, while it would be inaccurate to correlate more Prevent referrals and Channel Panel discussions involving those 51 and over with an increase in the far-right threat from this age group, the data does suggest that at a minimum, police and other public bodies are increasingly aware that this demographic is at risk of being involved in terrorism.

Conclusion: Implications for Policymakers and P/CVE Responses

The cases studies and data analysis point to the two key questions recent attacks pose for U.K. policymakers (and those elsewhere): Will existing systems identify individuals within older age groups who are vulnerable to radicalization and/or who are already radicalized? And, if identified, will the preventative programming and tailored interventions currently offered be effective for them?

^k In 2020-21, the categories were Islamist, Extreme Right-Wing, Other and Mixed, unstable, or unclear. In 2021-22, these were adjusted to Extreme Right-Wing, Islamist, Other, Conflicted, No specific extremism issue, High CT risk but no ideology present, Vulnerability present but no ideology or CT risk, No risk, vulnerability or Ideology Present, School massacre, Incel and Unspecified. “Official Statistics: Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, April 2021 to March 2022.”

On the first question, the above data suggests that a range of U.K. authorities have recognized the potential vulnerability of individuals aged 51 and above to radicalization. The failure of the U.K. system to prevent the attacks explored here does not in and of itself indicate that specific opportunities were missed (particularly given the low-tech methodology used and limited planning times). And it is to be hoped that similar cases would be treated differently in the future, given the increased awareness that the Prevent data appears to indicate.

There are, however, questions about how individuals are identified in the United Kingdom. Will a system that relies heavily on referrals from the education system and the police^l identify concerns relating to older, isolated individuals who are disconnected from other touchpoints across local government? Other sources of referrals—friends, family, the community—rely on a broad awareness of potential warning signs among this age group. It is unclear to what extent this awareness exists, or indeed has been included in messaging by relevant authorities, despite recent attacks by older far-right extremists.

Whether existing programming in the United Kingdom (and elsewhere) will be effective for this age group is more difficult to answer. CVE programming recipients have tended to be young, with programming developed in response to how terrorist groups have sought to radicalize young people (particularly online).

The profiles of the five U.K. attackers (incomplete though they are) suggest that online connectivity between them and the organized extreme far-right predominantly took place on mainstream social networks, and points to the role of the broader political environment as a catalyzing factor. Although online material played a significant role in Darren Osborne’s radicalization, none of it, as far as is known, broke any terrorism or criminal law.³²

Exposure to this lawful but hateful material does not require access to the niche apps and channels often used by young extreme far-right actors. Globally, 51% of 50- to 65-year-olds use Facebook, while 58% of those over 56 use YouTube.³³ Tailoring preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programming to engage with this very online but perhaps less tech-savvy cohort may present challenges, due to the difficulty of identifying how and where to engage with them, and how to teach people who grew up before the internet age to navigate the current information environment.

There remain significant gaps relating to the extent of this phenomenon in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, with further data needed to understand the extent to which recent arrests and attacks might be indicative of a broader trend. And while it would be unwise to draw broader conclusions solely from the U.K. experience, it is an important reminder that the profile of terrorist attackers continues to evolve in terms of gender, ideological inspiration, and in this case, age. Last year saw a U.K. teenager convicted for far-right-related terrorism offenses conducted when he was 13³⁴ as well as an attack by 66-year-old Andrew Leak. Norms and expectations among authorities and the general public about what a terrorist looks and sounds like—and key warning signs and trigger points for intervention—need to evolve at a similar pace, as do the types of intervention available to address their unique age-related needs. **CTC**

^l These two streams have consistently been the source of a majority of Prevent referrals. See “Official Statistics: Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, April 2021 to March 2022.”

Appendix

Table 4: Ideological connections of older extreme right-wing (XRW) and Islamist individuals, 2016-2022*

Age Group	Prevent Referrals											
	2016-17		2017-18		2018-19		2019-20		2020-21		2021-22	
	Islamist	XRW	Islamist	XRW	Islamist	XRW	Islamist	XRW	Islamist	XRW	Islamist	XRW
Aged 41-50	248	92	222	125	93	110	114	120	81	131	78	97
Aged 51-60	76	44	66	88	30	82	44	112	33	107	33	92
Aged 61+	20	17	11	17	8	32	10	37	10	49	6	27

Age Group	Channel Panel Discussions											
	2016-17		2017-18		2018-19		2019-20		2020-21		2021-22	
	Islamist	XRW	Islamist	XRW	Islamist	XRW	Islamist	XRW	Islamist	XRW	Islamist	XRW
Aged 41-50	55	26	41	27	28	44	37	36	22	47	15	31
Aged 51-60	12	6	17	24	15	28	12	43	11	42	8	31
Aged 61+	5	1	0	3	3	12	1	9	3	19	1	10

Age Group	Channel Cases											
	2016-17		2017-18		2018-19		2019-20		2020-21		2021-22	
	Islamist	XRW	Islamist	XRW	Islamist	XRW	Islamist	XRW	Islamist	XRW	Islamist	XRW
Aged 41-50	12	7	11	9	9	19	14	22	8	19	7	12
Aged 51-60	1	3	3	12	4	7	6	23	5	18	5	10
Aged 61+	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	4	1	8	1	2

*Although there have been several changes in the typology used by the UK Home Office to characterize ideological connections (referred to as “type of concern”) throughout the data collection period, Islamist and extreme right-wing have remained a constant data collection point. As such, the tables above do not include more recent additions to Prevent and Channel datasets and simply focus on changing trends in the two largest terrorist threats posed to the United Kingdom between 2016 and 2022: Islamist terrorism and extreme right-wing.

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