FEATURE ARTICLE

Surging Threat

The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan takeover

ABDUL SAYED AND TORE HAMMING

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

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Contents

FROM THE EDITOR

With Pakistan engulfed by political and economic turmoil, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—better known as the Pakistani Taliban—is again growing as a threat. In our feature article, Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming write: "With the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, the TTP has obtained new more sophisticated weapons and relocated fighters from Afghanistan to Pakistan and is now turning its focus back to its war against the Pakistani state. Over the past two years, the group has gone through a series of mergers, strengthened its media and operational activities, moved away from the indiscriminate targeting of civilians in suicide attacks, implemented a range of new internal policies centralizing its organizational structure, and settled on a localized strategy. With a solid organizational foundation and its eyes set on the Pakistani state, the TTP appears ready to follow in the footsteps of the Afghan Taliban and take control of territory in Pakistan's tribal areas. The Taliban victory in Afghanistan has emboldened and strengthened the TTP. With the Taliban in control of Afghanistan and sympathetic to the TTP, the TTP now enjoys a level of 'strategic depth' that is arguably unparalleled in its history."

Our interview is with Robin Simcox, the United Kingdom's Commissioner for Countering Extremism. He talks about tackling violent and non-violent extremism across the ideological spectrum and the findings of the recent independent review of the United Kingdom's "Prevent" counter-extremism pillar.

Wassim Nasr recounts his journey through Idlib in late April and early May 2023 on a reporting assignment for France24. He met with senior leaders of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, including its leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani, who told him they have definitively turned away from global jihad. In Nasr's words: "You have a core jihadi group with core leaders saying, 'OK, we don't want anything to do with international jihad anymore.' This is unique. It's never happened before."

Colin Clarke, Mollie Saltskog, Michaela Millender, and Naureen Fink examine the recent targeting of infrastructure by America's violent far-right. They write that "the increased focus and attacks on critical infrastructure by far-right extremists has the potential to wreak extensive, multifaceted societal disruption and damage, impacting communications, the economy, mobility, and basic human necessities."

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover

By Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming

After the historic events leading to the Taliban's capture of Afghan territory and return to government in the summer of 2021, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—better known as the Pakistani Taliban—has begun a trajectory to emulate its allies in Afghanistan. Founded in 2007 as an umbrella movement in Pakistan's tribal territory uniting the area's militant Islamist outfits, the TTP later suffered from a government crackdown and an internal fragmentation that critically threatened its survival. As a survival mechanism, the group relocated to Afghanistan, embedding itself into the Taliban's insurgency, but with the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, the TTP has obtained new more sophisticated weapons and relocated fighters from Afghanistan to Pakistan and is now turning its focus back to its war against the Pakistani state. Over the past two years, the group has gone through a series of mergers, strengthened its media and operational activities, moved away from the indiscriminate targeting of civilians in suicide attacks, implemented a range of new internal policies centralizing its organizational structure, and settled on a localized strategy. With a solid organizational foundation and its eyes set on the Pakistani state, the TTP appears ready to follow in the footsteps of the Afghan Taliban and take control of territory in Pakistan's tribal areas. The Taliban victory in Afghanistan has emboldened and strengthened the TTP. With the Taliban in control of Afghanistan and sympathetic to the TTP, the TTP now enjoys a level of 'strategic depth' that is arguably unparalleled in its history.

Even before the August 2021 Afghan Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—better known as the Pakistani Taliban—appeared to be on an upward trajectory, as these authors outlined in an article for *CTC Sentinel* in the spring of 2021. At that time, after years of organizational fragmentation, the group was beginning to show signs of a resurgence. Not only had it managed to survive the existential threat previously posed by the Islamic State, but it had also strengthened its ranks through a series of mergers, broadened its support base, introduced a series of new regulations curtailing the indiscriminate targeting of civilians in suicide bombings, and increased the tempo of its operations. In the ensuing two years, building on the Afghan Taliban's victory, and drawing strength and inspiration from it, the TTP's revival has continued to grow in strength, partly due to an 'incoherent' response from the Pakistani military. The group is now on the trajectory to emulate the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan.[1] With a further uptick in and geographical expansion of its operations, additional mergers, its fighters relocating from their 'victory' in Afghanistan to Pakistan, and a much more local focus and a centralized organizational structure, the TTP is now attempting to escalate its violence against the state after a series of failed peace negotiations.

This article draws on open-source materials and interviews to assess the TTP's growing strength over the past two years and analyze its potential future trajectory. The first section analyzes the implications of the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan for the TTP. The second section examines the group's growing strength, defining four key developments: mergers, organizational centralization, growing operational activity, and a strengthening of media operations. The third section looks into the 2021-2022 negotiations between the TTP and the Pakistani government, and the fourth section outlines the TTP's recent and more localized focus. The final section investigates the January 2023 Peshawar Mosque attack and offers an assessment of the TTP's potential short-term future trajectory.

The Implications of the Taliban's Takeover in Afghanistan for the TTP

The Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Taliban have long had deep-rooted relations. Yet, prior to the Afghan Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the government in Pakistan promoted the narrative that the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban were not interconnected and blamed the growing threat from the TTP on foreign intelligence agencies' support through the former Afghan government.[2] Pakistani officials claimed the Taliban's recent accession to power would force the TTP to retreat from Afghan territory and eventually face a certain organizational death.[3] As this piece will outline, many Pakistani militants did leave Afghanistan, but when they came home, with the war won in Afghanistan, they focused all their attention on the TTP's war against the Pakistani state and

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A screen capture from a video showing TTP emir Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud (in sunglasses) at a large gathering of TTP militants in the eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar in October 2021 during his first-ever trip there to meet his commanders after the Taliban takeover. (Umar Media, December 2021).

particularly the tribal belt adjacent to Afghanistan. This specific, and localized, focus became clear during peace negotiations in Kabul last year between the TTP and Pakistani government when the TTP stressed that the reinstatement of the semiautonomous status of the tribal belt and the implementation of sharia were its key demands.[4]

The TTP was the first militant group to officially celebrate the Taliban takeover within hours of the Taliban entering Kabul. In a statement released on August 17, 2021, the TTP declared the Taliban's return to power as a great victory for the jihadi project.[5] The TTP emir Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud publicly renewed his group's pledge of allegiance to the Taliban emir Hibatullah Akhundzada and promised to continue unconditional support to the Afghan Taliban. Drawing attention to the TTP's two decades of fighting U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan, Mehsud announced that his group would now work to ensure the stability and survival of the Taliban regime.[6]

The Taliban's takeover also resulted in an instant injection of strength for the TTP with the release of hundreds of TTP members from prisons across Kabul, who had been imprisoned by U.S. forces and the former Afghan government.[7] This included senior commanders like the TTP's founding deputy emir Maulawi Faqir Muhammad Bajauri and former spokesperson Mufti Khalid Bulti, arrested in Afghanistan in 2013 and 2015, respectively. Immediately after his release, Bajauri was seen addressing large gatherings of TTP fighters in Kunar province adjacent to his native Bajaur tribal district in Pakistan.[8] During his speech, he proclaimed that the anti-state militant struggle in Pakistan continued and urged those gathered to dedicate all efforts to the jihadi front in Pakistan.

Praising the locals' support and shelter of the TTP, he claimed that his group was now aiming for a comparable victory in Pakistan.[9]

The Afghan Taliban leadership publicly discourages its members from joining the war against the Pakistani state,[10] although the group's rank-and-file consider it a religious and national obligation to support the TTP from an ideological perspective and due to tribal and personal connections cemented in the last two decades of insurgency. Unsurprisingly, reports are emerging of Afghan militants contributing to the TTP's war against Pakistani security forces, including suicide bombers.[11] Some Afghan Taliban foot soldiers have declared the fight against Pakistani forces as the next phase of their jihad.[12]

The TTP legitimizes its war against the state by applying the same arguments that the Taliban used in Afghanistan. An interesting manifestation of this overlap is the TTP's response to a statement from a senior Pakistani religious leader Mufti Taqi Usmani in January 2023, who declared any armed uprising against the state illegitimate.[13] In response, the TTP's central Umar Media foundation released an archived statement from the Taliban's supreme leader supporting the TTP in its jihad against the Pakistani state.[14]

In sum, the Taliban victory in Afghanistan has emboldened and strengthened the TTP. With the Taliban in control of Afghanistan and sympathetic to the TTP, and the group no longer having to fear operations against it there, the TTP now enjoys a level of 'strategic

depth' that is arguably unparalleled in its history.[a]

TTP Resurgence

In the aftermath of the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan, four key developments have defined the TTP's ensuing resurgence: a series of mergers, the adoption of a centralized organizational structure emulating the Afghan Taliban insurgency, growing operational activity, and a sharp strengthening in media operations.

Mergers

The TTP's absorption of other militant groups was already underway prior to the Taliban takeover, as the authors described in their spring 2021 *CTC Sentinel* article, but it accelerated thereafter.[15] Since the fall of Kabul, 21 smaller militant groups and networks, referred to by the TTP as "*Dalgay*,"[b] have joined the TTP with one group joining after the Taliban takeover in 2021, 12 groups joining in 2022, and another eight in the first four months of 2023.[c] The series of TTP mergers started in July 2020 when it seemed likely the Taliban would eventually return to power in the wake of the Doha peace deal between the United States and the Taliban signed on February 29, 2020. Eight militant groups, including former TTP splinters, were absorbed into the TTP in the first phase of mergers in 2020.[16]

Two factors explain the acceleration of mergers after the Taliban takeover: the end of the active jihadi insurgency in Afghanistan and the reforms under the current TTP emir Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud. A number of Pakistani militants that did not fight in Pakistan but were previously part of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan also joined the TTP after the Taliban's transition from insurgency to governance. The U.S. and allied forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan removed much of the Pakistani militants' *raison d'être* to remain in the country as they could not continue their military activities and faced obstacles being integrated into the new Taliban government structure. These hurdles primarily relate to the fact that Afghan politics and culture is strongly opposed to any foreign rule or interference in the country. One recent example serves as a good illustration. Senior Taliban commander Haji Usman Turabi was instrumental in the fight against the Islamic State in Afghanistan's eastern Kunar Province. After defeating Islamic State elements in the province, Turabi was named its governor, but he was quickly removed from the post after news started to circulate on social media that he and his family have Pakistani nationality, as well as Afghan nationality, and that his family had permanently

> ## "The reforms to the TTP under Mehsud's leadership have motivated anti-state Pakistani militants to trust and join the group to pursue a Taliban-inspired victory in Pakistan."

settled in Pakistan.[d] The Taliban are also sensitive to the fact that any foreign fighter presence, especially of Pakistani nationality, in the Taliban security forces risks strengthening the counter-Taliban narrative framing the Taliban as Pakistani stooges.[e]

The reforms to the TTP under Mehsud's leadership have motivated anti-state Pakistani militants to trust and join the group to pursue a Taliban-inspired victory in Pakistan. By the spring of 2021, Mehsud had implemented very significant changes in the TTP's *modus operandi* to avoid past violations that were central to its decline. His new approach significantly reduced attacks against civilians and considerably reduced civilian casualties in attacks.[17] Mehsud has also succeeded in reabsorbing various splinter factions that had previously been busy opposing one another.

The mergers have had two key benefits for the TTP. First, they brought other battle-hardened militants into the TTP ranks, which has had a concrete impact on the TTP's insurgency. The three militant groups merging under the leadership of the Maulawi Tipu Gul from the Lakki Marwat district in Khyber Pukhtoonkhawa province in January 2022 is a case in point. They soon turned their native district into one of the TTP's most active districts for attacks against the security forces.[f]

Second, these mergers helped TTP strengthen its organizational foothold in strategically important areas like southern Balochistan province and the North Waziristan tribal district of Khyber Pukhtoonkhawa province. The four Baloch militant groups that have joined TTP since July 2022 have helped the group expand its organizational presence into the ethnic Baloch areas of Pakistan's

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a   'Strategic depth' refers to a situation where the TTP no longer fear the kind of airstrikes, ground attacks, and arrests it faced during the time U.S. troops operated in Afghanistan. Senior leaders, including former emir Maulana Fazlullah Khurasani and military chief Khalifa Umar Mansur among others, were killed in U.S. drone strikes. After the Taliban takeover, there have been no reports of TTP militants or commanders killed in similar attacks in Afghanistan.

b   TTP uses the word "*dalgay*" for these groups, which has a minimum requirement of five members in urban areas and 12-25 members in tribal areas or shadow provinces. For details, see "Guidelines for the Mujahideen of Tihreak-e-Taliban Pakistan," Umar Media, March 2022, pp. 28.

c   These militant groups include 17 groups from the northwestern Khyber Pukhtoonkhawa province and four groups from the southern Balochistan province. Authors' tracking of TTP mergers.

d   Haji Muhammad Usman Turabi faced immediate massive criticism after a picture showing him meeting at this office with a Pakistani religious leader, Mufti Nadeem Mahmoodi, surfaced on Afghan social media in mid-September 2021. Many Afghans, including Taliban supporters, vehemently criticized him for meeting with a pro-state Pakistani religious figure. These criticisms further increased when the details of his family being settled in Pakistan and holding dual Pakistani citizenship were added to the social media campaign against him, which ended with his removal from office in October 2021. Kunar governor office's official Twitter account posted pictures of the ceremony in which a new governor replaced him. See Kunar Governor's Office tweet on October 1, 2021, at 7:59 AM.

e   Afghans are very critical of the Pakistan government due to its overt and covert support of insurgencies in Afghanistan since the Islamist youth uprising against President Daud Khan's government in 1973.

f   In Lakki Marwat, TTP attacks jumped from five in 2021 to 20 in 2022 and 10 attacks in the first three months of 2023. The attacks targeted police, military, and paramilitary forces. Such was the impact of the attacks that military and police launched large-scale operations against the group in November 2022 and January 2023. See Ayaz Gul, "Militant Ambush, Gunfight Kill 8 Pakistan Security Forces," VOA, November 16, 2022, and "Operation launched against terrorists in Lakki forest," *Dawn*, January 27, 2023.

Balochistan province apparently for the first time.[g] These four groups, led by Aslam Baloch, Mazar Baloch, Akram Baloch, and Asim Baloch, had initially fought against the U.S.-led NATO alliance in Afghanistan but later joined the TTP.[18] Balochistan is a volatile province where an anti-state separatist movement has been active for the past two decades. The significance of TTP's expansion to Balochistan is discussed later in the article.

The TTP has significantly bolstered its position in North Waziristan in the past three years. Although in the post-9/11 landscape until 2015 North Waziristan was the strongest base for the jihadi movement in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the TTP continuously struggled to establish the kind of dominance there that it enjoyed in the other six tribal areas that previously composed the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). A local militant group led by Hafiz Gul Bahadar (HGB) remained the unchallenged militant outfit in North Waziristan for years.[19] HGB enjoyed the support of al-Qa`ida and the Haqqani Network as North Waziristan served as a sanctuary for local and foreign militants. But in an important development, since November 2020 nine militant groups in North Waziristan have joined the TTP. One of them—the Ustad Aleem Khan group—very significantly strengthened TTP's position in North Waziristan because its leader was a deputy to HGB and one of the strongest commanders in the district.[20]

A Centralized Structure
A second key development that has characterized the TTP's resurgence is that last year the TTP transformed its organizational structure from an umbrella tribal organization with limited control at the top into a centralized structure similar to the Afghan

"Last year the TTP transformed its organizational structure from an umbrella tribal organization with limited control at the top into a centralized structure similar to the Afghan Taliban."

Taliban.[21][h] In the previous umbrella structure, the local leadership had enormous power with the central command depending upon them to implement orders and finding it more difficult to replace powerful commanders. This was a key reason for the internal anarchy and infightings that splintered the TTP back in 2014.[22]

The new arrangement is based on the Afghan Taliban insurgency structure that includes shadow provinces and central organizational units responsible for key portfolios.[23] The TTP first announced this new structure in 2022,[24] but its implementation remains an ongoing process. The number of appointed officials increased from 34 in 2022 to 139 in 2023, and the group added seven ministries, an intelligence directorate, a suicide brigade and training camp, a three-layer court system, an institute of 'Islamic' jurisprudence, and a housing department to the shadow structure in 2023.[25] The number of shadow provinces saw a modest increase from eight to nine.[26]

In the new structure, the leadership council is the highest authority that, in consultation with the emir, appoints shadow ministers. Only a leadership council member can become a "minister." The TTP's ministries include information and broadcasting, political affairs, defense, accountability, education, finance, and welfare, in addition to a General Directorate of Intelligence.[27] Each ministry has a minister and a deputy. The Defense Ministry is the largest organizational unit of the TTP.[28] It comprises two military commissions, named North-zone and South-zone. Each military commission has a body of six or seven TTP members that includes a director and his deputy, which oversees the shadow provinces. Ministries appoint representatives

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g   A TTP leadership council member, Qari Muhammad Shoaib Bajauri, told the author Abdul Sayed in April 2023 that these four groups were the first Baloch-ethnic commanders to join TTP in Balochistan. Thus, these mergers expanded the TTP's organizational presence in Balochistan's Baloch and Baruhi-dominated areas, a significant achievement for the TTP.

TTP's operational network has long existed in Balochistan. For example, the militants targeted the residence of a senior security official in the provincial capital Quetta as revenge for the arrest of senior al-Qa`ida leader Yunus al-Mauritani, who was arrested in a joint U.S. and Pakistani security operation announced by the Pakistanis on September 5, 2011. See Shehzad Baloch, "Terror in Quetta: Taliban 'avenge' arrest of senior al Qaeda cadre," *Express Tribune*, September 7, 2011. A Baloch separatist leader told author Abdul Sayed in April 2023 that the TTP network in Balochistan was limited to the Pashtun belt of the province from Quetta to Zhob, which shares a close boundary with the group's birthplace and stronghold, South Waziristan. The TTP used it as a transit route to the Taliban insurgency in southern Afghanistan and to conduct operations in Karachi and different parts of the country from Waziristan via Quetta. For further details, see Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, *Inqilab-i-Mehsud [Mehsuds Revolution]* (Paktika: Al-Shahab Publishers, 2017).

h   The TTP's announcement of a centralized structure with shadow provinces and ministries is the product of continuous efforts within the group. This was a vital demand of major TTP factions Jama'at ul-Ahrar (JuA) and Hizb ul-Ahrar (HuA) that joined TTP in August 2020 under the leadership of Umar Khalid Khurasani. A key reason for Khurasani's separation from TTP in August 2014 was that he demanded a centralized structure for TTP like the Afghan Taliban. Thus, such a change was his single condition to merge with the TTP. For details, see Abdul Sayed, "An In-Depth Portrait of a Pakistani Taliban Founding Father: Umar Khalid Khurasani," *Militant Leadership Monitor* XII:5 (2021). The implementation of a centralized structure began when the two factions joined the TTP in August 2020. For example, TTP emir Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud announced the first-ever centralized training camp for recruits named "al-Farooq" that he said would serve as the only training facility for all TTP groups from that point onward. See the video, "Those who prepare for battles," Umar Media, August 5, 2021. The TTP announced shadow governors in the summer of 2021, but the first-ever centralized structure of governance was introduced in February 2022. See "Tihreak-e-Taliban Pakistan statement regarding latest appointments," Umar Media, February 22, 2022. Furthermore, this structure was further expanded in 2023 with additional ministries and commissions added to the TTP's shadow government structure. See "Tihreak-e-Taliban appointments for 2023," Umar Media, December 30, 2022.

at the provincial level at the recommendations of the military commissions.[29]

The leadership council appoints shadow governors in consultation with the emir and the deputy on recommendations of the defense ministry and reports from the TTP's accountability commission.[30] The nine shadow provinces correspond to the seven divisions of the Khyber Pukhtoonkhawa province, as well as one allocated for the Pashtun-dominated Zhob division in Baluchistan and one for the Gilgit-Baltistan province.

In the rest of the country, the TTP's organizational structure is based on the "Dalgay" system. "Dalgay" is the lowest unit of the TTP military structure derived from the Afghan Taliban insurgency phase. "Dalgay" is a Pashto word meaning group, but the Taliban used it to mean a "military unit." The TTP minimum requirement for a "Dalgay" is five members in urban areas and 12-25 members in tribal areas or shadow provinces.[31] According to the TTP defense minister Mufti Muzahim, the group has more than 400 "Dalgay" across the country.[32]

Growing Operational Activity

A third feature of the TTP's resurgence is that the group's attacks have increased rapidly, have expanded from the tribal belt to the major cities of the country, and have strategically focused on the security forces. The number of TTP-claimed attacks more than tripled between 2020 and 2022, with the monthly attack average increasing from 14.5 in 2020 to 23.5 in 2021 and 45.8 in 2022.[33][i]

Moreover, the TTP introduced modern weaponry, including the sophisticated M24 sniper rifle, M4 carbines with Trijicon ACOG scopes, and the M16A4 rifle with a thermal scope making it more lethal.[j] The TTP acquired these weapons after the former Afghan government collapsed and U.S. troops withdrew from Afghanistan.[k] The group obtained these weapons after local people looted the abandoned military bases.[l] These weapons also constituted the TTP's share in the spoils of war.[34] Former Afghan commanders handed significant numbers of these weapons over to their TTP comrades to help them securely leave Afghanistan and because

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i   TTP did not claim any attack between May and August 2022 due to the ceasefire with Pakistani security forces. However, it claimed 367 attacks in the other eight months of the year with an average of 45.9 per month. The highest number of attacks were 54, 59, and 69, claimed in April, November, and December 2022, respectively. The highest monthly number of attacks in the preceding two years was 45 in December 2021 and 23 in September 2020.

j   Pakistani defense minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif confirmed in a recent interview that these weapons have added to the lethality of the TTP attacks. See Sarah Zaman, "Pakistan Will Hit Terror Hideouts Inside Afghanistan, Defense Minister Warns Kabul," Voice of America, April 12, 2023.

k   The TTP's possession of these weapons is evident from its propaganda videos that provide what it purports to be visual evidence of attacks carried out against the security forces. See, for example, the fifth and sixth episodes of the Umar Media-produced "Terrifying Attacks" series released in February and May 2022, and the four episodes of a similar attack series, "Battles are accelerated," launched in October 2022.

l   Due to the sudden collapse of Kabul, the security forces had to flee rapidly, leaving behind their bases with weapons and equipment. TTP militants captured weapons when the local people looted government offices and military bases in Afghanistan's border provinces with Pakistan. Many Pakistani militants (hundreds of families) are based on the Afghanistan side of the border, having escaped there due to many years of military operations on the Pakistan side of the border. They have established close ties with the local people due to tribal links and inter-marriages.

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of their shared hatred of Pakistani security forces.[35] The acquired sniper rifles, equipped with a thermal scope, have become a favored weapon for the TTP against Pakistani security forces.[36]

Over the course of the last five years, the TTP has introduced important changes[m] (described later) to its policy regarding suicide attacks, which has resulted in a decrease in civilian casualties per suicide attack compared to the large casualty counts it inflicted in the past. Furthermore, the overall number of civilian casualties in suicide attacks has gone down despite an uptick in suicide operations.[37] The highest number of civilian deaths in a TTP suicide attack was 20 in 2015, 21 in 2016, 26 in 2017, 23 in 2018, five in 2019, zero in 2020, four in 2021, and two in 2022.[n] February 2023 saw the highest number of claimed suicide attacks in a single month in recent years, with three suicide attacks claimed in the whole of 2020 and in 2021 and five in the whole of 2022.[38]

The massive civilian losses from suicide attacks over the years turned out to be a decisive reason for the decline in support among the public and even among fellow jihadis.[39] Moreover, the previous large number of civilian casualties generated significant support for the security forces' military operations. This resulted in critical blows against the militants, forced them to flee to neighboring Afghanistan, and left the TTP fighting for survival in the 2014-16 period.[40] Realizing that a new approach was needed, the TTP in September 2018 designed a sophisticated strategy to vet suicide attack plans to avoid past mistakes with this strategy apparently being further developed in the ensuing years.[41] Suicide attacks are now planned by the central suicide brigade and executed with approval from the emir and his deputy.[42] The result so far has been a string of attacks targeting the security forces with minimal civilian

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m   The TTP introduced strict instructions for suicide attacks in its 18-page general guidelines for militants published in September 2018, which were emphasized in the 33-page updated general guidelines published in March 2022 and the 70-page 'defense ministry' guidelines published in January 2023.

n   The number of civilian fatalities in TTP suicide attacks from 2015 to 2020 is taken from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). The authors have independently compiled a list of TTP-claimed attacks for the years 2021 and 2022, as the GTD has not published any TTP attack data beyond 2020. In their data collection, the authors have relied on official government sources reported in news reports for the fatalities number.

casualties reported.[o]

Besides the growth in frequency of attacks, a resurgent TTP has also succeeded in geographically expanding its area of operational activities beyond the Khyber Pukhtoonkhawa province once again. The group's recent major attacks show that it has re-established itself in the capital, Islamabad, and in Sindh, Punjab, and Balochistan provinces. Recent indications of this expansion include suicide attacks carried out in Islamabad and in Karachi, the capital of Sindh province.[43] And in January 2023, TTP militants assassinated a senior official of Pakistan's intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), in a targeted attack in Punjab, which was a major blow to the agency.[44] Additionally, the rate of TTP attacks in the southern Balochistan province is increasing, with numerous targeted killings and IED attacks carried out by the group in the provincial capital Quetta.[p]

Strengthened Media and Propaganda Operations

The fourth dynamic associated with the TTP's resurgence is an increase in the output and sophistication of the TTP's main propaganda outlet, Umar Media.[45] The past two years have seen an increase in the number and variety of productions and significantly improved quality.[q] Umar Media now produces audio, video, and text materials in a half dozen languages: Pashto, Urdu, English, Baluchi, Dari/Persian, and Arabic. The propaganda operations opportunistically link the group's anti-state war narrative with the

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grievances of different communities to try to earn their support in the war against the security forces.[r]

The main audience for Umar Media productions remains the Pashtun and Baloch people, Islamists, and political activists from mainstream parties who are disgruntled with the current system and the rulers of the country. This list of the key target audiences is evident from the central themes of the propaganda outputs, irrespective of language, which aim to mobilize the Baloch and Pashtun tribespeople for a war against security forces. Umar Media's Arabic productions are likely directed at wealthy sympathizers in the Arab world. Umar Media's Dari production are aimed at winning support from that language community in Afghanistan. Umar Media also publishes a monthly Urdu magazine and daily statements that attempt to exploit contemporary political issues and generate maximum support for the group's war against the regime.[s] In 2022, Umar Media produced its first-ever Balochi language video.[46] While the TTP disseminates messages to the Baloch people via Urdu outputs, which is a common language across the country, it released, for the first time in history, Balochi audio and video products in 2022.[47] In March 2023, the TTP media unit produced an English documentary with a fluent English speaker as the narrator for the first time, suggesting its recruitment aspirations have widened well beyond the tribal belt toward educated youth.[48]

Negotiations with the Pakistani Government

Shortly after the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, Pakistan's government approached the Afghan Taliban to facilitate peace negotiations with the TTP.[49] During the summer of 2022, there was significant progress in the negotiations, but they slowed after a U.S. drone strike killed al-Qa`ida emir Ayman al-

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o   For example, a three-member TTP suicide squad attacked the police headquarters in Karachi on February 17, 2023, which resulted in one civilian death. See "Pakistani Taliban attack Karachi police station," BBC, February 17, 2023. This was the first TTP major attack in Karachi in eight years. Another suicide attack targeted a security check post in the Khyber tribal district in January with zero civilian casualties. See "Two cops martyred in TTP-led terrorist attack," *Express Tribune*, January 19, 2023. The TTP's current emir Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud acknowledged and criticized the group's use of indiscriminate civilian casualties in suicide attacks in his book *Inqilab-i-Mehsud*, published in November 2017. He introduced strict policies for suicide attacks in the militant guidelines published a few weeks after becoming emir in July 2018, see "Guidelines for the Tihreak-e-Taliban Pakistan Mujahideen," Umar Media, September 2018. TTP suicide attacks against civilians and the overall number of civilian casualties in suicide attacks sharply dropped with the new guidelines. See Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Revival of the Pakistani Taliban," *CTC Sentinel* 14:4 (2021). Moreover, the TTP further tightened its policies for suicide attacks in the updated versions of the attack guidelines published in 2022 and 2023. Guidelines for the Mujahideen of Tihreak-e-Taliban Pakistan" Umar Media, March 2022; "Guidelines for the Defense Ministry," Umar Media, January 2023.

p   The TTP claimed 11 attacks in Balochistan province during the first three months of 2023 compared to seven in the whole of 2020, 17 in the whole of 2021, and 12 in the whole of 2022. After it officially ended the ceasefire on November 28, 2022, the TTP carried out two of the seven suicide attacks carried out in Balochistan between November 30, 2022, and February 17, 2023. These two attacks targeted police and military, and paramilitary forces on November 30, 2022, and February 5, 2023, in the provincial capital of Quetta.

q   According to author Abdul Sayed's collection of Umar Media videos, the media outlet released 26 videos in 2022 and around 20 in the first four months of 2023. There was a noticeable increase in quality in a new series of seven videos launched by Umar Media productions in the six months between September 2022 and March 2023. These new series of videos focused on socio-political problems in Pakistan to try to win the support of disgruntled communities for the TTP's war against the Pakistani state. For details, see Abdul Sayed, "Analysis: Resurgence of Umar Media boosts Pakistani Taliban messaging," BBC Monitoring, January 13, 2023. These series included "We Are Ready," "Battles are Accelerated," "Under Observation," "I am a Traveler of Jihad," "A Call to Jihad," "The Eagle Man," and "We are the Taliban" launched in September, October, and November 2022 and February and March 2023.

r   This strategy is evident from the Umar Media six-video series and a first-ever current affairs podcast series launched in the last six months.

s   For example, Umar Media launched the special video series "Under Observations" for this purpose last year, as is evident from the six episodes of this series produced since October 2022. Similarly, the TTP Urdu monthly "Taliban Magazine" is also dedicated to this objective. See the 14th issue of "Taliban Magazine," published in April 2023.

Zawahiri in the Afghan capital Kabul on July 31.[t]

The Pakistani government initiated negotiations under the mistaken view that the TTP was in a fragile position due to a lack of support for the anti-state war after the Taliban replaced the former Afghan government.[u] Senior Pakistani officials who were serving at the time, including then Prime Minister Imran Khan,[50] President Arif Alvi,[51] and Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi[52] offered a general amnesty to the militants on the condition they lay down arms and return to normal life in the country.[v] The TTP rejected this offer, saying the group intended to continue its armed struggle until democracy had been replaced with sharia law governing Pakistan.[53]

Nonetheless, the Afghan Taliban succeeded in convincing the TTP to enter into negotiations with the Pakistani government in November 2021.[54] [w] In September 2021, the Afghan Taliban leadership conveyed the Pakistani government's call for negotiations to the TTP in their first meeting after the Taliban takeover.[55] The TTP was at first reluctant but agreed because of the mediating role of the Afghan Taliban. The TTP[56] and the government[57] announced the negotiations with a month-long ceasefire on November 9, 2021. However, the first negotiation attempt failed without any substantial progress.

Pakistani stakeholders were largely divided over negotiations with the TTP,[58] and thus, the government was unable to send a team to instigate dialogue with TTP representatives in Afghanistan.[59] The TTP blamed the failure on the government's supposed lack of interest and resumed attacks after the end of the ceasefire on December 10, 2021.[60] The group, however, did not entirely reject talks and announced that it was ready for "meaningful negotiations."[61]

In late 2021, TTP attacks against Pakistani security forces immediately increased in frequency and intensity after the end of the ceasefire. The TTP claimed 45 attacks in December 2021 alone, which was the highest number of attacks in a month for several years.[62] In April 2022, TTP claimed 54 attacks, thus setting a new 'record.'[63] Furthermore, TTP went beyond regular small-scale attacks. On March 30, 2022, a three-member squad of suicide fighters attacked a military fort in the Tank district of Khyber Pukhtoonkhawa province, killing and wounding 24 soldiers.[64] The trio used sniper rifles equipped with thermal scopes in their attack on the high-security military base.[x] Their attack mode contrasted with the many suicide-vest bombings and vehicle-borne suicide attacks carried out by the group since 2019.

In retaliation, in the weeks that followed, Pakistani security forces carried out cross-border attacks into Afghanistan against the TTP and operations against them inside Pakistan. In their targeting of the militants, Pakistani fighter jets bombarded tribal refugee camps on the Afghan side of the border in the southeastern Khost and northeastern Kunar provinces.[65] Additionally, TTP commanders were targeted in suspected covert operations by Pakistani security agencies. A former TTP spokesperson, Mufti Khalid Balti,[66] was among those killed, and a senior military commander, Mufti Burjan,[67] was left in critical condition as a result of the unclaimed strikes. TTP supporters blamed Pakistan's security agencies for these attacks, but no official claim of responsibility has been made public yet.

Despite these tensions, the TTP resumed negotiations with the Pakistani government and announced a unilateral ceasefire in May 2022 as a result of the Afghan Taliban pressing them to do so as a trust-building measure for peace negotiations.[68] The TTP announced a 12-day ceasefire on Eid-ul-Fitr (the holiday marking the end of Ramadan),[69] which it extended for another five days on May 10[70] and to the end of the month on May 18.[71] At the same time, the group announced the resumption of negotiations with the government through Afghan Taliban mediation. The TTP expressed trust in the negotiation process and extended the ceasefire for an indefinite period on June 2, 2022.[72] The TTP and the government subsequently held several negotiation rounds in the Afghan capital Kabul with the group's emir, Noor Wali Mehsud, leading the TTP negotiating team, which included all senior commanders of the group.[73] The Peshawar Corps Commander, Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed, represented the government team, which included senior government and military officials.[74]

At this point, there was significant progress in the negotiations, and the militants appeared optimistic about a peace settlement.[75] To facilitate a settlement, the TTP reduced their key demand for the implementation of sharia in Pakistan to just the tribal districts, formerly known as the FATA. The TTP demanded the reinstatement of the semi-autonomous status of the FATA, and that the TTP should be handed limited control over certain parts to govern them with sharia laws.[76]

However, the negotiations ended as a result of al-Qa`ida emir Ayman al-Zawahiri's death in a U.S. drone strike in Kabul on July 31, 2022. Although the Afghan Taliban did not confirm al-Zawahiri's presence in Kabul nor his death in the drone strike, the Taliban's

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t   Pakistan had sent a delegation of religious leaders, led by a senior Deobandi leader (Mufti Taqi Usmani), to a meeting with the TTP in Kabul, returning to Pakistan on July 30, 2022. The following day, a drone strike targeted Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul, which led the TTP leadership to immediately leave the Afghan capital. In the aftermath, negotiations between the government and the TTP stalled, and TTP resumed attacks on September 2 and formally ended the ceasefire on November 28, blaming the government for violations.

u   This was obvious from former Prime Minister Imran Khan's interview with BBC in March 2023, who backed his government negotiations with the TTP, saying the Pakistani militants in Afghanistan had no option except a peace settlement with the government. "Pakistan had no choice but to rehabilitate TTP members after Taliban takeover in Afghanistan: Imran," The News, March 14, 2023; Fahd Husain, "PM followed force, but the military opposed it," Dawn, November 10, 2021.

v   After being forced out as prime minister, Imran Khan backed his amnesty offer to militants in an interview with BBC in March 2023, saying this was the only option for repatriation and rehabilitation of the 30,000-40,000 Pakistani militants and their families left in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover. He said, "We could either line up those 40,000 people—including fighters and their families—and shoot them, or we could rehabilitate them." See "Imran Khan's interview with BBC Urdu," BBC Urdu, March 13, 2023.

w   The Afghan Taliban foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, recently confirmed that the Afghan Taliban brought TTP to negotiations with the government. See Tahir Khan, "Afghan FM Muttaqi urges Pakistan, TTP to hold talks," Dawn, May 8, 2023. The TTP's now deceased senior commander Umar Khalid Khurasani confirmed in an interview with author Abdul Sayed in November 2021 that TTP had agreed to negotiations with the government only out of obedience to the Afghan Taliban. For details, see Abdul Sayed, "Pakistan's Peace Talks with the Pakistani Taliban: Insights from an Interview with Abdul Wali Mohmand (alias Umar Khalid Khurasani)," Terrorism Monitor 19:23 (2021).

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x   A TTP suicide fighting squad carried out a similar attack on June 26, 2019, that targeted the police headquarters in the Loralai district in Balochistan. See Mohammad Zafar, "Three bombers killed as forces stave off terror attack," Express Tribune, June 26, 2019.

acting defense minister, Mullah Muhammad Yaqub, among others, blamed Pakistan for facilitating U.S. drone operations in Afghanistan.[77] The TTP was even more direct in blaming Pakistan for the killing of al-Zawahiri.[78] A month after the drone strike, on September 2, 2022, the TTP resumed attacks after a four-month ceasefire process, blaming the Pakistani security forces' supposed repeated ceasefire violations. It officially ended the ceasefire on November 28, blaming the government's supposed lack of interest in negotiations on top of the earlier accusation.[y]

Another key reason for the failure of the negotiations was political instability inside Pakistan. In April 2022, Imran Khan was ousted as prime minister after a no-confidence vote in parliament. One of Khan's close allies,[79] Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed was a strong proponent of a political settlement with the TTP, a process he started as ISI chief and later continued, with army chief Qama Javed Bajwa's blessing, as Peshawar Corps Commander.[80] Some in the TTP and the Taliban hoped for Hameed's ascension to army chief as that would have energized the dialogue process. However, Hameed failed to make it to the top job, and after General Asim Munir's appointment as army chief in November 2022, Hameed resigned from the army,[81] which turned out to be a blow to the hope of a negotiated settlement.

A Much More Local Focus

The TTP has always been a local group, embedded in Pakistan's tribal politics, and with a localized strategy and objectives. Yet another defining feature of the TTP's early history was its simultaneous external focus, mainly manifesting through its participation in the insurgency in Afghanistan and its support for a globally oriented jihadi agenda. The group's alignment with al-Qa`ida, its collaboration in the suicide attack on the CIA station in Afghanistan's Khost province in December 2009,[z] and its role in the May 2010 failed bomb attack in New York City's Times Square are testament to the group's global orientation.[aa]

However, under its current emir, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, the TTP publicly disowned any transnational or regional agenda. This change turned into official policy when the TTP revised its manifesto and its attack guidelines after Mehsud became leader in 2018.[82] Since then, the TTP has adopted an exclusively local agenda and assured the regional political stakeholders and the international community that it only fights against the Pakistani

state for domestic objectives. This narrative became even more explicit after the Doha deal between the United States and the Afghan Taliban in February 2020. The TTP leadership in public, particularly in messages to the United States, the international community, and regional powers, claimed they were only interested in fighting against the Pakistani security forces on their own soil.[83]

The TTP also pushed back against the notion it had a global agenda in its condemnations of U.N. Security Council reports that alleged it had links with the Islamic State[84] and al-Qa`ida[85] in July 2020 and February 2021, respectively. Similarly, the group accused Pakistan of passing false information to the United Nations, the United States, and the international community about its global agenda to draw support in fighting the militants.[86] Besides this, the group announced that its militants do not pose any threat to diplomats, citizens, or assets of any foreign country in Pakistan and only fight against the security forces.[87]

There is evidence that TTP's distancing from the transnational agenda is real and not just a PR exercise. A February 2020-dated letter written by a senior TTP ideologue sent to the Pakistani cadres in al-Qa`ida's regional branch in South Asia, al-Qa`ida in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS), explicitly stated that AQIS leader Osama Mahmoud should abandon any regional and global aspirations and merge his group with the TTP to support the militants' victory in Pakistan.[88] [ab] This reorientation is further backed up by its operational activities because under the leadership of Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, the TTP has generally not claimed any attack against foreigners, except one against Chinese nationals at the Serena hotel in Quetta in April 2021, which the group stated was intended only to target Pakistani officials. A second attack on a Chinese engineers' bus in Dasu, Khyber Pukhtoonkhawa province, in July 2021 has also been attributed to the TTP, but remains unclaimed.[89]

Three factors help explain why the TTP has prioritized a localized agenda: al-Qa`ida's decline in the region, massive losses suffered by the TTP over the years in U.S. drone strikes, and the successful approach of the Afghan Taliban.

Al-Qa`ida played an instrumental role in the TTP's establishment and initially enjoyed significant influence over its rank-and-file.[90] In the years after the TTP's founding, al-Qa`ida's senior leadership mentored its commanders and financed it for cross-border operations.[91] However, this influence appears to have gradually declined because of the al-Qa`ida leadership decapitations in Waziristan during the intense U.S. air campaign that peaked in 2010.[92] The relationship soured after the groups' joint sanctuaries in Waziristan were destroyed in a major Pakistan army military

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y   The TTP resumed attacks on September 2, 2022. However, the outfit formally announced an end to the ceasefire on November 28, 2022, via a letter attributed to the shadow defense minister Mufti Muzahim. See Mufti Muzahim, "Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan defence ministry orders regarding the current operations," Umar Media, November 28, 2022.

z   The TTP confirmed its slain leader Hakeem Ullah Mehsud played a key role in al-Qa`ida's planned suicide attack by the Jordanian Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi on the CIA Forward Operating Base Chapman in southeastern Afghanistan Khost province on December 30, 2009. "Heroes of the Ummah 03: Hakeem Ullah Mehsud," Umar Media, April 2020.

aa According to the U.S. government, the TTP "directed and facilitated Faisal Shahzad's failed attempt to detonate an explosive device in New York City's Times Square on May 1, 2010." Moreover, TTP official Umar Media produced two videos of Faisal Shahzad that featured his last will and testament and him meeting with TTP's then-emir Hakeem Ullah Mehsud before departing for the attack. See "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019," U.S. Department of State, 2019; "Faisal Shahzad," Umar Media, December 2010; and Bill Roggio, "Time Square bomber Faisal Shahzad seen on a video with Pakistani Taliban commander Hakeem Ullah Mehsud," Long War Journal, July 23, 2010.

ab The 12-page Urdu letter was authored by the TTP senior ideologue and leadership council member Qari Muhammad Shoaib Bajauri on February 9, 2020. Bajauri stated the Pakistani AQIS militants should learn from the Afghan Taliban and focus on their country first rather than pursue regional or global jihadi ambitions. He reminded them that any regional or global aspirations could have consequences for the Taliban's forthcoming government in Afghanistan. This letter, along with the AQIS response to TTP, was leaked by al-Qa`ida supporters on social media, probably to prevent Pakistani al-Qa`ida militants from defecting to TTP. See "A letter from the TTP leadership council member Qari Muhammad Shoaib Bajauri to the respected brother Usama Mahmoud," February 9, 2020.

operation launched in 2014.[93] [ac]

As noted, the TTP itself suffered massive losses due to U.S. drone strikes that eliminated the majority of its senior commanders, including the group's founder Baitullah Mehsud, his two successors, and their deputies.[94] The leadership losses contributed toward internal fragmentation that resulted in splinter groups forming.[ad] This ultimately impacted the group's operational activity.[95]

The Afghan Taliban's successful political settlement with the United States in Doha also pushed the TTP to shift its messaging to reflect the group's exclusive commitment to a localized agenda. Following the February 2020 Doha agreement between the United States and the Taliban, in November 2020 TTP emir Mehsud released a statement urging militants to limit the war to security forces on Pakistani soil so that it could replicate the Afghanistan Taliban's success in Pakistan.[96] [ae] The Taliban's diplomatic victory in Doha had strengthened the localization imperative for the TTP, on one hand demonstrating the necessity of localizing jihad for it to become successful and on the other hand removing the need for the TTP to fight its battle across the Afghan-Pakistani border.

Furthermore, a leadership council member and "information minister" Mufti Ghufran in January 2023, emphasized three defining characteristics of the Afghan Taliban that the TTP militants should emulate: limit the war to one enemy (i.e., security forces), enforce unity within its ranks, and build ideological coherence and obedience.[97] The Taliban victory in Afghanistan in August 2021 gave TTP even more impetus to localize their jihad because of the same two factors mentioned above: The Taliban had proved successful by keeping it local and the TTP no longer had to fight across the border against international forces.

In an attempt to build sustainable support for its war against the Pakistani state, the TTP is now expanding its exploitation of local grievances. The TTP narrative exploits domestic grievances to legitimize fighting against the Pakistani security forces. For example, the group claims it fights to end the perceived deprivations

> ## "In an attempt to build sustainable support for its war against the Pakistani state, the TTP is now expanding its exploitation of local grievances."

of the Pashtun and Baloch tribes and to protect their rights vis-à-vis the state.[af] It also claims it is fighting to end socio-economic injustice and liberate the public from the corrupt rulers and the corrupt system in the country.[ag]

A central theme of the TTP anti-state propaganda narratives revolves around the political and economic crisis in the country. While the TTP has always blamed Pakistan's political elite for its support of the global war on terror and by extension the civil and military leadership for its corruption and dishonesty, the group is now utilizing these accusations in new ways. Connecting its insurgency to the grievances of disgruntled communities, it blames the political and military elite for the country's current political and economic turmoil and its toll on these communities.[ah] Interestingly, despite its sectarianism and abuse of religious and ethnic minorities, the TTP opportunistically features any critical voice against Pakistan's rulers in its propaganda irrespective of ideological and religious differences.[98] It is worth noting that TTP does not have any concrete political or economic agenda to present as an alternative to the public, beyond the example of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. TTP presents Taliban rule in Afghanistan as a panacea to Pakistan's political and economic crises, claiming that Afghan citizens now enjoy peace and are better governed than in Pakistan.[99]

The Peshawar Mosque Attack and the TTP's Future Outlook

How pervasive is the TTP's internal reformation, and what trajectory can be expected from the group in the coming months?

On January 30, 2023, a devastating suicide attack killed over 100 people, mostly police officials, praying at a mosque at the police headquarters in Peshawar. That same day, two senior TTP commanders, Umar Mukarram Khurasani and Sarbakaf Mohmand, claimed what was the deadliest terrorist attack in Pakistan since

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ac Al-Qa`ida and the TTP established shelters on the Afghan side of the border when the militants lost sanctuaries in Waziristan in 2014 due to Pakistan's military operations. In this period, AQIS replaced al-Qa`ida's central (AQC) leadership in the militant landscape of Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, the AQIS leadership's criticism of the TTP during this period shows that al-Qa`ida lost influence and that the relationship with the TTP deteriorated. See, for example, the AQIS emir Usama Mahmood's 85:54-minute address to his commanders in Afghanistan, recorded during 2018-2020, entitled, "Security Course." Audio file with author Abdul Sayed, downloaded from an AQIS website in 2021. Similarly, the above-mentioned AQIS response to the TTP letter in July 2020 provides a deep insight into the widened distance and complaints of al-Qa`ida from TTP after these groups shifted to Afghanistan in 2014-2015.

ad The TTP splintered over the leadership disputes after its then emir Hakeem Ullah Mehsud died in a drone strike in November 2013. Maulana Fazlullah Khurasani succeeded him, but other senior commanders, including Hafiz Saeed Khan Orakzai, Khalid Mehsud Sajna, Shehryar Mehsud, and Umar Khalid Khurasani, all wanted to succeed him as the TTP emir. Failing in their ambitions, these commanders left the TTP, bringing with them hundreds of militants, and established new factions. The TTP's current emir, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, and the former spokesperson Ehsan Ullah Ehsan have provided details of these differences that resulted in the splintering. See Mehsud, *Inqilab-i-Mehsud [Mehsuds Revolution]* and Salim Safi's interview on Geo News Jirga program with the former TTP spokesperson Ehsanullah Ehsan, May 12, 2017.

ae On the issue of TTP's strategic focus, it might be that the group's strategy consists of several layers or phases. While Pakistan, and specifically the tribal areas, is the immediate priority, it is possible the group will eventually expand its operational focus.

af This has become an essential part of the TTP war narrative against security forces, as evident from its public communications, including propaganda videos and leadership statements. See, for example, "The Eid greetings and an important message from the emir of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, Mufti Abu Mansur Asim Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, may Allah protect him," Umar Media, April 29, 2022. Umar Media released an exclusive video on this message to the Baloch people. See "Under Observation," third episode (video), Umar Media, January 26, 2023.

ag TTP recently launched two video series—"Under Observation" in October 2022 and "We are the Taliban?" in April 2023—and a bi-weekly podcast series, "Pasoon or Uprising," in September 2022 for this purpose. These outputs propagate the narrative that the implementation of sharia in the country will end corruption, and socioeconomic and political instability, which the TTP blames on the civil and military rulers.

ah For example, Umar Media launched an "Under Observation" political video series and a bi-weekly podcast in Urdu and Pashto last year in October and September, respectively, that serve this purpose.

the brutal terrorist attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar back in December 2014.[100] However, the official TTP spokesperson Muhammad Khurasani later disowned the attack, declaring it an impeachable offense, although he stopped short of directly denouncing Mukarram and Mohmand.[101] Khurasani stressed that the attack violated the TTP's new manifesto and guidelines forbidding attacks against mosques, seminaries, funeral places, and so forth.[102] In the aftermath of Khurasani's intervention, Mukarram and Mohmand neither commented on TTP's official statement nor retracted their earlier claim. The two commanders were senior leaders of the former Jama'at ul-Ahrar faction but now serve in key positions in the TTP after the Jama'at ul-Ahrar-TTP merger in August 2020. Highlighting their high rank, Mukarram is currently on the leadership council while Mohmand is the shadow governor for the Zhob division in the southern Balochistan province.

The attack resulted in the highest number of police force deaths in a single incident in the province.[103] Notwithstanding the group's efforts to distance itself from the claim of responsibility by two of its senior figures, the attack sows doubt about how sincere the TTP is about its new policies and guidelines and the degree of internal support the policies enjoy. In the authors' view, the official statement from the spokesperson, however, serves as an indication that the top leadership of the TTP is not willing to compromise on its reform initiatives, despite the military significance of the attack.

The Peshawar attack also provided important insights on how the Afghan Taliban positions itself in the war between the Pakistan state and the TTP. In the wake of the attack, the Taliban's interim foreign minister Emir Khan Muttaqi furiously reacted to Pakistani officials' claim that the TTP was planning further attacks from Afghan soil.[104] Muttaqi asserted that there were no terrorist sanctuaries in Afghanistan because if that were the case, other neighboring countries would have the same complaint, which he claimed was not the case. Muttaqi went on to declare the TTP as Pakistan's own internal problem and essentially told Pakistan, do not blame us for your problems but sort them out yourself.[105]

The TTP's ascendant trajectory suggests that the current leader, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, appears to have been successful in defining and implementing a new strategy based on the group's internal reform process, which was integral to its survival. As outlined above, it became clear in the negotiations with the government in 2022 that the group has limited its immediate objective to territorially controlling the tribal belt adjacent to Afghanistan. For now, this indicates that the TTP has placed limits on its insurgency in the realization that an Afghan Taliban-style victory in Pakistan is currently an unrealistic goal.   CTC

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Robin Simcox, Commissioner, U.K. Commission for Countering Extremism

By Paul Cruickshank

Robin Simcox was appointed as Interim Commissioner for the Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE) in March 2021. He was appointed as the substantive Commissioner for Countering Extremism in July 2022, for a three-year term. Before his appointment, Simcox worked for public policy centers based in the United Kingdom and the United States. Most recently, he was the founder and Director of the Counter Extremism Group, a public policy center providing non-partisan research, commentary, and policy looking at all forms of extremism. Simcox is a past contributor to CTC Sentinel.

CTC: What is the Commission for Countering Extremism, and what role does it play?

Simcox: The Commission was established in the wake of a series of terrorist attacks in the U.K. in 2017. The then Prime Minister Theresa May talked about the Commission's purpose being to help fight extremism in the same way as we have fought racism; that was the framing behind the formation of the Commission. We exist to provide the government with impartial expert advice and scrutiny on how to counter extremism in this country. I am, as Commissioner, the Home Secretary's independent advisor on extremism; and I'm supported by a small secretariat of civil servants. We do undertake external engagement, but the way I've tried to orient the Commission is to emphasize advice and scrutiny to government. That's not just with the Home Office, but it's also the Department for Education, it's the Department for Leveling Up, it's the Ministry of Justice. There's counter-extremism work going on throughout government, and I want the Commission to be able to bring its expertise to bear wherever it can. So we have very much taken on a government-facing approach over the last couple of years.

In terms of the scope, obviously there's some crossover between our work and counterterrorism concerns, but we're focused on the challenges below the counterterrorism threshold as well—segregation, community isolation, communities being cut off from one another, the normalization of intolerance and bigotry. Our thresholds would be different to that of counterterrorism police or MI5, for example.

CTC: When it comes to your overall assessment of the violent extremism landscape in the U.K. today, can you speak to how you see that across the ideological spectrum: Islamist, far-right, far-left, other forms of extremism and violent extremism?

Simcox: Islamist extremism is definitely the dominant terrorism threat here. That's been the case for a couple of decades. I don't see a convincing argument as to why that would change, certainly in the short term. Again, looking at this beyond just the CT point of view, the challenge we have with Islamism in this country isn't just about terrorism, though that's obviously the most violent manifestation. But you've got the values questions as well. The most pertinent issue is probably about freedom of speech. Because there's been a form of activism that has sought to police the limits around what can be said around religious prophets; we had death threats towards teachers who showed a depiction of Muhammad in the school classroom during a discussion of freedom of speech. It's a concern that we could be drifting as a society informally into a kind of de facto blasphemy law, which is obviously a key issue for us. Not just because we as a Commission have a stake in protecting free speech, although of course we do, but because of some of the violent acts carried out against perceived blasphemers: the attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris in January 2015 or the recent attempted assassination of Salman Rushdie or if you want to look beyond the West, look at the assassination of Salman Taseer in Pakistan[a] and the broader flow of momentum regarding limitations of free speech in Pakistan. The threats being made towards people over this issue aren't a bluff. There are those who are willing to kill, essentially, over defense of the honor of the Prophet. And so I also look at the Commission's role as being helping defend pluralism, helping defend key values, and trying to push back on the assassin's veto.

When it comes to the problem set posed by the extreme right-wing, there have been various attacks in recent years. Jo Cox MP was assassinated in 2016; we had the fire-bombing of a migrant center in Dover as well recently.[1] Various extreme right-wing groups have been proscribed, white supremacist groups like National Action.

Similarly with the Islamist challenge, there's a variety of those who sit below the terrorism threshold who operate legally but who promote unacceptable views that we clearly have a stake in wider society in rejecting and challenging: hatred of Muslims, hatred of Jews, the idea there should be a kind of ethnically homogeneous country, hatred of minorities. Again, these are all quite fringe views, but that doesn't mean we should ever tire of doing the work needed to reject them. And that's the work the Commission sets out to do, [it's] to challenge those kind of ideological excesses.

When it comes to the extreme left, my sense is it's generally under-researched, certainly in the U.K. context, within the counter-extremism field. Some single-issue groups sometimes associated with the left, like environmental groups, offer a quite particular challenge as there is significant public support for the broader goal of protecting the environment. However, that doesn't mean that scrutiny shouldn't be brought to how some of these groups are looking to achieve their aims. The level of disruptiveness caused

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a   Editor's Note: In January 2011, Punjab governor Salman Taseer was assassinated in Islamabad. Pakistan's then Interior Minister stated that one of Taseer's bodyguards had told police that he killed Taseer because of the governor's opposition to Pakistan's blasphemy law. "Punjab Governor Salman Taseer assassinated in Islamabad," BBC, January 4, 2011.

Robin Simcox

by certain groups focusing on environmental issues in the U.K. is pretty significant at the moment. And I think there's a reasonable concern that some of those tactics could get more extreme over time. These groups have got to respect the democratic process. Civic society cannot choose to turn a blind eye to the severe disruptiveness they cause just because there are some sympathies with their overall goals. We have to be consistent. Otherwise, on what grounds can you speak out against the far right, if they were to launch a campaign of disruption, once you've essentially already given a pass to groups whose aims you agree with? There is a need here for consistency that Western democracies have struggled with in the past.

To go to the other issues that I think we need to understand better that are relevant to the U.K.: pro-Khalistan sentiment in Sikh communities,[b] Hindtuva and Hindu nationalism; integrating incels who feel rejected, cut off by society, hopeless. They don't all represent pressing CT issues; they may ultimately not be CT issues at all. They don't even always fit neatly into the extremist paradigm, but they are definitely relevant community cohesion issues in the U.K. They're bubbling under the surface.

CTC: Coming back to the far-right side of the ledger, violent far-right and extreme, non-violent far-right, can you elaborate on what the concern set is in the U.K.?

Simcox: The concerns would be that there is an uptick in far-right

terrorist activity. You've seen a variety of senior CT police officers and MI5 talk about this: The majority of live investigations are on the Islamist side but you are seeing an uptick with regard to the extreme right-wing. You're seeing prosecutions of extreme right-wing terrorism cases, although it is worth remembering that some of the prosecutions (as with other ideologies) are for possession offenses as opposed to live terrorist attack planning.

But there seems little doubt there's been an overall uptick of far-right activity. I also mentioned earlier the broader cultural challenge. That relates to the idea that concepts like the Great Replacement Theory are being pushed with greater enthusiasm or that the far-right may feel more emboldened to spread poison about certain minorities than they once were.

However, there are also reasons for some optimism. The far right consistently perform very poorly in elections here. There has not been a groundswell of electoral support for the far right in this country in a way that we've seen in other parts of Europe. Long may that continue.

I know there's a lot of policy and media focus on the far right in the U.S. at the moment. We have to make sure we keep it in context when it comes to the U.K. The vast majority of terrorist attacks in this country over the past couple decades have been committed by Islamist terrorists; that's still where most live investigations from a policing and security service point of view are focused. Just because there may be an increase in this threat in the U.S. doesn't necessarily track that there will automatically be an increase in this threat in the U.K. So it's just a case of ensuring that there's an appropriate focus on the far right from a CT point of view, while organizations like mine look to challenge the ideology of the far right wherever and whenever we can.

CTC: In his February 2023 independent review of Prevent,[c] William Shawcross stressed that: "Prevent must return to its overarching objective: to stop individuals from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism." He noted that "at present, 80% of the Counter Terrorism Police network's live investigations are Islamist while 10% are Extreme Right-Wing. The fact that only 22% of Prevent referrals for the year 2020-21 concerned Islamism suggests a loss of focus and failure to identify warning signs." He also stated that "Prevent is not doing enough to counter non-violent Islamist extremism."[2] What for you are the key takeaways from the independent review?

Simcox: There's a lot in it. In terms of my big-picture takeaways from the independent review, obviously there is firstly that desire that Prevent gets back to first principles: that Prevent is a CT program first and foremost, that it's not overly focused on safeguarding, it's not just an exercise in community cohesion, and that maybe there was a bit too much emphasis on that by Prevent in the past. There's also been—and this came out in the review as well—this tendency to treat those who've been referred into the Prevent program through a lens of vulnerability. The idea that

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b   Editor's Note: The Khalistan movement advocates for the creation of an independent Sikh state (Khalistan) in Punjab. For more on how "Britain has seen a recent upsurge in activity by the Khalistan movement," see "The Security Challenge of the Khalistan Movement," European Eye on Radicalization, April 7, 2023.

c   Prevent is one of the four pillars of the United Kingdom's counterterrorism strategy (CONTEST). Prevent aims to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. Pursue aims to stop terrorist attacks. Protect seeks to strengthen protection against terrorist attack. Prepare aims to mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack. "Counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST) 2018," U.K. Home Office, August 20, 2018.

radicalization was a process that was occurring to the unwitting or easily manipulated, or that there was a lack of agency, as opposed to this being a political choice that was consciously made. I would say—and I think the independent review would agree with this—that meant that the role of ideology was sometimes underplayed.

Secondly, the significant majority of CTP [counterterrorism police] and MI5 work focuses on Islamism. Most terrorist attacks take place in this country by Islamist terrorists, but the number of referrals into Prevent of individuals where there were concerns about Islamist radicalization was—generally—pretty small. If individuals where there is an Islamist radicalization concern are, for whatever reason, not being referred into Prevent, then there's an issue. Prevent can only deal with the referrals it receives into the system. The fact that Islamist referrals into Prevent were shrinking, but the terrorism threat from Islamism remained so significant and that terrorist attacks were still taking place committed by Islamist terrorists, suggests to me that something had gone slightly askew.

The independent review is also concerned with disparity with the way Prevent was treating different ideologies. Training material on Islamism had a focus on proscribed groups: really just al-Qa`ida and Islamic State. There's nothing on some of the Islamist groups operating legally that may be contributing to violent narratives. But the scope of the training material on the extreme right-wing was really broad. It included proscribed organizations like National Action that would be analogous to al-Qa`ida and ISIS ... but then also street movements like EDL [English Defence League], football hooliganism, some of the far-right political parties. So there was almost this disparity ingrained into the way Prevent was being trained out. That's one reason why I think the understanding of Islamist ideology was imperfect and there was inconsistency in the system. So that is really important to address.

Finally, I would just say that I think Prevent has a better story to tell than its critics allow. It's been a pretty important part of our CT infrastructure for a long time now, used by other countries as a model for their own efforts at terrorism prevention, and has doubtless saved lives. But Prevent has also been subject to quite a lot of criticism and a pretty concerted attempt to undermine it by various activist groups who attempt to depict Prevent as repressive state surveillance. The independent review says the government should look to push back on this more, and I'd go along with that. I think it's probably overdue.

CTC: As you've noted previously, "the Independent Review identified several areas[d] where the CCE should play a vital role in helping Prevent"[3] including "training and upskilling government's understanding of extremist ideology."[4] You have also stated that an important part of your work will be "scrutinising the government's response to the Independent Review of Prevent's findings, to ensure its recommendations are implemented in both letter and spirit."[5] It would be great if you could elaborate on the work you will be doing in these

respects.

Simcox: I'll start with the second point in terms of ethos and spirit. We go through such fluctuations on this point. This is not the first Home Secretary, nor would it be the first Prime Minister, to say we need to get serious about dealing with the terrorism problem we face. Tony Blair said in 2005 that "the rules of the game have changed."[6] Theresa May said in 2017 that 'it's time for some difficult conversations.'[7] So there's always been a political desire to take a more forward-leaning approach to dealing with extremism and violent extremism. I see the role of the Commission as trying to ensure this time there's really some follow-through. The Home Secretary said we would need to ditch "cultural timidity" if we're going to deal with extremism effectively. I agree with that. Where we at the Commission can be helpful is helping to scrutinize how the recommendations, as put in the Prevent review, are being put into practice. The government's committed to implementing all 34. I am enthusiastic about the fact that this is a chance for a reset across the system. There are a variety of areas where there's been an insufficiently forward-leaning approach in the past; this is a chance to rectify it.

One of my first priorities when I first took the job was increasing awareness on extremism across the system. By this, I mean primarily improving the offer around training. We've done a lot of work with government at various levels getting a sense of what training is out there on extremism and what people working within Prevent and beyond need. What's their current level of knowledge and what do they want it to be? How do we fill that gap? And where is there an absence of expertise at the moment? So we have done a lot of work looking into the current training offer across the system. We've commissioned a suite of training products, most particularly focused on ideology, looking to address those gaps, and there's a few recommendations in the government response to Prevent that talks about the role the Commission is going to play.

As I say, the Home Secretary talked about cultural timidity and also institutional hesitancy. Sometimes that's not a deliberate desire to be timid or hesitant. It's often because people just don't have the expertise and the knowledge to be able to know that 'this is religious conservatism,' for example, versus 'this is a manifestation of ideological extremism.'

So through the work that the Commission does on training, what we're trying to do is empower those in Prevent and beyond, those across government who have a stake in this issue, to give them greater confidence about being able to go about their day-to-day job. It's where I hope we add value as an organization in terms of having that specific expertise that some parts of government may not have at present.

CTC: We've touched on this already, but you have noted that "individuals or groups that do not plot acts of terrorism can still create permissive environments for the spread of extremist ideologies."[8] What is being done and what needs to be done to address this challenge? How do you see the link between non-violent extremism and violent extremism?

Simcox: I'm surprised sometimes how contentious the link between non-violent extremism and violent extremism still is. Take Samuel Paty, who is beheaded in Paris for blasphemy, essentially, showing an image of Mohammed in [his] class. He's murdered by

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d   For example, the Independent Review called for the "Commission for Countering Extremism to review all Prevent advisory boards and panels to ensure membership includes necessary, credible and impartial expertise on extremist ideology. ... The Commission for Countering Extremism should oversee Prevent products informed by consultation with advisory boards, such as those used to identify and assess risk." "Independent Review of Prevent By William Shawcross CVO," U.K. Home Office, February 2023, p. 160.

an Islamist terrorist, but the Islamist terrorist had picked up on a social media campaign that had been launched against Paty by some local community activists. So one individual was culpable for Samuel Paty's murder, but I'd argue there was a wider ecosystem that essentially painted the target on Paty's back prior to his murder.

I believe that those who sit below the thresholds of counterterrorism investigations can still create a permissive environment in which ideologies that inform terrorist behavior incubate. Then you have academics like Noémie Bouhana at UCL who talk about 'extremism-enabling environments' and emphasize the importance of geographical location.[9]

Take another example: ISIS recruitment. It's inconceivable to me that the tens of thousands of recruits ISIS drew in, including those from Western Europe, were all drawn in by online propaganda (as effective as I know the propaganda was and as 'smart' as some of it was). There was also a socialization into extremist beliefs by the permissive environments in which they lived. Again, look at some of the work by Hugo Micheron, for example, who identifies certain key hubs where ISIS recruited from—very, very specific locations across Europe.[10] This is where we get to it not being so much a radicalization problem as a socialization problem.

Building upon this point, in the U.K. we've had groups and individuals who have for many years relentlessly, publicly, promoted this idea that creating a caliphate is a religious obligation. This has been an argument that has sat below the terrorism threshold. I would say rightly; I don't think they should be criminalized. However, it seems unlikely to me that there would be no connection to this messaging whatsoever and 1,000-odd British citizens and residents leaving this country to travel to a caliphate when it emerges in Syria and Iraq.

The Prevent Review talked about the need for the government to do more on this; it's exactly where the CCE sits because we are not an operational body in terms of CT. We are designed to look at those knotty issues that fall below the CT threshold. This is a vital piece of the jigsaw, and maybe one that more could be done on than has been in the past. But of course, you can imagine the challenges. You're dealing with organizations and people that aren't breaking the law, that have a right to freedom of speech, but are championing all sorts of concepts that fundamentally oppose some key values we have in this country. That is what makes it such a challenging issue to take on.

CTC: You previously spent a lot of time researching and analyzing CT challenges, including in the pages of *CTC Sentinel*. How has this helped you in your new role?

Simcox: Perspective and context would be the main things because the challenges that I look at in 2023 aren't so unrecognizable from what we were facing more broadly 20 years ago. There are obviously differences; there are nuances. But a lot of the challenges are still the same. So I think having that perspective can help you not to overreact to certain issues. Yet awful atrocities like the November 2015 Paris attacks and the 2017 Manchester attack also remind you why it's so important to remain engaged in this area and to get it right.

Having a broader view informed by experiences of researching and analyzing this area can also guide your approach to policy work. Most of my work has previously focused on Islamism, but it also helps inform my understanding of other forms of

> "We are designed to look at those knotty issues that fall below the CT threshold. This is a vital piece of the jigsaw, and maybe one that more could be done on than has been in the past. But of course, you can imagine the challenges. You're dealing with organizations and people that aren't breaking the law, that have a right to freedom of speech, but are championing all sorts of concepts that fundamentally oppose some key values we have in this country. That is what makes it such a challenging issue to take on."

extremism. Islamism in many ways has a very apocalyptic vision. White supremacist groups are similarly apocalyptic at times: they are talking about the extinction of the white race, the Great Replacement Theory. They are not two sides of the same coin—I think that's an overly reductionist way to view two very specific and distinct ideologies—but they echo each other at times.

CTC: In the July 2020 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, you co-authored an article looking at the threat posed by Europe's jihadi prisoners and prison leavers.[11] It's been a big concern. What is your updated assessment of this problem set in the U.K.? What for you are the lessons learned in addressing this particular problem set? These are people who have been convicted of terrorism offenses, in jail, getting out of jail, and potentially posing a threat.

Simcox: It's definitely still an issue. Some of the most recent Islamist terrorist attacks in the U.K. were committed by prisoners who were either still in custody—so attacks in the prison itself—or had been recently released.[12] And there's been some really good work done on this recently. The Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Jonathan Hall, had a report called "Terrorism in Prisons" that came out last year[13] that had some very constructive ways of framing terrorist risk behavior so that prison staff were able to look out for key signs and understand certain key indicators. I mentioned the research of Hugo Micheron earlier. Some of his work on how to frame the jihadi experience in prison I think is really important because he talks about how jihadist activity behind bars isn't necessarily just focused on violence or planning attacks, but strengthening networks, making new contacts, deepening their faith, deepening their dedication.[14] That's an example of research that definitely helped shape my thinking about how to conceptualize that problem.

The Independent Review [of Prevent] also particularly drew out the problem of those who may appear cordial, may appear compliant,

but still pose a terrorism risk. Obviously, the case of Usman Khan [who carried out an attack at] Fishmongers' Hall [in 2019] has been very influential in shaping the current thinking in the U.K. There was an inquest[15] into this terrorist attack, which was really revealing in terms of some of the signs that were missed, things that were overlooked, maybe there had been an overly optimistic view of the extent to which Khan changed his views and deradicalized. As some of the work we looked at for the *CTC Sentinel* article and Thomas Renard's work[16] previously demonstrated, there isn't a super high percentage of convicted Islamist terrorists relapsing, but it's really high impact when they do. And so I understand why there's been such focus on it across government.

CTC: In the March 2021 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, Douglas Weeks, a researcher who has focused on counter-radicalization efforts in the U.K., argued that "there is too much pessimism over deradicalization efforts [of terrorist offenders]. While there are many challenges in changing the mindset of terrorist offenders, some mentors have employed approaches that have proven effective in rehabilitating a not insignificant number of terrorist offenders and helped reduce the overall threat."[17] What can the government do to empower those pursuing effective approaches?

Simcox: I don't know whether there's too much pessimism. DDP, the Desistance and Disengagement Programme part of Prevent, is quite new, and so I think there's still some analysis that needs to be done about its effectiveness. We as a society are all invested in the success of this because the failures are really visible. The failures look like Usman Khan. While I would stress the importance of getting this piece of work right, what that looks like depends on your objective. Is what we're really looking for here the desistance part (changing people's behavior) or is it disengagement (changing people's mindsets and beliefs)? Is it both?

The desistance part is potentially easier to deal with as most people who leave prison after committing a terrorism offence don't go on to commit another one. But the office I sit in means inevitably I am interested in the mindset question. I am interested in challenging ideological extremism as we aren't purely a CT-focused body. I am also aware that deradicalization is a monumentally difficult task. With some, it will be impossible. There will be failures again in the future, inevitably. Deradicalization of terrorism offenders is never going to be foolproof. It's never going to be a silver bullet.

Yet, I see some fantastically qualified, dedicated people who devote their time to dealing with this, so that is a cause for optimism. And it's a worthwhile pursuit because we have to do all we can to avoid another Usman Khan, another Sudesh Amman,[18] and any other variety of previously convicted terrorists who've gone on to commit further attacks upon release.

CTC: You have stressed that a key part of CCE's mission set is "bringing together practitioners, academics, experts and policy leads to help ensure a thorough understanding of the current extremism landscape and horizon scanning for any emerging trends" and that "engagement helps the CCE to develop our knowledge of emerging trends, research and evidence gaps."[19] It would be great if you could elaborate on these efforts. What for you are the lessons learned on making sure government

"There can be an academic perception that government isn't always guided by the best evidence; government can get frustrated that academics don't package their work in a super digestible way or policy recommendations are not always realistic or feasible. I can see how the policy world and academic world talk past each other at times. I would like to do all we can to lessen that because the Commission does have a foot in both of those worlds."

officials have access to the best independent research and analysis? What for you are the lessons learned on how the research community can carry out research helpful to creating good public policy?

Simcox: I'm aware frustration can exist on both sides. A lot of experience and expertise lies outside of government but obviously the decision-makers are all within it. There can be an academic perception that government isn't always guided by the best evidence; government can get frustrated that academics don't package their work in a super digestible way or policy recommendations are not always realistic or feasible.

I can see how the policy world and academic world talk past each other at times. I would like to do all we can to lessen that because the Commission does have a foot in both of those worlds and government needs help on loads of these knotty issues.

The Commission operates the Academic-Practitioner Counter Extremism Network (APCEN), which is our attempt to bring together academia and government/policy folks in the same forum to discuss emerging trends, identify knowledge gaps, foster collaboration, get them talking to each other more. Putting funding questions aside for a second, which I know brings its own complications for both sides, for academics to be policy-relevant and influential they need to know what the top priorities for government are so [that] their work isn't operating in a vacuum. What current workstreams are going on across departments? Where are the knowledge gaps? How can academic expertise go about filling them?

Government needs to know who can deliver the work, who can do it credibly, who can bring the expertise, who can do it on time, and who can do it within budget. So we as a Commission are committed to trying to connect academia with policy and we definitely want to support research which contributes to a sophisticated understanding of the extremism landscape. It's helpful to government and helpful to wider society in improving our collective understanding.

CTC: You have highlighted the dangers of "giving extremists

legitimacy through funding or engagement."[20] It is obviously also important to carry out outreach to communities vulnerable to radicalization and to empower voices within those communities working to counter extremism. Talk us through how see this issue. Is enough being done by U.K. authorities to understand, identify, and empower such voices?

Simcox: I would argue that we actually empower those working to counter extremism when we elevate those who share core values, and do not bolster those who promote division, who promote segregation, who promote sectarianism.

So one of the key areas of work which we are engaged in at the Commission is helping to improve how government engages; to make that engagement more strategic; to weigh up risk and reward when considering why engagement is taking place. Is government talking to the right people? Is there too much emphasis on gatekeeper groups? Are we just engaging with certain groups because that's just who we've always engaged with? Is fresh thinking being brought to ensure that you get the most rounded and accurate view about what's going on in different communities across this country as possible?

So the aim with that is obviously to improve community engagement and improve the process. It's also designed to reduce potential risk around government funding or engaging with individuals and groups with extremism concern. This is hardly new. The review of Prevent by Lord Carlile in 2011[21] talked about government funding and engaging with extremist groups. The [recently published] Independent Review of Prevent that comes out over 10 years later makes the same point. I think back to the debates over whether the state should be empowering certain groups—legacy Muslim Brotherhood groups—as a bulwark against al-Qa`ida, for example, which was a hot debate in the U.K. in the post-7/7 landscape.

What we, as the Commission, are keen to do is encourage the government to take a more strategic approach to engagement, and this goes beyond Muslim communities. This is about communities up and down the country. It's about making sure the government talks to people as citizens, not treating them in religious blocs or ethnic blocs. It's something that government recognizes is a problem. It's keen to act upon it, and obviously, we as a Commission are keen to advise and scrutinize and help them do it in the most effective way possible.   CTC

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Journey to Idlib: An Interview with Wassim Nasr, Journalist, France24

By Paul Cruickshank

Wassim Nasr is a French journalist who has been monitoring jihadi groups for more than a decade for the French news outlet France24 in French, English, and Arabic. He has conducted multiple investigations and interviews in this regard. He is the author of État islamique, le fait accompli *(2016). He has also been a contributor to CTC Sentinel. Twitter: @SimNasr*

Editor's Note: Between April 29 and May 2, 2023, Wassim Nasr traveled to the Idlib Province of Syria on a reporting assignment for French public broadcaster France24. During his time there, he spoke to senior figures within Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), including the group's leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani and senior ideologue Abu Mariya al-Qahtani. His reporting from Idlib was broadcast and published by France24 on May 11.[1]

CTC: How did this trip come together?

Nasr: I started working on this [visit] in 2020. And it could have happened then, but there was the murder of a French teacher who was beheaded in October 2020, Samuel Paty. His killer, a Frenchman of Chechen origin, had some contacts with a Tajik fighter in the ranks of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) at the time.[2] As you can imagine, things were halted from our side because France24 didn't want to send me there because of this issue. The group told me at the time that it had nothing to do with the attack. And this is when [in early 2021] PBS got the interview of al-Julani.[3]

So, by the autumn of 2020, contacts were already seriously established in order to make a trip to Idlib. We kept talking, and then there was an opportunity to go there. So I had to, as you can imagine, organize things with the Turkish side and organize things with HTS, and such preparations always take a long time. But then the 'go' comes fast, and you have to be fast. And so I grabbed the chance to go there.

I did not request to meet al-Julani ahead of time. What interested me intellectually and as someone following these issues for 10 years was the shift that I was seeing from afar and through pieces that were written by Aaron Zelin in *CTC Sentinel*[4] and by the International Crisis Group on the evolving situation in Idlib, by contacts I have with people there. I wanted to see for myself what was happening. Not the military effort or foreign fighters, but the administration of the territory, justice, education, hospitals, prisons. At the same time, we were witnessing a shift in al-Julani's speech, a shift in Abu Maria al-Qahtani's speech—with a new emphasis put on fighting the Islamic State, fighting al-Qa`ida, etc., etc.

At first, the idea was to bring a camera, but HTS were very wary. They preferred that I talk with them off camera, as it was a first visit.

CTC: How did you get into Idlib from Turkey?

Nasr: I went through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, which is held actually by the Turks on both sides. There is a military road for Turkish military, etc. Going through this was easy because they knew I was coming. I didn't just show up on the border with my French passport and say, 'Let me in.' So it was quite smooth.

Turkish humanitarian relief workers drove me by van to the HTS side. I was the only one crossing the border. The HTS border people said, 'What are you doing here?' I explained in Arabic, and within a minute, the media guys from the Salvation Government that governs HTS-controlled areas of Idlib greeted me and escorted me to their media office. They did not have guns and were dressed in civilian attire. I think that was done on purpose. During my entire stay, I didn't see people with Afghani outfits. I hardly even saw people with military outfits. After spending time in the media office, we went to lunch at a restaurant called Disneyland. We were joined by a personality from the media office of HTS, and the talk became more in-depth.

Then we drove through a couple of checkpoints to get into the city of Idlib, and one thing that really struck me was the flags of the Syrian revolution were fluttering everywhere and that no one was dressed in jihadi attire. Fighters were not present. Entering the city, there was only one classic white Islamic flag with the Shahada written in black. This is different to how you might imagine things looking given HTS' predecessor organization Jabhat al-Nusra was affiliated with al-Qa`ida and jihadi groups have tended to view nationalist symbols as unacceptable. My first thought was 'it's the Potemkin thing.' They're showing me what they want me to see. But as I toured the city and its various neighborhoods, it became clear to me that this display was not just for my benefit. At the end of the day, I was just a journalist, without a television camera. The same spectacle greeted us in all the towns we visited: Sarmada, Dana, Jisr al-Chughur, Ariha, Atmeh, Harem, all over the place. Other than at checkpoints, I saw only one guy on a bike with a Kalashnikov.

I saw men smoking. Women wore either the niqab or just a hijab. There's mixing between men and women in shops and Idlib's many malls and markets. There was separation of men and women in all the restaurants and cafes I went to. I talked to students there that were preparing for their exams. I saw women. I didn't talk to them, but I saw female students as well. Those are interesting indicators.

I asked my escorts about the absence of fighters. They told me, 'We convinced people that there shouldn't be any armed presence in the streets. Those who want to fight, go to the frontlines rather than remaining among civilians in the streets and the shops.' A lot of them told me, 'We don't understand why in the West the army is in the streets. It scares people. Our way to reassure people is not to have military presence in towns and on the streets and in the markets.'

CTC: What freedom of movement and access did you have while you were there?

Wassim Nasr

Nasr: I was always with the representative from the media of the Salvation Government. He didn't tell me, 'You can do this. You can't do that' or tell people what to tell me. But I'm in an atmosphere where you have to be aware of your environment, especially not to put in difficulty the people you talk to. I talked to people in the streets. I talked to people in the camps. I talked to people in restaurants and shops.

CTC: How did you end up meeting al-Julani?

Nasr: We quickly decided to go to Harem on the border with Turkey, from where you can see a very old beautiful medieval citadel, and I guess that all the way there, they were testing me—see what I'm going to ask for, am I going to be very pushy, do I know my stuff, am I just looking for a scoop. Before setting off for Syria, I had not asked to see al-Julani, but I had made it clear I wanted to speak to people who were able to talk on behalf of HTS in an official capacity. During this time, I think my escorts were assessing whether they should allow me to meet al-Julani.

The second night, they called me and said, 'We're going to take you for tea.' I understood that I was going to see someone prominent. On the way, they were like, 'OK, you have to leave your phones in this car. We'll leave this car in this neighborhood, and we'll go to another neighborhood.' And so at that point, I knew I was going to meet Julani because there were no security measures of this kind previously. The whole time up till that point, I had my phone on me; they never asked me to even turn it off.

CTC: What's going through your head at this point?

Nasr: I sensed the mood change. They got very serious. I was quite OK with it because I knew that I didn't have a camera. I'm alone, which is actually very good because if you have someone else with you who doesn't speak the language who's holding the camera, you

have to monitor them. I wasn't stressed at all. They, however, were stressed because they were taking me to see the boss after having, I guess, vouched for me. So they were more stressed than me because if I'm not up to it, they're going to be blamed.

We arrived at a residential area in the city of Idlib, where I was greeted by one of his people who said, 'We are not fond of talking to experts in global jihad,' but the conversation took a normal path afterwards. My conversation with al-Julani was off the record but afterwards they said I could state that I saw him.

I talked for an hour and a half with al-Julani. The spirit of what he said, if you want to know, is available publicly, most of it, including in his latest public announcement at Eid that he made with prominent figures and representatives from Idlib.[a] So it was really open, and I guess it was open because he knew he wasn't being filmed and he understood that I know my stuff.

CTC: What was your impression of al-Julani?

Nasr: Sharp. I don't know if it was because of the absence of the camera, but he was straightforward. At the beginning, of course, he also tested me. We ended up talking about the era of 2013, 2014. He knew that I've been following all these issues since then, so his attitude changed a little bit. He was really straightforward. He was dressed as a civilian: jeans and a black shirt, [Hugo] Boss. I don't know it's a fake or a real one, but it was a black Boss shirt with the logo in white. Very short hair. There was one person with us at the beginning, and then we were left one to one. So even the people who were with me at the beginning stayed away. And so it was really an open discussion. The impression he made is that he knows what he wants, and he knows that he has weaknesses, but also that he has some cards that he can play—regarding, for example, Ankara and Damascus.

As I think he's made clear on other occasions, he doesn't draw a line between the fighting that is going on in Syria with Russia and the regime in Syria and the fighting ongoing in Ukraine and views both as the product of Russia's unchecked aggression in the years after 2014-2015. He and his group are no longer committed to whatever is meant by international jihad, that was crystal clear; they consider that it "only brought destruction and failure to their communities."

CTC: So, without going into specifics of what he said, he made very clear during the time he spent with you that his group has moved completely away from global jihad?

Nasr: Absolutely. Not only him. Later during my trip, I also met [HTS senior ideologue] Abu Maria al-Qahtani, and he made the same thing clear to me on the record. And that's intellectually really one of the things that pushed me to go there. Because it's a unique development. You have a core jihadi group with core leaders

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a   Editor's Note: Among various things Abu Muhammad al-Julani stressed in a Q&A released to mark the Eid al-Fitr celebration at the end of Ramadan in April 2023 was that, when it came to implementing sharia, it should not be a case of "a man with a stick running behind people." He also stated: "We do not want to impose anything that is not commonly agreed upon to be haram [forbidden]." Abu Muhammad al-Julani et al., "Eid Greetings to the representatives and working forces in the liberated areas," Amjad (HTS media outlet), circa April 21, 2023 (translation by Wassim Nasr).

saying, 'OK, we don't want anything to do with international jihad anymore.' This is unique. It's never happened before.

CTC: Talk to us about your interview with Abu Maria al-Qahtani.

Nasr: I was the first journalist to meet him, ever. He had not even been interviewed by an Arab journalist before. I met him at another location the day before I left. He came to me. There were again security measures. A car came, checked the place, then another car came, and he was in the second car.

He is in charge, in an unofficial way, of the fight against Islamic State and al-Qa`ida. He's the man. He was very clear. He said, 'We are preventing our youth from joining the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida. Not only by force, but also by convincing them and by showing them that we have a system which is viable and able to work.' You can't get clearer than this, and actually I was surprised not only that he said it but that he also told me, 'You can say it on record. You can say that you saw me, too.' I wasn't expecting this actually, but he insisted on it, like 'I have a message to get through.'

CTC: What was your impression of al-Qahtani?

Nasr: He's tall. He's a big guy. You realize that with age, he understood things. He was like, 'We made mistakes. We have been living in wars for decades. I spent my youth in war, and now we are looking for something else. We don't want to fight the West. We even want to fight those who want to target the West from our area. Help us out.' That was his message.

But of course, we're not talking about democratic and liberal parties. They're still very conservative. They are still Islamist. But they are less radical than the Taliban, for example, to make a comparison. Women go to school, women drive, you see people smoking in the street. Of course, they far from espouse democratic values or those of a liberal free society, but it's a shift. And as you know, when you have radical groups, when you see a shift, you have to assess it and take it into consideration. Otherwise, the most radical in the group will have the heaviest weight. Even in their ranks, you see that, for example, on the issue of Christians, there is still resistance inside the group: What should be done? What shouldn't be done? How far can the group go in accommodating minorities? And each step they take towards treating minorities better is very costly for them in terms of creating internal criticism.

CTC: Did al-Qahtani elaborate on his August 2022 call for al-Qa`ida to be dissolved?[b]

Nasr: He said, 'I called in the open'—the open for them, among their groups—'for the dissolution.' He told me, 'I even reached out

> "We're not talking about people who made defections on a low-ranking level saying, 'Oh no, al-Qa`ida was bad.' We're talking about commanders such as Julani and Qahtani who had responsibilities in the Islamic State of Iraq and in ... one of the most powerful branches of al-Qa`ida, and today, they are saying, 'That was a mistake.'"

to al-Qa`ida in Yemen and told them you have to stop.' And he told me, 'Especially because now if the head of al-Qa`ida is Saif al-`Adl in Iran, what's the point? We don't want our Sunni organization to be led by Iran, so there's no point in it.'[c] He told me to go public with this.

CTC: This is a remarkable turnaround because up until 2016, HTS' predecessor group Jabhat al-Nusra was a very powerful part of al-Qa`ida.[5] Now HTS is presenting itself as involved in counterterrorism. As Aaron Zelin has documented in *CTC Sentinel*, the group has quite aggressively gone after the Islamic State in Idlib.[6]

Nasr: Yes. We can think, 'OK, it's just to please the Western public.' But that's what is really being said there on the ground and not just by the top leaders including Abu Maria Qahtani. Others that I spoke to made me understand that they came to the conclusion that the al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State projects "aren't viable projects." So they have to find something else—more political, more in coherence with the aspirations of the populations. And this is also why it was interesting for me to go there because it could be a way or a path that could be taken in other areas of conflict, like the Sahel, for example. The interesting thing is that it's all new. We don't know where it's going to go. And this is why it's very interesting and especially coming from people who had high responsibilities. We're not talking about people who made defections on a low-ranking level saying, 'Oh no, al-Qa`ida was bad.' We're talking about commanders such as Julani and Qahtani who had responsibilities in the Islamic State of Iraq and in—as you said—one of the most

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b   As documented by the researcher Cole Bunzel in August 2022, "Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, a senior leader in Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), delivered a controversial message on his Telegram channel. The time had come, he wrote, for al-Qaida's branches to shut the organization down. After the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri on July 31, 2022, and with the question of succession complicated by the leading candidate's presence in Iran, this was the best path forward. He urged the affiliates to consider an alternative model of jihadism, one that embraces cooperation with regional states as part of a strategy of confronting 'the Iranian project' in the Middle East." Cole Bunzel, "Dissolve al-Qaida": The Advice of Abu Mariya al-Qahtani," Jihadica, August 24, 2022.

c   Editor's Note: Abu Mariya al-Qahtani reiterated this in a message he subsequently posted on Telegram on May 14, 2023. In this message, he stated: "Some people blame me because of the words I said a month ago about the news of Saif al-`Adl assuming leadership of al-Qa`ida, for I had said that he was a prisoner in Iran, how could he communicate with the branches, learn the secrets of the [battle] fields, hold the reins of affairs, and command, knowing that his condition is as we know? ... I again direct my call to the [al-Qa`ida] branches to prioritize the interest of the umma, which is engaged in its battle with the Safavids in more than one arena, and to disengage from their association with al-Qa`ida [as] Saif al-`Adl has become the one who runs it while he is in captivity under the authority of the Revolutionary Guards. He is unable - at minimum - to declare everything he believes in, not to mention giving orders that might be detrimental to the interests of the Iranians." Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, "A Message to the Sane People Regarding Disengagement from al-Qa`ida," Telegram, May 14, 2023.

Idlib town with Islamist and revolutionary flags in view (Wassim Nasr)

powerful branches of al-Qa`ida, and today, they are saying, 'That was a mistake.'

CTC: Did any of the HTS figures you spoke to bring up or acknowledge al-Zawahiri's death?

Nasr: No, not directly, but, as I told you, Qahtani said, 'If today, Saif al-`Adl is leading al-Qa`ida from Iran,' which is kind of acknowledging.

And Qahtani said one thing about the Shi`a, too. He said, 'We don't have anything against the Shi`a or the minorities, but we are against Iran and Russia, etc., etc.'

CTC: But of course, it is well documented that historically the jihadis in Syria, including Jabhat al-Nusra, were responsible for a lot of atrocities and abuses, including of a sectarian nature over the years.[d] It seems the message they were trying to give

to you was that they are trying to turn a new page and moving away from that.

Nasr: Yes. That's what I saw. The issue of minorities and the Christians was one area I wanted to bring up with them. I had heard they were returning some homes in Idlib to Christians, and I wanted to see if it was for real.[e] One day, I was taken to visit with the Christian community in the village of Yacubiyeh. I was the first foreign person and journalist to enter the village in 12 years. I attended a meeting at the reception room of the village church attended by HTS representatives and about 15 elderly Christians from three villages in the area. I quickly understood that the meeting was to talk about the local Christians getting back some of the homes and their lands that are occupied by foreign jihadists and lands that were confiscated by the Nusra Front and even HTS back in 2018. There was a pretty frank exchange of views. One thing that struck me was that when I entered the church, I saw Muslim workers renovating the church. This was meaningful because HTS would not let Muslim villagers come and work in it unless they were okay with the Christians renovating their church.

CTC: So you felt then that this wasn't just being put on as a show for you, that there is a genuine change here?

Nasr: When we left the church, we went to a monastery, Saint

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d   According to the U.S. State Department, "nonstate actors, including a number of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United States and other governments, such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN, also known as al-Nusra Front), targeted Shia, Alawites, Christians, and other religious minorities, as well as other Sunnis, with indiscriminate attacks as well as killings, kidnappings, physical mistreatment, and arrests in the areas of the country under their control … ISIS required Christians to convert, flee, pay a special tax, or face execution. It destroyed churches, Shia shrines, and other religious heritage sites. ISIS used its own police force, court system, and revised school curriculum to enforce and spread its interpretation of Islam. JAN was responsible for similar executions and punishments, though the number of victims appeared much smaller than the number of ISIS victims. JAN continued to implement policies of forced Islamization in minority communities under its control, particularly among the Druze in Idlib." "2016 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, U.S. State Department," U.S. Department of State, n.d.

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e   Editor's Note: Nasr reported for France24 that "HTS claims it has launched a process to return confiscated property to Christians who come forward 'with the exception of those linked to the Syrian regime … So far, several houses have been returned to their rightful owners, some by force." Wassim Nasr, "Reporter's notebook: Idlib, the last Islamist rebel bastion in Syria," France24, May 11, 2023.

Joseph Monastery. The local Christians showed me what they are repairing in the wake of the February 2023 earthquake. If HTS wanted to prevent this, they could have. Because as a jihadi group, you are not allowed to restore and to repair churches when they get destroyed. You are not allowed. I even saw Christian charity; I saw tens of Muslims who were hit by the earthquake that were living in the monastery. Despite all the things that they went through, those Christians are still helping out.

One of the Christians I met told me, "The situation is certainly delicate for us Christians, but it's been improving for the past two years." In my reporting for France24, I noted that the fact that the situation has improved has led some to try to bring their family members back to the area.[7]

CTC: When you're reporting something like this, as a journalist and as a media organization, you have to think very carefully about how you approach it from an editorial point of view. Clearly, you're meeting a group that has a particular agenda and wants to present a certain face to the world. Clearly this is a group with an extremely problematic back-story in terms of their linkages to a global terror organization responsible for so much murder and mayhem around the world. How did you think through these challenges as you reported this story out for France24?

Nasr: As I always do, by just doing my job properly and by telling the whole story. Each time I talked about them, I said who al-Julani was, what's his history, who sent him. Among those not tracking these issues closely, few people are aware that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sent him to Syria early on during the Syrian civil war.[f] I reminded our readers and viewers when I was writing the piece for France24 and was talking on TV, that the people who burned the churches were Jabhat al-Nusra, headed by al-Julani. And I said that more than one time, so people can still follow the link. He was in charge when those things happened. Today, if he says that there's been a change, and that it was a chaotic period, OK, but it doesn't erase what happened.

The effort made by al-Julani today is: 'We're going to go back to our Syrian heritage.' He said, 'Christians are here [for] more than 1,000 years. This is your land'—a declaration he made in July 2022 during a meeting with Christian representatives. Of course, he's using minorities as a card. But when you talk to them, to the Christians, they say, 'We are not totally free, but in the last two years, things have been getting better.' They told me that three years ago, they had to say mass secretly but now they say mass every day. However, it should be noted that they cannot ring church bells or put crosses on buildings.

To go back to your question of how I work on it as a journalist, what interests me intellectually is that it appears to be an historic shift. But I don't know where it's going. Time will tell if it endures and how truly committed they are.

CTC: That's the big question, right? Can we, as analysts, trust

> **"I think they have an interest in going away from global jihad. A real interest, in order to govern and to maintain their presence in this region. The fact is that they are fighting al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. The fact is they are not plotting attacks against the West themselves from Idlib. The fact is they are distancing themselves in public and in private from this ideology ... they seem to understand that the global jihad is not a viable way of governance."**

their words, that they're really, truly distancing themselves from global jihad and going in a new direction, and obviously reporting like this is very important for trying to figure out those kind of questions.

Nasr: I think they have an interest in going away from global jihad. A real interest, in order to govern and to maintain their presence in this region. The fact is that they are fighting al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. The fact is they are not plotting attacks against the West themselves from Idlib. The fact is they are distancing themselves in public and in private from this ideology. Qahtani told me, 'Our jihad is still real, but our jihad is against the Russians and the Syrian regime to free Syria. Nothing more.' So they seem to understand that the global jihad is not a viable way of governance. So we have to assess this and see where it will go. At the end of the day, they are labeled as terrorists, but they are not targeted. There's a reason for that.

CTC: The United States is offering a reward of up to $10 million for information on al-Julani.[8] HTS is designated by the United States as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO).[g] Does HTS have any hope or wish to get removed from some of these designations?

Nasr: Yes. I was there when Abu Ahmad Zakour was designated.[9] He is the second to Qahtani actually in the fight against the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida. And Qahtani told me, 'I don't understand why the Americans and the Turks designated Abu Ahmed Zakour. We are fighting the Islamic State. We are fighting al-Qa`ida. Why are you putting obstacles for us? This is a political scam because they don't want us to unite the northern free area of Syria, etc., etc.' He

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f   Editor's Note: In his report for France24, Nasr wrote: "In 2012, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, then-leader of the Islamic State group of Iraq who would later head the IS group, assigned Joulani to Syria along with some of his men to benefit from the contacts and networks his group already had in the country and form a sub-branch called the al-Nusra Front." Nasr.

g   In May 2018, the U.S. State Department "amended the designation of al-Nusrah Front — an al-Qa'ida affiliate in Syria — to include Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other aliases. These aliases [were] added to al-Nusrah Front's designations as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)." "Amendments to the Terrorist Designations of al-Nusrah Front, Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, May 31, 2018.

was affected and emotional about it.

CTC: During your trip, what was the biggest thing that you learned, and what was the biggest thing that surprised you?

Nasr: As I've already noted, the biggest thing that surprised me was the absence of military presence and the presence of fairly vibrant economic activity really. I really wasn't expecting this. That's the thing that surprised me the most. What I learned is that they are quite organized, and they are trying really to create a civil administration.

For example, when it comes to checkpoints, they have a small administration for checkpoints—police, the military branch. So they are really trying to make something from nothing, which means they understood something. In the administration of the Salvation Government, it's mostly civilians. They understood that they have to gain the support of the civilians and the population as the last hope for the revolution. Insurgencies, when they try to, they can begin to settle. It tends to be the case that it's when they govern that they get less radical.

The Salvation government figures I spoke to told me: 'We don't want money. We need the international community to back us politically and to back us with people who have skills to help us build this administration. We are not rebuilding. We're building from zero.'

CTC: What do they want to build? What kind of state? What's their goal as articulated to you and your sense of their ambitions?

Nasr: They want to build a modern Islamist state. They have ministries already, but these offices are small and sometimes empty. There's a will to do something. History is made with moments like this.

Also what I understood from talking with them is that it is difficult also for them to implement all those decisions regarding the requirement for foreign fighters to leave global jihad, accept HTS' legal and military authority, all operate under HTS' banner, as well as decisions regarding getting away from al-Qa`ida, regarding fighting the Islamic State. It is not just showing off for the West to get some money. It is very costly for them internally. So the decision the international community needs to make is, should it help this model to survive or not? That's the thing. At the same time, it's such a mess in Idlib. Who wants to handle the mess? You have four and a half million people there, including one and half million people displaced by force. Who's going to handle them? Turkey? No. Assad? No. France? No. You have foreign fighters. Who's going to handle that? This is a real question, and it's a card in HTS' hand because they are willing to handle these challenges.

CTC: And I guess there's almost like an implicit threat that if they don't handle it, then there could be significant refugee flows into Turkey and into Europe even.

Nasr: Yes. This is why they are being tolerated by Turkey.

CTC: Are they open about holding that card up and saying this is a card that we can play?

> "What I saw is the beginning or the premises of a third path, another path that could be useful for the international community to try implement or to build upon in other places. These days, HTS is less radical than the Taliban ... and they might have a more viable model. Of course, again it's important to stress, it's authoritarian; it's not liberal ... But when you have prominent commanders like this who were in the ranks of the Islamic State of Iraq, al-Qa`ida making this kind of shift publicly, people will look at them and say, 'If those people are saying it was a mistake, maybe we should do things another way.'"

Nasr: No, but it's obvious. Why do you think the Turks are tolerating them? Inside the Turkish administrations, there are people who are tolerant with them and people who are against them, because the Turks realize that HTS is handling the issue. And they are handling the issue better than the factions that are on Turkish payroll in other areas. Still HTS is still a designated terrorist group by Turkey.

CTC: There's been a lot of talk about a potential rapprochement between Damascus and Ankara.[10] Did the HTS leaders you met talk about the geopolitical aspect, the possibility that if a deal is eventually reached between them, Turkey may pull back from northwest Syria and the regime of Bashar al Assad might try to move in?

Nasr: We didn't talk about it clearly. I asked the question to Julani, but he didn't answer clearly. And this is how I understood what I just told you, that the power cards that they have are the refugees and the foreign fighters.[h] He didn't answer it clearly, but I came out with this conclusion. You have those two cards actually that, even if

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h   Editor's Note: In his reporting for France24, Nasr recounted that "both the Islamist and Syrian representatives I met on the ground said it would be difficult 'for Ankara, Moscow and Damascus to impose an agreement that has been negotiated without the HTS.' If they did, it would be perceived as a diktat against not only their interests, but those of the revolution. The HTS holds several strategic cards it can use if it needs to, and still considers itself in a position of strength in its commanding position. One of the most precious cards it holds is the threat of hostilities resuming, which would send a flood of refugees to Turkey — where they are less and less welcome — and in the longer term, potentially also to Europe. Such a surge of refugees would not only consist of civilians but also of local and foreign jihadists, who the HTS up until now has somehow managed to control and contain. Several dozen of the jihadists are French nationals." Nasr.

you don't play them, they're going to play by themselves. If there's a deal between Damascus and Ankara or a big military operation, people are just going to go to Turkey and even maybe to Europe.

CTC: Do you see any parallel with what Hamas have put together in Gaza and what they're trying to do?

Nasr: Yes. I even told them, 'OK, you are making some kind of a Hamas. Without accusing you of being like Hamas, but it's similar.' And actually, it is. It is maybe the way for them to attract human skills in their ranks, Syrians who don't want to be involved with the jihadi movement and don't want to be labeled as working with the jihadi movement.

CTC: When you asked them whether they are aspiring to be like Hamas, what was their reaction?

Nasr: They laughed. That was an informal discussion with some people from the Salvation Government administration.

CTC: HTS clearly has significant sympathy for Hamas. As has been noted in this publication, during a round of hostilities between Hamas and Israel in May 2021, al-Qahtani tweeted out a video of rockets launched by Hamas toward civilian areas in Israel and stated, "These scenes delight the believers."[11] Is there anything for our readers who are involved in counterterrorism and thinking through the challenges posed by jihadi groups that came out of the trip that is going to help guide your analysis moving forward?

Nasr: To sum it up, I went there to see things for myself, and what I saw is the beginning or the premises of a third path, another path that could be useful for the international community to try to implement or to build upon in other places. These days, HTS is less radical than the Taliban—women have access to higher education in universities, for example—and they might have a more viable model. Of course, again it's important to stress, it's authoritarian; it's not liberal. Of course, the freedom of minorities is limited, as in other places. Of course, it's a war zone. But when you have prominent commanders like this who were in the ranks of the Islamic State of Iraq, al-Qa`ida making this kind of shift publicly, people will look at them and say, 'If those people are saying it was a mistake, maybe we should do things another way.'

One more thing to stress: They all told me that their fight is the same fight as the Ukrainians. They said, 'You are fighting the Russians. If you had helped us at the time'—meaning 2013 after the chemical attacks—'maybe things would have gone another way.'[i]

CTC: They're trying to say that they share the same enemies. They feel that they're fighting the same fight as the West.

Nasr: And that their war is not against the West. They will not allow attacks on the West, etc. That's what they said, and it's significant because you are talking about those people—Qahtani, Julani—in command and with this kind of past.   **CTC**

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i   Editor's Note: According to the U.S. State Department, in August 2013, "the Assad regime released the nerve agent sarin on its own people in the Ghouta district of Damascus, killing more than 1,400 Syrians, many of them children." Despite previously stating that the use of chemical weapons would be a red line, President Obama ultimately decided not to carry out military action against the Syrian regime. "Press Statement: Syria: Eighth Anniversary of the Ghouta Chemical Weapons Attack," U.S. Department of State, August 21, 2021; Ben Rhodes, "Inside the White House During the Syrian 'Red Line' Crisis," *Atlantic*, June 3, 2018.

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The Targeting of Infrastructure by America's Violent Far-Right

By Colin P. Clarke, Mollie Saltskog, Michaela Millender, and Naureen C. Fink

Violent far-right extremists have targeted critical infrastructure to radicalize and recruit members, promulgate their narratives, and sow chaos, all in an attempt to precipitate the destruction of political systems and society writ large. Accelerationist ideology, conspiracy theories, disinformation, and far-right extremist narratives have played a key role in the prioritization of critical infrastructure as a target for the violent far-right. The intersections of these ideologies and narratives have led to complex attacks on power grids and the targeting of telecommunications systems by far-right extremists. The increased focus and attacks on critical infrastructure by far-right extremists has the potential to wreak extensive, multifaceted societal disruption and damage, impacting communications, the economy, mobility, and basic human necessities.

In early February 2023, federal authorities announced the arrest of Brandon Russell and Sarah Clendaniel, both charged with conspiracy to damage a U.S. energy facility.[1] Russell, one of the founding members of the neo-Nazi group known as the Atomwaffen Division (AWD),[2] and Clendaniel planned to use automatic weapons to attack an electrical grid in Baltimore, Maryland.

The plot was far from an outlier, as terrorists and violent extremists have long sought to target critical infrastructure. Between 1970 and 2015, according to a study by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), there were approximately 2,055 attacks targeting critical infrastructure just in the United States alone.[3] In recent years, it has been largely far-right extremists in the United States who have increasingly targeted critical infrastructure. As noted in a report by Ilana Krill and Bennet Clifford, "between 2016 and 2022, white supremacist plots targeting energy systems dramatically increased in frequency. 13 individuals associated with the movement were arrested and charged in federal court with planning attacks on the energy sector; 11 of these attack planners were charged after 2020."[4] As Brian Harrell, a former Assistant Secretary of Infrastructure Protection at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, has noted, "extremists on the left and right continue to fantasize about attacks on critical infrastructure. This is a growing trend here in the United States, but also globally. Industry owns the infrastructure, so it's imperative that the private sector stay coordinated with law enforcement and National Security partners."[5]

Although recent examples display the violent far-right's prominence and increased focus on targeting critical infrastructure, far-right extremists have historically been far from the sole actors in this particular threat landscape. According to a study by START, far-left and anarchist violent extremists were responsible for 14 percent of attacks against government facilities and 74 percent of attacks on the emergency services sector between 1979 and 2015, with the height of their activity taking place in the 1970s.[6] Generally, the scale and scope of attacks by far-left and anarchist violent extremists in the past decade seems eclipsed by other forms of violent extremism, particularly in terms of human casualties and frequency of attacks.[7] Yet, with the wider scope of influence of accelerationist ideologies among extreme right-wing groups, coupled with potential shifts rightward in the U.S. political landscape, such trends may change. On top of the threat posed by the violent far-right, the potential for extreme far-left and anarchist actors to return to historic practices of targeting critical infrastructure, such as attacks committed by the Weather Underground and the New World Liberation Front, renders understanding how these actors interact with and are influenced by accelerationist ideology critical.[8]

This article will explore why and how far-right extremists have targeted critical infrastructure, including the role and application of accelerationist ideology, conspiracy theories and disinformation involving 5G networks and COVID-19, and other far-right extremist narratives in motivating violent far-right actors to prioritize and commit such attacks. From complex plots against power grids to attacks on telecommunications systems, this article demonstrates how far-right extremists have targeted infrastructure to radicalize and recruit members, promulgate their narratives, and sow chaos, with the potential for extensive societal disruption and damage.

Accelerationism and Infrastructure

The U.S. government has taken notice of far-right extremists' renewed interest in targeting critical infrastructure, releasing numerous bulletins and warnings to educate the public and

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Power pylons (Christian Charisius/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)

communicate transparently about the nature of the threat. According to CNN reporting, in late April 2023, a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) bulletin noted that domestic violent extremists in the United States are increasingly sharing tactics with each other, trading best practices related to how to attack electric power stations and other forms of critical infrastructure.[9] In February 2022, DHS released a National Terrorism Advisory System (NTAS) Bulletin noting the following: "Domestic violent extremists have also viewed attacks against U.S. critical infrastructure as a means to create chaos and advance ideological goals, and have recently aspired to disrupt U.S. electric and communications critical infrastructure, including by spreading false or misleading narratives about 5G cellular technology."[10]

One of the primary drivers of this increased focus is the growing popularity of accelerationism among extreme far-right and white supremacist groups, the ideology that influenced Russell and his Atomwaffen Division co-founders and that continues to contribute to far-right extremist radicalization. "Accelerationism is an ideologically agnostic doctrine of violent and non-violent actions taken to exploit contradictions intrinsic to a political system to 'accelerate' its destruction through the friction caused by its features."[11] Atomwaffen has since collapsed, replaced by the National Socialist Order (NSO), yet was driven by the same worldview as other nodes in the accelerationist global network.[12] Militant accelerationism, in particular, advocates for political

violence and terrorism to physically destroy society as it currently exists.[13] Accelerationists believe that lone actors can engage in acts of mass violence to catalyze a broader conflict within society.[14] In that worldview, targeting critical infrastructure is viewed as an important means of destroying society and a catalytic predecessor to the ensuing chaos and anarchy desired. It is little surprise then that Russell reportedly kept a framed picture of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh on his dresser.[15]

So-called "neo-Luddites" or "technophobes"—many of whom have been inspired by the writings of the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski—have developed an obsession with 5G wireless networks and towers.[16] Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, among other countries, have experienced individuals and small groups attacking telecommunications infrastructure, especially cell phone towers.[17] Over time and with enough momentum, this could evolve into a global movement motivated by an aversion to technology and all of the perceived ills that emerging tech contributes toward, including the perception that robotics will be a source of job loss for entire sections and industries. Recent declarations by companies like IBM that they will freeze hiring for jobs that may be performed by artificial intelligence (AI) give an initial indication of the potential impacts on the workforce.[18] As AI becomes inextricably linked with the facets of everyday life, violent groups could seek to push individuals to engage in acts of terrorism as a means of fighting against what

they see as the total domination of, and growing dependence upon, technology in modern society.[19] Attacks on 5G wireless towers will be covered in more detail below, but it remains a growing concern for counterterrorism practitioners.

Complex Plots and Attacks Against Power Grids

Several cases within the United States speak directly to the nature of the growing threat posed by violent extremists to critical infrastructure. In 2013, in San Jose, California, an attack on PG&E Corp.'s Metcalf transmission substation knocked it offline. But the attack was not random, nor was it amateurish in nature. On the contrary, the plot involved multiple snipers firing for nearly 20 minutes at an electrical substation. Before escaping undetected, the assailants disabled 17 transformers that carried power to Silicon Valley. At the time, Chairman of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission Jon Wellinghoff called the attack "the most significant incident of domestic terrorism involving the grid that has ever occurred."[20] In the attack, more than 100 rounds were fired from high-powered rifles in what was described as a "military-style" raid.[21] In late August 2014, the same substation was struck again.[22]

In June 2020, a federal grand jury indicted two individuals for violations of federal law for conspiracy to damage and destroy U.S. government buildings and property, in addition to a public utility installation.[23] Those charged—Stephen T. Parshall, Andrew Lynam, and William L. Loomis—were self-proclaimed members of the Boogaloo movement.[a] The Boogaloo movement, or "Boogaloo Bois," is "best conceptualized as a decentralized, anti-authority movement composed of a diverse range of actors mobilized in part by adherents' belief that they are following in the footsteps of the United States' founders and participating in a revolution against tyranny."[24] Within the Boogaloo movement there has been an accelerationist faction that has frequently discussed targeting law enforcement officials, political figures, and critical infrastructure.[25]

In July 2020, there was an attempt to disrupt the power grid in Pennsylvania using two DJI Mavic 2 drones to create a short circuit. The drone crashed before it could cause major damage, but the perpetrator was never apprehended.[26] Between 2015 and 2019, two dozen nuclear reactors and fuel storage sites in the United States suffered from at least 57 drone incursions.[27]

In August 2021, several individuals were arrested and charged with conspiracy to damage the property of an energy facility in the United States. Paul James Kryscuk, Liam Collins, Jordan Duncan, and Joseph Maurino "researched, discussed, and reviewed at length a previous attack on a power grid by an unknown group" and ultimately sought to use explosives "to burn through and destroy power transformers."[28][b] A list of over a dozen targets was discovered with transformers or substations in Idaho and surrounding states

indicated. Two of the individuals charged, Collins and Duncan, are former U.S. Marines previously stationed at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.[29] In December 2022, an attack on two substations in Moore County, North Carolina, cut power to thousands of people, the latest in a series of attacks against critical infrastructure. Since 2014, there have been approximately 600 electric emergency incidents and disturbances cause by suspected and confirmed physical attacks and vandalism against the electrical grid.[30]

Violent extremist actors are not the only ones interested in utilizing the advancement of commercialized technology such as drones. The 2023 Annual Threat Assessment by the U.S. intelligence community warned that "foreign intelligence services are adopting cutting-edge technologies—from advanced cyber tools to unmanned systems to enhanced technical surveillance equipment—that improve their capabilities and challenge U.S. defenses. Much of this technology is available commercially, providing a shortcut for previously unsophisticated services to become legitimate threats."[31] Attacks need not be successful to disrupt critical services; the sighting of a drone brought flights to a standstill at London's Heathrow airport in 2019, demonstrating the potential for chaos and damage in the event of a malicious attack.[32] Prior to that, in 2018, a sighting of two drones forced London's Gatwick airport to shut down for about 33 hours and the cancellation of more than 1,000 flights affecting more than 140,000 passengers.[33] Beyond the immediate disruption and cost, it generated significant anxiety among the public and security officials about aviation security.

As drones become more commonly used in everyday life—for example, if Amazon begins delivering products via drone—this will offer more cover and concealment for nefarious state and non-state actors to use drones for malicious purposes. As such, one should expect an uptick in drone incursions around critical infrastructure. This emerging threat has garnered the attention of the U.N. Security Council, which in December 2022 issued the Delhi Declaration[34] of non-binding guiding principles for states, many of whom are working with U.N. experts, to develop a globally agreed framework to manage the terrorism threat posed by new and emerging technologies.

COVID-19, Conspiracies, and Disinformation

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about many challenges, including the proliferation of conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives that eroded trust in public health institutions and practices, enhanced anti-government sentiments among populations, and cast unfounded blame onto minorities, government officials, healthcare workers, and others. One only has to look at the increase in anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States[35] or the widespread anti-COVID measures protests in Canada and Europe in 2021, such as the "Freedom Convoy" protests,[36] to discern the very real and dangerous implications of false or misleading information online for the security of communities, including people and infrastructure.

Conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives have existed throughout human history. However, the uncertainty the pandemic brought, coupled with modern information and communications technologies, the penetration of social media as well as large swaths of Western populations spending the majority of their time at home and online, combined to create an unprecedented reach and captive audience for online conspiracy theories.

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a   "Parshall and Lynam are currently scheduled to stand trial November in the federal terrorism case. Both have pleaded not guilty. Loomis, now 42, was sentenced in January to four to 20 years in a Nevada prison after reaching a deal with prosecutors and pleading guilty last October to providing material support for the commission of an act of terrorism, a felony." Rio Yamat, "Vegas terrorism suspect sentenced for sexually abusing girl," Associated Press, March 15, 2023.

b   Kryscuk and Maurino are scheduled to be sentenced in June and July, respectively. Collins and Duncan are awaiting trial. For more details, see Emily Mikkelsen, "National Guardsman accused in neo-Nazi power grid plot pleads guilty in North Carolina court," Fox 8 North Carolina, April 19, 2023 (updated April 20, 2023).

Some of these conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives motivated extremists and radicalized individuals to carry out acts of violence, including those targeting critical infrastructure. In 2020, there was a wave of attacks targeting telecommunication facilities in Europe, the United Kingdom, and North America—largely triggered by conspiracy theories and disinformation revolving around the COVID-19 pandemic.[37] Among accelerationist groups and ideology, a plethora of narratives frequently identify critical infrastructure—especially nuclear facilities and energy pipelines—as key targets to accelerate the collapse of society. It is key to understand the role disinformation and conspiracy theories play in motivating and radicalizing violent extremists to attack critical infrastructure and the threat that poses to society. Moreover, as conspiracy-driven narratives become repeated and endorsed by politicians and public figures, they become more mainstream, and are likely to boost the threat across the United States, Europe, and beyond.

The 5G Bogeyman

One conspiracy theory that has caused significant damage to infrastructure in the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe is the one alleging a false correlation between 5G telecommunications infrastructure, especially cellular towers, and COVID-19. The conspiracy theory became particularly widespread on social media in the early days of the global pandemic in 2020.

There were different strands of the conspiracy theory, ranging from unfounded claims that the origin of the virus from Wuhan made sense because 5G was first rolled out there to claims that the virus was deliberately spread so that 5G technology could quickly be installed worldwide and profit the "elites."[38] The conspiracy theory was frequently spread online through the use of maps indicating the construction or installation of an alleged 5G cellular tower, overlayed with the spread of COVID-19, insinuating to the consumer of the false and misleading information that the use of 5G infrastructure was causing or spreading the virus.[39]

Figure 1: Example of 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory content that circulated online in April 2020 (Source: Telegram)

One of the biggest challenges when studying conspiracy-driven terrorism motivated by disinformation is to identify the causal relationship between the narrative and the perpetration of an act of violence. When studying manifestos of far-right extremist terrorists, for example, it is evident that they often have been influenced by a plethora of conspiracy theories (e.g., the Great Replacement, the Great Reset, and/or anti-Semitic conspiracy theories) and adopted an array of disinformation narratives (anti-LGBTQ+, election fraud, anti-establishment, climate change, and/or human trafficking disinformation), often combining elements from various strands. Indeed, scholars such as Bruce Hoffman have argued that the world is witnessing "ideological convergence" within the far-right extremist milieu, where perpetrators pick and choose from seemingly contradictory ideologies, conspiracy theories, and disinformation narratives to justify violence.[40] A February 2022 Terrorism Advisory Bulletin by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security warned that "the United States remains in a heightened threat environment fueled by several factors, including an online environment filled with false or misleading narratives and conspiracy theories."[41]

It is important to note that conspiracy theories as well as dis- and misinformation centered around telecommunications technology, including 5G technology, has existed throughout the 20th and the 21st centuries in different waves depending on technological advancements. The 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory and the different disinformation narratives stemming from it, however, mainstreamed these false and misleading notions to an unprecedented level. One study on COVID-19 conspiracy theories found that between January 2020 and November 2021, English-language tweets concerning the 5G conspiracy theory numbered 326,035, with the majority of those appearing in April 2020.[42] On April 4 and 5, 2020, the "5G coronavirus" and "5G map" search terminologies peaked on Google among worldwide users, but searches for these terms on Google had dramatically decreased by the end of the month. An investigation by *The New York Times* found 487 Facebook communities concerned with the specific conspiracy theory, with nearly 500,000 followers added to these Facebook communities centered on 5G and COVID-19 in the first two weeks of April 2020.

Although broad public interest in the conspiracy theory seemingly dissipated as quickly as it emerged, the widespread reach of the 5G-COVID19 conspiracy theory online came to inspire acts of violence in the real world, specifically targeting telecommunication infrastructure. Between April and May 2020 in the United Kingdom alone, almost 90 cell towers were destroyed, primarily through arson and sabotage attacks.[43] In addition, during the same time period, just under 50 engineers and other telecommunications workers were physically and verbally attacked by individuals motivated by this conspiracy theory.[44] By mid-May 2020, at least 16 cell towers in the Netherlands had been targeted in arson attacks.[45] Around the same time, there were similar reports of cell tower attacks in other European countries, including Ireland, Sweden, Italy, France, Germany, Belgium, and Cyprus.[46] In May 2020, DHS's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) reportedly planned on issuing an industry alert aimed at advising the telecom industry on measures to reduce the risk of attack.[47] Also, according to ABC News, in May 2020, DHS issued an intelligence report warning about how the 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory had prompted a wave of global attacks against cell towers, including in the United States.[48]

On far-right extremist chat forums on platforms such as Telegram, the attacks on cellular towers in Europe were celebrated

(see Figure 2). These celebratory messages also frequently intermingled with white supremacist and accelerationist ideology, illustrating the connection between conspiracy theories and violent extremism. Some neo-Nazi Telegram channels (see Figure 2) even encouraged users to utilize the 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory in radicalization efforts, positing that it may be more effective than trying to convince potential recruits that the Holocaust never happened (another notable conspiracy theory that has long motivated neo-Nazi adherents and other white supremacy extremists).

Figure 2: Extremist postings related to the 5G conspiracy (Source: Telegram)

Beyond the Grid: Targeting Telecoms
According to researchers with the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), in 2020, terrorist attacks committed by conspiracy theory extremists climbed to 116 from just six the previous year, an increase of 1,833%. Of those 116 attacks spanning countries from North America to Europe and Australia, 96 percent were aimed at damaging telecommunications infrastructure.[49]

Several notable attacks occurred in the United States in 2020. In Tennessee, at least eight cell towers were vandalized between December 2019 and November 2020.[50] On December 25, 2020, Anthony Quinn Warner detonated a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device in downtown Nashville, Tennessee, close to a commercial AT&T networks facility. The attack killed Warner and injured eight others, as well as caused widespread damage to surrounding buildings and communication networks and service disruptions.[51] An assessment by CISA concluded that the Nashville Christmas Day bombing "caused consumer telephone and internet outages, as well as 911 outages as far as Alabama and Kentucky. The 911 outages impacted some centers for over a week."[52]

An assessment by the FBI found that Warner's choice of location for the explosion had nothing to do with AT&T in particular. The assessment determined the motivation as follows: "Warner's detonation of the improvised explosive device was an intentional act in an effort to end his own life, driven in part by a totality of life stressors – including paranoia, long-held individualized beliefs adopted from several eccentric conspiracy theories, and the loss of stabilizing anchors and deteriorating interpersonal relationships."[53] While Warner does not appear to have been motivated by the 5G-COVID19 conspiracy theory, the bombing indicates the potential damage and disruption caused by an attack targeting critical infrastructure, such as a telecommunications network facility. Furthermore, it has raised the worrying prospect of inspiring copycat attacks, whether by violent far-right groups or others intent on committing mass harm.

The intermingling of 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theories with anti-Semitism is particularly troubling. That narrative suggests that the global pandemic was part of a diabolical plan by 'the global elite,' consisting of the likes of George Soros and Bill Gates, that had supposedly colluded with 'big pharma' to introduce mandatory vaccinations that secretly include chips that can track an individual. These microchip implants, in turn, would supposedly be activated by 5G technology.[54] In these instances, a conspiracy theory that motivates people to attack critical infrastructure intermingles with long-standing conspiracy theories and disinformation that have historically underpinned acts of violence within the far-right extremist umbrella, creating a dangerous cocktail. In January 2021, the Intelligence Bureau of the New York Police Department (NYPD) reportedly issued an internal report assessing that conspiracy theorists, neo-Nazis, and white supremacists are increasingly targeting telecommunication towers to "incite fear, disrupt essential services, and cause economic damage."[55]

Conclusion
If organized into a regular campaign with a high operational tempo, violent extremists could inflict very significant damage by targeting critical infrastructure. This appears particularly appealing to groups ascribing to accelerationist ideas, given the prospect of wider social and economic damage. There is a belief in extreme far-right circles that such attacks can topple governments. In February 2023, German police carried out searches against six individuals part of the Reichsburger network, who are suspected of planning to sabotage the power grid. Allegedly, their goal was to catalyze others to follow suit and generate enough momentum to overthrow the government.[56]

The number of targets, from power grids to telecommunications systems to government facilities, from military installations to public transportation system increases societal vulnerability to these types of attacks. This is particularly the case given the volume of potential targets and their accessibility to the public in many instances, making preventive efforts particularly challenging and dependent on public and private sector entities, the latter often being less familiar or less resourced to address such potential

threats. The disruption could be multi-faceted, with potential impacts in communications, the economy, mobility, health services, and other basic human necessities. The commercialization of new technologies, e.g., drones, adds another layer of complexity to the challenge of securing critical infrastructure. The increased ease of availability and lower barriers to entry will complicate efforts to distinguish malevolent from recreational use.

The mounting appeal of accelerationist ideology, and its driving focus on targeting infrastructure, reinforces the need to prioritize protection measures and foster public-private partnership bringing together government and local officials with businesses that often own the infrastructure sites.

The proliferation and mainstreaming of extreme far-right ideologies, conspiracies, and narratives by both public figures and politicians demonstrate the importance and urgency in understanding how the far-right ecosystem interacts with critical infrastructure. The current political outlook in the U.S. and the West more broadly makes monitoring which narratives and conspiracies seem to resonate with the public an imperative, as far-right extremists have proven adept at capitalizing on pre-existing grievances and distrust in institutions to promulgate their own narratives. As attacks on telecommunications systems have shown, narratives that begin in the online space do not always remain there. Moreover, the speed at which conspiracy theories can spread, particularly in periods of volatility or uncertainty, as seen with the 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy, reinforces the need to understand further how different narratives and ideologies interact and motivate violent extremists to target critical infrastructure.   CTC

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