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FROM THE EDITOR

The late General Wayne A. Downing, a former distinguished chair of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, used to tell his colleagues at the Center, "Who thinks wins." In this month's feature article, Christopher Faulkner, Raphael Parens, and Marcel Plichta argue that smarter counterterrorism in the Sahel, and across sub-Saharan Africa, can pay big dividends for the United States on the field of great power competition. They write that "the United States is at a critical juncture as it looks to adapt its counterterrorism mission. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Sahel region of Africa, where for the past decade, the United States has relied on France to serve as the counterterrorism lead. Those days are over, at least for now, and the United States is left attempting to balance its counterterrorism efforts in the frame of great power competition. However, too often these two strategic objectives are cast as zero-sum. In reality, U.S. counterterrorism in the Sahel, if appropriately reassessed, designed, and implemented, can generate real wins for the United States as it seeks to counter Russian and Chinese influence in the region. Additionally, and most importantly, it can improve the prospects for stability and security for African states in desperate need of both."

Our interview is with two counterterrorism officials at the Catalan Police – Mossos d'Esquadra: Inspector Lluis Paradell Fernandez, head of the Central Analysis Unit, Intelligence and Counterterrorism Service, and Deputy Inspector Xavier Cortés Camacho, head of the Counterterrorism Central Area. They discuss lessons learned as a result of the 2017 Islamic State-inspired attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, the evolving threats Catalonia faces, and the importance of "a joined-up effort in working to prevent violent extremism."

Lucas Webber and Daniele Garofalo write that "the Islamic State's leadership and central propaganda apparatus have been pushing to boost the Somalia branch's profile, while pro-Islamic State-Somalia groups have been producing media content to help the movement's message reach Somali, Amharic, Oromo, and Swahili speakers to boost fundraising, recruitment, and violent incitement efforts as well as to grow grassroot support in regions populated by these ethnolinguistic communities." They argue that "these developments could have regional security implications if the Islamic State is able to strengthen the Somalia branch using these means. Bolstered transnational connections could enable violent incitement and attacks directed into neighboring countries." Nodirbek Soliev examines digital terror financing by central Asian jihadis. He writes that "their online financing efforts tend to involve three stages. The first is the dissemination of fundraising propaganda and contacting prospective donors via online public accounts. The second is communication via encrypted messaging apps to identify a suitable mode of transaction and to provide security protocols. The third is the transaction itself. Understanding these mechanisms can help enhance relevant countries' response strategies against terrorism financing risks."

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

Commentary: "Who Thinks Wins": How Smarter U.S. Counterterrorism in the Sahel Can Pay Dividends for Great Power Competition

By Christopher Faulkner, Raphael Parens, and Marcel Plichta

The United States is at a critical juncture as it looks to adapt its counterterrorism mission. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Sahel region of Africa, where for the past decade, the United States has relied on France to serve as the counterterrorism lead. Those days are over, at least for now, and the United States is left attempting to balance its counterterrorism efforts in the frame of great power competition. However, too often these two strategic objectives are cast as zero-sum. In reality, U.S. counterterrorism in the Sahel, if appropriately reassessed, designed, and implemented, can generate real wins for the United States as it seeks to counter Russian and Chinese influence in the region. Additionally, and most importantly, it can improve the prospects for stability and security for African states in desperate need of both.

African leaders must be feeling host fatigue. This year, a cavalcade of foreign officials traveled to Africa, including French President Emmanuel Macron and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.[1] The United States sent a months-long parade of officials, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Vice President Kamala Harris, and CIA Director William Burns, among others, visiting countries across the continent.[2] These charm offensives reflect a reassessment of foreign interests in Africa, from Macron's rhetorical commitment to scale back France's defense commitments to Lavrov's eagerness to shore up Russia's image as a global player to twin U.S. concerns about great power competition and the expansion of terror groups. As much as U.S. officials would like to focus on the former, in the short term, the latter will present the most challenges and requires a serious reevaluation.

The United Nations recently labeled sub-Saharan Africa as the "new epicenter of violent extremism," one that has drawn in U.S. forces—from Somalia to Niger and beyond.[3] Scholars and policymakers are also engaged in a parallel discourse on whether we are witnessing a "new scramble for Africa" or even a "new Cold War" amid great power competition between the United States, China, and Russia, which supposedly led to the deployment of Russian mercenaries in several African countries.[4] This tension between power politics and counterterrorism is not new to Africa watchers. As argued in these pages not long ago, "Despite the United States' desire to shift toward near-peer competition, abandoning the fight against the jihadi groups that now proliferate on the continent runs counter to U.S. interests."[5] Near-peer competition in Africa and counterterrorism cannot, and should not, be decoupled. In order to compete with other powers, the United States will have to conduct security assistance well, especially in the counterterrorism space.

Policymakers will need to be much more intentional, building unique regional strategies, while determining the degree to which a military approach is even necessary.

This article examines the nexus between counterterrorism (CT) and great power competition in sub-Saharan Africa, with a central focus on the Sahel. The article first surveys the state of terrorism in the Sahel and then secondly discusses U.S. counterterrorism efforts over the past 20 years. The third part of the article outlines the role of great power competition in Sahelian counterterrorism, primarily examining Russia's growing engagement. The final section concludes with some ways forward for U.S. policymakers in their efforts to assist African countries with their most acute security challenges in the Sahel, without exacerbating great power dynamics or undermining support for economic growth and democratic governance.

Surveying the Terrorist Landscape in the Sahel

For all the hand-wringing about Russia and China, neither is the biggest threat to U.S. interests in much of Africa. Threats from militant groups have continued to evolve and escalate. Africa is host to over 20 percent of designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).[6] Stalwarts of the FTO list include organizations like Boko Haram, which has plagued Nigeria for over a decade, and al-Shabaab, the al-Qa`ida-affiliated militant organization that remains an enduring threat to Somalia despite an African Union

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peacekeeping mission there and persistent counterterrorism support from the United States.

And it is Africa's Sahel region, where al-Qa`ida and Islamic State affiliates have carved out significant influence, that is most concerning. The State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations recently noted that the Sahel "experienced more terrorist attacks than any other part of the world in 2021."[7] That trend has only continued, leading to increasing distrust between government and civilians, triggering coups, and fomenting a willingness among at least one of the region's regimes to partner with Russian mercenaries.

Mali, for instance, has struggled to contain an ever-expanding group of terrorist threats from the al-Qa`ida-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) as well as the Islamic State's Sahelian Province. An August 2020 coup only exacerbated that insecurity.[8] The new Malian regime expelled long-term security partners such as France—choosing instead to contract the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company that has been making gains across the continent.[9]

The militant threat is much the same in neighboring Burkina Faso where the ruling junta recently ended its five-year-long military accord with France.[10] Like Mali, Burkina Faso has struggled to grapple with simultaneous campaigns from the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) and JNIM. 2022 saw the highest number of fatalities since the onset of militant violence circa 2015.[11] Dismissing partners and surging violence have led to speculation about a potential Wagner deployment similar to Mali, though Burkina's junta has denied that it needs Wagner to win and has still invoked a desire for U.S. support.[12]

Though the pace of violence is nowhere near the levels seen in Mali and Burkina Faso, Niger has also had to grapple with insurgent attacks. To its southeastern border, Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West African Province conduct attacks while JNIM and ISSP have threatened its western flank.[13]

Violence in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are quickly becoming a regional problem, bleeding into coastal West African states. Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo are dealing with more extremist activity, particularly around their northern borders.[14] Porous borders and deteriorating security situations in Mali and Burkina Faso put significant pressure on these littoral states to contain the operational reach and tempo of JNIM and the Islamic State's regional affiliates.[15] These warning signs have prompted a renewed sense of international and domestic urgency in West Africa. In November 2022, the Accra Initiative, comprising Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Niger, and Togo, reached an agreement to establish a 10,000-troop Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF/AI) in an effort to curb jihadi spillover violence.[16] Meanwhile, Vice President Harris' recent West Africa trip started with a $100 million pledge to security assistance in the region.[17]

U.S. Counterterrorism Efforts in Africa

For the past two decades, U.S. counterterrorism efforts across Africa might best be described as "lackluster at best … harmful at worst."[18] Indeed, while successive presidential administrations have invested in counterterrorism on the continent, the U.S. *modus operandi* has primarily consisted of a light physical footprint; a concoction of special operators to "advise, assist, and accompany" African partners, training programs designed to build the capacity of African militaries and relevant security forces, and direct targeting of terrorist operatives.[19]

The U.S. military has sought to engage Africa-based terrorist threats through the 2001 AUMF, an authorization used against al-Qa`ida affiliates, and various congressional authorizations including the 10 U.S.C. § 333, which gives DoD-wide purview to "train and equip" foreign forces and 10 U.S.C. § 127e, which authorizes "DoD provide 'support' to foreign partners, state or otherwise, who in turn are 'supporting' authorized U.S. counterterrorism operations."[20] The United States also steadily backed France's efforts in the Sahel, offering logistical support and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assistance to French counterterrorism interventions since the onset of Operation Serval in 2013 (later Operation Barkhane).

U.S. non-kinetic approaches to counterterrorism in Africa have focused on security assistance and capacity building since 2002. These include the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) in four Sahelian countries and the $100 million East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative (EACTI) for six East African countries.[21] These programs aimed to bolster the counterterrorism capacity of host nations, and both expanded into broader programs, eventually encompassing 17 more countries through the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and Partnership for Regional East Africa Counterterrorism (PREACT).[22] [a] Most accounts assess these interagency programs as overly militaristic, carried out and implemented by AFRICOM after its establishment in 2007.[23] Several also note that the United States has been overly focused on these capacity-building missions, assuming that it is African militaries' lack of capacity to combat terrorist threats and not more systemic governance issues such as corruption that have been key sources of legitimacy/strength for extremist organizations.[24]

The U.S. counterterrorism approach also has a kinetic angle. For instance, the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or drones, has increased dramatically since 2007.[25] Perhaps the most well-known U.S. counterterrorism tactics on the continent have been those directed at al-Shabaab in Somalia, where the use of drones and piloted aircraft to conduct targeted killings is a staple of the U.S. counterterrorism approach. Yet, despite 16 years of airstrikes and an intermittent SOF presence, the effectiveness of such tactics has been questionable.[26]

Effective counterterrorism operations are notoriously difficult, and over-the-horizon operations (i.e., those done from a distance)

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a   Active members of PREACT, according to the U.S. State Department, include Djibouti, Kenya, Mozambique, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda.

Cameroonian soldiers interact with a U.S. soldier (left) as they take part in a counterterrorism training session during the Flintlock 2023 military training in a makeshift village in Daboya, Ghana, on March 11, 2023. (Nipah Dennis/AFP via Getty Images)

can increase the complexity of operations, as occurred against al-Shabaab and similar groups. Moreover, operations from a distance, while increasing the security of operators, can degrade other aspects such as confidence in intelligence. Such operations can also lead to errors, including civilian harm. In response to growing concerns over DoD mishaps, the FY 2019 NDAA included a requirement that the Secretary of Defense designate a senior civilian official to oversee compliance with DoD's policy on civilian casualties.[27] AFRICOM has established a civilian casualty reporting tool, though questions about its efficacy abound.[28] As several have noted, when militaries employ tactics that distance themselves from the battlefield, this distance creates a disconnect with those experiencing the effects of such attacks[29]—a phenomenon that could itself be linked to terrorist recruitment.

In the Sahel specifically, the U.S. story is much the same. A decade ago, then-President Barack Obama informed Congress that he was deploying some 100 military personnel to Niger to assist French forces in their operations in Mali. From there, U.S. deployments to the Sahel only grew along with their mission.[30] Terrorist threats also grew. The Tongo Tongo ambush in 2017, in which four U.S. service members were killed alongside five Nigerien soldiers and interpreters, led many to question the utility of U.S. boots on the ground in the Sahel—seeing the terrorist threats stemming from there as only tertiary (at best) to more pressing security issues arising from the big four of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea.[31] Such a misalignment of policy can be seen in Burkina Faso today, where a team of Green Berets reportedly cools

its heels in Ouagadougou, unable to train local forces due to the recent coup.[32]

Divestment in advise, assist, and accompany missions have also meant increasing reliance on allied partners, such as France—whose deteriorating relationships with Mali and Burkina Faso in recent years have complicated U.S. CT efforts. To bolster its foothold in the region, the United States spent the last several years constructing a drone base in Agadez, Niger, at a cost north of $100 million.[33] Known as Air Base 201, it has garnered significant attention, particularly in the aftermath of France's Sahel drawdown.[34] While the United States maintains an "archipelago of bases in North and West Africa" as part of its broader security efforts in the region, the Biden administration's preference for conducting counterterrorism operations over-the-horizon could have important effects in the Sahel.[35] There is some concern that armed drones in the Sahel will become the preferred CT tool of choice, replicating tactics employed in Somalia.[36] However, the Biden administration's May 2022 authorization to deploy 500 military personnel to Somalia[37] may suggest a U.S. security pivot.

Is There Even Great Power Competition in the Sahel?

Rhetoric about a "new Cold War" or "Scramble for Africa" gives the erroneous impression that there is a collection of powers, usually Russia, the United States, and China, seeking the same things at each other's expense. That is not the case. Advocates for a more robust U.S.-Africa policy too often ascribe more influence to Russia and more malevolence to China than either are due, especially in

the Sahel.[38] That is not to say that Russia is powerless or China benign, but the rhetoric removes the nuance in their approaches and reduces, and in some cases removes, African states' agency on a great power chessboard.

Russia and China are very different actors in Africa. Russia's economic clout on the continent is meager and focused on a few key partners.[39] Major Russian security projects are likewise few and have uncertain futures, like the proposed naval base in Port Sudan.[40] Where Russian security policy excels is in leveraging insecurity to strengthen its influence in Africa, such as the Wagner Group's meddling in the ongoing clashes in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces.[41] The Wagner Group's actions in Sudan and Moscow's provocative naval exercises with South Africa and China in February of this year reflect Russia's revisionist and disruptive goals on the continent.[42] In contrast, China has a much wider set of economic partners and successfully built a military base in Djibouti in 2017.[43] AFRICOM assessed in March 2022 that the Chinese have aspirations to build a second naval base on Africa's Atlantic coast.[44] But unlike Russia, China's primary interest in Africa is economic. Outside of arms sales, China is dragged kicking and screaming into security engagement in African affairs unless it protects Chinese economic interests.[45] China's peacekeeping mission to Sudan during the Darfur crisis and its naval mission countering piracy efforts in the Horn of Africa reflected Beijing's investment in Sudanese oil and protecting international trade corridors. Even the Djibouti naval base has an economic angle, as Djibouti is a major conduit for goods between the Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean.[46]

Fundamentally, U.S. policymakers need to recognize that the strategic challenge in the Sahel is not a neo-colonial game for riches and influence between the United States, China, and Russia. Instead, Russia is cheaply exploiting a security vacuum for geopolitical purposes. China has a robust economic relationship with the Sahel countries and participates in the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Mali.[47] Russia engaged Mali and other countries through arms sales and an organization of state-supported mercenaries like the Wagner Group. China's economic expansion might be concerning in the long run, but Russia's actions make the international community's CT efforts more challenging, at the expense of the Sahel's civilians and service members. It is the latter where the U.S. CT investment has the most to gain.

Russian Competition in the African Counterterrorism Space
While the U.S. footprint and investment in the Sahel is waxing, French engagement is waning. The French have conducted over 50 military interventions since 1960—the largest of which, Operation Barkhane, saw as many as 5,100 French troops deployed to Mali, Niger, and Chad.[48] There are long-standing critiques of Paris' Africa policy, but its footprint is fading fast, amid growing discontent at its failure to successfully combat terrorist organizations. The erosion of legitimacy and the sidelining of host nation militaries led to anti-French juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso, opening the door in Mali for the Wagner Group to undermine French, E.U., and U.N. efforts. France's recent decision to withdraw CT forces in Mali,[49] the Central African Republic (CAR),[50] and Burkina Faso[51] reflects a desire to reassess the country's security operations in Francophone Africa,[52] including a new French strategy aimed at Africanizing its CT support on the continent. Instead of providing direct military support, France has committed to training forces at military bases

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in the Sahel rather than maintaining standing forces.[53] Part of this reflects a French about-face, and an attempt to save face, moving away from unpopular and unsuccessful long-term CT operations,[54] but also a *fait accompli* by Wagner Group, the Kremlin, and coup regimes disinterested in cooperating further with their former colonizers.[55]

Russia has exploited France's troubles, leveraging counterterrorism and its own security assistance package(s) to engage with illiberal regimes across Africa, particularly in the Sahel. Moscow builds military partnerships and patron-client relationships with countries such as Mali, Sudan, and the CAR. Over the past decade, the Kremlin has frequently operated through the Wagner Group, a state-affiliated private military company and business consortium that has historically been composed of former members of Russian special forces and intelligence.[56] This organization provides plausible deniability and reduces financial risk for the Russian government, given the state's limited formal connections with Wagner outside of Ukraine.[57]

African states, particularly those at loggerheads with traditional security partners, see Wagner as an attractive security option. For its part, Wagner has helped craft conditions necessary for its own interventions. Disinformation operations that capitalize on disdain toward France's neo-colonial relationships with Africa and unsuccessful CT operations by the West pay dividends in the Sahel and across the broader region.[58] Wagner successfully co-opted military assistance and CT programs in Mali and the CAR through these disinformation operations[59] in addition to its provision of vehicle support[60] and its willingness to engage in crimes against civilians and minorities in the name of security.[61] Wagner's history of human rights abuses—including kidnapping, murder, and rape— are no deterrent for such regimes who face increasingly precarious internal threats and are willing to compromise on human rights and the rule of law. Moreover, Sahelian countries skeptical about U.S. and French involvement, and especially those who have come to power via unconstitutional regime changes, have few viable alternatives.

Wagner's track record in counterterrorism campaigns has been mixed, unsurprising given how difficult it is to achieve a military or political victory in the CT space. Instead, Wagner is 'winning' its engagements in the eyes of its clients because its set of political demands are narrow and limited: building Russian military relationships on the continent, gaining access to and maintaining resource extraction contracts and sites, and capitalizing on various regimes' dissatisfaction with the West.

In terms of genuine CT success, Wagner's track record is much weaker. While it has been comparatively successful against CAR rebel groups, such success came only after those groups were stretched to their limits attempting to reach the capital city of Bangui, and last-minute Wagner reinforcements blocked

their advances.[62] Meanwhile, Wagner's CT mission failed in Mozambique, as contractors struggled with language barriers and combat conditions, leading to casualties and a quick withdrawal.[63]

In Mali, the junta's recruitment of Wagner aligns with its refocused military strategy aimed at combating Islamist militias after pulling back in 2021.[64] But the likelihood of Wagner's CT approach resulting in any durable improvements in countering jihadi violence is unlikely. The group is far less capable than the French and "logistically, completely dependent on their hosts."[65] The result has been consequential for civilians who bear the brunt of Wagner's disregard for the laws of armed conflict.[66]

So far, all signs point to Wagner facing difficulties in Mali. Islamic State affiliates are resilient to Wagner advances, claiming to have killed 15 Wagner mercenaries and downed a Wagner drone.[67] JNIM uses IEDs, ambushes, and other tactics to great effect against Wagner, killing an estimated 20 fighters and injuring 100 others as of January 2023. Amidst these casualties, JNIM has demonstrated an ability to marshal and deploy its forces south, attacking the Kati military camp on July 22, 2022.[68] More recently, in April 2023, militants attacked a military camp in the town of Sevare where some fighters from Wagner are stationed.[69]

Across all of these deployments, Wagner has mixed motives. The group has a history of pursuing lucrative state mining,[70] forestry,[71] and other economic contracts[72] in exchange for its services. Many have argued that mercenaries tend to prolong conflicts,[73] choosing to prioritize cash flow over defeating insurgents.[74] This is especially true for Wagner, whose leadership often owns the mining and logistics companies that benefit from gold, timber, and diamonds.[75] Beyond economic gains, Wagner supports the Kremlin's interests in building Russian relationships in the Sahel, be they military-to-military connections[76] or political alignment at the United Nations.[77] Further, Wagner undermines Russia's ideological and political competitors on the continent.[78] None of these motives align with a successful CT campaign, which would allow the Wagner Group to leave in a timely fashion. It benefits both Wagner and the Kremlin for the former to maintain a parasitical CT presence in African states.

Wagner's participation in ideological struggles could create major blowback for Russia in the future. Russia's continued alignment with anti-Sunni actors including Hezbollah,[79] as well as the Malian government, the CAR government, among others, could eventually lead to terrorist attacks against Russian targets and possibly even the Russian homeland, if given the proper fuse. Russia's over-recruitment of ethnic minorities in the Caucasus and Central Asia for military service in Ukraine could provide the spark.[80]

Way(s) Forward

Counterterrorism and great power competition in Africa are not in tension. Investing in CT in the Sahel and Africa more broadly, with non-military instruments of national power leading the charge, will pay dividends as the United States and Western allies seek to prove that they are more reliable and ethical partners across a spectrum of categories. In this section, the authors consider ways forward for the United States in the Sahel. These include the need of a clearer sense of what the United States wants to accomplish in the region, prioritizing non-military means of engagement, and tailoring military approaches prudently amidst diverse partners.

First, the United States must seek clarity in defining CT

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success. While tactical and operational victory might be possible with enough resources, strategic victory in a CT campaign can be elusive.[81] Decisionmakers, whether African, French, or American, must determine a reasonable and attainable set of "winning" goals in deploying forces and resources to counter jihadism in sub-Saharan Africa. Clearly operationalizing what winning entails in different contexts—whether aspirational, such as a stable democratic regime with strong and representative civil institutions, or something more limited, such as containment of jihadi violence—enhances the chances of CT efficacy. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive goals, but they must be clearly conceptualized to frame U.S. CT engagement.

In the case of Western actors, particularly the United States and France, winning a CT campaign in sub-Saharan Africa is multi-dimensional. At its core, winning ensures the prevention of attacks on the homeland, but the spectrum of end goals is much wider. Promoting democracy, deterring human rights violations, countering influence from near-peer rivals, and cultivating a genuine African alliance base are all central features for effective and durable CT.

Russian goals, on the other hand, are far more limited. First and foremost, Russia's approach parallels a Cold War mentality where predatory practices for economic and political gains are paramount. It cares little about the long-term stability of African states and instead, seeks to expand military relationships via formal and irregular means as it seeks to erode respect for a rules-based international order that is misaligned with its strategic ambitions.[82] Thus, the Russian government can cheaply invest in Africa without concern for human rights or democratic values, often alongside leaders desperate for assistance in maintaining power and control of state resources. Western involvement, meanwhile, requires significantly more preconditions and includes more ethical dilemmas.

'Containment' can be applied to both Wagner and violent extremist organizations (VEOs). If Russian proxies like Wagner expand operations at the expense of good governance and strategic coherence, African countries will be dealing with the fallout for decades to come. For Western powers, it is more prudent and cost-effective to invest in countries with existing infrastructure, some modicum of popular support for governance, and existing institutions (even fragile ones) rather than failed states. Wagner's commitment to insulating elites, killing civilians, and fighting

terror with terror will only augment the grievances that have led Sahelian populations toward jihadi recruitment in the past. Russian mercenaries help fuel the fire that jihadis thrive on, and divestment in countering VEOs by the West today ensures the need for significant investment in the future.

However, the U.S. approach to terrorist threats in the Sahel, and across Africa, must move past offering narrow military solutions. Good governance and civil society support cannot remain afterthoughts. Strong investment in economic and social institutions in Africa's democracies well before violent extremism becomes an existential threat will prove an essential tool for engaging with countries where great power competition is not acute. Escalating to a Cold War redux is a surefire way to exacerbate terrorist threats while simultaneously legitimizing Russia's deployment of mercenaries. The United States must avoid "competing … for the affections of autocrats" and supporting armed actors that are only superficially interested in democratic values in the name of countering another great power.[83]

U.S. policymakers leave very real opportunities for economic and political benefits on the table when they dismiss African countries—in short: "the world has become far too small for America to pretend that what happens in Africa stays in Africa."[84] Short-staffed U.S. embassies in Africa and declining U.S. bulk trade despite the continent's booming economies and population should be met with a sense of urgency by U.S. policymakers.[85] Although some have suggested regional czars to solve the staffing gap, there are no substitutes for on-the-ground policymakers and implementers.[86] The Biden administration appears to recognize this, at least to a degree. Secretary of State Blinken's $150 million commitment to humanitarian aid for several Sahelian countries and Vice President Harris' pledge of $100 million to help littoral West African states counter rising threats from jihadi groups are important steps in the right direction.[87] The State Department and USAID must ensure that these funds are properly distributed among partners. However, financial pledges are only the first step. These organizations must work with NGOs and local organizations to build confidence in rule of law, local governance, and civil society institutions, in order to deter the grievances that jihadis often feed on.

African input and support for maintaining international institutions such as the United Nations is likewise critical, as regional experts argue that the United Nations' African delegations have historically had the "largest and most unified voting bloc."[88] It is therefore incumbent to rethink both the level of U.S. engagement with African countries and ensure that future policy does not repeat the exploitative and self-defeating policies of the Cold War and Global War on Terror.

When military approaches are appropriate, they need to consider local context. As Sahel expert Alex Thurston has argued, Exercise Flintlock 2023, the United States' annual training exercise for West and North African militaries, focused too heavily on urban CT operations when "most soldiers … [are] going to be trying to decide who's a threat and who's not in a village where civilians are frightened and suspicious."[89] And while Exercise Flintlock's academic instruction included courses on the rule of law and protection of civilians, genuine and lasting security force assistance is going to demand a more comprehensive approach to avoid the "overly securitized approaches" of past efforts.[90] One of the central challenges here is that the security climate facing the current regimes in Mali and Burkina Faso might make them less keen on

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approaches that do not prioritize kinetic military operations—promises that the Wagner Group can make—even if they lack the capacity to keep them.

The U.S. Department of Defense should simultaneously be cautious in its approach through the various authorities it has used (or may use) in countering terrorism on the continent. While enticing, overuse of Section 127e ("counterterrorism proxy force authority") or dipping into Section 1202 ("irregular warfare proxy authority"), both of which are exempt from any human rights vetting, will likely become problematic for counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel, if carried out in isolation.[91] AFRICOM's recent increased demand signal may look to tap into these line items—it has done so for Section 127e in the past—and Section 1202 authority may be used to justify combating Russian influence in the region. But a balanced approach is imperative, one that leads with diplomatic and economic tools first and frequently.

Conditions for assistance may be tighter for the State Department, but that does not mean DoD should be the primary way the United States assists Sahelian countries. Sahelian countries where terrorist threats are most severe are also the most vulnerable to civil-military crises that preclude most kinds of assistance. P.L. 117-328, Division K, Section 7008 restricts U.S. foreign assistance for coup regimes.[92] Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso face restrictions on bilateral economic assistance, international security assistance, multilateral assistance, and export and investment assistance.[b] However, these do not preclude assistance entirely. Section 7008 generally applies to aid administered directly "to" or "implemented through or with host governments," allowing the State Department to work with NGOs and civil society.[93] Moreover, the Secretary of State now has more latitude for how restrictions are applied. The Department of State should use its increased latitude to lead on Sahel engagement and can ask for DoD assistance sparingly.

Conclusion

Overall, the United States' counterterrorism approach in the Sahel needs serious reflection. Recycling the same CT policies while condemning Russia's mercenaries or Chinese economic influence will do little to move the needle with African governments that are undoubtedly tired of being treated as "pawns" in the great power

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b   A notable omission from this list is Chad. Following the death of Idriss Déby in April 2021, a military council headed by Déby's son, Mahamat, seized power, bypassing constitutionally established succession plans. The United States, though calling for a democratic transition, refused to label the event a coup largely because Chad is seen as the lynchpin for U.S. and allied counterterrorism efforts in the region. Robbie Gramer, "Biden Defaults to 'War on Terror Approach' to Chad," *Foreign Policy*, May 13, 2021.

competition landscape.[94] Given the variety of threats and rival interests attempting to establish footholds, U.S. policymakers must show that working with the United States is a mutually beneficial prospect but that may be easier said than done. As critics of current CT efforts note, reactive counterterrorism policies that neglect the agency of African partners and an overly "securitized rhetoric" are factors that have enabled strategic challengers to outcompete the United States in the region.[95] AFRICOM'S leadership reiterates the importance of the 3D approach—diplomacy, development, and defense—and it is critical that diplomacy and development are not drowned out by defense.[96]

It is incumbent for U.S. policy in the Sahel to be more focused on tangible support that matters for states in the region. These efforts should center on rectifying the humanitarian and developmental needs facing Sahelian governments to avoid cascading effects that can generate wider regional instability. American diplomats and leaders should build broader and more transparent partnerships in Africa. Of course, traditional counterterror operations can be a strategically important part of a more holistic Sahel policy, but without establishing strong economic and social partnerships, they will be Sisyphean tasks on the continent.

The late General Wayne A. Downing, a former distinguished chair of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, used to remind his colleagues at the Center, "Who thinks wins."[97] Smarter counterterrorism in the Sahel, and across sub-Saharan Africa, will pay big dividends for the United States on the field of great power competition.   CTC

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Catalan Police – Mossos d'Esquadra with Lluis Paradell Fernandez, Head of the Central Analysis Unit, Intelligence and Counterterrorism Service; Xavier Cortés Camacho, Head of the Counterterrorism Central Area

By Paul Cruickshank

Inspector Lluís Paradell Fernandez is the head of the Central Analysis Unit, Intelligence and Counterterrorism Service, Catalan Police – Mossos d'Esquadra. He has served on the police force since 1992 and between 2003 to 2012 managed the Strategic Analysis Unit focusing on gang violence at the Security Cabinet of the Department of Interior of the Generalitat de Catalunya (government of Catalonia).

Deputy Inspector Xavier Cortés Camacho is the current head of the Counterterrorism Central Area at the Catalan Police – Mossos d'Esquadra. Deputy Inspector Cortés joined the Catalan police in 1994, where he has commanded several specialized units in criminal investigation including relating to homicides, robberies, and human trafficking.

CTC: Both of you have been heavily involved in counterterrorism efforts for the Catalonian police force, Mossos, during your career. Can you explain the role you play and the role your respective units play in analyzing, identifying, and countering terrorists and violent extremist threats?

Paradell Fernandez: Much of my career has been devoted to these challenges. One thing I'd like to point out at the start is that while we have a strong relationship with other police forces in Spain and organizations such as Europol, we can only speak to the situation in Catalonia.

In 1996, with three colleagues, I started the first analysis unit within our Department of Intelligence and Counterterrorism. I remember we traveled to the U.S. in order to know better how this task of intelligence analysis worked in the U.S. We participated in a meeting hosted by what was called IALEIA, the International Association of Law Enforcement Intelligence Analysts, and we received some advice in how to start a new intelligence unit in a police force—just some basic tips in order to build our own model in Catalonia. This was my starting point dealing with this issue. I worked on issues relating to street gangs between 2002 and 2012 and then in 2012 came back to my previous position as chief of the Central Analysis Unit within the intelligence and counterterrorism service, and that is the position I hold right now. We are divided into three units. One is devoted to operational analysis. A second is devoted to strategic analysis, and the smallest and newest one is devoted to the radicalization processes of all kinds and also focuses on what we call manipulation groups—people who use psychological techniques to modify beliefs.

Cortés: My profile is quite different from Lluis'. I've been working as a police officer for 28 years, and I joined the counterterrorism services in 2018, just after the [August 2017] terrorist attack in Barcelona.[1] I've been running units for 22 years related to organized crime here in Mossos d'Esquadra, so my expertise is as an investigator. The reason why I have been working since 2018 in the counterterrorism services is because my bosses, after the experience of the terrorist attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, asked me to join this service with the idea of trying to transform it into an advanced investigation service. There are two different ways of dealing with terrorism from the perspective of the police forces: One is the classical approach—the pure information, the intelligence, what Lluis is dealing with; and the other one is to investigate. One thing became very clear after the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, which is that you need to turn all the information that you develop into legal evidence. If not, you don't have the opportunity to put all those people in jail. That was the reason why I was moved to this service four years ago. So my profile is quite different from Lluis. My duty is to fight the terrorist groups that are acting against the Catalan interest in the field. Obviously, I'm working hand-in-hand with Lluis because he's offering me all the information they have and all the support they can offer to me, and I'm working to obtain the evidence.

Paradell Fernandez: Just to make you aware of the level of cooperation, one of my team members who belongs to the operational analysis unit is embedded in his unit. He sits next to the investigators, not in my office or in the office with other analysts. And this is the change, in the sense of being hand-in-hand in order to work altogether.

Cortés: Exactly. We are part of the same machine.

CTC: How did the threat environment in Barcelona evolve after 9/11 and in the years before the 2017 attack in Barcelona?

Paradell Fernandez: 9/11 underlined to us that Islamist terrorism was a threat to all Western countries and the 2004 Madrid bombings underlined that it was specifically a threat to Spain, and we focused on it at the same level as we'd been dealing with other threats like the ETA threat for many years in Spain.

The Islamic State's declaration of a caliphate in 2014 was a turning point in the sense that it had a powerful effect in spreading their narrative around the world. We have five threat levels. When in September 2014 the Islamic State's Abu Muhammed al-Adnani issued his declaration pushing for attacks in the West, we raised

The Las Ramblas promenade in Barcelona, Spain, on August 19, 2017,
two days after a terrorist vehicle attack there. (Carl Court/Getty Images)

the threat level from 2 to 3. After the attacks on the Charlie Hebdo offices and a kosher market in Paris in January 2015, we raised the threat to 4. We have remained at this level since then to stay alert.

In the wake of the November 2015 Paris attacks, we made changes to let our patrols deploy with different kinds of weapons to respond in case of a similar attack. Fast forward to August 2017, and this meant that when the terrorist cell that had just targeted Barcelona was about to launch a follow-up attack in the village of Cambrils, our patrols were positioned in a very crucial place and well equipped, and it was the place where the attackers, the terrorists, entered the city. This made a difference because they were able to neutralize four of the five people that were in the car. Only one was able to get out of the car and to attack other people, and he was neutralized almost 500 meters later.

CTC: In August 2017, in the space of nine hours, members of a 10-man cell of Islamic State-inspired terrorists from the Catalonian town of Ripoll carried out vehicle and knife attacks in Barcelona and the Catalonian town of Cambrils, killing 16.[2] The attacks were rapidly improvised after their 'bomb factory' exploded, forcing them to abandon plans to blow up vans containing high amounts of explosive. Many of our readers are fellow counterterrorism practitioners. Can you describe what it was like to respond to and investigate this attack? According

to an analysis published in *CTC Sentinel*, "Considering the lethal resources assembled by the terrorists and their lethal intent, the death toll could have reached hundreds had they not accidently blow up their bomb factory in Alcanar."[3] What were you able to establish about their initial attack plans? Has any evidence come to light that the Islamic State had any role, for example through a cybercoach, in directing the attack? What have been the key lessons learned?

Cortés: There was not any kind of evidence establishing links between the offenders in this case and the Islamic State. Obviously, the attackers were inspired by the Islamic State, but there were not direct links between them or to any kind of terrorist organization abroad.

CTC: So there was no 'cyber-coach' from Islamic State territory directing them?

Cortés: No, not in this case. We have other investigations made recently in Catalonia when we have a lot of evidence establishing direct contact between the Islamic State, [but] not in this case. This case was very, very local.

CTC: What was it like to respond to the attack?

Paradell Fernandez: Even though we had developed a well-planned strategy in order to respond in case of an attack, it was of course shocking. Those colleagues that were on vacation that day, including me, immediately came into work. I was at the office 30 minutes later. The attack provided many lessons learned and helped us improve our procedures.

With regard to the terrorist cell's initial attack plans, they had aspirations, rather than concrete plans, to attack the Sagrada Familia,[a] Barcelona's football stadium, the Ramblas, or even the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Their intention was to place a lot of explosives inside big vehicles, and this could have produced a massacre if they had succeeded in these intentions.

CTC: What has been described as the cell's 'bomb factory,' where they were making TATP,[4] exploded, forcing them to improvise lower-tech attacks.

Paradell Fernandez: It was not as elaborate as a 'bomb factory.' We were lucky that it was not a bomb factory, because if there had been a bomb factory, they would have succeeded in their intention to execute the attacks, using all the explosives they were manufacturing at that moment. They didn't take into account certain safety measures. Just today, I was talking with a colleague who is an expert in this field, and he told me what they were trying to achieve was very difficult. You need the correct premises, the correct procedures, and safety measures in order to succeed.

Cortés: The bottom line is they did not have the professionalism or ability to do it in a proper way.

CTC: You mentioned there were many lessons learned.

Paradell Fernandez: Compared to what we had faced from the ETA organization or even the GRAPO[b] organization from the far-left, anarchist end of the spectrum, the paradigm change was that the Ripoll cell was not directly connected to an established terrorist organization. They were not trained by anybody who was an expert in this field, but they decided to commit a major attack. Their intentions were really high. The cell's ringleader, Abdelbaki Es Satty [a preacher from Morocco who had settled in Ripoll],[5] was the one who legitimized the attack through the framework of jihadi salafi ideology. Ripoll did not have a significant Islamist presence like some other parts of Catalonia. This was a case of a group radicalizing themselves. The key lesson for me is the need to invest in detecting and preventing violent extremism not just in the case of Islamists but also for the far-left, the far-right, and for gangs.

Cortés: I agree. The first lesson was that the most important thing is prevention, always prevention. And in fact, one of my current responsibilities inside my area is to deal with a plan, which is called #PREV, to prevent radicalism and violent extremism. This effort grew a lot after the Barcelona attack.

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a   Editor's Note: The Sagrada Familia is an iconic unfinished Catholic church in Barcelona that receives millions of visitors each year. It is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

b   Editor's Note: GRAPO, Grupos de Resistencia Antifascista Primero de Octubre (First of October Anti-fascist Resistance Group)

Lluís Paradell Fernandez

In detecting radicalization and preventing the kind of attacks we saw in Catalonia 2017, information from the community is a vital element. We have sought to establish a strong relationship with imams and the Islamic community in Catalonia. We have deep contacts with the schools, where we help teachers understand what to look out for. We also need to closely monitor the prison community—both those convicted of crimes related to terrorism and those convicted of ordinary crime but that are vulnerable to radicalization.

When it comes to investigations, obviously you need to hurry a lot when you are trying to neutralize a threat. But you have to take your time after a terrorist attack has already been committed. Time is on your side from this point on, and you should use it to develop information that could prevent other threats in the future and to build the strongest possible case to secure convictions.

CTC: Lluis, you have had a lot of experience countering gang violence. Many of those involved in Islamic State activity in Europe have been involved in gangs and petty theft, with the Islamic State itself described as "a sort of super-gang" that attracted those involved in gangs and legitimized their violent street credo.[6] What for you are the crossovers between gang violence and other forms of crime and jihadi terrorism? What lessons have you learned from addressing gang violence that is relevant to the counterterrorism enterprise?

Paradell Fernandez: In general, the perspective is that they share more or less the same triggers, you could also say the same kind of vulnerabilities.

When it comes to countering violent Islamist extremism, we have a set of different programs to get to the roots of the problem. In

fact, the objective is not just to detect the terrorist or the radicalized person, but it is to avoid this process of radicalization. It's to detect these factors that can lead somebody to radicalize. We started working with the prison system on this back in 2008. In 2012, we also established a program within our police force devoted to the jihadist threat to help our police officers differentiate between Islam, Islamism, and jihadism.

In 2016, we began a program in schools to prevent the radicalization process.

CTC: Shifting gears a little bit, how has Mossos worked to improve information sharing and cooperation with federal counterterrorism agencies in Spain and with counterparts across Europe, and what is the value of your relationships with the CT community in the United States?

Cortés: I can say that a very important part of my time has always been dealing with my colleagues from the national police and security services in Spain. One of our aims is always to have good contact with the international community in terms of sharing information. It's important to note that we are a regional police force focused on Catalonia, but if I'm in the middle of an investigation, a judge can open the door to engage with colleagues from overseas.

Paradell Fernandez: As I mentioned at the beginning of our conversation, we are not a national police force, so we coordinate with other law enforcement agencies and mainly through the Intelligence Center for Counter-Terrorism and Organized Crime, the state body, in order to guarantee this kind of coordination. And we have almost daily participation with them in different aspects of the threat assessment, for example; Xavier is responsible for this coordination in different investigations in his field. And we are also participating in other working groups. But we have to use some Spanish points of contact in order to relate with other organizations, like Interpol or even Europol, in practical day-to-day use. Things have improved a lot in recent years but in my mind can still improve further as we would like to work with all tools available at every moment. And I have to say that the cooperation and the coordination with the national bodies is really good in this moment. For example, as Xavier mentioned, there's a national court that is responsible for terrorist investigations. We have direct access to this national court.

With regard to engagement with colleagues in the United States, we feel that there's very good contact and quality, and they appreciate also our work and our cooperation whenever they have made requests. I have to say, we look at the law enforcement in the United States, agencies like the FBI, as more or less the model because of the capacity they have, the resources, the level of specialization in every kind of threat and this is also really very important for us.

Cortés: There's an important point that should be stressed: Although we are a regional police force, we are the main police force in Catalonia. So if you need something, if you need information, if you need to act in the field, in Catalonia you have to deal with us. So obviously, we are inside the country of Spain, but if the United States' law enforcement wants to obtain information about what is happening in Catalonia, they come to us.

> **"These days, whether it's anarchists, jihadists, or far-right extremists, the paradigm now is 'propaganda by deed.' Without being connected to an organized group or receiving instructions from such a group, people decide to commit an action."**
>
> **- Lluís Paradell Fernandez**

CTC: In May 2020, authorities disrupted an Islamic State-linked drone attack plot in Barcelona. Mohammed Yassi Amrani, a former barman, was convicted of the plot in October 2022. According to media reporting, after being very quickly radicalized, Amrani was contacted online by an Islamic State recruiter who instructed him to fly a drone packed with explosives over Barcelona's Camp Nou stadium during a soccer match between Barcelona and Real Madrid and then detonate it.[7] What for you were the takeaways from this case involving fast radicalization, a cybercoach, and a drone attack plan?

Paradell Fernandez: In our analysis, this case in some sense proves what we are always taking into account, that the bad guys are always thinking how to improve their methods, and at that time, we were aware that in Syria, in northern Iraq, some of the ISIS groups were using drones in order to attack their targets. Also, this kind of *modus operandi* was appearing in different kinds of propaganda that they were spreading out all around the planet. So this is something that we have been taking into account for a long time. We don't have any case where they succeeded in using this kind of method. But it's likely that they can use it or are trying to use it. I'm not so sure about the level of development of this particular plot.

CTC: What is the current threat picture in Catalonia across the ideological spectrum?

Paradell Fernandez: We face the same threat from jihadi terrorism as elsewhere in the West. The last significant jihadi terror attack in Europe was the November 2020 Vienna terrorist attack.[8] Since then, there have been various attacks, but they have been carried out by a single person acting by himself without any kind of relationship with members of ISIS or al-Qa`ida and using really very, very simple methods—for example, using knives or a car—that don't require training to cause mass damage. We are working to avoid these kind of attacks, which are less dangerous in terms of causing casualties but are more difficult to detect. So we are in a continuous process of ensuring our colleagues are aware of the latest developments with regard to this kind of threat.

We are also concerned about the threat coming from racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism and white supremacism, white nationalism, and associated conspiracy theories. We have been detecting this kind of activity in social networks in Catalonia. Two years ago, we stopped a terrorism plot by arresting two far-right extremists. One of them was a U.S. citizen. They were connected with other people in other parts of Spain. We had to arrest them

because they were about to commit an offense that had nothing to do with this terrorist threat and so we don't know whether they would have succeeded to recruit more people, but we detected them and we were after them. The investigation was a good example of cooperation. We conducted this operation jointly with the Guardia Civil, because there were people involved in Catalonia, but they were involved with people from other regions in Spain. These individuals made references to Brenton Tarrant in New Zealand,[9] Anders Breivik in Norway and the Buffalo, New York, attack,[10] and had been spraying this message through the networks.

For us, this extreme far-right threat vector, this leaderless resistance ideology is really a very, very serious threat at this moment.

CTC: So the far-right extremist threat has being going up in the last few years?

Paradell Fernandez: Yes. Not just in terms of attacks in Europe. In France several months ago, a 17-year-old was arrested because he was detected when he was trying to buy a weapon through the internet. He had a lot of connections with these kind of far-right extremist groups, and he was convinced to conduct an attack in Europe.

At the same time, when it comes to violent anarchism, we have been really vigilant over this kind of threat because it has some kind of Mediterranean dimension. There's a connection between Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal less so, and some Latin American countries like Chile or Mexico.

These days, whether it's anarchists, jihadists, or far-right extremists, the paradigm now is 'propaganda by deed.' Without being connected to an organized group or receiving instructions from such a group, people decide to commit an action. At the moment in Europe, we are really concerned about one of the most important anarchist leaders who is in jail in Italy, Alfredo Cospito.[11] He was on a hunger strike.[12] If he had died, there would have been some kind of reaction. What we had expected in Catalonia was not for a reaction that involved major attacks or bombings, but we expected some kind of a demonstration on the streets and trying to break windows of banks and so on. It's not the main threat, but the anarchist terrorist threat is still there.

Cortés: I'm almost totally focused on jihadism nowadays. For us, we think that the main threat nowadays, as Lluis said, is the lone wolf, using unsophisticated weapons, but from time to time, we are really concerned about a very similar threat and this is people with mental health challenges. We are monitoring a group of people that have mental health challenges, who are playing with the ideology of jihadism. So they are not really people concerned with this ideology, but they *think* they are concerned. So the threat is almost bigger because they are not under any kind of personal control and they very usually have problems with people in the street, so they could act with a knife or something similar at any moment. So we are making, we could say, almost a list of those kinds of people, and we are monitoring them day by day because they are one of the main threats nowadays. So we are moving from the big organizations in the past, and now we are monitoring people with mental health challenges who could carry [out] what could appear as a terrorist attack, but it's not. For example, in Algeciras in January 2023,[13] there was an attack that was initially considered a terrorist attack

> **"I'm almost totally focused on jihadism nowadays. For us, we think that the main threat … is the lone wolf, using unsophisticated weapons, but from time to time, we are really concerned about a very similar threat and this is people with mental health challenges."**
> **- Xavier Cortés Camacho**

but now it seems to not have been so because the perpetrator had mental health challenges.

The other threat that is very important for us is related to terrorist convicts being released from prison after serving their sentence. Over the years, we made a large number of arrests of individuals who were involved in propaganda, indoctrination, and support for terrorist groups. They tended to be given prison sentences of five or six years, and they are now back on the streets or due to be released in the near future. In Europe, as in the case of the Vienna attacker, some of those responsible for terrorist attacks have been people that have been released from prison after being sentenced in relation to terrorist crimes.[14] So we are monitoring this group of people as well, which is a very important part of our work.

There are also some kinds of threats that are not so well-known. For example, an investigation we worked on for three, almost four years, that was called Alexandria. In about 2017, we stopped a group of Algerian people that were plotting to carry out a bombing in Barcelona. They were preparing a terrorist attack against Russian interests in Barcelona; at that time, Russia was carrying out operations against the Islamic State in Syria. We got a lot of information that they were monitoring some yachts belonging to Russian oligarchs here—those yachts most of time are in the Barcelona harbor—and that was the target. As a result of our three-year investigation, there were some very interesting final conclusions. We have a lot of evidence that there was a deep relationship between common robberies in the center of Barcelona and the financing of terrorism groups abroad—in this case, in Algeria.

This group was composed of people related to gangs carrying out petty thefts in the center of Barcelona. We got information it was sending more than €300,000 in a year as a result of the robberies, especially robberies of tourists, in Barcelona, to people in Algeria. We have some confidential informants, collaborating with the judge, who got direct information about what they were doing with that money. They were sending that money in order to finance terrorist activity. But it's not easy to obtain information from some other country—in this case, Algeria. In my case, I made a trip to Algeria to try to obtain that information, but it was impossible. We knew the names, we knew the telephone numbers of the people who were receiving that money, but we did not have, in terms of legal evidence, proof that they were doing that activity. But we have confidential informants that had been offering that information for us and for the judge. So it's clear that it's not a question of our imagination.

After making the arrests, we got evidence that this group had

more than 50 direct contacts with the Islamic State through the internet—in this case, through the dark web.

So we think it's a new paradigm that people who could appear in front of our eyes as simple pickpockets in our country are in such sophisticated and current contact with the Islamic State in order to prepare a bombing in the city. We have to deal with these two dimensions of the threat. On the one hand, the day-by-day monitoring of people with mental health challenges with the potential to carry out lone wolf attacks. On the other hand, we have people that don't have the appearance of being terrorists, but when you look deeply at the information they have in their houses or electronic devices, you can see that they are really deeply connected with these international groups. So we have to open our eyes to threats we might otherwise miss.

CTC: Is there anything you would like to add?

Paradell Fernandez: For us as a police service, a big challenge is the growing polarization in our societies. The concern is this will fuel more support for violent extremism. We need to do our best to try to improve the social equation. The way we act as the police and the rest of society looks at the police is going to be important. We have to build bridges between those providing social services and the police because there is some distrust between them. There needs to be a joined-up effort in working to prevent violent extremism. In our analysis efforts, we need to make sure not to confuse the effects of some problems with the causes. Using an example from my period dealing with street gangs, there were stabbings in the streets, fights, but these were the effects of a bigger problem—what some experts called 'wicked problems' that don't have an easy solution. And in one of the first reports we wrote when we assessed the appearance of this phenomenon in Catalonia, we identified that in order to be effective in responding to this kind of phenomena, a level of coordination is needed between different practitioners and different services. This is the real challenge, to be able to work together in a coordinated effort to face this kind of phenomenon or threat.

Cortés: The most important thing is prevention. Always prevention. Every time an investigator like me gets involved after an attack, it is always the result of a failure to prevent it.   CTC

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The Islamic State Somalia Propaganda Coalition's Regional Language Push

By Lucas Webber and Daniele Garofalo

The Islamic State's Somalia branch pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in October 2015 and was formally recognized in December 2017. Since its founding, the group has been one of the weaker groupings on the African continent and has struggled to expand in any significant way. Somalian security forces with multifaceted operational support from the United States have degraded and hindered the group. The Islamic State's leadership and central propaganda apparatus have been pushing to boost the Somalia branch's profile, while pro-Islamic State-Somalia groups have been producing media content to help the movement's message reach Somali, Amharic, Oromo, and Swahili speakers to boost fundraising, recruitment, and violent incitement efforts as well as to grow grassroot support in regions populated by these ethnolinguistic communities. The efforts are very much in line with the spirit of the global Islamic State movement's ethos in outreaching and trying to win over Muslims of all languages, ethnicities, and geographical locations. These developments could have regional security implications if the Islamic State is able to strengthen the Somalia branch using these means. Bolstered transnational connections could enable violent incitement and attacks directed into neighboring countries.

Following the loss of the last bastions of the Islamic State's caliphate in 2019, the organization has increasingly promoted the successes of its branches in other conflict theaters—most prominently, those in Africa. The African branches are by no means heterogeneous; the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) is the movement's most powerful external network, while Islamic State-Somalia is one of the weaker branches on the continent.

Given this, the Islamic State-Somalia Province has sought to grow by tapping into local grievances to appeal to a broader range of ethnolinguistic population segments.[1] This has been done through official propaganda in regional languages as well as through unofficial propaganda and supporter networks in additional tongues.

This article will examine the background and current state of the Islamic State's Somalia branch, as well as Islamic State Central's propaganda promotion of the outfit and the role supporting media outlets are playing in the outreach campaign to Amharic, Somali, Oromo, and Swahili-speaking target audiences. It will then conclude with an analysis of the potential regional security implications relating to these developments.

History of Islamic State-Somalia

The expansion of the Islamic State in Africa is increasingly evident, and the continent is a highly strategic region for the jihadi organization. This expansion includes an active official province in Somalia. Somalia's security is threatened not only by al-Shabaab's violent military campaigns but also by the military and propaganda activities of the Islamic State province in Somalia.

In 2012, al-Shabaab[a] leadership sent a charismatic leader, Abdulqadir Mumin, to Puntland to carry out a vast recruitment campaign to establish an outpost of the al-Qa`ida affiliate in East Africa in the mountainous areas of the northern Somali hinterland and expand its areas of activity. With the severe operational and leadership difficulties faced by al-Shabaab in 2014, Mumin found himself alone and isolated running the Somali jihadi group's cell in Puntland.[2] This isolation and distance from al-Shabaab's central leadership made the operations of the group increasingly independent. At that time, al-Shabaab was in the midst of a bitter internal dispute between factions.[3] Mumin, dissatisfied with the situation and his isolation, decided to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State in October 2015,[4] causing a violent split in the Puntland group, as only about 30 of the 300 local Islamist fighters reportedly joined Mumin.[5]

On April 25, 2016, the Somali province of the Islamic State carried out its first attack against government forces, an AMISOM convoy in Mogadishu.[6] In October 2016, the group launched its first major operation targeting the main port city of Qandala,[7] which it controlled until December 3 that year.[8] Throughout 2016 and 2017, the group suffered several losses in counterterrorism operations, and was also designated by the United States as a global terrorist organization.[9] In December 2017, the central Islamic State media indirectly confirmed that it had elevated the Islamic State

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a   Starting in 2008, al-Shabaab began to have ties and operate under the umbrella of the leadership of al-Qa`ida Central, when Usama bin Ladin was leading the organization. Officially, al-Shabaab became an affiliate of al-Qa`ida in 2012, with the commitment formally accepted by new leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio "Shabaab formally joins al Qaeda," FDD's Long War Journal, February 9, 2012.

in Somalia to the status of a province, releasing a propaganda video from Somalia showing three fighters from the Mumin-led cell threatening attacks on Western states and calling on Muslims, particularly those in East Africa, to join the Islamic State's cause.[10] In 2018, the group bolstered its ranks with other al-Shabaab defectors, carried out several attacks in Puntland, expanded into Mogadishu and the south of the country,[11] began collecting taxes in the areas it controlled or operated in, and created small new cells in central and southern Somalia. Between December 2018 and March 2019, a full-blown war between Islamic State-Somalia and al-Shabaab began in numerous locations within Somalia.[12] In August 2021, Islamic State militants in Somalia carried out another major military operation, occupying and looting the town of Balidhidin in the semi-autonomous Somali region of Puntland.[13]

The Current Status of Islamic State-Somalia

Analyzing the claims and attacks conducted by the Islamic State in Somalia, 36 attacks were claimed by the Somali jihadi group in 2021 and 32 attacks in 2022, mostly in Puntland and the capital, Mogadishu. The Islamic State in Somalia currently operates mainly in the mountainous areas of Puntland, and in southern Somalia mainly in the areas of the capital Mogadishu. In January and February 2023, Islamic State-Somalia conducted five attacks:[14] on the road between Mogadishu-Afgooye; in the towns of Blay Tadan and Wadi Ja'il, southeast of the city of Bosaso, in the province of Bari; in the district of Karan, in Mogadishu; hitting several targets such as Somali police, the Somali army, Puntland security forces, and politicians.[15]

At the head of the Somali jihadi organization is still the veteran leader Mumin, whose group consists of around 200-250 fighters.[16] Importantly, the Islamic State's Al-Karrar office is based in Somalia, acting as a financial hub and transmitter of funds to other provinces.[17] According to a February 2023 report by the U.N. monitoring team tracking the global jihadi threat, the Al-Karrar office has been sending financial funds to the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK), totaling approximately $25,000 per month in cryptocurrency. The U.N. report also states that Islamic State-Somalia "generated $100,000 per month through extortion of the shipping industry and illicit taxation."[18]

A major blow to the Somali Islamic State organization came in January 2023, when U.S. special operations forces raided a remote mountainous cave complex in northern Somalia and killed an important Islamic State leader in Somalia, Bilal al-Sudani,[19] who was responsible for the promotion and growth of the Islamic State in Africa and the group's global funding.[20] The exact impact is yet to be discerned, and it is unknown how the group will adapt following this loss and how it will reorganize its operational and financial side, as al-Sudani's departure is certainly a blow to the Somali province. Al-Sudani was a veteran member of the group since the creation of the province.[21] The most recent attack, officially claimed in a statement and later published by the newspaper Al Naba, was conducted on April 4, 2023, in Mogadishu, with an improvised explosive device hitting a convoy of the African Union Mission to Somalia (ATMIS) armed forces. In total, three attacks were conducted from March 1 to April 18, two in Mogadishu and one in the town of Bili Tadan, southeast of Bosaso, Puntland.[22]

Islamic State Central Media Promotion of Somalia Branch

The Islamic State-Somalia's propaganda is far inferior to that of its direct rival, al-Shabaab, and it is exclusively disseminated via Amaq News Agency and Al Naba. Recent Islamic State propaganda products in Somalia included the July 2021 publication of an extensive photo reportage of its fighters in daily activity, with many photos dedicated to its leader, Mumin.[23] In November 2021, a photo reportage featured its fighters at one of its training camps in Puntland carrying out different types of physical and weapons training.[24] After several months of silence, in March 2022, the Wilayah al-Somal released a photo reportage and a six-minute video[25] to extend its oath of allegiance to the new leader of the Islamic State, in which numerous fighters including several children are seen swearing allegiance to the new 'caliph.'[26]

Of notable importance was an Islamic State official media production released in July 2022. The 25-minute video, entitled "Upon the path of the Conquerors,"[27] was published in Amharic[b] with Arabic subtitles. Amharic is the official language of Ethiopia but is also spoken in parts of Eritrea and Somalia.[c] The video is shot in high quality and shows the military operations, training, and daily life of Islamic State-Somalia fighters, with a special emphasis on the Ethiopian fighters in its ranks. The video particularly focuses on showing Ethiopian recruits undergoing military training, and taking theoretical, religious, and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) courses. The video is a clear appeal to Ethiopians, Somalis, and Eritreans who speak the Amharic language to join the Islamic State and the Somali group[28] in particular, as well as a way to increase recruitment, fundraising, and support.

After several months of silence, with only individual claims disseminated through the Islamic State's central media or in Al Naba, between November and December 2022 the official media of the Islamic State published a photo report and a short video showing the Somali province's pledge of allegiance to the new Islamic State caliph.[29]

About six months after the last video, on January 20, 2023, the Islamic State's official media released a 14-minute video in reference to the Somali province entitled "God is the guardian of the believers."[30] This video is different from the others, as it focuses on displaying the type and quality of attacks and different types of training, as well as presenting a lengthy interview with Abu Salam al-Muhajir, a Kenyan fighter of the group.[31] The video began by showing one of the most important military operations conducted by Islamic State-Somalia in 2022, the armed clash against U.S. forces and the Somali army in Puntland on the Cal Maskad mountain range, east of Bosaso. The video of the violent attack by Islamic State fighters ends by showing images of Somali and U.S. soldiers fleeing. In the video, the group insisted that the armed clashes lasted more than six hours and that after killing dozens of "crusaders and apostates, they achieved victory despite the U.S. bombardment." The video also showed several attacks with IEDs against Somali military forces in Puntland and against military convoys near the town of Balli Dhiddin, and showed several moments in which Somali fighters repelled military offensives of the Puntland army in the same mountainous area. Additionally, the

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video displayed several killings conducted by Islamic State-Somalia cells operating in southern Somalia, particularly in the Mogadishu area. The killing of Somali policemen and soldiers are then shown, almost all conducted with small-caliber guns, in broad daylight, and notably when many civilians are present. In almost all the images, an Islamic State militant (at most, two) approaches and flanks the policeman and shoots him in the head or abdomen, and then flees.

Pro-Islamic State-Somalia Propaganda Target Audiences

In addition to these Islamic State Central productions, the Somalia branch is bolstered by several unofficial media outlets and online supporter networks. Most notable are those designed to build support among Somali, Amharic, Oromo, and Swahili-speaking populations. These groups share propaganda content on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Telegram, and the pro-Islamic State I'Lam Foundation, which is an archival website also accessible on the dark web that provides a backlog of Islamic State propaganda that is regularly updated.[32] I'Lam has a tab for media content in Somali, Swahili, and Amharic.

Somali is the national language of Somalia and is spoken by over 20 million people globally.[33] In Africa, it is the second language of sizable population segments in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Kenya. According to the United Nations, Swahili is among the 10 most-used languages in the world and is spoken by residents in more than 14 countries, including Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Somalia, Mozambique, and even as far as Oman and Yemen in the Middle East.[34] Amharic is mainly spoken in Ethiopia and Eritrea, while Oromo is mostly spoken in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and Egypt. These facts provide insight into the motivations behind, and opportunities assessed by, pro-Islamic State propaganda groups in pushing to expand the movement's reach by appealing to and winning over radical elements belonging to these ethnolinguistic populations. These Islamic State propaganda groups also provide discussion platforms for existing supporters who speak these languages and allow them to develop narratives, comment on current affairs and Islamic State-related news, as well as share jihadi content.

Amharic-Language Media Networks

Since the release of the Islamic State's July 2022 video in Amharic, a considerable pro-Islamic State media and communication ecosystem has emerged in Amharic, consisting of networks comprising various propaganda production models, with numerous ideological and religious materials and interactive discussion channels. The authors, in their daily monitoring of jihadi propaganda (both official and unofficial), found the presence of numerous Amharic-language media channels. Initially, the presence of these channels was mainly found on Telegram. As the weeks went on, links were posted within these channels that referred to other applications, both messaging and social media platforms (especially Facebook), websites, and online archives (some on the dark web, but many easily accessible and available simply from a search on any search engine). As the months passed, many media channels were closed or became inactive, but some of them, the most important ones, continued their activities and are still active today, such as Munasir Radio (or The Voice of Munasir), and Fatwa Media. In addition, the I'Lam Foundation, al-Furat Media, al-Bayan Radio, and Raadiyoo al-Hijrateyn (in the Oromo

> "A considerable pro-Islamic State media and communication ecosystem has emerged in Amharic, consisting of networks comprising various propaganda production models, with numerous ideological and religious materials and interactive discussion channels."

language) disseminate Amharic-language material often, and in some cases daily, from different channels.

In their monitoring of Amharic-language media and propaganda channels, the authors noted that on Facebook, Telegram, YouTube and WhatsApp, as well as on the website of the I'Lam Foundation, the most important and, above all, the most consistently published Amharic-language channel is The Voice of Munasir Radio. This channel publishes numerous types of media content, in particular audio dealing with theological and religious topics, jurisprudence topics, news and weekly updates on politics and geopolitics, news concerning the Islamic State, and explanations of historical and religious events. The Voice of Munasir Radio also broadcasts official Islamic State audios translated into Amharic (such as the latest audios of the Islamic State's central spokespersons), stories of martyrs (mainly Islamic State fighters in Somalia, but also from other Islamic State provinces, both past and more recent), and the narration of ideological and religious books. The channel's most important media product is a weekly program entitled "Mirror on the World," varying in length between 60 and 90 minutes and usually divided into five or six parts dealing with several topics, which reached its 165th episode in April 2023. During the Ramadan period, on the other hand, a purely religious media product lasting about seven minutes is aired every morning.

Al-Bayan Radio publishes audio material in the Amharic language on a continuous basis. One of the most popular and followed products, in its 44th episode in April 2023, is "Fatwa from the stronghold of Muslims." It is an ideological and religious product that discusses Islamic *fatwas*, but also issues concerning sharia, *hijrah*, and jihad. The Amharic-language radio product usually lasts 25 minutes. The Amharic version of al-Bayan Radio is disseminated on Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, and YouTube.

Another channel monitored by the authors throughout 2022 and until April 2023, important for its stability, consistency of publications, and audience following, was Fatwa Media, an Amharic-language media channel that deals exclusively with propagating religious and ideological material, present mainly on Telegram and Facebook. Fatwa Media also translates the official propaganda material of the Islamic State from Arabic into Amharic, which is then shared on all networks and platforms.

In addition, there are several related channels such as Ahlul Khilafa Media, Fatawa Min Sugur Media, and Qirat Media, as well as through the I'Lam Foundation, al-Furat Media, and Raadiyoo al-Hijrateyn that disseminate Amharic-language material such as religious material, sermons, videos, unofficial posters, material from the main channels mentioned above, and translated Islamic

State material.

All the channels mentioned are present on Telegram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. A notable component of these pro-Islamic State online networks in Amharic is the network of interactive channels where supporters, sympathizers, and ideologues discuss current affairs, religious topics, and events related to the Islamic State in Somalia and the rest of its provinces.

Somali, Oromo, and Swahili-Language Media Networks
One of the more notable recent developments in this space is the emergence of Fursan Altarjuma, an umbrella network bringing together various disparate and scattered pro-Islamic State media outlets. The new collective includes the Somali-language propaganda producer and translation foundation Al-Hijrateyn as well as 14 other groups, covering at least 18 languages. This cooperative is the manifestation of months of mixing and matching by certain outlets now involved in the operation. The English-language translation propaganda outfit Halummu have, for instance, partnered with Islamic State Khurasan's Al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production and the pro-Islamic State outlets Al-Battar and At-Taqwa over the last couple of years.[35] Halummu has been operating since at least 2016 and is one of the central drivers of the pro-Islamic State propaganda coalition. The cooperative is unprecedented in the scale and coherence of coordination; however, Halummu has a years-long history preceding this of bringing disparate propaganda elements together.

The announcement of Fursan Altarjuma's formation[36] included the mission statement declaring its objective as being "dedicated to the spread of the translated media around the world on as many platforms as possible from social media to applications, and websites in a way that the Islamic State media can reach and [be] accessed to as many users as possible." Its doctrine is aimed "to be the single source for translations of Islamic State media, publications that explain its policies bound by Shari'ah, dispel suspicions and false arguments raised by its enemies, and articles and graphics to inspire dedication and faith."

The primary group creating and disseminating pro-Islamic State content in Somali, Oromo, and Swahili is Al-Hijrateyn, which dates back at least as far as spring 2022.[37] Al-Hijrateyn creates audio (Al-Hijrateyn Radio) and online print propaganda, while using a host of social media platforms and encrypted messaging application channels to distribute its materials. These include I'Lam Foundation (accessible on the internet and the dark web), Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Telegram, Archive.org, and more. Al-Hijrateyn is an outlet that covers weekly news and *fatwas* relating to the Islamic State.[38]

A study by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue described Al-Hijrateyn as "the primary outlet for Islamic State support in the East Africa region."[39] ISD asserted that unlike official Islamic State propaganda content, unofficial Islamic State media outlets can proliferate and successfully evade social media moderators.

Al-Hijrateyn's new partnership with the streamlined umbrella network Fursan Altarjuma elevates its status among the global Islamic State movement and empowers the outlet to more quickly make available Somali, Oromo, and Swahili-language translations of official Islamic State Central propaganda content and attack claims. This enables the Islamic State to reach massive audiences that may not speak Arabic and make Islamic State Central media content easily accessible so that these audiences can more closely follow the activities of Islamic State-Somalia and each of the other branches.

This is likely to extend the reach of Islamic State-Somalia and other regional branches in terms of recruitment, support base enlargement, and fundraising. The partnership also expands Al-Hijrateyn's relations and links to an array of Islamic State actors around the world including ISK's Al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production, the Russian Irshad group, Turkish Meydan Medya, Indonesian At-Tamkin, Indian Al-Qitaal Media, and others. This media connectivity is a further indication of its growing transnational linkages with a recent U.N. report on the global jihadi threat suggesting the Islamic State-Somalia branch controls Al-Karrar office—a coordinating hub based in Puntland and involved with networks in Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The United Nations noted that the Al-Karrar office had also been active in funding ISK.[40] And following the U.S. special operations forces' raid that killed Bilal al-Sudani, the Biden administration emphasized al-Sudani's role in regional and international terrorist financing as well as his activities supporting the Islamic State in Afghanistan.[41]

Conclusion
The Islamic State-Somalia branch was already weak before suffering a series of setbacks and blows in recent years. Islamic State Central has sought to promote the group and urge the faithful to join Islamic State-Somalia's ranks. This has come in the form of financing, advising, and propaganda in Arabic and local languages.

Islamic State-Somalia's supporters, often in the form of unofficial media outlets, have produced propaganda in Somali, Oromo, Amharic, and Swahili to engage existing supporters and win over new ones. Outfits such as Al-Hijrateyn play a crucial role in this as do sympathizers who create online spaces on social media and encrypted messaging application channels to further the Islamic State cause and spread the organization's messaging. Al-Hijrateyn's integration into Fursan Altarjuma's umbrella network marks a new phase for outlets of this kind, yet it is too early to gauge if or how much of an impact it will have in strengthening Islamic State-Somalia's capabilities.

If these efforts do work, the Islamic State-Somalia branch could possibly pose a comparatively greater threat inside the country and even throughout the region. This could involve directed operations and violent incitement. Neighboring Ethiopia, for instance, has reportedly disrupted Islamic State activities, including in 2017 when 26 people were arrested who allegedly received training in Somalia, in 2019 when the military captured Islamic State militants, and in 2021 when government officials announced the dismantling of a cell known as the 'Islamic State Center.'[42]

Finally, there is also precedent for Islamic State branches yielding success in tailoring propaganda to appeal to specific local and regional ethnolinguistic populations. ISK, for example, has produced media content targeting South and Central Asia, growing notable levels of support among Indian, Tajik, Uzbek, and other radicals.[43] Militant groups are often learning organizations, and given the financial and now media links between the two, the Islamic State in Somalia may very well take lessons from ISK's media outreach techniques.   **CTC**

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The Digital Terror Financing of Central Asian Jihadis

By Nodirbek Soliev

Like all terror groups, Central Asian terrorist groups are continuously attempting to diversify how they finance their activities to avoid detection. Drawing on various reports, court documents, an array of research literature, and online extremist materials, this article explores some innovative methods that Central Asian terrorists have recently experimented with to finance their activities. Their online financing efforts tend to involve three stages. The first is the dissemination of fundraising propaganda and contacting prospective donors via online public accounts. The second is communication via encrypted messaging apps to identify a suitable mode of transaction and to provide security protocols. The third is the transaction itself. Understanding these mechanisms can help enhance relevant countries' response strategies against terrorism financing risks.

In October 2021, Kazakh authorities revealed that the country's law enforcement entities had suppressed several dozen instances of terrorist financing in Kazakhstan since 2019.[1] Similarly, counterterrorism agencies in Tajikistan investigated 15 cases in 2021 alone.[2] In Uzbekistan, from 2016 to the first half of 2021, 60 men and two women were convicted for their involvement in terrorism financing.[3] Nearly 70 percent (or 43) of these convicts in Uzbekistan reportedly committed their crimes in a foreign country. While Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have not provided many details of the cases committed abroad, what is known is that in recent years, individuals from Central Asian countries were found to have been involved in terrorism financing cases in Russia,[4] Turkey,[5] Germany,[6] Sweden,[7] the United States,[8] and South Korea,[9] indicating terrorist groups' interest in diaspora communities and migrant workers abroad as potential donors.

Drawing on evidence sourced from various local and international news reports, court documents, and online extremist propaganda materials, this article explores various tools and methods of illicit fundraising and fund-moving that have been used by Central Asian individuals and terrorist groups linked to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Islamic State in recent years. Based on the available open-source information, the article makes some tentative conclusions about the emerging patterns of terrorism financing in Central Asia that could also help enrich existing perspectives on the issue in other contexts. The article first outlines the available literature on Central Asian terrorism financing. It then draws on the existing open-source information to outline modalities in the three-step approach that tends to be used by Central Asian jihadi fundraisers: online fundraising appeals, encrypted communication with potential donors, and the transaction itself.

The Existing Literature

The available open-source reporting about terrorism financing cases in the region suggests that funds from Central Asia and its diaspora abroad mainly go, or are intended to go, to conflict zones such as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan to support various jihadi groups operating there. The main beneficiaries have been Central Asian units and individuals associated with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), al-Qa`ida's former representative on the Syrian battlefield, and the Islamic State's central network in Syria and its local faction in Afghanistan known as the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISK).[a] However, due to the scarcity of relevant publicly available data, only tentative observations can be made about Central Asian terrorism financing, including the size, scope, and geography of money transfers and how money is collected, moved, and used. The lack of open-source information is a function of the clandestine nature of terrorist groups and their operations, and the unwillingness of financial investigators to reveal sensitive details.[10]

As in many other contexts, the literature covering the topic in the Central Asian problem set has been piecemeal. Most existing publications are either not recent or only touch upon certain aspects of the subject. For instance, a study published by Kamila Abdulkarimova and Sanzhar Abubakirov in 2019 analyzed Kazakhstan's anti-money laundering (AML) system and legal regulations designed to combat money laundering and terrorist financing.[11] An article published by other Kazakh experts, Zagira Iskakova and Akmeir Rakhymzhanova, in 2014 highlighted the development of effective financial monitoring systems as an important preventive mechanism against money laundering and

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a   There are other Central Asian jihadi groups, such as the Taliban-linked Islamic Jihad Group (ISG) and Jamaat Ansarullah in Afghanistan. There are also Central Asian individuals fighting in the ranks of al-Qa`ida-affiliated Hurras al-Din (HAD) in Syria. Nevertheless, the author has not seen any evidence to suggest whether these entities and individuals have been collecting digital funding from Central Asians or not. See "Twenty-seventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations Security Council, February 3, 2021, pp. 15-16; "Thirtieth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations Security Council, July 15, 2022, p. 17.

terrorism financing in their country.[12] Similarly, a collection of essays that was published in 2019 jointly in Bishkek and Moscow as an a supplementary textbook for university students and, separately, a PhD study completed by Almaz Bazarbaev in 2004 explained the international and national legal basis of countering money laundering and terrorism financing in Kyrgyzstan.[13]

Only a handful of publications have provided a detailed examination of the issue of terrorism financing in Central Asia. One such publication came out in Bishkek in 2021 as an outcome of research that was conducted by a team led by Afzal Ashraf and Indira Aslanova.[14] Based on interviews with several foreign terrorist fighters and their family members from Kyrgyzstan, the report explored some interesting cases of fundraising from inside Kyrgyzstan and among its immigrant communities abroad, particularly in Russia and Turkey and to a lesser extent in South Korea and Ukraine. However, the report did not reveal how the funds raised had been delivered to their intended beneficiaries.

More recently, the research outlets Militant Wire and The Khorasan Diary have featured articles by Lucas Webber and others exploring how Afghanistan-based militant groups have used various online tools and platforms to boost recruitment and fundraising from Central Asia. However, this coverage has been mainly confined to the Islamic State terrorist network.[15] Separately, Viktor Mikhailov of the Center for Studying Regional Threats (CSRT), a Tashkent-based independent research center, has published some articles and analysis on fundraising propaganda and tactics used by Central Asian groups linked to HTS in particular.[16] In sum, the author's review of existing literature shows there are significant knowledge gaps especially in understanding how terrorism financing risks evolve around new technologies.[b]

The Three-Step Approach to Online Fundraising

Terrorist groups have often been early adopters of new technologies. They also often imitate each other's perceived successful tactical or technological innovations.[17] Given the widespread access to the internet and the rapid expansion of virtual communication platforms and encrypted messaging apps, bad actors have for some time been exploiting such online tools for fundraising.

Open-source data indicates that the financing efforts currently employed by Central Asian groups in the online domain are typically conducted in three main phases, with each step involving a different set of tools and techniques. The general three step process that the author observed include:

Step 1: The dissemination of fundraising appeals and the establishment of contacts within the pool of potential supporters online. The process is usually conducted on public pages and accounts, with those often spelling out explicitly the launch of fundraising campaigns.[18] While the stated cause the funds are being raised for may vary from case to case, one similar feature that they share is the framing of such drives as an opportunity to make indirect contribution to "jihad" for those who cannot travel

to conflict zones to attend the conflict in-person. Fundraising ads and posters tend to be first shared on websites and blogging pages affiliated with terrorist groups, from where they are further spread across various social media/networking platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and public groups and channels in encrypted messaging apps. This process is mostly relevant to HTS-linked Central Asians. As the Islamic State did not have separate media teams dedicated to propaganda in Central Asian languages,[c] to the author's knowledge, the Islamic State terrorist network has not established prominent web and blogging sites in these languages, and therefore Islamic State fundraising campaigns usually started on social media and networking sites and encrypted platforms.

As will be discussed in detail in relevant sections below, enhanced censorship and content moderation policies adopted by tech companies and the implementation of terrorist designation practices by countries have led terrorist groups to readjust their online propaganda strategies, while accelerating their shift to encrypted platforms.[19]

Step 2: The establishment of closer connections with potential supporters via encrypted messaging apps such as Element, Telegram, Tutanota, Wire, and Zello. In this stage, fundraisers tend to verify their identities, establish their financial circumstances, and determine their level of skills to conduct certain fund transfer methods. This stage also involves delivery of detailed security instructions to donors to complete the transfer through the mode identified as suitable.

Step 3: The completion of the transaction within the identified mode of digital transfer such as e-Wallets or cryptocurrencies.

The sections that follow look at the patterns of activity of Central Asian jihadi fundraisers relating to each of these steps.

Step 1: Online Fundraising Appeals

Despite the emergence of more secure types of internet communication tools such as encrypted messengers, jihadi groups of all stripes, including Central Asian groups, still rely on online public social media and networking platforms, web/blogging sites, and online forums as preferred channels for propaganda messaging. This is because, unlike private messengers where user engagement level is limited to a certain extent, online public platforms retain huge user bases globally—an ideal space that offers terrorists wide access to potential sympathizers.

Jihadi terrorist groups have preyed upon Central Asia's domestic population and its diaspora abroad not only as potential recruits but also financial supporters.[d] Central Asian jihadi groups fighting in Syria and Iraq have consistently invested in propaganda efforts

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b   It is worth highlighting that while jihadis have increasingly been using new technologies for terror financing, instances of cash-based jihadi fundraising have not halted. It is not clear the degree to which groups use cash to fund terrorism. Some experts argue that digital payment technologies have a tail that would make it easier for investigators to retrace the digital financial transactions, whereas the use of cash would involve more risk for those collecting the funds, but lesser risk for those who are donating/providing the funds.

c   In fact, ISK's media wing, Al-Azaim Foundation, started to produce and publish propaganda content in Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek on a regular basis on its Telegram channels in 2022. However, it should be noted that when Al-Azaim Foundation was founded in Afghanistan in 2021, its propaganda campaign was run mainly in Pashto, Dari, and Arabic. Subsequently, it has added multiple other languages including English, Hindi, Malayalam, Urdu, and the listed Central Asian languages apparently as part of efforts to expand its multilingual propaganda beyond Afghanistan. Lucas Webber, "Voice of Khorasan Magazine and the Internationalization of Islamic State's Anti-Taliban Propaganda," *Terrorism Monitor* 20:9 (2022).

d   For the purpose of this article, Central Asia is defined as the area encompassing the five countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

and adeptly used the internet to deliver their messages to the target population. As of July 2022, about 52.7 million (or 73 percent) of Central Asia's total 72 million population had access to the internet.[20] According to estimates, there are nearly five million Central Asians living in Russia. The United States hosts nearly 120,000 Central Asian immigrants, while a few hundred thousand Central Asians are known to reside in Turkey. Their total number in Germany, Poland, and Sweden runs into the tens of thousands. Between 20,000-30,000 Central Asian immigrants reside in South Korea, the largest such population in East Asia. These communities have been growing gradually throughout the last decade.

HTS-related Cases
Among Central Asian jihadi groups fighting in Syria, Kateebat Imam al-Bukhari (KIB) and Kateebat at Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) have been the most active in terms of both propaganda outreach and military strength. Affiliated with al-Qa`ida, the two groups operate primarily in Syria's northwestern Idlib province, under the control of HTS.

KIB and KTJ, through their own media divisions—which are called "Al-Bukhari Media" and "Jannat Oshiqlari" ('Lovers of Paradise'), respectively—have extensively produced extremist content and disseminated it online. Especially before their inclusion in the sanctions lists of United States, the United Nations, Central Asian governments, and Russia in recent years, KIB and KTJ had annually put out several dozen audio and video media releases on their Uzbek-language blogging websites.[21]

In the past, these releases have been redistributed by the groups' members and supporters on various social media sites including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Odnoklassniki, and VK, often without altering the existing title and visual content.[22] Some of these videos have recently appeared on Vimeo and Internet Archive. The propaganda messages have focused on promoting the narratives of victimhood of the Syrian people and cultivating a sense of solidarity among potential Central Asian recruits at home and abroad. Such publications have often included the groups' contact details on encrypted online platforms such as Telegram, Tutanova, and WhatsApp for those who wished to communicate with them on any matters, including to offer financial assistance. For instance, propaganda accounts on YouTube such as "Ustozlar yo'li" ("The Path of the Teacher/Guide") and "Abu Saloh darslik" ("Abul Saloh textbook") contain videos propagating the jihadi cause of KTJ and HTS. In the video descriptions and comments under their YouTube videos, the accounts have provided their contact details on Telegram for those viewers who would be interested in contacting them.

The author's tracking of online jihadi media indicates that KIB and KTJ have found it more difficult to post on social media platforms since their designations as terrorist groups.[23] Unlike previously, the groups now cannot maintain group accounts under their actual name for lengthy periods of time. Instead, their content is posted by anonymous individuals in limited volume and with titles often containing a combination of legitimate phrases such as "islomiy darsliklar" (Islamic textbooks), "islom tarixi" (history of Islam), and "islomiy darslar" (Islamic lessons/courses). While propaganda video lectures by notorious ideologues of KTJ, "Akhluddin Navkotiy" and the late "Abu Saloh," or KIB's "Abu Yusuf Muhojir," would have previously been uploaded predominantly in video format, now such lectures tend to appear on social media

> **"Jihadi terrorist groups have preyed upon Central Asia's domestic population and its diaspora abroad not only as potential recruits but also financial supporters. Central Asian jihadi groups fighting in Syria and Iraq have consistently invested in propaganda efforts and adeptly used the internet to deliver their messages to the target population."**
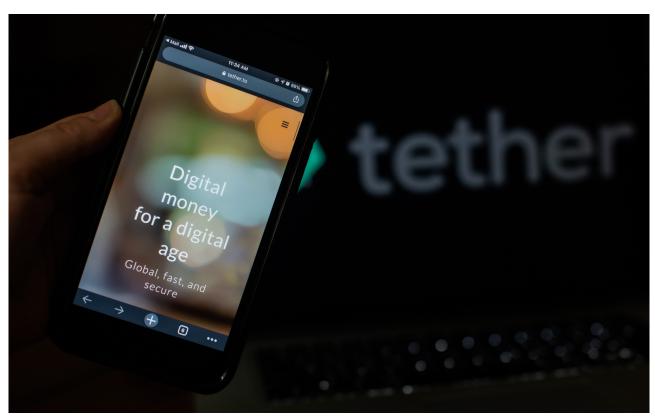
platforms mostly in the form of audio. Their visual publications do not explicitly promote violence, and their titles and descriptions do not contain the specific words that may result in the posts being flagged to content moderators.

Another case fitting the pattern discussed above is that of Farrukh Furkatovitch Fayzimatov, an Idlib-based Tajik militant who goes by the *nom de guerre* of "Faruq Shami." Fayzimatov has emerged as a prominent financier of HTS in recent years. He has conducted active propaganda campaigns via social media platforms aimed at recruiting new members and collecting donations among Russian and Central Asian speaking internet users.[24] His audio and video publications posted on a blogging site that publishes the content created by various HTS-linked groups from Russia and other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries have often provided some preliminary fundraising guidelines and contact information of HTS-linked individuals' encrypted communication accounts. In July 2021, the U.S. Treasury Department added Fayzimatov to its Specially Designated Nationals List as an HTS-linked financial facilitator in Syria.[25] His case will be discussed in detail further down.

Islamic State-related Cases
In contrast to the Central Asian HTS-affiliated entities and individuals described above, Islamic State-linked Central Asians in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan have not created specific Central Asian groupings with their own propaganda wings. Instead, Islamic State-affiliated Central Asian fighters have relied on various Islamic State media wings to produce propaganda content. Despite this, the Islamic State has outperformed HTS-linked Central Asians in terms of overall numbers of channels that they run on various online social media platforms.[26] Over years of monitoring relevant jihadi online media, the author has not seen any evidence to suggest that the Islamic State or its regional branch in Afghanistan created and maintained web/blogging sites to constantly disseminate propaganda in Central Asian languages. Studies conducted by Julia Sweet as part of her PhD dissertation submitted to the State University of New Jersey in 2020 suggested a similar pattern within Russian-speaking Islamic State groups. While describing the Islamic State as "being mainly a social media project," Sweet highlighted that she had not seen any significant website or blog run by the Islamic State's Russian-speaking networks since 2016.[27]

Instead, the launch by Central Asian Islamic State-linked

The Tether website is shown on a smartphone on May 22, 2021. (Tiffany Hagler-Geard/Bloomberg via Getty Images)

militants of several channels on Telegram in local languages suggests that their fundraising calls and contacts sharing mainly take place on public channels that they have created on various secure messaging apps including Telegram itself.[28] Such public channels allow the 'one-way' broadcast of messages to followers.[29] Researchers have noted that the Islamic State's Tajik fundraising propaganda might also have been disseminated on Instagram alongside such appeals on Instagram in Russian.[30]

Step 2: Encrypted Communication

Ensuring the secure online transfer of funds is a priority for terrorist groups. Otherwise, their fundraising practices and operational security as well as the identities of their financiers would be in danger of detection by law enforcement agencies.[31] Unlike in the first stage, fundraising efforts in this stage are usually therefore performed privately in encrypted messengers. As such, there is scarce information on the specifics and content of such interactions. Given this limitation, this study cannot grasp the entire complexity of terrorists' use of encrypted communication services. Instead, it provides a preliminary observation on some aspects.

Central Asian terrorist groups and terrorist individuals have encouraged their supporters to contact them directly via online encrypted messaging services such as Element, Telegram, Tutanota, WhatsApp, Wickr, Wire, and Zello in order to make contributions.[32] They have provided the phone numbers or usernames associated with their accounts on these platforms in public posts to facilitate this communication.[33] The author's analysis of a series of videos uploaded by the aforementioned Fayzimatov on a Russian-language blogging site from 2020 to 2021 implies that after establishing contact with interested users through initial interactions, militants apparently first study donors' backgrounds, financial circumstances,

and level of ability to use certain fund transfers methods before passing on detailed fund-moving safety guidelines within the identified transfer method. For instance, in a video appeal released on January 22, 2021, Fayzimatov claimed that "through direct and private communications," he would give "necessary consultations" to potential donors depending on their level of knowledge and location.[34] Within the indicated period (between 2020 and 2021), Fayzimatov organized at least 10 rounds of fundraising drives. Each video he uploaded got from 100 to 300 views.[35]

In the earlier videos, Fayzimatov encouraged HTS sympathizers to communicate with him via Telegram, WhatsApp, and Wickr if they wished to send money to the group. However, he subsequently asked his pool of online supporters to use Wire instead of Wickr, as he believed the latter was "run by security services."[36] He also suggested Element, an end-to-end encrypted messenger that uses the Matrix's Olm/Megolm crypto protocols, and Tutanota, a German end-to-end encrypted email provider, as secure communications systems while providing his contact addresses for both.[37] The WhatsApp number he shared had a country code of Poland.[38] However, it was unclear if this number was his personal WhatsApp account or not.

Online crowdfunding campaigns run by Fayzimatov have drawn inspiration from reward-based marketing techniques. For instance, in a video appeal issued on January 22, 2021, he announced an online fundraising campaign to purchase motorbikes for jihadi fighters.[39] One of the distinctive features of this drive, which was conducted in several rounds, was that it was organized in the form of a contest. After the end of each round of competition, the names of the winners were penned down on the motorcycle fuel tank as an appreciation.[40] According to Fayzimatov, this would serve as a "witness in the Judgement Day" that the sender had made

his/her contribution to "jihad." Fayzimatov also mentioned that participants in this online contest would be judged based on two main criteria: the level of secureness of the tool/mode proposed by the sender to transfer the money, and the amount of the donations.[41] By encouraging donors to offer their own way of safe transfers, Fayzimatov was tapping into the possibly deeper know-how of interested supporters on making money transfers.

Fayzimatov claimed that as a result of these campaigns, a total of seven motorcycles and one car were purchased for use in the mountainous environment of Syria.[42] He stated that some of these motorcycles would be used by the so-called *inghimasi* forces, well-trained shock troops who are deployed to launch surprise raids into fortified enemy positions.[43] The videos suggest that the funds raised have been used to purchase small weapons for HTS fighters and media equipment for Fayzimatov who presents himself as a "media activist."

Another case of Central Asian jihadis using encrypted communication to fundraise was the Tajik Islamic State cell allegedly plotting attacks against U.S. and NATO military bases in Germany before German police moved in to make arrests in April 2020.[44] The cell members used Telegram and Zello to organize and coordinate some of their fundraising and fund-moving operations across Europe, Turkey, and Syria under guidance received from their handlers in Afghanistan and Syria.[45]

In another case in Germany, an unnamed 29-year-old Tajik citizen was accused in February 2023 of being a member of the Islamic State and having mediated financial aid for widows and orphans of 'martyred' Islamic State members in Syria and Iraq as well as for female prisoners linked to the group in Syria and Iraq.[46] The Tajik man reportedly established contact with both prisoners and donors in early 2020. As of March 2023, the Tajik man was at liberty in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania with the presumption of innocence being applied until the conclusion of the criminal proceedings.[47]

Russia has also seen radicalized Central Asian migrants using encrypted messaging apps for fundraising. According to the verdict issued by the Court of Appeal of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation on June 5, 2020, a cell of Islamic State supporters in Russia led by a Tajik citizen, Giyeyev Shodruz, transferred 7,000 Russian roubles (nearly 130 U.S. dollars) to a Tajik Islamic State operative in Afghanistan in September 2017 via an undisclosed payment method after receiving instructions from this operative via Zello.[48] The cell members, comprised of citizens of Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, were ultimately sentenced up to 17 years in prison.[49]

Zello appears to have become a platform of choice for certain Central Asian jihadis. According to Tajik authorities, Sayvaly Shafiev, a notorious Afghanistan-based Tajik Islamic State commander who is also known as "Abubakri Muvakhkhid" or "Mauaviya," has used Zello in his propaganda targeting of Tajik migrant workers in Russia.[50] Concerned over the increasing usage of Zello by Tajik militant groups, Tajikistan's State Committee for National Security (GKNB) went so far as to call Zello an "extremist" platform.[51]

Step 3: Online Payment
The third step in the process is the completion of the transaction via online payment. According to the available open-source information, jihadis in the Central Asian region have used cryptocurrencies (Bitcoin, Lightcoin, Tether), digital payment

services (QIWI, E-Wallet, Western Union, Ria), and online bank transfers.

Cryptocurrencies: Bitcoin, Lightcoin, and Tether
The use of cryptocurrencies by Central Asian groups and individuals has thus far been limited. Despite this, there are some concerning trends. On April 18, 2019, the SITE Intelligence Group reported that HTS had called Bitcoin the "Currency of the Future Economy" in its online propaganda magazine and released a 26-minute video of an "HTS cleric discussing its compliance with Shariah-law."[52] As part of HTS' network in Syria, Fayzimatov reportedly collected several thousand dollars in Bitcoin (BTC) and other cryptocurrencies transferred from multiple U.S., Russian, Asian, and European exchanges through various online crowdfunding campaigns.[53]

One of the earliest promotions of cryptocurrency transfers by Fayzimatov came in the aforementioned video uploaded on January 16, 2021, in which he announced that the collected funds would be used to purchase motorbikes and automatic rifles for the *inghimasi* force.[54] He listed Bitcoin, Lightcoin, and Tether as options for crypto transfers by prospective donors.[55][e] However, in a video statement released on March 31, 2021, he claimed that the amount of the cryptocurrencies that he received was negligible and only a handful of people had made contributions.[56] Expressing his regrets that the collected amount was so small, he asked his followers to contact him via his contact addresses on Telegram and Wire that he provided to consult with him on whether such collections should be continued or not.[57] Via such consultations, he was seemingly trying to understand why the collected cryptocurrencies were so minimal.

Within the HTS alliance, there is a small jihadi unit named Malhama Tactical. With some Central Asians in its ranks, the Chechen-led Malhama Tactical has been part of a significant network engaged in bitcoin transfer run by various al-Qa`ida-affiliated groups in Idlib.[58] According to the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), two BTC addresses that were shared by Malhama Tactical on Twitter were part of a cluster that received approximately 0.19501359 BTC (about 5,330 U.S. dollars as of April 2023) via 15 transactions between July and November 2019.[59] According to the DOJ, the group transferred about 0.03839 (about 1,100 U.S. dollars currently) BTC to an al-Qa`ida-linked cluster in October 2018.[60] Often posing as charities, al-Qa`ida, HTS, and their affiliates operating in Syria have used Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, and other online platforms to collect bitcoin donations mainly through crowdfunding.[61] A significant portion of these donations were laundered through BitcoinTransfer, a crypto exchange hub based in Idlib.[62]

Besides Malhama Tactical, KTJ is another unit within HTS that has started receiving payments in cryptocurrencies from radicalized Central Asian individuals to support its activity. On January 17, 2023, the Supreme Prosecutors' Office in South Korea initiated a criminal case against two Central Asian individuals—an Uzbek and a Kazakh national—on charges of transferring financial aid to KTJ in cryptocurrency.[63] The Uzbek suspect, who settled in South Korea as a refugee in 2018, had allegedly raised about 10 million

e   *Forbes Advisor* describes Tether, which is also known as USDT, as the largest stablecoin by market capitalization. As with any stablecoin, the value of Tether is pegged to a stable asset like gold, the U.S. dollar, or another fiat currency, which means the coin attempts to maintain the same value as its peg. See Coryanne Hicks, "What Is Tether? How Does It Work?" *Forbes*, February 21, 2023.

won ($7,700) in cash from his "fellow accomplices" in towns such as Yeongam in the country's South Jeolla Province since August 2021 and transferred the collected funds to KTJ after converting the funds to USDT (or Tether) through a Hong Kong-based cryptocurrency exchange.[64] Similarly, the Kazakh detainee, who had reportedly moved to South Korea in 2019, allegedly collected one million won ($766) and delivered the funds to KTJ after exchanging the money to cryptocurrency.[65] While prosecutors did not provide further details to clarify if and how the detained duo coordinated their activities, this fundraising campaign was allegedly assisted by seven unnamed foreigners. South Korea deported five suspected accomplices to their home countries in December 2022 whereas deportation procedures for the remaining two are still yet to complete.[66] South Korean authorities also noted that this was the first case in which foreign residents in South Korea were found to have funded a terrorist group in cryptocurrencies.[67]

Although some Central Asian militant groups and individuals operating in Syria have shown some interest in and made some attempts at fundraising in cryptocurrencies as discussed above, there is little indication that they have turned to this type of fundraising en masse. Fayzimatov's acknowledgment that the volume of cryptocurrencies he collected through various campaigns was tiny suggests that Central Asian militants and their supporters do not really use or understand how to use such virtual currencies.

Digital Payment Services: QIWI Wallet, YandexMoney, Western Union, and Ria
The Russian payment services providers QIWI Wallet and YandexMoney have been popular modes of money transfer for terrorist supporters among Central Asians at home and abroad. Terrorism financiers often use QIWI as it allows transfers without inclusion of sensitive bank account details, and without opening a bank account in the first place. Transfers are done at a dedicated QIWI kiosk or via smartphone. QIWI is available in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, as well as in Russia.[68]

For instance, a terrorist cell that involved Kyrgyz and Tajik citizens operating across Kyrgyzstan and Turkey exchanged transactions via QIWI and Western Union amounting to a few thousand U.S. dollars from 2014 and 2015.[69] One of the cell members, whose national identity was not publicly disclosed, was wanted on terrorism charges in Belgium.[70] The cell members reportedly received instructions from their contact in an unnamed terrorist group via Zello.[71] Around the same time, an Islamic State recruitment cell run by Kazakh and Kyrgyz citizens in Kazakhstan transferred more than $19,000 via Western Union in eight tranches before its disruption by authorities.[72]

In recent years, there have been a significant number of counterterrorism financing cases in Russia involving Central Asians using digital payment systems. In August 2018, the Russian Supreme Court sentenced a Tajik citizen named Abduraim Bobomurodov to six years in a general-security penal colony for financing the Islamic State.[73] According to the court documents, Bobomurodov—while residing in Russia—transferred about $90 to an Islamic State member in Turkey using QIWI, WebMoney Transfer, and YandexMoney.[74] There was an unwitting middleman in Russia who helped Bobomurodov complete this transfer.[75] Notably, Bobomurodov was a member of an Islamic State-related channel on Zello, where he received instructions and details on how and where to send the money.[76]

The above-discussed HTS-affiliated terrorist Fayzimatov reportedly has also received transfers via digital payment systems. In April 2021, an investigation by Russia's security agencies into a group of suspected jihadi terrorists in Crimea established that one of the suspects sent money to Fayzimatov with QIWI and YandexMoney in several tranches to finance the activities of HTS.[77] YandexMoney, which has recently rebranded itself as YooMoney, is the second-largest electronic payments service in Russia and one of the most popular in the Commonwealth of Independent States.[78]

On April 22, 2021, a court in Russia's Novosibirsk sentenced an Uzbek citizen to eight and a half years imprisonment after finding him guilty of transferring money to KTJ in Syria via QIWI Wallet.[79] In February 2022, it was reported that authorities in Kazakhstan had begun an investigation of an unnamed citizen after being alerted by QIWI Wallet's monitoring team about his or her alleged transfer of funds to militants in Syria.[80]

As a number of researchers have documented, various Telegram groups run by Tajik-speaking recruiters have collected money among migrant laborers in Russia to send to Islamic State militants in Afghanistan and the wives and children of Islamic State fighters stranded in detention camps in Syria and Iraq.[81] Donors have used QIWI to make transfers. Most transactions have been made in small amounts (under 1,000 rubles, or 17 U.S. dollars), presumably so as to not attract suspicion from monitoring specialists.[82]

There was also a case in which Central Asian individuals used Ria Money Transfer, an international money remittances service, to fund terrorism. In 2019, Swedish police disrupted an Islamic State cell in the country. Investigations established that the cell, which brought together predominantly Uzbeks immigrants, planned an attack in Stockholm.[83] Investigations revealed that from January to May 2018, the cell had transferred approximately 95,000 Swedish kronor (about $9,400) to the Islamic State in Syria through a middleman in Turkey who was identified in Swedish court documents as Shavkat Gaziev.[84] The cell used Ria Money Transfer to deliver this amount to Gaziev in 12 tranches.[85]

Online Bank Transfers
In December 2021, a court in South Korea convicted a Russian citizen for establishing contact with a member of Jabhat al-Nusra (the HTS predecessor group in Syria) through unnamed online social networking platforms and sending 2.94 million Korean won (around $2,500) to the group through fraudulent bank accounts to help its activities.[86] The convicted man reportedly conducted the money transfer at the request of a friend in Kyrgyzstan.[87] The case illustrated one of the ways Central Asian individuals have attempted to disguise transactions.

South Korean authorities had previously arrested some Central Asians on similar charges. For instance, in November 2019, South Korean police detained an illegal Kazakh immigrant who allegedly collected money from three other foreign workers and transferred money worth about $1,000 to an unnamed Central Asian terrorist group.[88] In May 2017, a local Uzbek magazine reported about a group of detained Uzbek nationals who had sent funds to a madrasa and charity foundation run by a KIB-linked preacher in the Zeytinburnu neighborhood in Istanbul, Turkey, while working in South Korea.[89] The case illustrated how schools and charity organizations can be used as fronts in terrorism financing.

In a case in Russia, in January 2019, the country's Supreme Court sentenced a Tajik citizen named Naim Makhmadaliev to five years

in prison for being a member of an Islamic State support cell that conspired to attack a military truck on one of Moscow's highways.[90] Makhmadaliev transferred 2,400 rubles ($40) to the bank account of one of the cell members who then ordered a remote-controlled relay in the Alibaba e-commerce site to manufacture an improvised explosive device (IED) to be used in the planned attack.[91]

Conclusion

Central Asian terrorist groups and individuals have been exploring new and more secure ways of funding their activities. As part of these efforts, they are increasingly relying on modern internet-enabled technologies as means to reach out to their potential supporters among both Central Asia's domestic population and its immigrant communities abroad to collect money.

As detailed in the article, terrorism financing activities by Central Asian groups tend to involve three main stages: fundraising propaganda and contact sharing; communication over encrypted apps between potential donors and recipient militants; and the completion of transactions. It is worth noting that the stages listed and reviewed in this article are likely not unique to Central Asian groups. Rather, this is likely a general and logical method used

by other terrorist networks as well. The research of Julia Sweet suggests similar patterns have been observed in the online funding approaches employed by wider Russian-speaking jihadi networks.[92]

Based on the available data in the public domain, it seems that Telegram and Zello are preferred communication options for Central Asian jihadis. As Fayzimatov's encouragement of his supporters to use Wire instead of Wickr has shown, when militants perceive one tool to have become riskier, they move to other platforms.

When it comes to the transfer methods, QIWI and E-Wallet have repeatedly been used by Central Asian jihadis.

Despite some apparent interest by Central Asian terrorists in collecting payments in Bitcoin, Lightcoin, and Tether, the usage of virtual currencies appears to be limited at this point—possibly due to the unpopularity of such digital currencies among the general public of the region and existing practical limitations on their day-to-day use.[93] However, Central Asian groups' continuing engagement with bigger militant organizations such as HTS that have experience in using cryptocurrencies may serve as an inspiration and opportunity for them to learn and adopt various new approaches to digital terror financing.   CTC

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