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FEATURE ARTICLE

Guns, Drugs, and Smugglers

A recent heightened challenge at
Israel's borders with Jordan and Egypt

MATTHEW LEVITT AND LAUREN VON THADEN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Ravi Satkalmi

DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE,
UNITED STATES CAPITOL POLICE

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FROM THE EDITOR

In this month's feature article, Matthew Levitt and Lauren von Thaden examine the recent heightened smuggling challenge at Israel's borders with Jordan and Egypt. They write: "The guns and drugs that are flowing into Israel are creating societal problems and public safety issues. The influx of weapons is also a major counterterrorism concern. Smuggled weapons have been a contributing factor to the surge of violence that has plagued the West Bank and Israel." Building on the assessments of Israeli, Jordanian, and Egyptian officials, their study draws on a dataset they compiled of "105 cases of identified, thwarted, or disrupted weapons or drug smuggling attempts into Israel from March 2021 through April 2023 across all of Israel's borders."

Our interview is with Ravi Satkalmi, the director of intelligence of the United States Capitol Police. He describes the post-January 6 security challenge as "fundamentally different than that posed by 9/11. The risk is fundamentally different when we're discussing this kind of normalization of political violence against each other—an erosion of our civic norms—rather than a terrorist organization seeking to launch an attack from overseas." He says that "our goal is essentially to be the premier intel shop for anti-government violence, full stop. We are sitting on a vast trove of threat information that's being sent to us by our members' offices and that we are finding on our own. And the key distinction here is we get it from all sides all the time. We're protecting Democrats; we're protecting Republicans, people of all political persuasions."

Satkalmi came out publicly as a gay man while previously working at NYPD and describes the importance of inclusivity in the national security and counterterrorism domain. He notes that "essentially, anybody can experience the challenge of belonging and anybody can be part of the solution. If we can check some of our own assumptions about who may be struggling and who effective change agents can be, we improve the likelihood for progress."

Tore Hamming draws on a new cache of Islamic State documents he collected to examine how the Islamic State's General Directorate of Provinces has managed the Islamic State's global network. He writes: "With the deaths of successive caliphs, the territorial demise in the Levant, and the growing importance of its external provinces, the General Directorate of Provinces has emerged as the organization's most decisive body." His article "describes the institution's decisive role in the group's military and economic affairs and its growing responsibility managing its external attack planning and execution."

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Cover: In this November 13, 2019, file photo, a portion of the Israeli-Jordanian border is viewed through a barbed wire fence from Baqoura, in the Jordan Valley. (Raad Adayleh/AP Photo)

Guns, Drugs, and Smugglers: A Recent Heightened Challenge at Israel's Borders with Jordan and Egypt

By Matthew Levitt and Lauren von Thaden

Israel is known for its capable military, security, and intelligence services, which actively patrol and protect the country's borders. And yet, Israeli, Jordanian, and Egyptian officials report that the smuggling they have detected across Israel's borders with Jordan and Egypt—mostly involving drugs or guns—has increased significantly over the past two years, with major consequences for both the public health and public security of Israel. This is despite peace treaties with both Jordan and Egypt and parallel efforts on the part of those countries to patrol their sides of the border. Building on the assessments of Israeli, Jordanian, and Egyptian officials, this study draws on a dataset the authors compiled of 105 cases of identified, thwarted, or disrupted weapons or drug smuggling attempts into Israel from March 2021 through April 2023 across all of Israel's borders. The study focuses on the borders Israel shares with Jordan and Egypt, where disruptions of smuggling operations increased during this period.

In August 2022, the IDF reported there had been a “significant rise” in detected attempts to smuggle weapons and drugs into Israel from Jordan and Egypt, pointing to the more than 300 weapons and 2,150 kilograms of various drugs seized since the beginning of the year.¹ In late 2022, an Israeli official confirmed to the authors that detected smuggling attempts across Israel's borders had increased in recent years.² As will be outlined, a database maintained by the authors finds that detected smuggling attempts into Israel rose between early 2021 and early 2023.

Does this mean that smuggling at Israel's borders is becoming

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a greater challenge? Israeli, Jordanian, and Egyptian officials interviewed by the authors independently reported that it has, both in terms of an increase in known smuggling cases and in the complexity of smuggling operations and the dangers of addressing the challenge. The authors further believe it is reasonable to infer from the growth in *detected* smuggling activity that more smuggling is taking place, but this cannot be assumed with certainty.³ It is also important to put the recent heightened smuggling challenges into context by considering historical data. For example, as will be noted later, when it comes to the number of detected smuggling attempts along Israel's border with Egypt, despite the recent rise in cases, the levels remain lower than at their peak in 2019-2020, according to IDF data relayed to the authors.

The guns and drugs that are flowing into Israel are creating societal problems and public safety issues. The influx of weapons is also a major counterterrorism concern. Smuggled weapons have been a contributing factor to the surge of violence that has plagued the West Bank and Israel.³ Consider the December 2022 case when Israeli authorities arrested brothers Mohammed and Adam Abu Taha, residents of a Bedouin town near Beer Sheva in Israel's Negev desert, on charges of smuggling weapons and ammunition. The brothers knowingly sold the weapons to members of Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the West Bank and to criminals in southern Israel.⁴

Indeed, this increased arms smuggling⁵ occurred against the backdrop of over a year and a half of violence that began with an 11-day battle between Israeli forces and Hamas in May 2021 and continued through a string of terror attacks in the spring of 2022 that prompted a sweeping Israeli military campaign with nightly West Bank raids targeting terrorist operatives.⁶ In July 2023, Israeli forces carried out an operation targeting militant facilities and weapons depots in Jenin, focusing in particular on the Jenin Brigades of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Alongside the extensive

a For every smuggling attempt identified, thwarted, or disrupted, an unknown number of others presumably get through without authorities ever learning about them. The authors believe the numbers detected by authorities is likely to be indicative of the true larger total. Israeli, Jordanian, and Egyptian authorities also made this point in interviews with the authors. Significant caveats apply, however. It should be noted that more smuggling attempts being detected/interdicted could also theoretically reflect more concerted counter-smuggling efforts and better intelligence rather than an increase in overall smuggling attempts. It should also be noted that, all other things being equal, more thwarting and disruption of smuggling could be expected to lead to a reduction in smuggling attempts over time. In other words, a higher number of interdictions could theoretically be associated with a decreasing rather than increasing problem set, though this would likely occur over a longer period of time than that studied here. Indeed, while most officials interviewed for this study reported that increased disruption of smuggling attempts was taking place against the background of an increased trend in smuggling activity, one Israeli official expressed the opinion that what has changed at the Jordanian and Egyptian border is not the overall level of smuggling, but rather the number of smuggling attempts that are identified, thwarted, or disrupted. Israeli official's written answers to questions submitted by the authors, May 2023.

collection of chemical materials to make explosives and hundreds of assembled explosive devices seized, authorities also found thousands of rounds of ammunition and weapons such as M-16s, pistols, and shotguns.⁷

Of the 472 terrorist attacks foiled by Israel security forces in 2022 in the West Bank or Jerusalem, 358 were shooting attacks, underscoring the centrality of small arms smuggling to this spike in violence.⁸

This study assesses the smuggling problem set facing Israel on its borders with Jordan and Egypt^b by drawing on the authors' dataset of 105 cases of identified, thwarted, or disrupted^c weapons or drug smuggling attempts into Israel from March 2021 through April 2023 across all of Israel's borders.

This article first describes the authors' dataset and then makes some big picture observations. The study then focuses in turn on smuggling attempts at the borders Israel shares with Jordan and Egypt, where authorities on both sides of the border report a significant increase in detected smuggling activity has taken place in the past two years. In looking at the challenges at both borders, this article outlines what, as far as is known, is being smuggled, where smuggling attempts occur, and the impacts on Israel's security and public safety.

The Dataset

The authors' dataset consists of 105 cases of identified, thwarted, or disrupted weapons or drug smuggling attempts into Israel from March 22, 2021, through April 22, 2023 (the period over which the authors collected the data), primarily across the Jordanian and Egyptian borders (87) but also (18) across the de facto borders with Lebanon and Syria. It is important to stress that the approximately two-year time duration means that their data sheds light on recent and what may only be short-term trends.

The dataset draws from IDF and Israeli government press releases, news articles, and information gleaned from meetings with Israeli, Jordanian, and Egyptian government officials.⁹ The research also benefited from field research trips to smuggling hotspots along Israel's borders with Jordan and Egypt during which the authors spoke to officials involved in border security and counter-smuggling operations.¹⁰

The dataset is, by definition, not comprehensive because it is limited to information that is either publicly available in media reports or IDF press releases or that could be gleaned from documents shared with the authors and author interviews. Indeed, officials confirmed that not all smuggling cases that are identified,

b While not the focus of this study, it should be noted that smuggling also occurs along the Blue Line that marks the de facto border between Israel and Lebanon, as well as along the demilitarized zone between the Israeli and Syrian portions of the Golan Heights. However, these cases are much less common than those along the Jordanian and Egyptian borders, and the authors' dataset does not reflect significant changes in smuggling rates along these borders. Smuggling activity along Israel's northern borders is likely less common because Israel faces significant threats from both Lebanon and Syria and therefore prioritizes maintaining tight security along these borders.

c The IDF differentiates between smuggling cases that were thwarted (meaning authorities on one side of the border or the other arrived on the scene in time to arrest smugglers and prevent any contraband from crossing the border) and those that were disrupted (meaning authorities interrupted a smuggling operation midstream, some contraband crossed the border, and some or all smugglers disperse before they could be detained).

thwarted, or disrupted by authorities (on either side of the border) are publicized, adding that there are plenty of successful smuggling operations that authorities learn about after the fact (these are typically not reported publicly, and are therefore not generally represented in the authors' dataset).¹¹ Therefore, the authors also provide the reader with summary data drawn from IDF sources when those have been made available, such as in media reports or the IDF's annual report.

Publicly available data does not uniformly report the details of each smuggling operation. For example, the types of detail provided in reports varies regarding the specific locations where smugglings take place, the identities of those involved, and even the quantities of contraband smuggled. Any quantity of drugs smuggled is especially difficult to quantify over time, as reports sometimes describe the amount of drugs seized by estimated cash value and other times by weight. Despite these constraints, the dataset tracks available information regarding event location, perpetrator identity, and smuggled items (almost always weapons or drugs, but several cases involve money or gold).

What Authorities Say

Indeed, while the dataset is not an exhaustive list of each smuggling attempt during the March 2021 to April 2023 time period, the overall numbers in the dataset are nearly identical to those reported by Israeli authorities. (Neither Jordanian nor Egyptian authorities provided overall figures to the authors.) Israeli authorities confirmed to the authors the trendlines accurately reflect those observed by national counter-smuggling authorities.¹² Israeli officials periodically release overall numbers regarding the scale and scope of smuggling operations across their borders. Where available, the authors provide these numbers for greater context.¹³



IDF map depicting border smuggling interdiction hotspots (red dots). The red dots represent areas where there have been thwarted smugglings at or near the borders of Jordan and Egypt.¹⁴

Israeli, Jordanian, and Egyptian authorities all report significant increases in known cross-border smuggling between early 2021 and early 2023. These governments have access to far more detailed data than they make public and than that which is included in the author’s dataset, and they are therefore well-positioned to make such an assessment. The actual pace of known smuggling fluctuates from month to month, but authorities in these countries report that the overall trendlines point up during the past two years.

The Big Picture

Overall, according to the authors’ dataset, the number of identified, thwarted, or disrupted attempts to smuggle drugs or weapons into Israeli territory—mostly from Jordan and Egypt—increased during the course of 2021 and 2022. (See Figure 1.⁴) Looking across Israel’s various borders, the number of identified, thwarted, or disrupted smuggling attempts shot up from three in the third quarter of 2021 to 23 in the fourth quarter of 2022.¹⁵

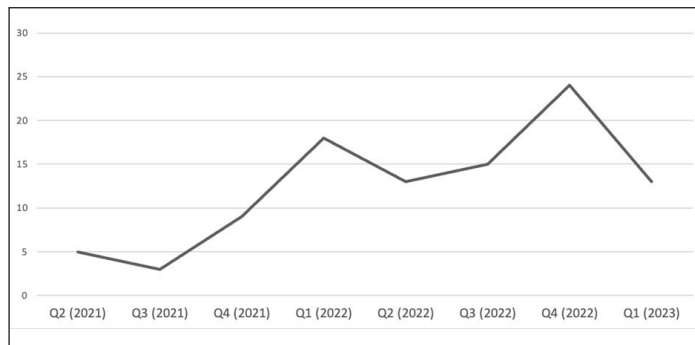


Figure 1: Identified/thwarted/disrupted attempts to smuggle guns or drugs into Israel per quarter (authors’ database)

In August 2022, the IDF reported there had been a “significant rise” in detected attempts to smuggle weapons and drugs into Israel from Jordan and Egypt, pointing to the more than 300 weapons and 2,150 kilograms of various drugs seized since the beginning of the year.¹⁶ Comparatively, 300 weapons were seized in 2020 and 2021 combined.¹⁷ Similarly, the authors’ dataset shows a stark increase in the number of weapons intercepted at the border from 2021 to 2022, with an even higher figure *per month* in 2023 for the period up until April 22. (See Figure 2.)

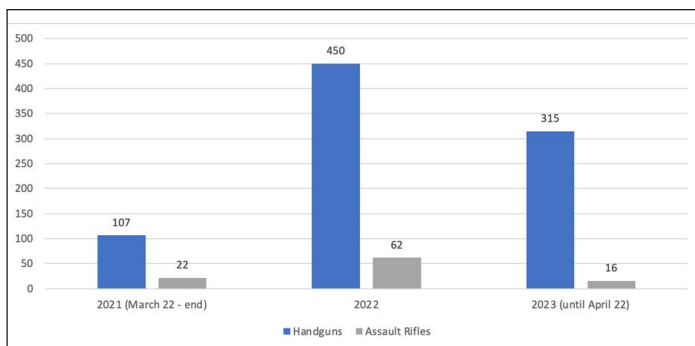


Figure 2: Smuggled weapons seized at or near Israeli borders by type in 2021 (starting March 22, 2021), 2022, and 2023 (through April 22, 2023) (authors’ database)

d Figure 1 is based on the authors’ dataset and refers to identified, thwarted or disrupted smuggling attempts across the Jordanian, Egyptian, Lebanese, and Syrian borders.

Israeli forces embarked on a concerted anti-smuggling campaign in 2018 alongside efforts by Egyptian and Jordanian counterparts. According to the IDF, the number of identified, thwarted, or disrupted smuggling attempts along the Egyptian border increased from 448 in 2021 to 575 in 2022.¹⁸ According to the IDF, both 2019 and 2020 saw more than 700 identified, thwarted, or disrupted drugs smuggling attempts along the Egyptian border, a higher number than in the past two years. (See Figure 4.)

Others point to changed circumstances to explain what they see as an ongoing threat from cross-border smuggling, even as the number of known smuggling attempts began to drop in early 2023 (Figure 1).¹⁹ For example, the cumulative tolls of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine put Israel and its neighbors under significant economic stress, creating an environment ripe for illicit activity.⁶ As lockdowns kept civilians out of work and shrank the number of available jobs, parallel gray and black job markets grew. Due to the lack of other opportunities, more people were drawn into the growing smuggling industry.²⁰ According to the IDF, Israeli Bedouin smugglers can make a profit of around \$50,000-\$70,000 from one smuggling operation, and Egyptian smugglers can earn \$25,000-\$35,000.²¹ Such lucrative opportunities enable smuggling rings to offer attractive salaries to those struggling to find a job. Because of these circumstances, authorities expect cross-border smuggling to remain an ongoing challenge.

Gun-Running Across the Israeli-Jordanian Border

On a Saturday evening in April 2023, Israeli authorities arrested Jordanian Member of Parliament (MP) Imad al-Adwan at the Allenby Bridge border crossing for attempting to smuggle over 200 guns into the West Bank. Subsequent investigation revealed that the Jordanian lawmaker reportedly carried out a dozen earlier smuggling runs starting in early 2022. In each, he leveraged his diplomatic passport to smuggle illicit goods: namely guns, electronic cigarettes, gold, and birds.²² Despite MP al-Adwan’s membership in the Jordanian Parliament’s Palestine Committee and his past statements in support of Hamas,²³ the primary driver for al-Adwan’s smuggling activities was financial rather than in support of any Palestinian militant group, according to Israel’s Shin Bet internal security service.²⁴

This incident stood out both for the number of weapons smuggled and the fact that a parliamentarian was used to drive them across an official border crossing at the Allenby Bridge into the West Bank. Most smuggling attempts from Jordan involve criminal smuggling networks that span the Israeli-Jordanian border using members of Bedouin tribes as runners to deliver illicit goods to and across the border, typically at isolated portions of the border far from official border crossings.²⁵

Israeli and Jordanian officials report that the level of arms smuggling from Jordan into Israel and the West Bank has increased over the past two years, in terms of what is being detected.²⁶ This increase is also reflected in the authors’ March 2021 to April 2023 database.

As already noted, more detected smuggling is likely indicative

e It should be noted with regard to the Egypt-Israel border, smuggling was higher the year before the pandemic (2019) than at any time since. Determining why the rate of detected smuggling goes up or down is complex, is not a result of any one factor, and may elude simple explanation.

of more smuggling getting through, and this appears to have fueled instability and a surge in terrorist and other violent activity. According to the authors' database, from March 2021–April 2023, at least 35 smuggling attempts and 951 weapons (809 handguns and assault rifles, plus grenades and other weapons) were discovered and seized by Israeli police. (Figure 3).^f These numbers include 22 thwarted smuggling attempts from Jordan in 2022 alone compared to four thwarted in 2021. According to summary data provided in the IDF's 2022 Annual Data Report, the number of smuggled weapons seized at or near the Jordanian border jumped to approximately 570, a large quantity compared to 239 seized at Israel's borders with Lebanon and Syria^{27 g} and the estimated zero weapons smuggled from Egypt that same year.²⁸ Aligning with the authors' data, Jordanian authorities have reportedly thwarted over 20 smuggling plots, most involving 9mm handguns, over the past three years.²⁹

As already noted, many smuggling plots on both sides of the border are not publicly reported. Weapons smuggling benefits both terrorist and organized criminal groups but is primarily driven by criminal smuggling networks that recruit members of Bedouin tribes to help facilitate their smuggling operations. Jordanian authorities report that drug smugglers in southern Syria also recruit Jordanian Bedouins to work with Shi'a militias tied to Iran and smuggle drugs—mostly Captagon—from Syria into Jordan.³⁰

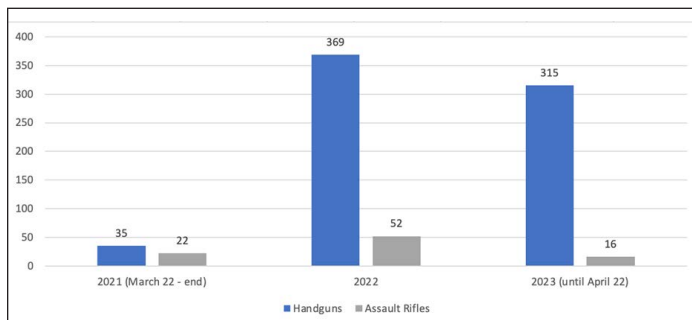


Figure 3: Smuggled weapons seized at or near the Jordan-Israel border by type in 2021 (starting March 22, 2021), 2022, and 2023 (through April 22, 2023) (authors' database)

According to Jordanian officials, cross-border smuggling incidents as of late 2022 were occurring about once or twice a week.³¹ Israeli officials also concede they neither stop nor even necessarily know about every smuggling attempt: "At the Jordanian border, the border is so long that we know smuggling events take place when we catch them, but IDF Bedouin trackers often tell us that more cross-border incidents happen that we don't know about until after the fact. And there are likely more still that we never find out about."³² Israeli authorities refer to these as "black smuggling

operations" where smugglers go "black" and trackers only find evidence after the fact.³³

The Jordanian border spans the geographic areas of responsibility of three IDF commands (north, central, and south), requiring robust coordination within the Israeli military to address security concerns. While the Jordanian military is fairly well-deployed along its side of the border, the Israeli military is more sparsely deployed along large portions of the border since the terrorism threat is comparatively lower there than in other parts of the country. This results from the 1994 Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty and the area's sparse population.³⁴ On the Israeli side, increased counter-smuggling efforts have yielded success, including surveillance cameras monitoring the Israel-Jordan border, undercover police operations, daily border patrols, and a joint operations center run by the IDF, Shin Bet, and Magen, the Israeli Police's anti-smuggling unit.³⁵

Cases along the Jordan-Israel border mostly involve weapons smuggling attempts conducted by West Bank Palestinians and Israeli-Arabs from Bedouin communities in the Negev desert and their counterparts on the Jordanian side of the border, many of whom come from the same Bedouin tribes.³⁶ Criminal smuggling organizations recruit members of these tribes across borderlines who then pass goods to fellow tribesmen on the other side of the border, saving smugglers from having to cross the border themselves.³⁷ Based on the data gleaned from incidents when arrests are made on the Israeli side of the border, the smuggling operatives along the Jordanian border tend to work in small groups of one to three people.³⁸

What Is Smuggled, and Where?

The Israeli-Jordanian border runs over 400 km from the Golan Heights and along the West Bank to the ports of Eilat and Aqaba, making it Israel's longest border. Significant portions of the Israeli border security fence in the south are old, lacking the more sophisticated technology featured in Israel's newer border fences. In some spots along the long and sparsely populated southern desert border, there is no security fence at all, just barbed wire. Along that stretch of border, the commander of the IDF's Jordan Valley 41st battalion told *The Jerusalem Post* that border penetrations are easy. "This area, the whole Jordanian border, is the easiest to breach. Here you can dig under, or simply cut a hole."³⁹ However, as one approaches the southern city of Eilat, a 30-km sophisticated border fence with sensors has been constructed.⁴⁰

Along certain parts of the border, smugglers benefit from the region's topography, which presents serious challenges to effective border surveillance. South of the Dead Sea, the Arava desert (*Wadi Araba*) is barren and flat. Smuggling succeeds here because the border is too long to effectively patrol and the area is a sparsely populated wilderness. North of the Dead Sea, the Jordan Valley is a rollercoaster of small hills running along the Jordan River marking the borderline between Israel and Jordan. "These hills cause us dead areas because of all the small channels," a local Israeli commander told *The Times of Israel*. "It's impossible to control. I can't put a soldier on each peak."⁴¹ Even from the best vantage points, he noted, one cannot see what is happening in each channel along the river's floodplain, where natural berms and ditches create blind spots that allow smugglers to evade surveillance cameras and patrols.⁴²

The authors' dataset includes nine smuggling attempts from the area around Jericho in the West Bank, just north of the Dead Sea to

f Figure 3 is based on the authors' dataset. It only includes data on assembled guns smuggled across the Jordanian border. It does not include weapons parts or grenades. The IDF compiled higher numbers of weapons seized in the past three years because they include smuggling attempts that were not made public, but they do not differentiate between types of weapons.

g In an author interview in May 2023, an Israeli official reported 508 weapons were seized in counter-smuggling operations in 2022. The larger number of 570 weapons seized at or near the border appears to reflect a broader category than just those seized in specifically counter-smuggling operations. Author (Levitt) interview, Israeli official, May 2023.

the northern border of the West Bank, and another eight smuggling attempts into Israel directly from the Beit She'an area to Hamat Gader, south of the Sea of Galilee. There are another 17 attempts that occurred in the “Jordan Valley” or “along the Jordanian border,” but it is unclear where exactly these incidents took place. The few smuggling attempts that did not occur within these aforementioned boundaries occurred south of the Dead Sea (Map 1).⁴³



Map 1: Smuggling attempts thwarted along the Jordan-Israel border between March 2021-April 2023. The red pins show smuggling hot spots.

As noted earlier, Jordanian MP al-Adwan allegedly attempted to smuggle three bags of weapons across the Allenby Bridge, including some 200 handguns and about a dozen AR-15 style assault rifles.⁴⁴ This represents a significantly greater scale of ambition beyond past smuggling plots. On average, weapons busts along the Jordanian border include roughly 15 handguns and one or two assault rifles.⁴⁵ Although there have been larger cases, no known public cases have matched the scale of MP al-Adwan’s various smuggling runs. Only after his arrest did authorities learn that starting in February 2022, the Jordanian parliamentarian allegedly made a dozen smuggling runs moving a variety of contraband across the border.⁴⁶

In April 2023, Israeli police confiscated 63 handguns and arrested a Bedouin Israeli citizen suspected of smuggling weapons from Jordan.⁴⁷ At the time, this was the largest-ever capture of weapons smuggled from Jordan. Earlier, in December 2022, Israeli authorities arrested two Israeli Bedouin brothers and a Palestinian from the northern West Bank on charges of smuggling weapons and ammunition that was then sold to members of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the West Bank and criminals in southern Israel.⁴⁸ According to Israeli prosecutors, the brothers knowingly sold weapons to the terrorist group—including around 150,000 rounds of ammunition, dozens of weapons parts, and hundreds of M-16 rifles—noting that they met with Palestinian Islamic Jihad

operatives on a regular basis over an extended period of time.⁴⁹

The overwhelming majority of smuggled weapons coming in through Jordan are handguns, which account for about 90 percent of smuggled weapons seized at or near the Jordan-Israel border, according to the IDF.⁵⁰ Many of the seized handguns are produced by Delta Defence Group,⁵¹ which has reportedly flooded the markets in Syria and Iraq in recent years, according to weapons research group *Silah Report*.⁵² The commander of Magen reports weapons dealers in Syria and Iraq enter into business deals with counterparts in Jordan who hire Jordanian smugglers to move guns into Israel and the West Bank.⁵³ They have no problem selling these weapons to terrorists or organized criminals, but they themselves are criminals driven by profit rather than violent extremist ideology.⁵⁴

Not all reported smuggling cases fully document what weapons were seized at or near the Jordan-Israel border, but collating the data from those that do reveals over 951 weapons were seized from March 2021 to April 2023, including 719 handguns and 90 assault rifles. Without providing details other than the total number of weapons seized per year, the IDF reported in May 2023 that 143 were seized in 2021, 508 in 2022, and 342 in the first five months of 2023 (not including weapons parts, which appear in about 50 percent of smuggling runs).⁵⁵ Over the same time period, Jordanian authorities reportedly seized 70 weapons in 2021, 100 in 2022, and 30 in the first five months of 2023.⁵⁶

The other 10 percent of guns smuggled across the Jordan-Israel border are M-16 and AK-47 style assault rifles and shotguns, officials report.⁵⁷ Just a few years ago, most guns used in terror attacks in Israel and the West Bank were homemade “Carlo” submachine guns assembled in the West Bank.⁵⁸ Today, journalists regularly document West Bank militants roaming the streets with proper assault rifles. Many of these are stolen from IDF armories or sold on the black market by IDF soldiers,⁵⁹ but some are also smuggled into the country from Jordan. The authors’ dataset includes 14 smuggling cases involving large weapons (M-16s, AK-47s, and shotguns) that were intercepted or detected.⁶⁰ IDF officials state that, along with M-16 and AK-47 style assault rifles, authorities have also seized a small number of shotguns at or near the Israel-Jordan border.⁶¹ These types of weapons (M-16s, AK-47s, and shotguns), Israeli authorities maintain, almost always end up in the hands of terrorists.⁶²

The other commodity most being smuggled across Israel’s borders is drugs. In fact, one reason Israeli officials believe they have had more success thwarting arms smuggling from Jordan is an intelligence collection shift from drugs to guns. Another reason is the IDF’s decision to have Jordan Valley-based units focus more time and resources on patrolling the Jordanian border rather than the West Bank.⁶³ Of the 35 documented smuggling cases along this border, 33 involved weapons, three involved unspecified drugs valued at \$1.2 million total, and two involved the movement of cash (80,000 Jordanian dinar) or gold (unspecified amount).⁶⁴

The precise location of each smuggling operation from Jordan is often unknown. Both government press releases and media reports identify where arrests take place, which is typically near the border, but not where the actual cross-border smuggling occurred. As a result, some of the locations tracked in the authors’ dataset are located a few kilometers from the border and some are listed only as “Jordan Valley.” The vast majority of the smuggling attempts from Jordan occurred along the border north of the Dead Sea and south of the Sea of Galilee, either crossing directly into the northern West

Bank or into Israel between the area around Beit She'an and north to Hamat Gader.⁶⁵ Some smuggling locations are recurring, though new ones appear each month, according to an IDF official involved in counter-smuggling efforts.⁶⁶

Rarely do smugglers cross the border themselves, instead preferring to come up to the border fence and either throw bags of weapons over the fence or leave them there for someone on the other side to pick up after cutting a hole in the fence. In other cases, smugglers deposit bags of weapons or other contraband at a prearranged drop site in the narrow 'no-man's-land' that lies between the Jordan River border and the Israeli border fence set back from the river. At some points, the space between the border and the fence can be as wide as 100 meters. Smugglers then cut through the security fence, retrieve the weapons from the 'no-man's-land,' and supply the weapons to arms dealers.⁶⁷

Impact on Security and Public Safety

Jordan's Interior Minister Salameh Hammad has attributed the sharp rise in illegal weapons to the civil war in neighboring Syria.⁶⁸ The increase was spurred by both the influx of guns from places such as Iraq and the growth of narcotics-smuggling networks in southern Syria, which often also smuggle guns into Jordan.⁶⁹ Many of these smuggling routes became much harder to patrol as jihadi groups and, later, Syrian regime forces controlled the Syrian side of Jordan's northern border.⁷⁰ The flow of Captagon pills from Syria into Jordan has been widely reported, but weapons flow along these routes as well, with the drugs destined for the Gulf and the guns for the West Bank and Israel.⁷¹

In July 2022, Jordanian armed forces thwarted an attempt to smuggle 54 handguns, five shotguns, and ammunition from Syria.⁷² Because the Jordanian market is saturated with easily obtainable small arms, weapons are now being smuggled to Israel and the West Bank, where demand is high. Small arms reportedly cost about \$2,000 apiece in Jordan, but sell for about \$5,000 in the West Bank.⁷³ According to a report from November 2022, a bullet for an M16 previously cost as little as about 85 cents in the West Bank, but by late 2022 cost about \$5.50.⁷⁴ In February 2023, an illegal gun dealer in East Jerusalem told *The Washington Post* that 9mm bullets were selling on the black market for as much as \$10 apiece and handguns were running \$13,000 to \$23,000 depending on the type, condition, and age.⁷⁵ In contrast, the same weapon could be legally bought in Israel for around \$1,350 if one has a weapons license.⁷⁶

The sharp increase in prices appears to be a function of both the impact of counter-smuggling efforts, which have put some constraints on the supply of weapons and ammunition, and continuing high demand for weapons in Israel and the West Bank. In fact, demand is so high that guns are often smuggled across the border before buyers are lined up.⁷⁷ Militant groups in the West Bank have been especially active, including new groups unaffiliated with Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad and without access to these groups' arms caches. As the February 2023 terrorism wave spread, applications for gun licenses by Israelis spiked by 400 percent.⁷⁸ Increased crime in Israel has led to increased demand for weapons among criminal syndicates and civilians seeking the means to protect themselves. In 2023, 51 Israeli-Arabs were reportedly killed by organized criminal gangs in Galilee, the so-called Triangle bordering the northern West Bank and the Negev.⁷⁹ As one East Jerusalem gun dealer told *The Washington Post*, "Guns

are everywhere. You want a gun? You can buy a gun in an hour. You can buy a handgun. They're not cheap. You can even buy a machine gun, an assault rifle. They're very expensive. But demand is very high. So it is a very good business."⁸⁰

Israeli organized criminal networks are another source of violence and instability in the West Bank. In 2022, seven criminal gangs were active in Arab communities, and over 104 Palestinians were killed by organized gangs.⁸¹ Consequently, the demand for arms in the Arab community has risen because of unsafe conditions and easy access to weapons.

The influx of guns has factored in the sharp increase in terrorist activity in the West Bank. West Bank militants increasingly walk the streets openly brandishing M-4s, M-16s, and CAR-15 style rifles.⁸² As early as 2019, there were reports that militants tied to Fatah Tazim were purchasing weapons that had been smuggled through Jordan from Syria.⁸³ While most of these weapons are smuggled for profit without prejudice as to who purchases them, Iran has publicly claimed responsibility for some undetermined percentage of the weapons flow.⁸⁴ In August 2022, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander Major General Hossein Salami stressed the importance of supporting Palestinians engaged in jihad against Israel, adding that just as Iran managed to send weapons to Gaza in the past, "the West Bank can be armed in the same way, and this process is happening."⁸⁵ General Salami continued on to praise the "unseen hands" getting weapons to Palestinians in the West Bank.⁸⁶

Smuggled weapons are flowing in from Jordan, but that is by no means the only source of black-market arms. Another problem is organized weapons and ammunition theft from IDF bases and the homes of IDF soldiers. In November 2022, for example, thieves stole approximately 70,000 bullets and 70 grenades from an IDF base in the north of the country.⁸⁷ Although this is a notable problem, there have only been around 10 reported cases of weapons stolen from IDF bases between January 2021 and April 2023.⁸⁸ Overall, the IDF reported a downward trend in such thefts as base inspections increased,⁸⁹ but weapons stolen from the IDF remain a primary source for assault rifles on the black market. An Israeli think tank found that between the weapons stolen from IDF bases and those smuggled through areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority, there are tens of thousands of illegal weapons in Israel's Arab communities.⁹⁰

Drug Smuggling Across the Egypt-Israel Border

On February 5, 2023, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Israel Police foiled an attempt to smuggle \$14 million (NIS 50 million) in drugs from Egypt by vehicle. Israeli forces confiscated 92 kg of heroin and cocaine and 28 kg of hashish from the vehicle. Bedouin smugglers in the Negev typically traffic marijuana and hashish grown in the Sinai Peninsula. In rare cases like this one, harder drugs such as cocaine and heroin have been smuggled as well.⁹¹ From November 2022 to May 2023, authorities identified, thwarted, or disrupted 18 known smuggling attempts along the

Egyptian border, seizing over 717 kg of drugs.^{92 h}

Smuggling along Israel's southern border with Egypt has also been a problem, though the number of detected smuggling attempts along this border has fallen since its peak in 2019-2020. Here, drugs are the primary illicit commodity smuggled across the border. The year 2022 saw an increase in attempted drug smuggling operations, according to the IDF, which reported approximately 800 "operational incidents" along Israel's various borders (a term that appears to include the 575 detected smuggling incidents and other, related 'operational incidents')—marking a significant increase from 2021.⁹³ The number of reported drugs smuggling attempts across the Egyptian border has steadily increased over several years, from 287 cases in 2016 to a peak of 726 cases in 2019, according to Israeli figures, before dropping significantly in 2021 and partially rebounding in 2022. (See Figure 4.) Israeli authorities said that, as of late 2022, there were typically one to two smuggling attempts a day along this border.⁹⁴

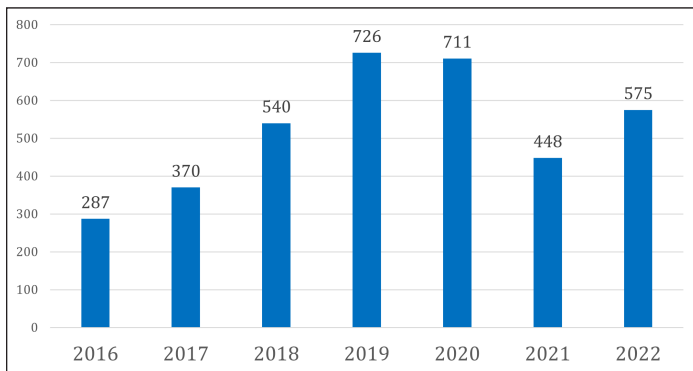


Figure 4: Identified/Thwarted/Disrupted Drug Smuggling Operations Per Year Along the Egypt-Israel Border. (IDF data relayed to the authors)⁹⁵

While some reports imply that the increase in drug smuggling is tied to terrorism,⁹⁶ evidence suggests otherwise.⁹⁷ Hamas has long smuggled weapons from Iran to the Gaza Strip via Sudan and the Sinai.⁹⁸ This study, however, focuses on smuggling along the Egyptian-Israeli border, not from Egypt directly into Gaza. Only in a small number of cases have terrorist groups engaged in smuggling operations along Israel's border with Egypt. The authors' dataset includes two such cases involving Hamas, one on land and one by sea, both involving weapons and equipment; but the overwhelming majority of smuggling is carried out by criminal organizations.⁹⁹ Israeli authorities assess that neither Hamas in the Gaza Strip nor Islamic State-Sinai has pursued smuggling drugs into Israel as a means of making money. Iran, they assess, has not done so either.¹⁰⁰

As in Jordan, smugglers in Egypt and Israel largely come from the Bedouin tribes that span the countries' borders. Israeli and Egyptian authorities point to increased identified, thwarted, or disrupted drug smuggling from 2016-2020¹⁰¹ (Figure 4), which is the result of several factors including long-term neglect by the Egyptian government and rampant unemployment. In 2013, a tribal leader pointed to unemployment as the primary driver

behind crime and violent extremism in the Sinai.¹⁰² Even jobs tied to smuggling goods from Sinai into Gaza dwindled over time. Egypt flooded tunnels under the popular Rafah crossing, collapsing the tunnels and the illicit economy they created.¹⁰³ For many, this left two options: either joining tribal militias being paid by the government to fight the Islamic State or joining criminal networks that cultivate marijuana in the Sinai and smuggle drugs into Israel. Between the two, smuggling pays far better and is the only growth industry in the area.¹⁰⁴ This was not the case until 2014, when Israel built a sophisticated security fence along key tracts of the border to prevent human trafficking. Until then, there was no need for, and thus market for, dedicated smugglers, because anybody could smuggle items across the then-open 200 km border with an easily-breached fence. The new fence includes sophisticated sensors and is 5 to 8 meters high, depending on the location.¹⁰⁵

Egypt's counterinsurgency campaign against Islamic State-Sinai, largely carried out through the so-called Sinai Tribal Union and other "armed civilian groups," sputtered along for a while but began making significant gains with "Operation Sinai 2018."¹⁰⁶ Perhaps counterintuitively, however, cracking down on Islamic State-Sinai opened established smuggling routes in North Sinai that were effectively denied to smugglers while the Islamic State controlled those areas. Due to the lack of economic opportunities in the region, some of these tribesmen, now better armed, are believed to have turned to smuggling once the Islamic State in Sinai was effectively defeated.¹⁰⁷ This helps explain the 2019-2020 spike in detected instances of smuggling of drugs at the Egyptian border.

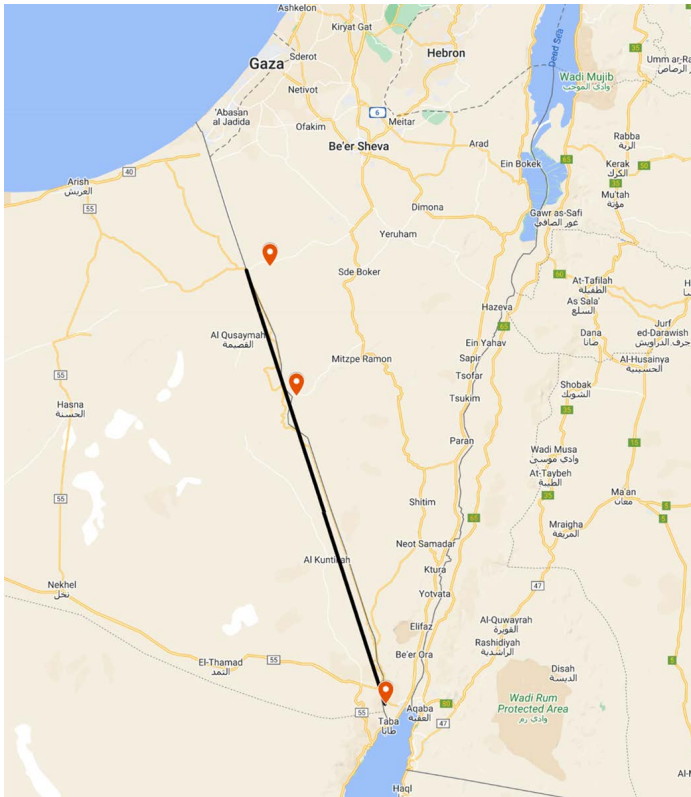
What Is Smuggled, and Where?

The Egyptian-Israeli border runs for just over 200 km, along which there are several hotspots where most of the cross-border smuggling takes place. Three of the most significant hotspots are along a 140-km run of the border starting at the Nitzana border crossing (border stone 26) and running south to Mount Harif (border stone 49) and Mount Sagi (border stone 53). Smuggling also occurs further north, near the Kerem Shalom crossing at the point where the Israeli, Gaza, and Egypt borders meet, and closer to the city of Eilat and the Red Sea.¹⁰⁸ Most publicly reported cases, however, state that smugglings took place along the Egyptian border or in the territory of the IDF's Paran Regional Brigade, which was established in 2018 (part of a restructuring of the IDF's 80th "Edom" Division) for the specific purpose of guarding Israel's border alongside the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula.¹⁰⁹ The IDF also reports thwarting over 30 maritime smuggling attempts in 2022 emanating from Egypt, though it does not differentiate between those destined for Israel and those for the Gaza Strip.¹¹⁰

The topography of the Egypt-Israel border area favors smuggling, with its many dry river beds (*wadis*) that complicate surveillance and reconnaissance efforts by military and police and block lines of sight. Large water pipes run under some of the roads and provide cover. Periodic bluffs overlooking the border provide natural lookout spots for smugglers. On the Egyptian side of the border, smugglers emerge from staging areas around Jebel Khali and other mountains and cross the flat plateau that leads to the border fence. On the Israeli side, they do much the same, exiting from staging areas around Mount Hanif and Mount Sagi.¹¹¹

Of the 52 reported smuggling attempts across the Egypt-Israeli border in the authors' dataset, 49 involved drugs, with the remaining cases involving weapons and, in one case, \$390,000 in gold bars.¹¹²

h It is important to note that most of the open-source reporting of drug smuggling along the Israeli-Egyptian border, including government sources and media reports, does not specify the types of drugs smuggled. Sometimes it quantifies the amount of drugs seized by weight, and sometimes by estimated worth in dollars or shekels.



Map 2: Locations of interdicted/disrupted smuggling attempts along the Egypt-Israeli border (March 2021-April 2023). The line shows the wider area where smugglings most frequently occur according to Israeli officials interviewed by the authors. The red pins show smuggling hot spots.

Hashish and marijuana grown in Sinai are two commonly smuggled commodities, but smugglers are increasingly trafficking hard drugs such as cocaine and heroin. In 2022, for example, Israeli authorities seized five tons of hashish, cocaine, and other drugs worth some \$57 million. Many more drug-smuggling runs were not disrupted.¹¹³ Based on reported cases, over the past few years Israeli authorities have seized over 2,900 kg and an additional \$31 million worth of drugs (some cases are reported by weight, others by value).¹¹⁴ According to a March 2023 U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime report on the global cocaine market, cocaine seizures in Israel increased dramatically from 2017 to 2021.¹¹⁵ However, the total value of drugs smuggled into Israel reportedly dropped from \$4 billion in 2019 to \$1.86 billion in 2020.¹¹⁶ Israel initiated an interagency counter-smuggling initiative in 2020, Operation Negev Shield (Magen HaNegev), after which the numbers reportedly dropped further still, reaching \$370 million in 2021 and \$85 million in 2022.¹¹⁷

Though much smaller in scale, there is also some limited smuggling from Israel into Egypt. This typically involves marijuana plant seeds first smuggled into Israel from the Netherlands onward into Egypt for cultivation there. The final product is later smuggled back into Israel for sale.¹¹⁸

As the pace of disruption rose, disrupting the flow of drugs in both directions across the border, smugglers developed more sophisticated and aggressive tactics to move their product. Countermeasures to evade counter-smuggling efforts include investing in surveillance and intelligence collection, fine-tuning smuggling tactics at the border and developing aggressive

maneuvers for situations when military or police encounter smugglers.¹¹⁹

“Smugglers don’t have much,” an Israeli official explains, “but they do have time and patience.”¹²⁰ Days ahead of a planned smuggling operation at the Egypt-Israel border, smugglers send spotters to a bluff overlooking a preferred smuggling spot along the border or along the roads leading to it to track security forces’ patterns of movement and determine when it is safe to approach the border. If needed, they will move on to another area or wait until security forces leave to patrol another area.¹²¹ At an abandoned Israeli military outpost on a ridge overlooking the Egypt-Israel border, the IDF found old mattresses, water bottles, and signs of a fire where spotters camped out for days to observe a preferred smuggling spot along the border. Smugglers also dispatch people to sit just outside the line of vision of the IDF’s stationary surveillance cameras, which are located sporadically along the border at smuggling hotspots, and report via walkie-talkie when the cameras are pointed away so that smugglers can move unnoticed.¹²²

The criminal networks running drugs across the Egypt-Israel border also invest significant sums of money to hire teams of couriers, drivers, lookouts, and scouts, as well as operations officers to oversee each smuggling operation. Smuggling operations officers seek financially unstable Bedouin in the Negev Desert area who have either completed their IDF service or still serve in the IDF, including as trackers in anti-smuggling efforts, to obtain advanced knowledge of Israeli patrols and other intelligence.¹²³ According to IDF figures, on the Israeli side of the border a courier is paid \$15,000-\$20,000 per smuggling run, a spotter sent to serve as a lookout at a border crossing before a smuggling operation is paid \$5,000-\$10,000, and the operations officer overseeing the smuggling attempt makes \$10,000 per bag smuggled. On the Egyptian side of the border, the pay runs much less, with couriers earning \$1,500-\$2,000 per smuggling run, a spotter making \$500-\$1,000, and the operations officer \$5,000 per smuggling attempt.¹²⁴

While smugglers along the Jordanian border operate in small groups, one-way smugglers along the Egyptian border cope with increased patrols is to overwhelm them by sending groups of up to 30 people at a time. Egyptian forces—drawn not from the regular military but the Ministry of Interior’s Central Forces—tend to be lightly armed, lack floodlights to illuminate the border, and have old communications systems. Large groups of well-armed smugglers can effectively keep such Egyptian forces at bay while they withdraw from the border fence and escape. A typical smuggling run takes just two to three minutes at the border fence, with smugglers converging from either side to send and receive goods. A long smuggling operation might run up to eight minutes, but they are intended to be quick to decrease the risk of disruption or capture.¹²⁵

At the Egypt-Israel border, smugglers typically throw bags of drugs and other contraband over the security fence,¹²⁶ which is five meters tall in most places but six to eight meters tall at smuggling hotspots along a 17 km stretch of the border.¹²⁷ At its higher points, smugglers rush the border with ladders so they can toss bags over the fence.¹²⁸ In other cases, smugglers run “ATM operations,” where a square is cut out of the border fence and goods are passed through to a counterpart on the other side who retrieves goods as he or she might retrieve money from an ATM.¹²⁹

Smugglers operating on the Egypt-Israel border tend to be more violent in cases when they are engaged by authorities and have large quantities of drugs in their possession. In some cases,

smugglers run off into the wilderness carrying the drugs and leave their vehicles behind. The cost of losing a car is the cost of business, as long as the drugs are not confiscated.¹³⁰

Smugglers on the Egypt-Israel border are growing increasingly sophisticated and are known to operate quadcopter drones to collect intelligence and evade patrols.¹³¹ In several cases, smugglers have managed to steal IDF tactical radios to broadcast music or gibberish noise and disrupt Israeli military communications during a smuggling operation.¹³² Smugglers, who typically drive sports utility vehicles (SUVs) or ATVs, can outrun both Egyptian and IDF patrols across the sandy terrain. They have also been known to run chains or place other impediments across roads to disable military or police vehicles, which must stick to the roads. Smugglers about to be cornered and desperate to evade capture have been known to attempt to ram military and civilian vehicles with their SUVs.¹³³

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The U.S. Department of State's 2012 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report listed Israel as having "a significant domestic demand for illegal drugs."¹³⁴ That demand has only intensified with the spread of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns. According to the 2022 World Drug Report, many countries, including Israel, reported overall growth in drug consumption and relapses since the start of the pandemic.¹³⁵ From 2018 to 2022, marijuana addiction increased by nearly 50 percent in Israel,¹³⁶ and by the end of 2022, the marijuana industry had grown to around 1.8 billion NIS (almost \$500,000).¹³⁷

While the majority of drugs consumed in Israel are smuggled into the country from abroad, domestic marijuana production is on the rise, with organized criminal groups growing the illegal crop in greenhouses in parts of the Negev desert classified as live firing zones.¹³⁸ Much as marijuana farms first popped up in isolated parts of U.S. national parks,¹³⁹ Bedouin criminals now grow marijuana in the desert where civilians are less likely to interfere.¹⁴⁰ While authorities are aware of this trend and now proactively cracking down on it, growers have become brazen as well. In 2020, Israeli Border Police found 27,500 marijuana plants growing at the edge of an IDF training base in the Negev. The plants were grown in trenches dug in a live fire zone with beige nets spread over them to make the area blend in with the desert.¹⁴¹

Aside from the public health threat posed by the flow of drugs into the country, Israeli officials are concerned about the increasingly aggressive and militant nature of these drug smuggling operations.¹⁴² Drug smuggling is so lucrative that criminal networks are willing to engage Israeli military and police in gun battles to protect their smuggling routes.¹⁴³ Because of this, and because authorities do not know if what is being smuggled is drugs or weapons until they arrive on the scene, the IDF take the lead on counter-smuggling along the Israeli side of the Egyptian border, not the Israeli police.¹⁴⁴

In December 2022, Israeli soldiers shot dead a suspect attempting to smuggle drugs from Egypt after smugglers fired at the soldiers as they arrived at the scene.¹⁴⁵ In January 2022,

nine drug- smuggling attempts took place across the Egyptian border on the same night. When IDF forces arrived at the various smuggling scenes, the smugglers fired at them. That night, soldiers confiscated over 400 kg of drugs worth approximately \$2.2 million (NIS 8 million).¹⁴⁶ Two Israeli Border Police officers were injured when Egyptian forces mistook them for smugglers.¹⁴⁷ In February 2023, smugglers fired some thirty bullets at a base near the Nahal Lavan (White River) hiking trail close to the Egyptian border. In the nearby Israeli border community of Kadesh Barnea, farmers complained that chickens were killed in the crossfire when they shot at the vehicles of arriving Israeli forces.¹⁴⁸

Conclusion

In early June 2023, Israeli forces thwarted a smuggling attempt in the middle of the night, and hours later, an Egyptian police officer crossed the border into Israel and shot and killed three Israeli soldiers. This case along with that of Jordanian Parliamentarian Imad al-Adwan attest to the increased need for cross-border security cooperation.¹⁴⁹

Al-Adwan's arrest came on the heels of increasingly strained Israeli-Jordanian relations, including clashes at the Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary in Jerusalem on April 5, 2023, and comments on March 18, 2023, by a right-wing Israeli minister, who suggested that the idea of a Palestinian people is an "invention" and posed with a map of Greater Israel that included modern-day Jordan.¹⁵⁰ And yet, both countries have sought to handle the arrest in a professional manner that would prevent further destabilization of the relationship between Jerusalem and Amman. The Jordanian foreign ministry released a statement noting it was following up on reports of the arrest with the relevant authorities.¹⁵¹ Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen went out of his way to state that he did not ascribe blame for MP al-Adwan's actions to either the government of Jordan or the Jordanian Parliament, but rather saw al-Adwan's behavior as "a foolhardy criminal act."¹⁵² After the June 2023 shooting at the Egypt-Israel border, Egyptian Defense Minister Mohamed Zaki called Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant to offer condolences and discuss measures to prevent such tragedies in the future.¹⁵³

The reason all sides displayed such restraint in these cases is that the three countries work diligently to prevent terrorist and criminal activities across and along their shared borders. It should therefore not come as a surprise that while al-Adwan was detained in Israel, Jordanian authorities ran a parallel investigation and arrested several suspects believed to be involved in the smuggling.¹⁵⁴ In early May 2023, Jordan revoked al-Adwan's legal immunity and Israel deported him back to Jordan to stand trial.¹⁵⁵ Following the June 2023 shooting at the Egypt-Israel border, a senior Egyptian officer quickly visited the scene of the attack in Israel and IDF officials confirmed that the Egyptian army was fully cooperating in the investigation.¹⁵⁶ Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Egyptian President al-Sisi spoke on the phone and reportedly agreed to conduct a joint investigation into the incident.¹⁵⁷

Israeli, Jordanian, and Egyptian authorities all report a sharp rise in cross-border smuggling over the past couple of years.¹⁵⁸ The authors' dataset underscores the assessments of these officials, showing a significant increase in identified, thwarted, and disrupted smuggling across Israel's borders with Jordan and Egypt, though the number of detected smuggling attempts across the Egyptian border was lower in 2021-2022 than its peak in 2019-

i The scheme does not always work, however, in part because Israelis have taken to camping in live firing zones when they are not in use. Shakked Auerbach and Daniel Tchetchik, "All the Fun Things Israelis Do in Army Firing Zones (Gun Training Not Included)," *Haaretz*, August 17, 2017.

2020. The downward slope in detected smuggling attempts since late 2022 (see figure 1) suggests that counter-smuggling efforts may be having the intended impact; however, it is still too early to draw firm conclusions. Some of the counter-smuggling success is attributable to enhanced cooperation between Israeli military and security agencies and the completion of border defenses. Furthermore, Israeli, Jordanian, and Egyptian officials all stressed to the authors the importance of their cross-border coordination and cooperation.¹⁵⁹

Officials are increasingly willing to make such statements publicly. Enhanced counter-smuggling efforts are the result of a “deep understanding by decision-makers — both the police and government — that the Jordanian border is the most intensive source of fuel for crime in the Arab community, and for terror,” the head of Magen explained in 2022.¹⁶⁰ “Strong cooperation” with Egyptian counterparts along the Egypt-Israel border has effectively constrained weapons and drug smuggling across that border, an Israeli officer noted that same year.¹⁶¹ Indeed, officials see counter-smuggling and border security as an area of growth with “lots of areas of potential regional and international cooperation.”¹⁶²

Multilateral bodies such as NATO agree. In May 2023, NATO and Jordan held talks that focused on how the military alliance could help Jordan secure its borders.¹⁶³ In the authors’ view, Egypt should be included in such discussions with particular focus on upgrading the training and equipment for the Egyptian Ministry of Interior’s Central Forces, its equivalent of Border Police, which often operate without basic necessities like modern communication gear and floodlights.¹⁶⁴

In the final analysis, Israel, Jordan, and Egypt all see counter-smuggling and border security as a shared interest and a security function they perform for their own benefit. Many of the circumstances that have contributed to the increase over the last two years in detected smuggling are highly likely to persist, from regional instability and the ready availability of guns to the massive profits criminals stand to make from narcotics sales. Commercial incentives mean that smugglers will likely become more violent and more creative, from digging tunnels under border fences to deploying drones to transport packages over them. Cooperation between the three countries will continue to be crucial. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Ravi Satkalmi, Director of Intelligence, United States Capitol Police

By Don Rassler

Ravi Satkalmi is an intelligence executive with over 15 years of experience in national security, counterterrorism, and law enforcement. He serves as the Director of Intelligence for U.S. Capitol Police (USCP), leading a team charged with identifying and interdicting threats to the U.S. Capitol and members of Congress.

He previously served with the New York City Police Department for over a decade, departing in 2022 as Director for Intelligence Analysis. In that role, Satkalmi helped lead the core analytical unit integral to the department's counterterrorism investigations, shaped the NYPD's understanding of strategic threats, and established analytical efforts to combat gun violence.

Satkalmi has also served as a South Asia analyst for the Department of Defense specializing in political and military matters, during which he completed two deployments to Afghanistan supporting senior leadership in theater.

Satkalmi holds an MA in International Relations from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and a BS in Business Management from the Peter J. Tobin College of Business at St. John's University in New York. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and a Fulbright fellow.

CTC: You serve as the director of intelligence at the U.S. Capitol Police (USCP). You assumed this role in April 2022, so you recently hit the one-year mark. Can you unpack the work of your team, your mission? What are the functions of the intel shop at USCP?

Satkalmi: The best way to think about this is to understand the scope of the mission of Capitol Police, which people intuitively understand to be protecting members of Congress here in D.C. and the Capitol and these wonderful buildings around us. But it's actually much broader than that. It entails protecting the members, the staff, and visitors who come up on the Hill, but also members and their family across the country. So it's a fairly large footprint that we have to cover from a protective standpoint and from an intel standpoint, which presents a lot of challenges.

We are focused here in D.C. We have two field offices—one in Tampa, one in San Francisco, both of which are relatively new—but we do not necessarily have the national footprint that is commensurate with the scale and the breadth of the threat that we face. And so our job as an intel shop is to solve for that problem. We have to figure out how to do that most effectively.

We're protecting 535 members of Congress and their families, as I mentioned, so that is a lot of people that we're responsible for. We do that in any number of ways, including doing what anybody in the business will understand as OSINT social media analysis and

threat intel work based on what's available online and through open sources. And this is largely an open-source threat environment. So we're doing a lot of that work to proactively identify threats and threat trends, which will be familiar to a lot of your readership as best practices. The Department also does a lot of coordination work with local law enforcement. That's how we solve for X. If we're not there, somebody's there. We reach out, build those relationships, and ask them to step in to provide protective services where we can't. A lot of that coordination is coming through my shop as well.

We are looking to continue to grow our own subject matter expertise on the full spectrum of anti-government threats and anti-government violence across the board. And I have said this probably *ad nauseam* to my team, but our goal is essentially to be the premier intel shop for anti-government violence, full stop. We are sitting on a vast trove of threat information that's being sent to us by our members' offices and that we are finding on our own. And the key distinction here is we get it from all sides all the time. We're protecting Democrats; we're protecting Republicans, people of all political persuasions. And they all have enemies, and they're all making threats. It provides a pretty robust dataset for us to think through trends and what may be coming down the pike, and I would argue our biggest responsibility is to cull through that data and identify those trends.

CTC: It's hard to talk about the U.S. Capitol Police intelligence and not talk about January 6 as a watershed moment for the country, for the U.S. government across the board, for U.S. Capitol Police generally, and the intelligence division specifically. You were brought on after the event, in April 2022, and there has been a lot written about January 6 and some of the challenges, some of the failures across different government components and the U.S. Capitol Police recognizes that there's a need for change and evolution. That's part of the reason why you were brought on, I'm sure. When you think about the key lessons that the U.S. Capitol Police has learned from January 6 and what led to it, how has the posture of your work on the intelligence team been evolving to prevent a future event like that or for other related threats?

Satkalmi: I spend a lot of time thinking about that. I have to approach it with a degree of humility because obviously I was not here, and many of my colleagues were, and they've got a lot of perspective to bring to that question. One of the first challenges I had [was] to understand how we as a shop were operating beforehand, what the trajectory of the shop was going into January 6, and then where we need to go from that point forward as we think strategically about building out the team.

There's a couple of things that stood out to me, not necessarily because of January 6th, but I think would go a long way to help plug some gaps. The first thing is making sure that the intel apparatus is



Ravi Satkalmi

at the ground level, integrated into the operational world of Capitol Police in a way that makes it unthinkable two years from today that we didn't have an analyst doing X or an analyst working on Y. It is important to me that the analytical and intel pieces become part of the cultural DNA of Capitol Police. That is a message that people understand and have bought into even before I got here, up the chain, and I think everybody is supportive of that. The question now is how we make that happen and finding those opportunities to integrate at the lowest level possible. It should be almost impossible to do your work here and not have an intel component inform what you're doing. So that is a huge step that we want to take and the direction that we're moving.

Secondly is making sure we are continuing to develop key relationships around the community in D.C., but also as I mentioned, given our national scope, that we are developing those relationships around the country. [That] is just as important. We've done a really good job of having those relationships in place here, with some of our key partners being MPD [Metropolitan Police Department], the Secret Service, U.S. Parks Police, the Supreme Court, and the FBI. That we have on lock. It's looking to replicate that across the country so that we're seeing not only what's in the District, but what's developing in places where our protectees have their district offices, state offices, and constituencies. We need to understand that. That's another lane of effort for us.

CTC: The USCP Strategic Plan for 2021 – 2025¹ acknowledges that 21st century technologies have changed how terrorists operate and talks about aspects that are obviously very relevant to you and your team. Things like prioritizing data analysis,

technology and tools, partnerships, as you mentioned. As you think about technology, tools, and data, how has the work of the intel team been evolving? Are there specific examples that speak to those changes, and challenges?

Satkalmi: This would be the third point to my previous answer: technology and identifying the gaps that we have in our view of the threat landscape and finding ways to fill them. Of course, technology is a huge piece of that, and so we acquire additional tools to help broaden our aperture in terms of what's out there from a threat perspective and to better inform us of where we need to be looking for the next threat vector. But the other piece, and it goes back to what I was saying earlier, is doing more with the data that we already have internally. For us, and this is true for any organization that is in the threat mitigation space, is to think about what you have that is unique, that adds value to the community. As I mentioned before, for us, that is this trove of threats data that is reported to us. Like I said, it's a large volume, but it's also exceedingly diverse. One of my goals is to be able to start culling through that in a systematic, disciplined way to start extracting value in a way that helps inform not just us but the broader community about what the threat is looking like: What is it that we're seeing in terms of tactics, ideology, motivation, actor, all those types of things. Nobody else has that data; we do. And to translate that into value for everybody else is going to be critical.

We had one of our analysts do a first deep dive into all of the 2022 data and just take a look at it. It was a manual process. So we talk about tech tools: This is something that we need to automate, and we're moving in that direction. We want to efficiently be able to answer questions [like]: What we can say about when threats spike vis-à-vis mentions on social media, vis-à-vis key political or sociological developments in the United States? How do those things map, and what does that mean for us [regarding] deploying resources to protect the people and places we're responsible for? I thought that was a good exercise; there was a proof of concept to say that this data is there and we can start answering these kinds of questions. That's something I want to continue to move forward on. It's one of those things that I want to institutionalize as a way of dealing with the data we have.

CTC: Yes, there's a lot of power in the context of data and the longitudinal look to help us evaluate and understand change. As you know, the broader counterterrorism community is, given the shift in priorities and being a bit more risk-accepting in certain ways when it comes to international terrorism, trying to navigate how we optimize the data that we have and get more out of it and understand it more. A lot of that conversation is oriented around this issue of indicators and warnings. You mentioned the pilot data project, are there partners that you have or entities that you're looking at to say, 'We like what they're doing. We have a unique mission, and we need to adapt it or adjust it, but we want to learn more from this entity when it comes to data and data analysis' and extracting that type of information and trends you mentioned?

Satkalmi: From a data analysis perspective, I'm all about finding partners that are doing this well in the government or outside of it. NCTC [National Counterterrorism Center] produces its Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators guide that lists dozens of flags

to look out for. USCP also participates in the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit to get additional insight into what motivates an actor to violence. And there are a lot of think-tanks that are looking at large datasets to extrapolate and quantify trends: New America Foundation, the George Washington University Program on Extremism, RAND, for example. I would love to be able to contribute to this body of research using our own data—and there's support for doing that here.

But, generally speaking, if you ask anybody to list their top-five indicators of concern, the lists are going to be pretty similar. And I think people have a good understanding of what's a red flag, what is maybe a yellow [flag]. The challenge at this point isn't trying to identify what some of those flags are, because I believe the community has a good understanding of what those are. It's being able to find it in the first place, and that's where the security community is struggling. The attack on [former Speaker of the House Nancy] Pelosi's husband is a good example of that. [In mid-May] an individual took a baseball bat to a district office in Virginia and carried out an act of violence.² How do you find those people is the question, right? That's getting harder. But if we have the data, we know the indicators. We can do the exercise.

CTC: And how do you do it in the American environment, where there is protection of civil liberties.

Satkalmi: Yes, and the other part that is making this difficult is [that] the general acceptance of violent rhetoric and violence as a tool is at a higher level now, and so it's hard to pick out when something becomes a threat. The way that I think about it is if you're at the ocean and it's low tide, you can see what's out there: I'm not going to step there; I'm not going to swim over there. You can see the dangers. But when the water level rises and everybody's angry, you stop seeing it. Threats stop sticking out, and people don't know what they need to report on anymore. You say, 'See something, say something' 20 years ago, great. But now, a lot of the stuff you're seeing—particularly violent rhetoric—has almost been normalized in a way that makes it unexceptional.

CTC: Sea level rises is a helpful way to frame it, just how the scale of issues to look at has changed in that regard and that makes it, as you mentioned, just harder to identify out of that bigger pool which of those individuals are going to be the individuals that are going to go violent. It's a tricky thing to do. You mentioned that the vision for the USCP's intelligence team is to be the premier intel shop for anti-government extremism. That makes a lot of sense. When your team looks at the terrorism and extremism threat landscapes, what do those landscapes look like? Can you talk a little bit about the diversity of that landscape? And more specifically, the types of actors that you are most concerned about?

Satkalmi: The diversity of the landscape is going to be familiar to a lot of readers. The ideologies that we're thinking about from the lone actor, unaffiliated individual, it spans the gambit. We've got everything from the left to the right. We've seen it from all sides here. We've had January 6th. We have the shooting at the baseball game practice in 2017 in which [Congressman Steve] Scalise was injured.³ We've had attacks coming from people that are ideologically difficult to pin down. They don't like the government,

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and they are going to do something about it. It could be informed by a range of different thoughts about what the government is not doing or is doing that motivates some to action, but it's not necessarily coming from a coherent book of thought. It's just *this* is the thing. Identifying these actors is increasingly difficult. The conspiracies are what concern me most because they have this way of seeding themselves in the general population. We talked about the sea level rising; I think that seeding is a contributing factor.

That's just talking about people that are consuming hateful ideology and deciding that they're going to act on their own, but of course, there are state actors that we are obviously concerned about. Iran specifically is a very capable actor that has proven willing to try and pull off an attack on our shores, pretty brazenly at that. You had the [John] Bolton assassination plot most recently⁴ or the attempted kidnapping and assassination of the Brooklyn-based journalist, Masih Alinejad.⁵ There's the Russian plot to target a CIA informant down in Miami in 2020⁶ or the Chinese setting up their own police stations to target dissidents.⁷ There's a brazenness that is prevalent among some of our most ardent state actor foes in crossing lines that maybe they weren't going to cross 10 years ago. And we're protecting people that are caught in the crosshairs. That's a whole other level of concern that we have to deal with.

But that is just physical threats. Now we're talking about counter-intelligence threats: How do you protect against that? We've got the bedrock of American democracy that we are, in fact, protecting, and all the processes, information, and people that go with it. You have to try to get ahead of that to get a better understanding of who is targeting us, how, why, and what they're going to do with that information. That is a huge challenge.

Then [there's] cyber, which feeds each one of these different threat streams but is also a threat stream unto itself. So, it's a huge threat landscape. We have to look at everything from every angle. Our challenge is to stay ahead of it all. And [that speaks to] the need to have the relationships I mentioned before. We're not going to be the expert in all these things. We need to rely on our friends to help us figure this out and help us respond. And we're doing that.

CTC: You mentioned the sea level rising and how there appears to be a normalization of violent rhetoric or extremist rhetoric and also just an embrace of violence, and that's reflected in some of the threats against members of Congress that we've seen. You have your chief here at USCP on record saying that over the past several years, threats against members are "historically high."⁸ For the last year that USCP has released data, in 2022, there was a decrease in the number of threat investigations by USCP, but looking at the last couple of years, you can see in the numbers that it's still quite high.⁹ As a result of the uptick, your chief also made the comment that it "has resulted in a necessary expansion of, not only investigative capabilities, but ... protection responsibilities as well."¹⁰ And he also talked about how "everyone continuing to decrease violent rhetoric across the country is the best way to keep everyone safe."¹¹ That seems like a very tricky thing to do. How have you been trying to navigate that challenge?

Satkalmi: I don't know that we can. We don't have control over that dial, unfortunately. I wish we did, but we don't. The Chief is right: We are at an elevated threat level. The number of investigations into threats or concerning communications [per year] was about 7,500 when we closed out 2022; it was about 9,600 the year before, but that was coming after January 6th and a particularly trying and tense time in our national political discourse. So it's come down a little, but as a point of comparison, it was under 4,000 five years ago. So certainly a large increase, and we're going into what's going to be undoubtedly a super contentious election cycle. And I expect that number to shoot right back up, and the fact that the baseline is now 7,500 and not, say, 3,500 is concerning. Again, rising sea level. The volume presents a challenge for us both in terms of managing the caseload but also identifying the ones we need to focus on.

I actually don't know how it gets better. I think that is a whole-of-society conversation that is beyond my role here. The challenge here is fundamentally different than that posed by 9/11. The risk is fundamentally different when we're discussing this kind of normalization of political violence against each other—an erosion of our civic norms—rather than a terrorist organization seeking to launch an attack from overseas. We're not going to drone our way to success here. Regardless of the cause or ideology, this pursuit of political violence will [require] a law enforcement response at the last few inches of that threat. But everything that comes before is a much, much deeper conversation for us as a society to bring that temperature down.

CTC: There is now a bunch of data, including on threats against members of Congress, that demonstrates how the sea has risen and that hopefully can help to influence the trajectory of things. You talked about a range of different threats, cyber and so forth. To what extent is your team concerned about bioterrorism? Several days after 9/11, as you remember, there was the Amerithrax episode, and that was a core issue the government had to deal with at that time. There's been a lot of technological change and innovation that's taken place in the field of biology to include synthetic biology.¹² So there's concern there. How much is that an issue that you are concerned about?

Satkalmi: We're absolutely concerned about it. It's baked into the way that we do business. You're right; you've got the Amerithrax

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incident that you're referring to. People are thinking about ways to deliver toxins. It's hard to do but there are some methods that are easier than others. It's something that we absolutely have to plan for and mitigate. The folks responsible for our HVAC [heating, ventilation, and air conditioning] or the folks that are doing our evacuation plans or the folks are thinking about intel and threat detection—that threat stream is baked into all of that decision making. And it has to be because even if it's not the threat vector that we see the most often, it's certainly one that has proven effective in the past.

CTC: You talked a lot about partners throughout this whole conversation. USCP is not a huge organization, and you mentioned how you need to rely on partners to cover the amount of threats and issues that your team is looking at. You have a unique mission. Who are your key peers and partners? And when you look around, particularly in the intelligence division for organizations and entities that you look for inspiration or to validate your efforts and where you're driving from a change perspective, who do you look to?

Satkalmi: We have so many, which we have to. Some of it is a function of necessity because the jurisdictional boundaries of D.C. itself are very challenging: You're looking at three different jurisdictions across the street. But our closest partners range from the local level to the federal level. So MPD is a huge partner for us. We can't protect Capitol Hill without making sure that we are coordinating with the Metropolitan Police Department. They've got resources, and they've got domain awareness here of the entire city. So they're a huge partner for us.

The Supreme Court [is] across the street. We are literally

adjacent to one another, so whatever threat they are facing, you just turn around and we're facing it as well. Threat actors don't make those kinds of jurisdictional distinctions. The Supreme Court police are partners that I have made a priority from the intel side. We're both making sure that we're building this relationship because we're both small so we're looking to come to the fight together.

U.S. Park Police are another key partner. The National Mall is on the other side of us. Same rationale and justification. They are responsible for large swaths of this area and have a ton of experience in terms of protest groups: Who's a problem? Who's not a problem? What's coming down the pike? And so they are a huge partner for us.

Secret Service, for obvious reasons: They're the ones that have the closest kinship with us in [terms of the] mission to protect elected officials; that's what's driving a lot of their work, and so we do look to them for how they operate from an intel perspective. It's another intelligence relationship that we've prioritized so that we can pick up the phone and ask, 'What are you seeing about X?' And we've been doing that in both directions, which is super helpful.

From an investigative standpoint, our biggest partner is the FBI. We have several Task Force Officers detailed to teams dealing with terrorism, cyber threats, and counterintelligence. They are the lead agency in investigating and bringing to trial the over 1,000 January 6 defendants that have been charged for their actions on that day. And their national reach helps us mitigate threats well outside the D.C. area.

DHS is a big partner for us, I should mention. We've got an analyst there that's over at I&A [Office of Intelligence and Analysis] working on the domestic terrorism threat. She just briefed their leadership on a product that we did in collaboration, which is a huge move forward to show number one, that we can produce finished intelligence that is useful to our Executive Branch IC counterparts, and two, that there's inherent value in these kinds of relationships.

The takeaway here is that we rely on a lot of people, and those relationships are critical for us. As I mentioned before, we are tightly networked here in D.C., and the next challenge is to export that model to other parts of the country. So we've been talking to the National Fusion Center Association about getting some analysts in the fusion centers across the country. That was a conversation that started before I even got here. We're continuing to move in that direction, choosing our locations based in part on the level of threats that we're getting from these places, and using those as launching pads to replicate this kind of networked relationships that we have here in the National Capital Region. This initiative is going to prove to be hugely important over the next five years.

CTC: Similarly, are there foreign partners you work with or look to?

Satkalmi: We have spoken with agencies from other Five Eyes countries that are protecting their legislative branches as well. I'm not as familiar with their operations as I am with our partners here in D.C., obviously, but it is clear that they are facing the same threats we are—and many of the same challenges mitigating them. It's a fascinating conversation to have, to overlay our respective authorities and resources over the threat picture to figure out what works and what doesn't in a rapidly evolving landscape.

CTC: You spent time at NYPD before your current role. How

“Thinking about how to turn information into intelligence in a way that is useful from a law enforcement standpoint—from the officer on patrol to police executives—is one of the biggest lessons that I took away from NYPD. Just as important is the integration of the analysts with the operational and investigative missions of the agency at the ground level ... One of the approaches I'm trying to replicate here in a much broader scale is making sure that each one of USCP's critical lines of effort has an intel component that is supporting it. [This] is something that I saw work well at NYPD and that I'm bringing over here.”

has your time at NYPD impacted and influenced your work here at USCP intel?

Satkalmi: From a technical standpoint, what I learned from NYPD that is directly applicable here is how to approach intelligence from a law enforcement standpoint versus an IC [intelligence community] Title 50 organizational standpoint. That understanding I don't think is intuitive for lots of people because as soon as you say intel, they're like, 'Oh, CIA.' It's like, no, intel as a discipline, not intel as in the Agency. Thinking about how to turn information into intelligence in a way that is useful from a law enforcement standpoint—from the officer on patrol to police executives—is one of the biggest lessons that I took away from NYPD. Just as important is the integration of the analysts with the operational and investigative missions of the agency at the ground level. To go back to one of my earlier points, one of the approaches I'm trying to replicate here in a much broader scale is making sure that each one of USCP's critical lines of effort has an intel component that is supporting it. [This] is something that I saw work well at NYPD and that I'm bringing over here.

The other aspects are more personal, which is I went to NYPD thinking I was going to spend two or three years there: maybe do this thing and then go back to D.C. where the 'real' intel jobs are. I stayed for 11 years, and that [was] because they kept me challenged. I thought “there's enough interesting work happening here that it's not worth walking away.” The shop that I came from at NYPD is full of super smart people doing super cool things, and that certainly influenced the way that I feel an intel shop should work—collaboratively, asking the right questions, and finding innovative means to answer them in a way that is relevant to the agency that we are serving. You're not doing those pie-in-the-sky, abstract exercises, but you are literally answering questions that are going to impact operations tomorrow. That's hugely important—and motivating.

NYPD is actually the first place where I was out professionally as a gay man. I started NYPD in the closet as I had been previously in my work life. A few close colleagues knew, but I wasn't open about it. But I decided to come out publicly as New York hosted World Pride in 2019 and I was provided the opportunity to provide a security briefing to the community. Because of that milestone, U.S. Capitol Police is the first place I've ever worked where I walked into the role assuming everybody knew. The support I received from NYPD had a lot to do with that, from my immediate bosses to the chiefs to the people that I was working with every day. That gave me the confidence when I was interviewing for this job to speak openly about my work with the LGBTQ+ community and essentially say this is who you are getting if you offer me the job. Just assuming everybody knows is empowering in a very real way; to not have to think about who knows and who doesn't is freeing. So that is something else that NYPD gave me that I was able to bring here.

CTC: You've blazed some trails through your career. You just talked about coming out as openly gay at NYPD. You've written a little bit about this, but I'm just curious through your time at NYPD and to who you are today, who did you look at as role models?

Satkalmi: It's a good question. So this is not really a family business. Although there's a big asterisk that comes with that and that is my dad's father, who actually died before I was born but who was in law enforcement in India. And so every time I show [my] dad the badge, he gets a kick out of it. It's still in the family, so there's that super personal element of it, which provides some grounding. But I made the decision to come into national security after college. I was brought up by my parents valuing public service, community service. My dad is a social worker; my mom is a librarian. They are very civic minded, and they still are very involved in community activities. I also had a very impactful junior high school biology teacher and band leader, Mr. Harvey Moder, who was an American Legion member, World War II vet, and firefighter who instilled in his own way a sincere love of country and further nurtured in me this notion of giving back.

When I graduated college, I went into the private sector, and hated it because it was about counting your billable hours. This was not what I wanted to do with my life. So I made the decision to go back to school to pursue foreign policy, came to [John Hopkins] SAIS [School of Advanced International Studies] and that really launched my national security career. Throughout that career, I have to say that there have been several people that I worked under that I thought were excellent at developing talent and mentoring. Importantly, a lot of them were women, and to be a minority in this space that's generally male and straight, there was probably some unspoken kinship in which I was like, 'OK, there's space for others here.' I think about my first boss at DIA—who's still in the game there—she was a fantastic boss and a good shepherd of how I should be doing intel work. Rebecca [Weiner] at NYPD was a great mentor, somebody that was very open to discussing new ideas and thinking about intel from novel perspectives. So all of those people I carried forward with me and continue to influence how I do the job here.

CTC: If you were to offer advice about how to make the terrorism studies or counterterrorism space more inclusive,

what would that be? I think the community recognizes and has made changes, and there's been varying views on that. There's been criticism of that, in that it doesn't go far enough. What's your view? If you have recommendations for how to make our community more inclusive, what would that be?

Satkalmi: That's an excellent question. I think—and this is not true just in our industry but in society in general—people need to be open to different experiences that they may not have had themselves, and to be able to understand the value that can come from that. It's hard to do. If you don't know somebody who represents a different background than you, you're probably not going to be immediately comfortable with them. But you should challenge yourself. Think about what is maybe lacking [in] perspective in your organization and go out and seek it. As an example, USCP hosted its first ever Pride event this June. That's a huge step for the Department.

For those of us looking for inclusion, we have our own burden—and that's trying to point out behavior or practices that make us or others feel like we don't belong. We have to both educate and advocate, especially when in a leadership position. It's tricky and it demands patience and energy. But my experience tells me that there are partners in progress in unexpected places. And we need to be open to bringing them into the fold. Our Chief Diversity Officer has a saying that I really like: "Diversity includes you." Essentially, anybody can experience the challenge of belonging and anybody can be part of the solution. If we can check some of our own assumptions about who may be struggling and who effective change agents can be, we improve the likelihood for progress.

The other piece of advice I can offer to those striving for inclusion is pretty simple and that is to say that when presented with the choice, to choose being yourself and doing the job well. Because that will drive things forward.

CTC: Does it feel that there's been progress when you look at it over time, when you look at your career and where you started and then to now, that arc?

Satkalmi: I think so, although I'm a little biased because I had one anecdote and it's mine. It's the lens through which I have seen my career and the lens through which I have progressed through it. But I look at people that have helped shape my path, organizations such as GOAL [Gay Officers Action League, which is a gay/LGBTQ law enforcement organization], the fact that those organizations exist and have healthy memberships is a good sign that people are willing to stand up and be counted. And that is the most important act to make these places more inclusive. Because when it's abstract, it's not going to go anywhere. When people know that it's their staff member, their officer, their analyst that's struggling, that's when you see changes. So you need to stand up and be counted.

CTC: You grew up in Queens.

Satkalmi: I did.

CTC: If you were to offer advice to a younger kid from Queens, who grew up in your neighborhood who is interested in this career area, what would you tell them? What advice would you give that person?

Satkalmi: I've had this conversation with a couple of people, and they're like, 'Alright I should study intel.' My response reflexively is, no, you shouldn't study intel. If you want to succeed in this space, number one you need to know about the world, its histories, its cultures. You need to travel. You need to get out there. You need to be uncomfortable. Learn about the world in a way that makes you question what you assume. Because if you can't do that, you're not going to succeed in this job, in this career. There's no way. Traveling is a great way of doing that. Languages are a great way of doing that. Understanding people and their perspective is one of the top qualifications you can have to be good at intelligence. Because ultimately when we are doing intelligence work, it's not threat actors in the abstract, but people at the other end. So you need to be able to understand how they think, what they value, and how they perceive. You also need to know how to communicate. Learn to write and learn to write well. Learn to speak in public. That's hugely, hugely important. Because if you can't effectively explain why you think what you think, that's pretty much useless.

And you've got to get out of New York a little bit. There's a lot to learn west of the Hudson.

CTC: As you know, Queens has a very rich hip-hop history, and so I imagine you can't be a kid from Queens and not have your preference for an artist that you're a big fan of.

Satkalmi: Interesting. I'll tell you, growing up I was actually a huge country music fan, generally because it was one of the few things on the radio that my parents, who immigrated from India, could easily understand and, I think, relate to. (I was closeted about this in high school, too.) But you're right, coming out of Queens, obviously I grew up to the sounds of Run DMC and LL Cool J. A Tribe Called Quest was huge. They were pretty awesome and thankfully a big part of the soundtrack of my life in Queens. There's a rich history there of music. And Nicki Minaj is from Queens; she's super talented.

CTC: Nas is from Queens.

Satkalmi: Yeah, and you've got some contemporaries out there in Queens that are killing it. Lots of stuff going on in that small place.

CTC

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The General Directorate of Provinces: Managing the Islamic State's Global Network

By Tore Refslund Hamming

Despite dominating the headlines for almost a decade, surprisingly little is known about the Islamic State's internal organization. After the declaration of the caliphate in June 2014, the organization's center of gravity rested in the offices of the caliph and the spokesman and the Delegated Committee. Yet, with the deaths of successive caliphs, the territorial demise in the Levant, and the growing importance of its external provinces, the General Directorate of Provinces has emerged as the organization's most decisive body. This is the first exhaustive account of the Islamic State's most important, yet little understood, institution.

When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took the pulpit in Mosul's Great Mosque on July 4, 2014, in his first public appearance as the new self-declared caliph, his organization had its firm foundation in Iraq and Syria, a region referred to as the Levant. Growing out of al-Qa`ida in Iraq, the Islamic State had historically been preoccupied with a regional focus, but the caliphate declaration immediately augmented the group's geographical ambition to a global scale. In less than five months, the Islamic State would begin announcing its expansion to new countries around the Middle East, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa through its model of establishing provinces (*wilayat*).

In an attempt to manage its expanding organization and ensure the Levant-based leadership's command over its new provinces, the Islamic State established the institution of the Administration of Distant Provinces (ADP) that later evolved into the General Directorate of Provinces (GDP). While its Delegated Committee (*al-lajna al-mufawwada*)^a was in charge of defining the ideological course and clarifying issues of creed (*aqida*) and methodology (*manhaj*), the ADP was an administrative body intended to ensure cohesion and function as a focal point for communication across

a The Delegated Committee is the successor to the General Supervising Committee (*lajnat al-'ammat al-mushrifah*).

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borders that over time developed to become the global organization's most important institution. Although scarcely reported, it was of huge importance when a drone strike on February 20, 2023, killed Abu Sarah al-Iraqi while he was traveling on the Qah-Deir Hassan road in rural Idlib, northern Syria. Better known as Abd al-Raouf al-Muhajir, he was the emir of the Islamic State's Shura Council and the GDP, effectively making him the Islamic State's primary decision maker.¹

According to U.N. reporting, the ADP/GDP was developed as "a hub-and-spoke approach to the problem of the core's inability to maintain its previous level of command and control."² But over time, and especially under al-Baghdadi's successor Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi (the 'caliph' between October 2019 to February 2022), it has become an increasingly important institution within the 'caliphate' and now allegedly occupies a central position in the execution of external terrorist operations.³ Illustrating the concern in the counterterrorism community about the activities of the institution, on June 8, 2023, the U.S. State Department announced the designation of two GDP leaders as Specially Designated Global Terrorists. According to the State Department, "ISIS Core has relied on its regional General Directorate of Provinces (GDP) offices to provide operational guidance and funding around the world."^b

There remains little concrete information about the GDP's exact role and activities, but this article intends to collect and present the pieces in the puzzle that are available to shed light on arguably the most important institution within the Islamic State. The GDP will likely be central in the evolution of the Islamic State in terms of its internal cohesion and power balance and the terrorism threat it will pose in the future. This article begins with an overview of the GDP's origin, structural configuration, and institutional authority before proceeding with an examination of the first-known example of its interference in the Islamic State's transnational affairs in the context of Yemen. Over the following three sections, it describes the institution's decisive role in the group's military and economic affairs and its growing responsibility managing its external attack planning and execution, before offering some concluding observations.

In addition to numerous reports by the United Nations' Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, the primary empirical foundation for this article is a series of internal Islamic State documents that the author has compiled from the platforms Telegram and Rocket.chat. Especially within the past year, a number of documents detailing the affairs of the ADP/GDP have been

b The individuals in question were Abdallah Makki Muslih al-Rufay'i, the Iraq-based Islamic State GDP Bilad al-Rafidayn Office emir, and Abu Bakr ibn Muhammad ibn 'Ali al-Mainuki, a Sahel-based Islamic State GDP al-Furqan Office senior leader. Al-Rufay'i was previously the *wali* (governor) of the Islamic State's Iraq Province. "Terrorist Designation of ISIS General Directorate of Provinces Leaders," United States Department of State, June 8, 2023.

leaked by an account within al-Qa`ida's online ecosystem. Because of the competitive and conflictual relationship between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, there is a real risk that such documents are forgeries.⁴ Fake documents have been seen in the past.⁵ Hence, there is a need to carefully consider each leaked internal document to assess its veracity.

The account that has been leaking many of the documents is allegedly run by former Islamic State members who identified with the so-called Binaliyya wing^c of the Islamic State and left the group in protest against the dominance of a more extreme group, known as the Hazimiyah.⁶ In examining the documents, however, this author did not find any red flags indicating that the documents are forgeries. Whenever possible, information in the letters has been triangulated through alternative sources.

Origins, Structure, and Leadership of the Directorate

It is not known exactly when the ADP was established. The earliest document mentioning the institution dates back to September 28, 2015, but the document's top left corner states that it is document number 145 issued by the ADP. On this basis, it seems fair to assume that its origin dates back to the announcement of new Islamic State provinces in November 2014 or even earlier, going back to the announcement of the caliphate in late June that year.

The Islamic State has, since November 2014, been active announcing new provinces (wilayats) outside of the Levant. But it is likely that with the caliphate declaration several months prior, the organization identified a need to engage with like-minded groups outside of Syria and Iraq. Much of what is publicly known about the ADP/GDP comes from the United Nations' Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team and is based on U.N. member state intelligence, but this information is largely limited to confirming the institution's existence, including specific offices and responsibilities. This article offers the first in-depth look into the ADP/GDP. Through a detailed examination of the paper trail, a better understanding of its structure, responsibility, and importance for the Islamic State can be established.

At the very beginning, the ADP was nothing more than a committee based exclusively in the Levant with direct responsibility for outreach to and control over official affiliate groups. Yet, in the author's assessment, it was a committee in its own right and not one and the same as the Delegated Committee (*al-Lajnat al-Mufawwadah*), as some have argued.⁷ The two institutions have existed simultaneously and with distinctive responsibilities, although there appears to have been an overlap in members between the ADP, the Delegated Committee, and the Shura Council. For instance, according to a variety of Islamic State documents reviewed by the author, the first emir of the ADP was Abu Muhammad al-Furqan (Wa'il al-Ta'i), who also headed the Islamic State's Media Department and, for a brief period, the Delegated Committee, while also being a member of the Shura Council. As head of the ADP, al-Furqan used the *kunya* Abu Ubaydah Abd al-Hakim. Other members of the ADP and its successor include Haji Hamid

(Sami Jasim al-Jaburi) and Hajji Zaid (Bashar Khattab Ghazal al-Sumaidai), who were both on the Delegated Committee, and who have both been arrested.

Table 1: Leaders of ADP/GDP from 2014 to Present

Leader of the ADP/GDP	Period
Abu Muhammad al-Furqan	2014 - September 2016
Unknown	September 2016 - September 2019
Abu Sa'ad al-Shimali	September 2019 - June 2020
Abd al-Raouf al-Muhajir	June 2020 - February 2023
Unknown	February 2023 - present

After the death of Abu Muhammad al-Furqan in September 2016, there is little information about the leadership of the ADP until September 2019, when Abu Sa'ad al-Shimali (Fayez Al-Akal) took over. Al-Shimali was himself killed near al-Bab in Syria in June 2020 by a drone strike while traveling on a motorbike.⁸ He was then succeeded by Abd al-Raouf al-Muhajir (Abu Sarah al-Iraqi), a senior leader who also occupied a place on the group's Shura Council and was a central voice in the election of Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini as caliph. As already outlined, al-Muhajir was killed on February 24, 2023.⁹

At some point during the Islamic State's evolution, the structure of the ADP started to change. New provinces were added while the existing organization of provinces was altered to either better fit realities on the ground or simply as a symbol of power projection. For instance, in late 2015, prior to it becoming an official province, Somalia was under the authority of the Islamic State's Yemeni Province, which 'supervised' Islamic State sympathizers in Somalia,¹⁰ but on December 24, 2017, Somalia was for the first time referred to as an independent province.^d The major restructuring, however, came with the establishment of a series of regional offices: *Maktab al-Sadiq* covering Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, India, and the rest of South Asia; *Maktab al-Karrar* covering Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Mozambique; *Maktab al-Furqan* covering the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel; *Maktab al-Anfal* (now defunct) covering Libya and neighboring countries; *Maktab Umm al-Qura* covering Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf; *Maktab Dhu al-Nurayn* covering Egypt and Sudan; and *Maktab al-Farouq* covering Turkey, the Caucasus, Russia, and Europe. (See Figure 1.)

It is not clear exactly when this development of regional offices happened, but it likely occurred with the creation of a series of new smaller provinces such as Central Africa, Turkey, and India in the spring of 2019.¹¹ With the rapid expansion of new provinces, a regional office structure enabled the Islamic State's central institutions to command and communicate to its global provinces much more efficiently. According to internal documents, as of late 2020, salary structure for the leaders of the organization is as follows: emirs and deputies of ADP/GDP offices are paid a monthly salary of \$300, emirs of provinces are paid \$200, and emirs of subnational provinces such as Idlib, Hauran, Baghdad, and Anbar

c The 'Binaliyya wing' refers to a faction within the Islamic State supporting the ideological line of Turki al-Binali, a deceased senior Bahrani leader in the group, who headed its Office of Research and Studies (*maktab al-buhuth wa-l-dirasat*). In contrast to the Hazimiyah, the Binaliyya wing is more lenient on matters of excommunication (*takfir*).

d On December 24, 2017, the Islamic State's media department issued for the first time material referring to Somalia as a province.

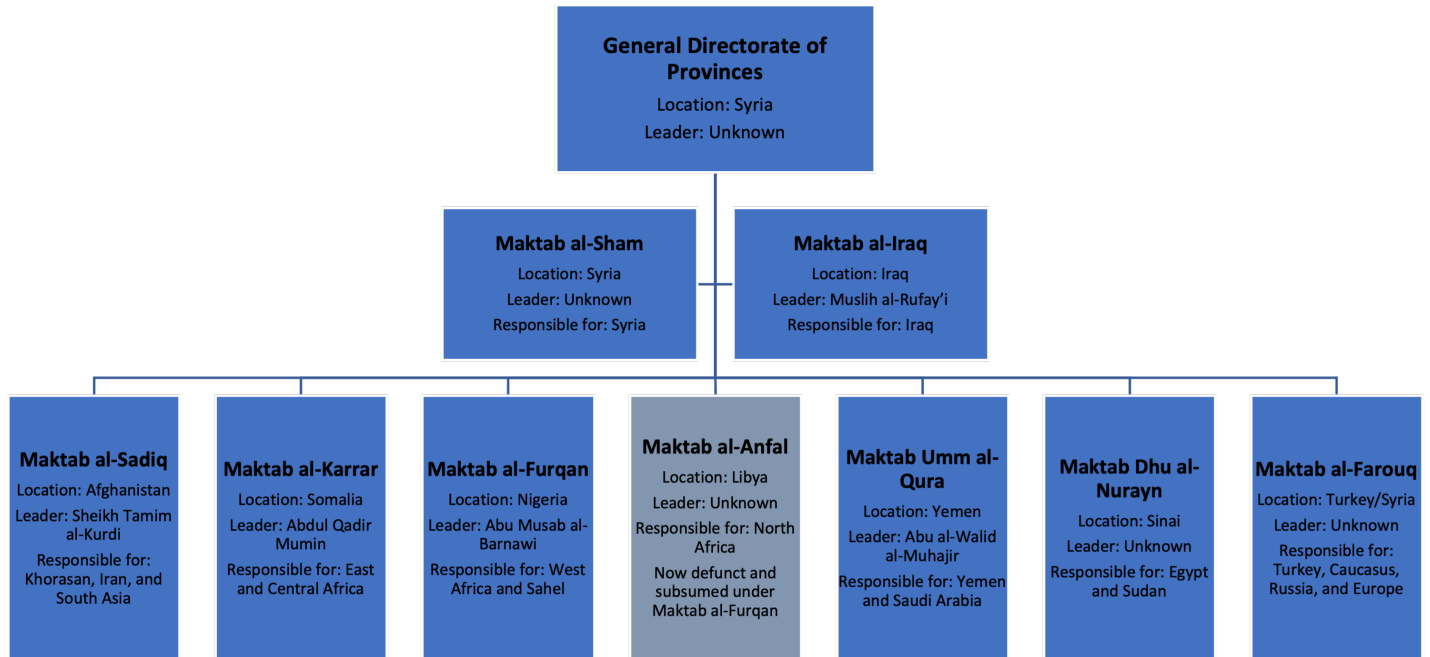


Figure 1: Overview of the ADP/GDP structure. Note that Maktab al-Anfal is now defunct and has been subsumed under Maktab al-Furqan.

are paid \$100.¹²

Possibly as part of this restructuring, the provinces in Syria and Iraq also came under the authority of the ADP despite not being very ‘distant.’ It might also be that the inclusion of Syria and Iraq occurred a little later, because sometime between July 28 and September 27, 2020, the ADP was renamed the ‘General Directorate of Provinces’ (*Idarat al-‘Ammat al-Wilayat*), GDP. It now referred to an institution in charge of all provinces and not simply those being ‘distant.’ This shift cemented the institution’s growing power within the Islamic State.

According to the United Nations, “ISIL command and control over its provinces has loosened, although it still functions in terms of the provision of guidance and some financial support.” Over recent years, the group has experienced a decentralization of its internal power distribution, with provinces gaining more autonomy.¹³ The United Nations additionally claims that the best-functioning offices are al-Sadiq, al-Furqan, and al-Karrar, which corresponds with the localities where the Islamic State is currently experiencing success.¹⁴

Interference to Quell Dissent in Yemen

The first textual proof of the ADP’s existence came in a cache of documents published by the researcher Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi and dealt with an episode of dissent within the Islamic State’s franchise in Yemen in late 2015–early 2016. Al-Tamimi documented the episode based on seven internal documents comprising a set of complaints from dissidents in Yemen against the local *wali* (Islamic State governor) and the response from Abu Ubaydah Abd al-Hakim, a pseudonym for Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, the then head of the ADP.¹⁵ In the new cache of documents collected by the author (Hamming), an additional nine documents concerning the dissent in Yemen have been uncovered. They help to show the extensive involvement of the ADP in the affair.

The documents translated by al-Tamimi indicated that the whole episode began with a letter dated December 15, 2015, in which a large number of dissidents conveyed their criticism of

the *wali* in Yemen to the Islamic State’s central leadership. But, in actual fact, the new documents make clear that the whole affair began months earlier in September 2015, with correspondence between the then ADP head al-Hakim and Abu Usama al-Muhajir (Muhammad Qanan al-Saya’ri), the interim *wali* in Yemen. The letter touched on several issues that al-Hakim needed answers to: He asked Abu Usama to send a situation report from Yemen, about how much funding he received from the Islamic State’s central coffers, and because Abu Usama had made changes to the Shura Council in Yemen, he requested biographies of new council members and reprimanded Abu Usama for making such changes without consulting the ADP first. Most importantly, however, al-Hakim informed Abu Usama that the ADP was about to announce his appointment as the permanent *wali* in Yemen, replacing Abu al-Maali.¹⁶ The same day, al-Hakim sent a letter announcing Abu Usama’s new official role, saying that he was approved directly by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.¹⁷

In one of his first actions as the new *wali*, Abu Usama issued a statement on November 1, 2015, expelling 15 members of the Islamic State in Yemen without the knowledge of the ADP. He explained that he has been informed that some members had disobeyed orders and that they were sowing discord (*fitna*) within the ranks. He also prohibited any remaining members from having contact with those expelled.¹⁸

Two weeks later, Abu Usama received a reprimand from al-Hakim. Reacting to the news of the expulsions from Yemen, al-Hakim reminded Abu Usama that he must always consult with the ADP on such matters because only the ADP has the authority to expel anyone from the Islamic State. This highlights the central role the institution had back in late 2015, managing the Islamic State’s global affairs. In an attempt to remedy the problem, al-Hakim instructed Islamic State members in Yemen not to circulate any information about the expulsion and prohibited them from opening personal social media accounts. On a more general note, he also reminded Abu Usama and his Shura Council to send regular

situational reports and to find a secure method to receive funding from the Levant.¹⁹

In an effort to clear itself of all wrongdoing, the Yemeni Islamic State Shura Council eventually responded to the ADP. In a letter dated December 14, 2015, the Shura Council complained about an individual named Abu Khaybar al-Somali, whom it considered the source of dissent in Yemen and who had allegedly created “a group within the group,” telling Islamic State members that Yemeni leadership was not following “the prophetic methodology.” The leadership in Yemen asked for advice on how to act against Abu Khaybar al-Somali and his group of dissidents and for permission to expel them.²⁰

The following day, a letter of dissent was signed by 70 members of the Islamic State’s Yemeni group and sent to the ADP. This is the first letter covered by al-Tamimi. The dissidents wrote to the Levant-based leadership, informing them of *shari’i* (legal) infringements and violations of the prophetic methodology. They also complained about the military strategy of the group that allegedly had led to high casualties on the frontline. In another humiliation for the Islamic State’s Yemeni leadership, the dissidents pledged allegiance directly to al-Baghdadi to indicate their continued membership of the group while opposing the local leadership.²¹ Two days later, another 31 dissidents signed a letter of complaint against the leaders in Yemen, stating their refusal to work under the *wali*.²²

In between the two dissident letters, the Shura Council in Yemen sent a second letter to the ADP, again complaining about Abu Khaybar al-Somali and his co-conspirators. Providing the ADP with detailed information about the dissident leaders, it asked al-Hakim to issue a strong statement to deter further rebellion. To discredit al-Somali further, the Shura Council wrote that he enjoyed a close relationship with the emir of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Nasir al-Wuhayshi, and his successor, Qassim al-Rimi, with whom the Islamic State was actively competing.²³ On the same day, the Yemen *wali* Abu Usama wrote to the ADP again, asking them to relieve him of his duties because he did not feel up to the task and advised them to replace him with Abu Muhammad al-Jazrawi, a veteran from the Levant.²⁴

When al-Hakim and the ADP eventually responded on December 19, 2015, to the prior series of letters, they rejected the dissidents’ disavowal of Abu Usama and ruled that such behavior constituted disobedience to the caliph. Warning against splitting the ranks, the ADP told the dissenters to return to the group under Abu Usama’s leadership, and if anyone refused, they should consider themselves expelled.²⁵ In a desperate attempt to win sympathy for their cause, the dissidents responded with a pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi but remained firm on their disavowal of the *wali*.²⁶ Doing so helped little. On December 26, 2015, the ADP issued a statement expelling seven leaders of the rebellion, including Abu Khaybar al-Somali. The individuals were further told to hand back all belongings in terms of weapons and wealth that were the property of the Islamic State.²⁷ About a month later, the ADP issued another statement explaining that, now after some time had passed, all those who continued to support the expelled dissident leaders would face a similar fate.²⁸ Abu Usama’s request to be relieved of duty was later rejected. He was eventually apprehended in a joint Saudi-Yemeni operation on June 3, 2019.²⁹

Institutional Leadership and Authority

The GDP and its predecessor ADP are administrative institutions

not only acting as a bridge between the Islamic State’s central leadership and its various provinces but are also directly responsible for managing high-level affairs within the provinces’ domain. This includes issuing guidelines on how provinces should organize, supervising election of leadership figures, and acting as judge in the context of intra-provincial problems, as the early episode of conflict management in the context of Yemen illustrates.

The internal documents reviewed show that the ADP/GDP has tremendous institutional power within the Islamic State and directs how provinces are organized and set up. As the following sections in this article detail, the Islamic State’s central leadership based in Syria and in Iraq issue orders on how provinces should organize their economic institutions, handle their finances, and pursue their military strategy. Arguably, the most direct example of ADP/GDP interference is the election of leadership.

In the Yemeni case, it was the ADP that officially appointed Abu Usama al-Muhajir as the new emir of the province in 2015. A document sent to the Islamic State’s province in Khorasan covering Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India noted that the emir of Maktab al-Sadiq, Sheikh Tamim al-Kurdi (Abu Ahmed al-Madani), was not just chosen by the ADP but also sent to that region. He was most likely dispatched from the Levant.³⁰

An even more revealing example comes from West Africa. On July 27, 2020, Abd al-Raouf al-Muhajir, who then headed the ADP, sent a letter to the emir of Maktab al-Furqan, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, informing him of the appointment of Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui as al-Barnawi’s first deputy. At the time, al-Sahraoui headed the Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS) group, but al-Muhajir informed al-Barnawi of the decision to integrate ISGS into the Islamic State’s West Africa (ISWAP) Province. Al-Sahraoui’s responsibility would remain in the Sahel, with the then ADP head al-Muhajir outlining Sahraoui’s direct supervision of Mali and Burkina Faso.³¹

In the July 2020 letter, which came as a response to a previous letter from al-Barnawi to the ADP, al-Muhajir stated that a second ISWAP deputy emir had been appointed on al-Barnawi’s request. That second deputy emir was Abu Bilal al-Mainoki, whom al-Barnawi had supposedly initially requested as a first deputy, but he appears to have been overruled on this first request by the ADP. Indicative of the Islamic State’s regional hierarchy in West Africa, it was made clear that al-Mainoki as the second deputy emir of ISWAP was subordinate to al-Sahraoui and should “listen [to] and obey” his instructions.³² A veteran, al-Mainoki previously headed the ISWAP’s finances.³³ Underlining the administration’s desire to remain in control, al-Muhajir also stated that all communication between al-Barnawi and his two deputies must be shared with the ADP in the Levant.³⁴

Military Affairs

A central element in the relationship between the Islamic State’s provinces and the ADP/GDP is the obligation provinces have to send monthly reports on the ongoing military situation in their respective region and, in return, receive advice on future strategy and tactics. Such links of authority and knowledge transfer are some of the most important and worrying indications of a substantial connection between the Islamic State’s central organization and its external provinces. Understanding these links help illuminates the strategic and tactical trajectory of militants associated with the Islamic State around the world.

While this obligation is dictated by the ADP/GDP, documents show that the process of sending such reports and receiving responses has been fraught with problems. For instance, on October 10, 2017, al-Barnawi wrote a letter to the ADP approximately a year after his appointment to the position as emir of Maktab al-Furqan. The letter is essentially an update on the military situation in West Africa, but al-Barnawi struck a tone of extreme frustration—not only because he reported that no progress has been made on the ground, but also because the ADP, in his opinion, had failed to respond to his latest letters.³⁵

Al-Barnawi's October 2017 letter came at a time when the Islamic State was still struggling in the West Africa region, in stark contrast to its success at the time in expanding and holding territory elsewhere. The reason for this failure, according to al-Barnawi, was that his fighters lacked skills and “did not understand how to fight.” A specific issue he mentioned was the inability of his soldiers to hold a town or village when security forces returned to retake it. Highlighting his frustration, al-Barnawi wrote: “I have tried my best to remedy this deplorable situation. I have suggested to you a number of measures that I have devised and I was waiting for you to review them. Should you find a mistake, you will inform us and we will correct it, and if you validate them all without any modification, we shall implement them. Unfortunately, our call did not receive an answer.”³⁶

In the letter, al-Barnawi brought up the transfer of tactical knowledge to the Islamic State fighters in Libya that helped them take over large swathes of territory along the coast, and made clear he believed that a similar outcome could become reality in West Africa if only the ADP would assist. “When it comes to military affairs,” al-Barnawi complained, “your guidance is required to organize the army, to recruit new fighters, to improve defenses, to learn attack tactics and the making of explosives, for the use of canons, mortars and howitzers. This is the biggest and the most chaotic sector and we deploy enormous efforts there in vain. It is necessary to send us a framework to help us overcome the big imbalance in our province.”

The frustration at the time clearly extended to the Islamic State's West African fighters who, like al-Barnawi, felt an urgent need to receive expertise. Revealing these frustrations, al-Barnawi included the following anecdote: “I am reminded of a funny story when about a year ago, we seized Dragunov rifles as war spoils and we had to make them work so we could use them. We checked many handbooks and specialized videos on this technical issue, but we eventually dropped it in despair after all our attempts failed. We use artillery such as rifles or machine guns, putting them on cars and we do straight shots because otherwise we never hit the target since the shells fired miss the enemy, flying over his head or falling on the side to the point where the enemy is no longer bothered by us anymore and does not busy themselves protecting themselves from our fire. They know we will miss everything.” As Jacob Zenn and Vincent Foucher have argued, however, it is likely that such advice and assistance eventually reached Maktab al-Furqan and played a central role in turning around its success on the battlefield.³⁷

Other accounts suggest that similar dynamics are taking place in central and east Africa. In September 2021, Hytham Alfar, a Jordanian national with the Islamic State in DRC, was arrested. While details remain scarce, it has been reported that he was sent to DRC to help Islamic State fighters enhance their technological warfare capabilities.³⁸ In Mozambique, large caches of Islamic State documents that focused on operational elements such as how to

employ specific weapons systems and tactical maneuvers have been retrieved by military forces raiding the camps. Experienced trainers have also come to Mozambique from both DRC and Somalia to help the insurgency train and specialize.³⁹

Economic and Financial Affairs

Another aspect where the ADP/GDP has had a very significant impact is on the caliphate's global financial structure and the provinces' respective economic and financial responsibilities. The examined letters reveal a surprising financial structure around 2017 with funds no longer flowing from the organization's central coffers to the provinces, but instead partly from the provinces to the center, a model Caleb Weiss et al. refer to as a “regionally pooled financing” model.⁴⁰

The first indication of the ADP/GDP's sway over the Islamic State's finances is a letter from January 2020, in which it attached a book on economics that all states were obliged to review and follow.⁴¹ The contents of that book are not known, but another letter from October 11, 2020, is helpful to understand the group's new economic directives. In the letter, signed by Abd al-Raouf al-Muhajir, all provinces were informed that a General Economic Office has been set up under the authority of the GDP. Al-Muhajir asked all the provinces to set up a similar economic office to manage their respective economic affairs and communicate directly, through encryption, with the GDP's economic office.⁴²

In another letter, dated January 21, 2021, al-Muhajir reiterated the above instructions involving the structures of economic offices and wrote that a person should be appointed in each regional office in charge of the economy.⁴³ A similar structure is spelled out in another undated letter that was most likely authored sometime in late 2017 or early 2018 and is entitled “Instructions on the Economic Work in the States.” Again, it is mentioned that each small and large province should set up an economic office with the person responsible for the economy in larger provinces receiving direct instructions from the head of the economic department in Iraq.⁴⁴

The same letter also detailed the allocation of funds accumulated in the caliphate's larger provinces. As a new policy, 50 percent of funds was required to be allocated for smaller provinces associated with a specific larger province, 25 percent for the general administration of larger provinces, and 25 percent to the Islamic State's *Bayt al-Mal*.^e For example, this meant that in West Africa, Maktab al-Furqan was required to ensure that 50 percent of the funds generated by the Islamic State's West Africa province in Nigeria were dispersed to the smaller provinces under its tutelage in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. In the context of central and east Africa, there is reporting on how Maktab al-Karrar in Somalia has been sending funds to the smaller provinces in DRC and Mozambique.⁴⁵ Bilal al-Sudani, a Sudanese Islamic State leader in Somalia killed by U.S. forces in January 2023, was in charge of this transfer scheme through a range of associates in South Africa, Kenya, and Uganda, relying on a complex web of money transfer systems.⁴⁶

According to the United Nations and the United States, Maktab al-Karrar has been not only sending money to the smaller provinces directly under its authority, but also the Islamic State province in Khorasan (ISK).⁴⁷ This complexity is confirmed in the cache of

e Literally meaning “the house of money” but more generally referring to an Islamic institution in charge of the treasury and finances.

internal documents assessed in this article. In a letter from the emir of Maktab al-Karrar, Abd al-Qadir Mu'min, dated November 22, 2018, and addressed to the ADP, Mu'min confirmed that Maktab al-Karrar would send funding to Islamic State provinces in Turkey and Yemen and noted the complicated nature of sending money to Turkey. Mu'min's letter helps make clear why his regional office had such a central role in the Islamic State's global economic structure despite its minor presence in Somalia. Maktab al-Karrar generated more than enough money to cover its own needs, he explained, and thus was capable of providing funds to other provinces. Since the letter was authored prior to the official announcement of Islamic State provinces in DRC and Mozambique, which fall under Maktab al-Karrar, it is not clear if his largesse at the time provided funding for these geographic areas.⁴⁸

The fact that part of the larger provinces' funds were allocated to the central organization's Bayt al-Mal is noteworthy because it indicates a noteworthy shift in the Islamic State's economic structure. As Weiss et al. have also noted, previously the Islamic State central organization was relying on a funding model sending money to its provinces, but with its degradation of the organization in Syria and Iraq and the strengthening of various provinces, at least for a period beginning around 2017, it appears to have been the other way around.⁴⁹ It is unclear how well the 'new model' functioned, however, because in a letter dated January 22, 2019, the GDP identified a problem of not receiving the requested funding from the provinces.⁵⁰

In addition to the new system for the distribution of funds within the Islamic State, the ADP/GDP also expected smaller provinces to send a situation report to the emir of the economy in the associated larger province on a monthly basis. In the context of central Africa, for instance, that implied that the person responsible for the economy in the Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP) should send monthly reports to the *wali* of economy in Somalia. That regular economic reporting was important to the organization's leadership is revealed in a reprimanding letter from March 23, 2018. Here, someone from the ADP asked the *wali* of the province in Yemen to send a detailed report on the economic situation and asked the person in Yemen in charge of submitting monthly reports to ensure they would be sent in the future.⁵¹

External Attacks

There are indications that the GDP has assumed responsibility for external attack planning. According to a February 2021 report by the U.N. monitoring team charged with tracking the global jihadi threat, based on member state intelligence the "general directorate of provinces is key to reviving ISIL external operational capability,"⁵² and sources tell the author that the institution is now in charge of all planning and execution of external attacks, with special responsibility handed to Maktab al-Farouq due to its geographical focus on Europe.⁵³ If this is the case, it implies that an understanding of the institution is not merely relevant to understanding the internal workings of the caliphate's global organization, but is also essential to grasping the terrorism threat that the group currently poses to territory outside its main theaters of operations, including in the West. The February 2021 U.N. report added that "the better established the remote provinces become, and the more unstable the conflict zones in which many of them are embedded are, the greater the potential external threat."⁵⁴

The Islamic State's external attacks capacity was previously under the authority of the organization's security unit, Diwan al-

Amn, and more specifically the Amn al-Kharji (external security). The external security branch was responsible for planning terrorist attacks such as the November 2015 attack in Paris, but also handling cases where so-called virtual planners reached out to individuals in the West and provided support and advice on how to commit attacks.⁵⁵ Ever since the Amn al-Kharji was largely dissolved in 2017⁵⁶—when the Islamic State lost much of its territorial caliphate in Syria and Iraq under severe military pressure—the organization has been incapable of orchestrating and directing attacks to the extent that it did during the 2015-2017 period.

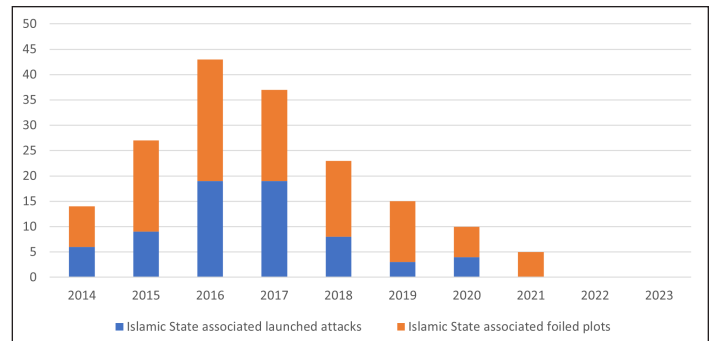


Figure 2: Islamic State-associated launched and foiled plots, 2014-2023 (Source: Author's Islamic State External Attack Database (EAD))^f

With its presence in the borderland between northwestern Syria and southeastern Turkey and its responsibility for Europe, Maktab al-Farouq is the natural candidate to take over the role of orchestrating, coordinating, and inspiring terrorist attacks in the West. Its management of the Caucasus file makes this role more likely, since a large number of Caucasian Islamic State members are present in Turkey with direct access to Europe. So far, no attacks or plots in the West can be directly connected to Maktab al-Farouq, but this may be due to an absence of access to attack plot information.

According to data compiled by the author based on publicly available information, no attacks in the West (Europe, North America, and Australia) since 2020 and no plots since 2021 can be associated with the Islamic State. Association in this context includes planning, guidance, or inspiration. While this data could indicate that the group during this period lost its capability to orchestrate, guide, or inspire attacks in the West, this might not be the case. Detailed information on attacks and foiled plots often becomes available much later through additional investigation or ensuing court cases. Hence, it might emerge that the Islamic State was indeed associated with recent attack plotting.

Recent testimony and reporting further strengthens the assertion that 'remote provinces' are taking the lead in orchestrating external attacks, albeit not necessarily under the exclusive responsibility of Maktab al-Farouq. In March 2022, the then CENTCOM Commander General Kenneth F. McKenzie testified that ISK would develop an external attack capability within 12 to 18 months.⁵⁷ In March 2023 current CENTCOM commander General Michael Kurilla testified that ISK had its sight set on attacking

^f The database covers attacks and plots in Europe, North America, and Australia. It includes attacks/plots where a connection to the Islamic State is confirmed or solidly reported. Such 'connection' includes simple inspiration where there is no interaction between the person(s) behind the attack/plot and the Islamic State. The database was last updated in June 2023.

Western interests and could carry out “external operations against U.S. or Western interests abroad in under six months with little to no warning,” with it being more likely the group would target Western or U.S. interests in Asia and Europe because it was “much harder” to attack the U.S. homeland.⁵⁸

As of February 2023, according to reporting in *The Washington Post*, Pentagon officials believed that as many as 15 terrorist plots targeting the West had been coordinated by Islamic State operatives in Afghanistan.⁵⁹ Gaining a better understanding of the Islamic State’s remote provinces is thus crucial to combat and prevent future plotting against Western homelands.

The Rubber Band Keeping the Islamic State Together

With Turkish claims that yet another caliph was killed on April 21, 2023, in Jinderes, northwestern Syria, the Islamic State’s leadership in the Levant may be facing additional pressure.⁶⁰ While leadership

decapitation does not end terrorist organizations, the continuous killing and arrest of senior leaders has seriously weakened the group’s central power base and arguably helped tilt the internal power balance more toward provinces outside of the Levant, enabling stronger decentralization.⁶¹

This weakening of the caliph’s office has not only turned the GDP into arguably the most powerful institution within the Islamic State’s Levant-based organization, it has also positioned the institution in a key role in the global management of the caliphate. With a weakening center and the strengthening of several provinces, the ability to keep the ‘hub’ and ‘spokes’ together cohesively will be critical for the Islamic State’s future. If the Islamic State were to experience the kind of organizational splintering that al-Qa`ida has suffered from, it would be catastrophic for the caliphate’s grand narrative. **CTC**

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