



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

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FEATURE ARTICLE

## The Road to October 7

Hamas' long game, clarified

DEVORAH MARGOLIN AND MATTHEW LEVITT

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## Ilkka Salmi

EU COUNTER-TERRORISM  
COORDINATOR

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## FROM THE EDITOR

On October 7, Hamas killed 1,200 Israelis in the largest terror attack since 9/11, carrying out acts of brutality that matched, and even surpassed, the worst atrocities of the Islamic State. The resulting war in Gaza, the escalation in tensions across the Middle East, and the anger in Arab and Muslim communities over the large number of Palestinian civilians killed in the conflict so far have upended the international terror threat landscape, creating acute concern about reprisals, and given the attacks already seen in France and Belgium, raised the specter of a new global wave of Islamist terror.

In our feature article, Devorah Margolin and Matthew Levitt write that “The brutal Hamas-led October 7 attack on Israeli communities near Gaza represented a tactical paradigm shift for the group.” They observe that “the group’s explicit targeted killing and kidnapping of civilians [on October 7] baldly contradicts Hamas’ articulated revised political strategy since it took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007. Ironically, Hamas’ sharp tactical shift only underscores that the group never abandoned its fundamental commitment to the creation of an Islamist state in all of what it considers historical Palestine and the destruction of Israel.”

Global jihadi groups have been exploiting the conflict in Gaza to call for attacks. In our feature interview, EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Ilkka Salmi says that “these calls to attack or to engage in some terrorist activity spread extremely quickly on social media and that’s why they could have a rapid and serious impact on the security situation. It reminds me of the days back in 2014–2016 when Daesh propaganda was at its high peak. The situation in Israel, combined with that sort of propaganda, could change the security situation in the E.U. quite drastically.” Torre Hamming writes that “three factors are likely to determine the impact of the ongoing events on the trajectory of the terrorism threat in the West: the length of the war, the scale of Israel’s offensive in Gaza, and the degree of support from Western nations to Israel.”

Erik Skare stresses that analysts need to holistically examine both what Hamas says and does to better understand the group. He writes: “October 7 likely signifies the victory of those in the movement who have grown frustrated with an excessive focus on politics, advocating instead for a renewed emphasis on violence to reach their long-term goals.”

In our second interview, General (Retired) Stephen Townsend, who commanded AFRICOM until August 2022, warns about intensifying jihadi terrorist threats across Africa. He says that al-Qa`ida’s affiliates there are “probably the largest threat to U.S. interests in the region today. And as they gain capacity, they’ll broaden their picture to the region and globally, to include our homeland eventually, I think.”

Finally, Asfandyar Mir examines the counterterrorism dilemmas facing the United States in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He writes: “Al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State are pivoting to exploit Hamas’ October 7 terrorist attack on Israel and the civilian harm in Israel’s military campaign in Gaza since ... Policymakers should take seriously the risk of a surprise terrorist provocation from Afghanistan.”

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

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*Cover: A small Israeli flag is placed near candles at a vigil for the hostages taken by Hamas and other terrorist groups during the October 7 attack, at Dizengoff Square (Kikar Dizengoff) in Tel Aviv, Israel on November 7, 2023. (Jack Guez/AFP via Getty Images)*

# The Road to October 7: Hamas' Long Game, Clarified

By Devorah Margolin and Matthew Levitt

**When Hamas took over the Gaza Strip by force of arms in 2007, it faced an ideological crisis. It could focus on governing Gaza and addressing the needs of the Palestinian people, or it could use the Gaza Strip as a springboard from which to attack Israel. Even then, Hamas understood these two goals were mutually exclusive. And while some anticipated Hamas would moderate, or at least be co-opted by the demands of governing, it did not. Instead, Hamas invested in efforts to radicalize society and build the militant infrastructure necessary to someday launch the kind of attack that in its view could contribute to the destruction of Israel. This article explores the road from Hamas' 2007 takeover of Gaza to the October 2023 massacre.**

The brutal Hamas-led October 7 attack on Israeli communities near Gaza represented a tactical paradigm shift for the group, which was previously known for firing rockets at Israel, carrying out suicide bombings targeting city buses or cafes, and conducting roadside attacks and shootings on restaurants and bars. October 7 was something different. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, after viewing evidence of the attackers' brutality, said that it "brings to mind the worst of ISIS."<sup>1</sup> The Secretary was painfully blunt in describing the attack: "Babies slaughtered. Bodies desecrated. Young people burned alive. Women raped. Parents executed in front of their children, children in front of their parents."

The group's explicit targeted killing and kidnapping of civilians baldly contradicts Hamas' articulated revised political strategy since it took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, Hamas' sharp tactical shift only underscores that the group never abandoned its fundamental commitment to the creation of an Islamist state in all of what it considers historical Palestine and the destruction of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, Hamas has always described itself as a resistance organization, pushing back firmly against the 'terrorist' designation Israel, the United States, the European Union, and many others apply to the group. But by any measure, the October 7 attack is one

<sup>a</sup> Over 35 years, Hamas had never undertaken an operation of such scale, and it had not explicitly targeted vulnerable groups like children or the elderly. While the group has struck civilians over the years, before October 7 those attacks mainly targeted adults, whom the group sees as legitimate targets due to Israeli military draft laws. To Hamas, all Israeli adults are military targets. Hamas has also indiscriminately targeted civilians through rocket attacks or suicide bombings. The taking of children and elderly hostages into Gaza is a first for the group, which before October 7 had only taken male hostages over the age of 18.

of the worst acts of international terrorism on record. Thousands of Hamas operatives, aided by small numbers of terrorists from other groups such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad, murdered some 1,200 people in Israel,<sup>b</sup> wounded thousands, and took at least 240 hostages with nationals from more than 40 countries.<sup>3</sup>

As such, the Hamas massacre demands a re-examination of a critical point in Hamas history: its 2007 takeover of the Gaza Strip by force of arms aimed at fellow Palestinians, and its initiation of its governance project in Gaza. Despite wide-held beliefs that the shift to governance led to a more moderate Hamas, it is now clear that Hamas did not moderate—nor was it co-opted by the responsibility of providing public services to its constituents—but rather it prioritized building and maintaining its militant and terrorist capabilities. The October 7 attack obliterates all Hamas claims to legitimacy as a political actor.

This article will explore where Hamas came from, how the group used its governance to further its long-term goals, and how the group played a long game, obfuscating its commitment to employing violence to replace the State of Israel with an Islamist Palestinian state in all of what the group considers historic Palestine.

<sup>b</sup> Regardless of Hamas' framing, the number killed on October 7 is similar to the number who died when al-Qa`ida crashed United Airlines Flight 175 into the World Trade Center's south tower two decades ago: 1,385 of the nearly 3,000 deaths caused on 9/11, according to the Global Terrorism Database. See "Incident Summary," GTD ID 200109110005, Global Terrorism Database; "Israel revises Hamas attack death toll to 'around 1200,'" Reuters, November 10, 2023.

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## Background: Founded in Violence, Driven from the Bottom Up

Founded in 1987, *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya*, commonly known as Hamas, emerged out of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine, where it gained popularity among Palestinians through its extensive social services.<sup>c</sup> The group released its first official statement as Hamas on December 14, 1987,<sup>4</sup> before publishing its organizational charter through the Islamic Association for Palestine, a Hamas front organization in Chicago, in August 1988.<sup>5</sup> The group's charter outlined its connection to the Muslim Brotherhood,<sup>6</sup> highlighted its focus on Palestine, nationalism, and Islamic law (sharia),<sup>7</sup> and underscored the group's fundamental rejection of any negotiations with Israel. For Hamas, only through violence—specifically jihad—could the group achieve its goal: the complete destruction of Israel and creation in its place of an Islamist state in all of historic Palestine.<sup>8</sup> Hamas' charter also conflated Jews with Israel, and is ripe with historical anti-Semitic tropes.<sup>9</sup> Hamas' official debut corresponded with a growing discontent among many Palestinians with the failed Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), an umbrella organization dominating Palestinian politics at the time.<sup>10</sup>

Its Muslim Brotherhood roots are a vital part of understanding who Hamas is as an organization, and how it seeks to garner support—both internally and externally. Specifically, its *modus operandi* has focused on revolution-from-below, participating in aspects of the modern political systems, including its eventual participation in the 2006 Palestinian elections, in order to create a government one day ruled by sharia.<sup>11</sup> In doing so, Hamas seeks to frame its “Islamization” of society as a “choice,” driven by the populous that lives under it. Despite this framing, Hamas has used violence and pressure countless times on civilian populations in order to achieve its goals of a ‘traditional’ Islamic society.

The spiritual founder of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, rejected the idea that Hamas' political and social wings were separate from its military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades: “We cannot separate the wing from the body. If we do so, the body will not be able to fly. Hamas is one body.”<sup>12</sup> Hamas itself sees three areas of the group's activity—political, social and charitable, and military—as mutually reinforcing. Each of these areas serve to benefit the other, and all are aimed at furthering the group's overarching goal of creating a culture of resistance and destroying Israel.<sup>13</sup> As such, Hamas deemed the mingling of funds given to the group as legitimate, as it considers the social services it provides a jihadi extension of its terrorist attacks. Hamas has a long history of raising funds through its charity, social welfare, and proselytizing organizations (collectively known as the Hamas *dawa*), including funds intended for terrorist and militant purposes. In a 1992 letter between two Hamas operatives that was seized by the FBI and later introduced as evidence in federal court, the two noted how when Hamas was still young, before the Hamas military wing had its own budget, Hamas operatives would “take not less than 50,000 from the monthly allowance of the *dawa*” for military expenses.<sup>14</sup>

Overseeing all of Hamas' activities is its *Majlis al-Shura*, the

group's overarching political and decision-making body. Hamas also maintains geographically-based leadership structures representing the interests of the group in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, within Israeli prisons, and among the group's external leadership. The Hamas external leadership was based in Jordan until authorities there expelled the group's leaders in 1999.<sup>15</sup> Hamas external headquarters then moved to Syria, where it remained until the group broke with the Assad regime over the Syrian civil war, after which Hamas leaders left Damascus for Turkey, Lebanon, Qatar, and (briefly, during the Morsi-led Muslim Brotherhood government) Egypt.<sup>16</sup> Hamas also maintains representative offices and personnel running Hamas investments and companies throughout the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>17</sup> Since the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007, the Gaza-based leadership has become the most prominent given its control of territory and the financial and military advantages that presents. Today, the leader of Hamas in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, working in tandem with Gaza-based Hamas militant leaders like Mohammed Dief, are in effect more powerful than the group's overall leader, Ismail Haniyeh, who was once based in Gaza but moved to Qatar in late 2019.<sup>18</sup>

Since its foundation, violence has been a central part of Hamas and its goals.<sup>d</sup> As Article 12 of the 1988 Hamas charter notes:<sup>e</sup>

*Nationalism, from the point of view of the Islamic Resistance Movement, is part of the religious creed. Nothing in nationalism is more significant or deeper than in the case when an enemy should tread Muslim land. Resisting and quelling the enemy become the individual duty of every Muslim, male or female. A woman can go out to fight the enemy without her husband's permission, and so does the slave: without his master's permission.*

Over time, Hamas released several other documents that explained its goals and ideals. For example, in the mid-1990s, the European Commission asked Hamas to clarify its “objectives, values and ideals,” which led Hamas to release a document titled “This is what we struggle for.”<sup>19</sup> While this, and another memorandum written in 2000 just before the Second Intifada, were written in an overall softer tone than the Hamas charter, both documents continued to acknowledge Hamas as a violent Islamist movement struggling for “the liberation of Palestine” that opposed Israel's right to exist as a state.

Since its founding, Hamas has committed countless acts of violence against both military and civilian targets, including bombings, rocket and mortar attacks, shootings, stabbings, kidnappings and attempted kidnappings, and car ramming attacks.

d Article 8 of the group's charter, reflects the centrality of violent jihad—religiously sanctioned resistance against perceived enemies of Islam—to its objectives:

“Allah is its target, the Prophet is its model, the Koran its constitution: Jihad is its path and death for the sake of Allah is the loftiest of its wishes.” Hamas, “The Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement,” August 18, 1988. This was also found in early leaflets produced by the group published in June 1988: “For our war is a holy war for the sake of Allah unto victory or death.” Reproduced in Mishal and Sela, p. 51.

e Hamas' language in Article 12 is seemingly a nod toward Abdallah Azzam's notorious *fatwa* on the individual duty of jihad. Ideologue Azzam, a Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood member, inspired the likes of other terrorist groups such as al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State, as both organizations have cited nearly indistinguishable language in their justifications for violence. See Devorah Margolin, “Hamas at 35,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 21, 2022.

c The Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine was active starting in the 1960s and 1970s. See Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence, and Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Jerrold Post, *The Mind of the Terrorist: The Psychology of Terrorism from the IRA to Al-Qaeda* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).



*Members of Al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of the Palestinian Hamas movement, march in Gaza City on May 22, 2021.  
(Emmanuel Dunand/AFP via Getty Images)*

With the onset of the Second Intifada in 2000, Hamas attacks dramatically increased. Between 2000 and 2005, 39.9 percent of the 135 suicide attacks carried out during the Second Intifada were executed by Hamas.<sup>20</sup> According to the Global Terrorism Database, Hamas killed 857 people and injured 2,819 between 1987 and 2020.<sup>21</sup> Intended to terrorize not only the targeted individuals but also the general Israeli population, Hamas attacks have been indiscriminate in nature.<sup>f</sup>

From its inception, Hamas attacks were intended to instill fear in the civilians who comprise the local population so that they will either leave the land Hamas claims belongs to the Palestinians or, at a minimum, pressure their leaders to give concessions to Hamas, such as obtaining the release of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli prisons. For example, both before and after the so-called “Shalit deal” in which Israel released over 1,000 Palestinian

security prisoners in exchange for one Israeli soldier captured in Gaza in 2006—Gilad Shalit<sup>22</sup>—Hamas has ceaselessly engaged in kidnappings and attempted kidnappings in hopes of gaining a valuable bargaining chip to use in future negotiations with Israel.<sup>23</sup>

For Hamas, eager to create a “culture of resistance,”<sup>24</sup> its bottom-up approach to shaping popular support for violence meant engaging with both men and women. While some parts of its charter were aimed at wide audiences, Articles 17 and 18 specifically note women’s unique role in Hamas. Stressing women as vital to the dissemination of their ideology, the Hamas charter calls Muslim women the “maker of men,” noting that “[w]oman in the home of the fighting family, whether she is a mother or a sister, plays the most important role in looking after the family, rearing the children and [imbuing] them with moral values and thoughts derived from Islam.” One of the reasons Hamas emphasizes women’s education is so that female supporters are knowledgeable enough to pass on

<sup>f</sup> While Hamas terror attacks may not explicitly target Westerners, the group’s terrorist attacks do not discriminate among their victims. As such, innocent civilians from around the world have been killed in Hamas attacks, including civilians from the United States, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, Romania, China, the Philippines, and Sweden, among other nationalities. Hamas has purposely targeted many busy civilian venues, including buses, bus and light rail stops, discotheques, restaurants, markets, universities, and even a hotel hosting a Passover Seder. See “Chinese Worker, Palestinian killed in Gaza Settlement Attack,” Agence France-Presse, June 7, 2005; “The Family of Nations Under Fire: Victims of Palestinian Violence From 18 Countries,” Beyond Images, March 2, 2004; “Palestinian Suicide Bombings 1994-2004: Don’t Let the World Forget ...,” Beyond Images, September 2, 2004.

Islam and the organization's ideology to their children.<sup>8</sup> Hamas has organized events on women's issues since its inception, and these have been attended by the highest echelons of the organization.<sup>25</sup> The group even established the "Islamic Women's Movement in Palestine" in 2003,<sup>26</sup> highlighting the strategic incorporation of women even prior to governance.<sup>1</sup>

Despite Hamas' transition into governance, most countries around the world do not engage in formal diplomatic relations with the group, due to the group's continued engagement in violent activities.<sup>1</sup> The following section will explore Hamas' governance project.

## Governance: Playing the Long Game on Their Own Terms

From its creation in late 1987 until its decision to participate in

g For example, in two identical articles on Hamas' Al-Qassam website, it is stated that: "More important than the role in armed resistance is women's role in spreading Islamic teaching and principles inside the Palestinian society. Women are very active in teaching the Holy Quran and Islamic conduct in various life issues. Women as mothers who carry the burden of caring for children have been able to educate future mothers on how to lead their lives, and how to raise their children." "Women's Participation in the Palestinian Struggle for Freedom," Al-Qassam website, December 3, 2006; "International Woman's Day Is Different in Palestine," Al-Qassam website, March 7, 2007; Gina Vale, Devorah Margolin, and Farkhondeh Akbari, "Repeating the Past or Following Precedent? Contextualising the Taliban 2.0's Governance of Women," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), January 12, 2023.

h While Hamas highlighted women's roles as wives, mothers, and supporters of the movement throughout the 1980s and 1990s, in the early 2000s, a shift occurred. In 2001, Ahlam Mazen Al-Tamimi was arrested for her support role in bombing a Sbarro restaurant in Jerusalem, and Hamas' Al-Qassam website praised Al-Tamimi and called her "the first female member in Al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas." "Prisoners: Ahlam Mazen At-Tamimi," Al-Qassam website, 2006 (online at time of collection in 2016, undated). Then, in 2004, Reem Riyashi became Hamas' first female suicide bomber. While Hamas praised Riyashi, the group also continued to underscore its use of women as suicide bombers only under conditions of strategic necessity. See Sami Abu Zuhri and Faraj Shalhoub, "Debate, al-Majid TV, Clip No. 117," MEMRI, June 13, 2004.

i Hamas has been variously designated as a terrorist group by countries around the world. Both the political and military wings of Hamas are designated as terrorist entities by Canada, the European Union, Israel, the United States, and the United Kingdom. In 1995, the U.S. government designated Hamas a Specially Designated Terrorist ("SDT"). In 1997, the U.S. government designated Hamas a Foreign Terrorist Organization ("FTO"), a designation that has been renewed every two years. In 2001, the U.S. government designated Hamas a Specially Designated Global Terrorist ("SDGT"), a designation Hamas has retained through the present. Additionally, several individuals and front organizations associated with Hamas have been designated SDTs and SDGTs. See Executive Order 12947, "Prohibiting Transactions with Terrorists Who Threaten to Disrupt the Middle East Peace Process," Part IX, January 25, 1995; U.S. State Department Bureau of Counterterrorism, "Designation of Foreign Terrorist Organizations," October 8, 1997; Executive Order 13224 - Blocking Property And Prohibiting Transactions With Persons Who Commit, Threaten To Commit, Or Support Terrorism; "US Designates Five Charities Funding Hamas and Six Senior Hamas Leaders as Terrorists," Office of Public Affairs, U.S. Treasury Department, August 22, 2003. In contrast, only the military wing of Hamas—lzz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, or more simply, Al-Qassam—has been designated by others, including Australia and New Zealand. In the Middle East, policies toward the group are mixed. Saudi Arabia's designation of the Muslim Brotherhood led to cool relations with Hamas, while Egypt overturned its previous designation of Hamas in 2015. The governments of Jordan, Qatar, and Turkey have not overtly supported Hamas and its agenda, but they have met with its leaders and played bystander or intermediary roles. Elsewhere, the group's complex relationship with Syria has just started to thaw, while Iran has financially and militarily supported Hamas for decades. See "Egypt court overturns Hamas terror blacklisting," BBC, June 6, 2015; Ido Levy, "How Iran Fuels Hamas Terrorism," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 1, 2021.

Palestinian elections held in early 2006, Hamas operated as a sub-state actor engaged in a spectrum of activities including terrorism, social welfare provision, charity, religious proselytization, and local political activities within professional syndicates and student groups on university campuses.<sup>27</sup>

Active as a violent non-state actor for almost 20 years, Hamas entered legislative politics with support from local populations that benefited from its largesse and were frustrated with the corruption of the group's primary Palestinian political rival, Fatah. For Hamas, efforts to win local support can have a significant payoff in its bid for international legitimacy.<sup>28</sup> Hamas' pivotal juncture came in the January 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections. The group won a majority 74 out of 132 seats in the PLC as part of the "Change and Reform" bloc, and, notably, ran with both men and women on the ballot.<sup>29</sup> For the first time since its formation, Hamas joined the Palestinian government. Election results led to the formation of a new government under Hamas' Ismail Haniyeh, which heightened tensions with its political rival, Fatah. Hamas' electoral success signified the first time an Islamist group democratically took power in the Arab world, with Hamas' governance style being described as an "Islamic democracy of sorts," in which the group saw compatibility between democracy and Islamism.<sup>30</sup>

In 2006, Fatah and Hamas agreed to a short-lived national unity government to govern the areas of the West Bank under PA authority and all of the Gaza Strip.<sup>31</sup> During this brief attempt at unity, Hamas tried to change the Palestinian political system from within and move the Palestinian Authority away from security cooperation with Israel and its pursuit of a two-state solution, and toward violent competition with Israel in pursuit of its destruction and the creation in its place of a single, Islamist, Palestinian state.<sup>32</sup>

For some, the very fact that Hamas decided to participate in elections for seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council—itsself a product of the Oslo peace process—was a sign that the group could, and maybe already was, moderating its hardline positions.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, more hardline jihadis such as Usama bin Ladin lambasted Hamas, saying the group had "forsaken their religion" by participating in elections.<sup>34</sup>

As for Hamas, the group's leaders were crystal clear that Hamas' participation in elections did not mean the group had moderated its position calling for the destruction of Israel. Gaza was to be a launchpad to further this goal, not a distraction from it. In an interview with an Israeli newspaper (not buried in an obscure Arabic publication), senior Hamas official Manmoud Zahar explained: "Some Israelis think that when we talk of the West Bank and Gaza it means we have given up our historic war. This is not the case." And Hamas' idea of parliamentary participation was equally clear, Zahar continued: "We will join the Legislative Council with our weapons in our hands."<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps, then, it should not have been a surprise when in 2007 Hamas turned its guns on its fellow Palestinians, took over the Gaza Strip by force of arms, and split the Palestinian polity in two.<sup>36</sup> Between January 2006 and June 6, 2007, more than 600 Palestinians were killed in factional fighting.<sup>37</sup> And in one week alone, between June 7, 2007, and June 14, 2007, more than 160 Palestinians in Gaza were killed in factional fighting, with at least 700 injured.<sup>38</sup> Tensions with Fatah continued, with reports that Hamas threw Fatah supporters off rooftops in 2009.<sup>39</sup>

Hamas has been the de facto ruler in Gaza since mid-June 2007,

running the administration of government and leveraging the same to build up its military capabilities to fight Israel. This resulted in two entities governing the Palestinian people: Hamas ruling Gaza and the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA) governing the West Bank. That said, Hamas in Gaza is not recognized as a legitimate government by the United Nations, other multilateral organizations, or the vast majority of countries around the world, including the United States. Hamas does not coin its own currency.<sup>40</sup> The legitimacy of Hamas' continued control of Gaza is regularly questioned by the PA, Israel, and the international community as there have been no elections since 2007.

Since its formation, Hamas has received and continues to receive significant financial and other support from Iran.<sup>41</sup> Ahmed Yousef, a Hamas leader and former advisor to Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Haniyeh, confirmed this in January 2016, when he stated that “the financial and military support Iran provides to the movement’s military wing has never stopped, it has been reduced over the past five years.”<sup>42</sup> While the exact amount has fluctuated over the years, Iranian funds to Hamas have covered operational costs—weapons, intelligence, sanctuary, safe haven, operational space, and training—as well as long-term organizational costs, such as leadership, ideology, human resources and recruitment, media, propaganda, public relations, and publicity.<sup>43</sup> Even when as a result of the Syrian civil war Hamas broke with the Assad regime in Syria, where it long maintained its external headquarters, Iran cut some funding for the Hamas political bureau but maintained funding for Hamas military activities.<sup>44</sup>

Iran is not the only state actor offering support to Hamas. For decades prior to the Syrian civil war, the Assad regime provided support to the group.<sup>45</sup> More recently, Qatar has publicly—with Israel’s knowledge and acquiescence—provided Hamas monthly stipends to pay for fuel for electricity and to help Hamas pay public sector wages.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas’ top political leader, along with several other senior Hamas leaders, lives in luxury in Qatar.<sup>47</sup> Since October 7, Qatar has utilized its unique relationship with Hamas to facilitate hostage negotiations and has publicly indicated it is open to reconsidering Hamas’ continued presence in Doha.<sup>48</sup>

Through its governance, Hamas developed the necessary bureaucracy to collect taxes, customs duties, and bribes, as well as extortion and racketeering schemes, through which the group raised significant funds.<sup>49</sup> Eventually, Hamas’ income from local governance of Gaza would dwarf its funding from Iran by a factor of about four to one.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Hamas has used its governance to entrench its system of control and continue its military engagement.

### Entrenching the System of Control

Long before Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip, the group invested in grassroots efforts to entrench its position within society and create broad public support for its goal of destroying Israel.<sup>j</sup> In

the years that followed, Hamas took advantage of the benefits of governance to deliver educational and social service programs that instilled its “culture of resistance” in Gazan society.<sup>51</sup> On Hamas’ payroll were Gazan men and women who worked in their police, and as teachers, doctors, administrators, and more. A critical component of Hamas’ ideology has been transforming the ethno-political Palestinian struggle into a religious conflict, which allows the group to inspire Palestinians to reject any sort of compromise or peaceful solution to the ongoing conflict.

Hamas emphasizes its campaign of radicalization targeting Palestinian youth. In 2010, on its Al-Qassam Brigades website in English, Hamas announced that it operated 800 youth summer camps, reaching over 100,000 male and female students. According to the group, the “Hamas summer games is an annual enterprise aim[ed] to convey joy and entertainment for Palestinian children and youth who suffer from cruelty of Israeli siege imposed after Hamas great democratic win.”<sup>52</sup> Arguing that youth are the most vital part of Palestinian society, Hamas claims “[t]he Islamic ideology adopted in Hamas summer games, meets with the Islamic values of the Palestinian people.” Hamas combines youth social services with its ideology, as seen by the fact that the theme of the summer camp that year was “Our Aqsa Mosque, Our Prisoners, Freedom Is Our Appointment,”<sup>53</sup> not the catchiest of summer camp names.

Hamas has used the tactic of exposing Gazan children to such radical messages at a young age in both recreational institutions and schools. In 2013, Hamas issued a new education law that excluded male teachers from girls’ schools and segregated classes by gender after age nine.<sup>54</sup> Hamas framed this as a decision to “codify conservative Palestinian values into law.”<sup>55</sup> Hamas has argued that women have agency to decide whether or not to wear a hijab, though the group has also noted that doing so is a religious obligation.<sup>56</sup> Hamas’ actions, however, did not always reflect this framing. To assist in the internalization of its ideals, Hamas exerted pressure mainly through “virtue” campaigns seeking to discourage “Western” behaviors.<sup>57</sup> In 2010, the group enforced the removal of “immodest” mannequins, which it argued was a policy derived from the complaints of ordinary Gazans.<sup>58</sup> While Hamas has not codified all of its behavioral strictures into law, in 2016, its police officers began to penalize driving instructors who did not have a chaperone for female students,<sup>59</sup> and in 2021 a Hamas-appointed judge sought to require a male guardian’s permission for women to travel outside of Gaza.<sup>60</sup>

To be sure, Hamas leverages its position in Gaza to radicalize Palestinians to support its commitment to violence. After taking control of Gaza, Hamas embarked on a considerable public relations campaign, focusing on culture and the arts to glorify violence against Israel. For instance, in July 2009, Hamas premiered the feature-length film *Emad Akel*, celebrating the life of a leading Hamas terrorist killed by Israeli troops in 1993. Written by hardline Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar, the film was screened at the Islamic University in Gaza City and dubbed by Hamas interior minister in Gaza Fathi Hamad as the first production of “Hamaswood instead of Hollywood.”<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, Hamas’ Al Aqsa Television produced a children’s show featuring a Mickey Mouse lookalike named Farfur who praised “martyrs” and preached Islamic domination. After being roundly condemned, including being described as “pure evil” by Walt Disney’s daughter, Hamas ran one final skit in which Farfur

j Hamas has used its governance to run an extensive social service network in Gaza. These include food-based charities (feeding women and children), operating weddings and financial incentives to newlyweds, and supporting widows and families of “martyrs” or those who are killed or imprisoned while supporting Hamas’ cause. See “Zionists Resort to ‘black Propaganda’ to Counter Hamas,” Al-Qassam website, September 5, 2009; “Because of the Siege, Children Suffer in Gaza,” Al-Qassam website, February 23, 2008; “We Will Never Recognize the Occupation,” Al-Qassam website, July 17, 2009.

refused to sell his land to an Israeli, who then murdered the Palestinian mouse.<sup>62</sup> The young Palestinian girl presenting the skit commented, “Farfur was martyred while defending his land.” He was killed “by the killers of children.”<sup>63</sup> Farfur was quickly replaced with a new character, Nahoul the Bee: “I want to continue in the path of Farfur, the path of Islam, of heroism, of martyrdom and of the mujahedeen ... We will take revenge of the enemies of Allah.”<sup>64</sup> Most recently, the program introduced Nassur, a stuffed bear who called for “slaughter” of Jews “so they will be expelled from our land.”<sup>65</sup> Notably, in 2016, the U.S. State Department designated Fathi Hammad himself as a specially designated terrorist for his ongoing terrorist activities on behalf of Hamas.<sup>66</sup>

Hamas has faced pushback to some of its politics, such as its promotion of “traditionalist” behaviors for men and women. For example, female lawyers fought back against a 2009 Hamas-appointed judge’s ruling which enforced a new uniform that mandated wearing a hijab and jilbab. In response to pressure, Hamas withdrew the decision, citing a misunderstanding.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, public protests erupted in February 2021 after a Hamas-appointed Higher Shari’a Council judge ruled that women required permission from a male guardian to travel outside of Gaza.<sup>68</sup> Gazan protests drove the court to amend the law, rewriting it to allow male guardians to petition the court to prevent a woman from traveling.<sup>69</sup> Protests also arose in 2019 and 2023 against living conditions in Gaza under Hamas, both of which Hamas violently suppressed.<sup>70</sup>

Notwithstanding such protests, Hamas has not tolerated any real challenge to its governing authority. In 2009, for example, Hamas security forces raided a mosque affiliated with a salafijihadi group that challenged Hamas’ authority in Gaza, killing 24 and wounding 130.<sup>71</sup>

### Continued Military Engagement and Preparation

Even as Hamas entrenched its political control of Gaza, it significantly expanded its security, militant, and terrorist cadre; developed domestic weapons production capabilities; dug tunnel networks to smuggle goods and covert weapons; and facilitated militant activities.<sup>72</sup> Hamas continued to engage in terrorist activities targeting Israel, instigated rocket wars with Israel, and invested significant time, energy, and funds into militant infrastructure such as rocket production and tunnel networks in preparation for future military engagements with Israel.

Despite periodic talk of ceasefires with Israel and reconciliation with its Palestinian political rival, Fatah, Hamas continued to engage in a wide array of militant and terrorist activities targeting Israel.<sup>73</sup> Shooting attacks and launching incendiary balloons were not uncommon along the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip.<sup>74</sup> Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip became accustomed to the firing of rocket-propelled grenades and mortar shells from Gaza toward their communities.<sup>75</sup> From time to time, Hamas operatives placed explosives along the Gaza border fence.<sup>76</sup> And for years, Hamas invested millions of dollars in an underground tunnel network—used by the group to smuggle weapons from Egypt, carry out attacks into Israel, and hide its operations and weapons production from Israel’s above-ground surveillance capabilities.<sup>77</sup> These were purposefully dug near and under schools, mosques, and U.N. facilities.<sup>78</sup> The placement of the tunnels near U.N. facilities was purportedly intended as a preventive measure, using these as human shields against an Israeli attempt to destroy the terror

infrastructure.<sup>79</sup>

Israeli and Palestinian Authority officials also point to Hamas’ plots to target PA officials and instigate a coup to take over the PA. In 2009, for example, Palestinian security forces in the West Bank seized \$8.5 million in cash from arrested Hamas members who plotted to kill Fatah-affiliated government officials. Palestinian officials reported that some of the accused had “recently purchased homes adjacent to government and military installations, mainly in the city of Nablus” for the purpose of observing the movements of government and security officials. Security forces also seized uniforms of several Palestinian security forces from the accused Hamas members.<sup>80</sup> Israeli and PA authorities thwarted another Hamas coup attempt two months later, this one overseen by Hamas external leadership based in Turkey and operatives in Jordan.<sup>81</sup> PA officials warned of still more Hamas coup plots in 2019.<sup>82</sup>

Meanwhile, working closely with Hezbollah, Hamas also slowly developed a terrorist capability in Lebanon that it could use at some point in the future to target Israel from more than one front at a time. In 2017, not long after Hamas leader Salah al-Arouri relocated from Turkey to Lebanon, the head of Israel’s Shin Bet security service warned that Hamas was setting up a base of operations in Lebanon. This was intended to complement the group’s main center of gravity in Gaza, he added, where the group was continuing “to invest considerable resources in preparation for a future conflict [with Israel], even at the cost of its citizens’ welfare.”<sup>83</sup> Fast-forward to 2023, and Hamas’ long-term planning in Lebanon paid off. In June 2023, Hamas operatives fired rockets into Israel from Lebanon.<sup>84</sup> And in the weeks following the October 7 massacre, Hamas again fired rockets at Israel from Lebanon in an attempted effort to encourage Hezbollah to open a second front with Israel and draw Israeli troops away from Gaza.<sup>85</sup>

Since Hamas took over the Gaza Strip by force in 2007, Hamas and Israel have had several ‘mini wars,’ including in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014, 2021, and now the most recent full-scale war sparked by the October 7 attack (see Figure 1). Hamas struggled to find ways to target Israel, despite the restraints of governance. The group evolved its strategy over time to employ new methods of targeting its primary threat—the Israeli state—but continued to make use of tried and trusted methods, including terror tunnels, rockets, and other hallmarks of the group’s decades-long history of violent action.

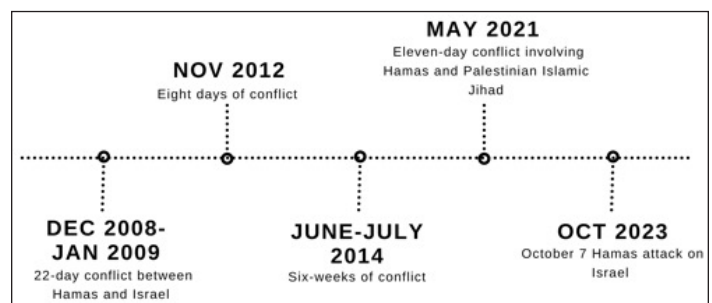


Figure 1: Israel-Hamas Conflicts Since 2007

Additionally, Hamas regularly sought to instigate violence in the West Bank, and periodically managed to carry out attacks there despite Israeli and PA security efforts to counter terrorism. Most notably, in August 2014, Hamas operatives kidnapped three teenage Israeli boys—one of whom was also an American citizen. The operation was led by Hamas operatives from the West



Bank, but funded by Hamas operatives in Gaza through the al-Nour Association, a Hamas-affiliated charity in Gaza.<sup>86</sup> From a conference in Turkey, Hamas leader Salah al-Arouri took credit for the operation, explaining the goal had been to spark a new Palestinian uprising.<sup>87</sup>

Al-Arouri has always been particularly focused on fanning the flames of violence in the West Bank, which is where he cut his teeth as a young Hamas operative himself.<sup>88</sup> This was especially true in the period following the summer 2014 war. Just in 2016, 114 local Hamas cells were apprehended in the West Bank, while only 70 were apprehended in 2015.<sup>89</sup> One cell, broken up near Hebron in February 2017, had been receiving instructions online from Hamas commanders in Gaza to carry out shooting, kidnapping, and explosives attacks in the West Bank and Israel, including a bus station, a train station, and a synagogue.<sup>90</sup> Another attempted kidnapping plot was foiled a few weeks earlier, resulting in the seizure of large quantities of ammunition, two AK-47s, three pistols, and a shotgun from a West Bank cell.<sup>91</sup>

### A Shift? Softening the Language

Since wresting control of Gaza, Hamas has strived to portray itself as a legitimate political actor and representative of Palestinians in Gaza—one less focused on violence, even operating with a semblance of foreign policy objectives. The group also operated several social media accounts, including an official Twitter account, to engage with the general public. One academic study examining Hamas' Twitter account found that between 2015 and 2018, the group mostly tweeted about its internal governance and foreign policy, with the smallest focus on "resistance."<sup>k</sup>

Even earlier, in 2009, Hamas leader Khaled Mishal offered to cooperate with U.S. efforts to promote a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>92</sup> Mishal stated that Hamas was willing to engage in a ceasefire with Israel and approve a new Israeli-Palestinian status quo, based on the 1967 borders, a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip with its capital in East Jerusalem.<sup>93</sup> Such sentiments were echoed by Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh in 2017, who stated that "while we are not opposed to the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital, on the basis of the 1967 territories, we refuse settlements and we adhere to our strategic choice not to recognize Israel."<sup>94</sup>

Yet at other times, Mishal, Haniyeh, and other senior Hamas leadership have outright refused to consider political compromise, instead asserting that violence is necessary for the group to achieve its stated goals. For example, at a 2009 speech in Damascus, Mishal insisted, "We must say: Palestine from the sea to the river, from the west to the occupied east, and it must be liberated. As long as there is occupation, there will be resistance to the occupation."<sup>95</sup> Violence, Mishal stressed, "is our strategic option to liberate our land and recover our rights."<sup>96</sup>

The inconsistency in Hamas' messaging was, at least in part, a result of its internally conflicted nature. Hamas—the government—seems to recognize that it must at least appear moderate for political expediency in an effort to achieve near-term political goals, like

opening border crossings into Gaza for trade. In particular, Hamas has been eager to gain access to building materials and financing to rebuild infrastructure destroyed during each round of fighting.<sup>97</sup>

The sometimes-conciliatory tone of Hamas leaders' public messaging is belied by the group's continued violent actions and radicalization on the ground, as well as the rise to prominence of violent extremist leaders within the group's local shura (consultative) councils.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, the discrepancy between Hamas' periodically softer messaging and its consistently hardline activities has underscored the group's discomfort with the ideological crisis presented by its governance project in Gaza.

This was further highlighted by the rhetorical shift in its May 2017 "Document of General Principles and Policies." Seen by some as an update to its 1988 charter, the document—which did not supersede the previous charter, despite the new language—adopted what seemed like a softer, more moderate tone. In the document, Hamas dropped reference to its Muslim Brotherhood roots and seemingly presented itself as a more "centrist" alternative to global jihadi organizations like the Islamic State and secular nationalist groups like the Palestine Liberation Organization. Hamas also highlighted that it believed in "managing its Palestinian relations on the basis of pluralism, democracy, national partnership, acceptance of the other and the adoption of dialogue." And for the first time, the group acknowledged in writing the possibility of a Palestinian state drawn along the borders that existed in 1967. But rhetoric aside, Hamas' actions at that time also offered a clear indication of the group's continued hardline militancy.

Hamas' so-called moderation was aimed at widening its international appeal at a time when the group faced multiple challenges, including a dismal economic situation in Gaza—most recently underscored by the energy crisis in Gaza—and strained relations with Egypt, which has violently suppressed Hamas' parent organization, the Muslim Brotherhood. And despite being hailed as a sign of moderation, the document still included less friendly sections, including a rededication to armed resistance to liberate all of Palestine: "Resistance and jihad for the liberation of Palestine will remain a legitimate right, a duty, and an honor for all the sons and daughters of our people and our umma [global Islamic community]," the document stated.

Even as Hamas was trying to change its tune, its parallel militant activity spoke volumes about the group's true intentions. After Yahya Sinwar became the group's leader in Gaza in 2017, the internal balance of power shifted from Hamas external leadership to officials inside Gaza. At this time, Hamas weathered a period of diminishing foreign relationships with longtime partners, including a break with Syria's Assad regime and the ouster of Mohamed Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt. Sinwar's tenure has also seen mounting influence exerted by two overlapping Hamas constituencies: prisoners and the military wing, both of which Sinwar has belonged to.<sup>99</sup>

In 2021, Palestinians were scheduled to vote for new legislators, and the Hamas list stood out for its sheer number of hardline militant candidates. These included Hamas members with known ties to deadly terrorist attacks, and several members who, like Sinwar, were released from Israeli prisons under the Shalit deal<sup>100</sup>—once again highlighting that there is no distinction between the group's political activities and its military wing. Some old-guard Hamas leaders appeared in the top ranks as well, including number-one candidate Khalil al-Hayya and Nazar Awadallah, who challenged

k In 2015, the group tweeted, "Hamas respects human rights; that is part of our ideology and dogma #AskHamas." See Tweet 2720, March 15, 2015, cited in Devorah Margolin, "#Hamas: A Thematic Exploration of Hamas's English-Language Twitter," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34:6 (2020).

Sinwar in the group's recent internal elections. Yet, two-thirds of the candidates were under age 40, according to Al-Monitor.<sup>101</sup>

Hamas has demonstrated its staying power in a competitive and often unforgiving institutional environment, including numerous challenges to its governance from both the PA and violent Islamist groups, including PIJ and the Islamic State. It has maintained control and adapted when necessary to stay in power.<sup>102</sup> For example, Hamas has previously accepted fragile calm with Israel, though reluctantly, to stabilize Gaza's economic situation,<sup>103</sup> and in March 2021, the group appointed a woman, Jamila al-Shanti, to its Political Bureau for the first time.<sup>104</sup> Hamas has also attempted to expand its political footprint, encroaching on Fatah strongholds in the West Bank through participating in student elections.<sup>105</sup>

As it turned 35 in 2022, Hamas unabashedly highlighted what it considers to be its most admirable traits in its continued attempt to gain international legitimacy. It brought attention to its self-proclaimed democratic rule allegedly supported by Gazans, alleged gender inclusivity, and its multi-language messaging aimed at local and international audiences.<sup>106</sup> Hamas hoped that by distracting Israeli and international attention away from its violent activities, it would be able to obfuscate its core, violent objectives. And yet, despite changes in Hamas rhetoric, as the events of October 7 underlined, the group remained committed to its original goal of Israel's destruction by any means necessary, and establishing a Palestinian state in its place with itself as its leader.

## Conclusions

The Hamas governance project in Gaza presented the group with a critical ideological and tactical crisis. Hamas was forced to choose between engaging in acts of violence targeting Israel or attempting to effectively govern the territory it took over by force of arms. For a short period of time after 2007, Hamas found itself forced by circumstance to suspend the tempo of resistance operations, for which it is named and by which it defines itself. For some, the cessation of violence, however temporary, was a sign of moderation within Hamas. Others expected Hamas to be co-opted by the day-to-day responsibilities of governance. However, Hamas' actions, including its continued radicalization and weapons smuggling into Gaza, better denoted the movement's true intentions and long-term trajectory. To be sure, Hamas is not a monolithic movement. But the one constant among its various currents is its self-identification

as a resistance movement committed to Israel's destruction and the creation in its place of an Islamist state in all of what it considers historic Palestine.

Looking back at the Hamas governance project in Gaza, it is clear the group remained committed to engaging in terrorist activity, and indeed it prioritized militancy over other activities at the expense of the Gaza Strip's civilian population. Never co-opted, Hamas invested in efforts to inculcate its ideal of violent resistance against Israel throughout its time governing Gaza, and played a long game lulling Israeli and Western leaders into thinking it could be deterred with periodic nods to moderation. Meanwhile, it built tunnels and weapons production facilities, trained operatives, and prepared for the day it could finally act on its commitment to destroying Israel. As Hamas politburo member Khalil al-Hayya noted in the wake of the October 7 attack, "Hamas's goal is not to run Gaza and to bring it water and electricity and such. Hamas, the Qassam and the resistance woke the world up from its deep sleep and showed that this issue must remain on the table."<sup>107</sup> Al-Hayya aptly summed up the relative weight Hamas gives to addressing the needs of Palestinians and fighting Israel. Referring to the October 7 attack, he explained: "This battle was not because we wanted fuel or laborers. It did not seek to improve the situation in Gaza. This battle is to completely overthrow the situation."

Hamas' attack was designed to elicit a "disproportionate" response from Israel. While several Israeli leaders have said the stated war objectives is the destruction of Hamas, such an operation cannot be done by military force alone. Rather, what the war appears to be about is ending Hamas' governance project in Gaza. What comes next for the group is largely dependent on how the war goes. Most of Hamas' leadership remains, Israelis are still being held hostage in Gaza, and the scale of Israel's response could serve to radicalize a new generation. As Hamas leader Haniyeh said in the days after Israel began its retaliatory attacks on Gaza that have resulted in thousands of deaths, "[w]e are the ones who need this blood, so it awakens within us the revolutionary spirit, so it awakens within us resolve, so it awakens within us the spirit of challenge, and [pushes us] to move forward."<sup>108</sup> Questions remain about what is next for Hamas. While true supporters of Hamas will see the October 7 attacks as a victory, many in Gaza will see the attacks as a betrayal of Hamas' governance promise. **CTC**

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: Ilkka Salmi, EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator

By Paul Cruickshank

*Ilkka Salmi has served as the European Union Counter-Terrorism Coordinator since October 2021. He previously served as the Director of the Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Directorate at the European Commission between January 2020 and September 2021. Prior to that, he was Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of the Interior in Finland, between 2018-2020. He served as Director of Security at the European Commission from 2016-2018 and as Director of the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre between 2011 and 2015. Between 2007-2011, Salmi served as the Director of the Finnish Security Intelligence Service (SUPO).*

**CTC: In the wake of the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack against Israel and the Israeli offensive in Gaza, there is a lot of concern about what it could mean for the terrorist threat in the West. In Europe, we've already seen deadly attacks in France<sup>1</sup> and Belgium.<sup>2</sup> What is your assessment of the threat picture in Europe in light of the events in Israel and Gaza?**

**Salmi:** Tensions have been mounting since October 7. On the eve of that attack jihadism was still the main terrorism threat in the E.U. With Israel and Gaza, the proximity to Europe is always an issue, geographically but also in the sentiments that we see in different groups: for instance, among the Palestinian diaspora and the Muslim population in Europe, but also among Jewish citizens. Given the tensions the conflict in Gaza is producing here in Europe, I'm concerned that there could be more polarization between different groups within the E.U. Member States, which could then, in turn, have an impact on terrorism and the overall security situation.

You were referring to these two attacks, the one in Arras, France [on October 13], and then the one here in Brussels on October 16. There are still ongoing investigations in France and Belgium. So we are still looking into and waiting for the results. One thing which seems to be clear—at least in the attack in Arras—[is that the] motivation of the perpetration seems to be linked, in part, to the crisis in Israel, in Gaza. That's definitely a concerning issue. The motives of the attacker here in Brussels seem to be more linked to the Qur'an burning issue in Sweden and to conspiracy theories that have been circulating for years in the Islamist extremist online sphere, which claim that the Swedish authorities would take custody of Muslim children, for example, and try to somehow separate or kidnap these kids from their parents.

What has happened in Israel will have an impact on the security situation also within Europe. We have to stay vigilant.

**CTC: There is also concern about Hezbollah. In 2012, the group was responsible for a deadly attack against Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria.<sup>3</sup> What is the level of concern in your assessment about possible Hezbollah action in Europe against**

## Israeli and Jewish targets?

**Salmi:** The terrorist threat posed by Hezbollah within the E.U. is currently assessed as limited, as the organization is likely to view the negative repercussions of an attack in the E.U. as greater than the potential benefits. However, Hezbollah is believed to have support networks in various parts of the world, including in the E.U.

This said, I am very concerned about acts of terrorism against Jewish targets in Europe perpetrated by individuals or groups who sympathise with Hezbollah or Hamas or who are inspired by them but have no direct connection with them. I also think that there is a possibility that pro-Palestinian demonstrations, notably unauthorised ones, could give rise to violence against real or perceived supporters of Israel, including Jewish citizens and their institutions. E.U. Member States governments should do all they can to protect European Jews from such violence.

**CTC: To broaden this out, what's your assessment of the terrorism threat picture in Europe heading into 2024 from all the different ideologies?**

**Salmi:** Firstly, as I said, the main threat towards Europe is jihadism, but the threat level varies from one Member State to another.

Secondly, I'm concerned about violent right-wing extremism and right-wing terrorism, which is also on the rise. That's specifically an issue which is of concern to certain E.U. Member States. Even in Finland, the Member State that I know best, there are ongoing terrorism-related court cases linked to violent right-wing extremism, notably the Siege<sup>4</sup>-related culture.

A third category of concern is what I would call anti-system extremism, which is a trend just to oppose so-called elites—be it the governments or journalists or what have you. This could be linked to the anti-vax movement; it could be linked to energy prices. We haven't really seen any major terrorist plots yet. But it could contribute to the polarization of our societies and violent incidents have happened and been prevented.

We also look into violent left-wing extremism and anarchism. Having said that, even if attacks linked to this part of the ideological spectrum are quite numerous, they are often far less lethal. But it's obviously an issue that we have to still pay attention to.

I see an upward curve in trends for jihadism and violent right-wing extremism. That's why they are at the top of my agenda.

**CTC: On the issue of left-wing terrorism, according to Europol's most recent Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) report, in 2022 "16 attacks were completed, of which the majority were attributed to left-wing and anarchist terrorism (13), two to jihadist terrorism, and one to right-wing terrorism."<sup>5</sup> What is striking about these numbers is that over 80 percent of completed terrorist attacks were carried out by left-wing and**



*Ilkka Salmi*

**anarchist actors. Now, you made an important point that this threat vector has not recently been as deadly as some of the other ideologies, but even so, what are your concerns about the evolving threat posed by left-wing and anarchist terrorism and what can be done at the E.U. level to protect against it?**

**Salmi:** Violent left-wing and anarchist terrorism has been present in the E.U. for many decades. It currently constitutes a much lower threat than it did in the 1970s and 1980s, but it has not disappeared altogether. Figures collected by Europol show a high number of attacks motivated by violent left-wing extremism and anarchism, as well as a high number of arrests of left-wing and anarchist terrorist suspects, although these figures tend to fluctuate a great deal. In its latest TE-SAT report, Europol foresees a rise in the threat of right-wing as well as left-wing terrorism in the near future.

Currently, violent left-wing and anarchist terrorism in the E.U. is more geographically concentrated than jihadist terrorism and right-wing terrorism. Left-wing and anarchist terrorist attacks are generally far less lethal than jihadist and right-wing terrorist attacks. Their aim is often to cause material damage or to intimidate (perceived) political opponents, not to kill. I am concerned about an increasing willingness among left-wing extremists to commit large-scale violence against law enforcement personnel. Some left-wing perpetrators of sabotage, such as the extremists plotting the derailment of a high-speed train, deliberately accepted the possibility of mass casualties.

E.U. policies to fight terrorism are generally ‘color blind’—they address all forms of terrorism irrespective of motivation. Our CT cooperation already encompasses left-wing and anarchist terrorism. In my view, the E.U. should urge social media companies to remove instances of ‘doxing,’ that is, the publication of personal

details of (perceived) political opponents in order to scare them or even to provoke attacks against them. This tactic is used by violent extremists of all stripes, but it is particularly popular among violent left-wing extremists.

**CTC: What are your priorities as the E.U. Counter-Terrorism Coordinator? What does the role entail?**

**Salmi:** I always underline the fact that the office, my position does not involve any operational activity. So we do not coordinate what’s done by frontline responders and operational colleagues. The office was established after the Madrid bombings in 2004 to bring strategic coherence in E.U. policies in countering terrorism. [As] such, my office connects the external and the internal dimension of countering terrorism. We keep track of dynamics outside the European Union, be they in Israel, Africa, Central Asia, Afghanistan etcetera, as well as obviously understanding what the impact could be on the E.U. With regard to the internal dimension, one aspect, for example, is the impact of new technologies for law enforcement agencies so that they would still be capable of carrying out their tasks in the future and hopefully also benefit from these new technologies.

It’s important to emphasize that the office has an external and an intra-E.U. function, if I may put it that way, because many of these threats actually originate outside the E.U. but will have an impact within the E.U. So we try to connect the dots so that we don’t work in silos with the external colleagues on one hand and the internal ones on the other.

When it comes to our priorities, if I start geographically, we do have concerns—it goes without saying—now in the Middle East in how the situation in Israel and Gaza will evolve. We traditionally

have been following very closely the developments in Syria and Iraq; that dates back to those days of the Daesh caliphate over there. And then Africa is of concern, especially Sahel, but also East Africa, including the threat posed by al-Shabaab, in Somalia. An issue which if of growing concern to us is how do things evolve in Afghanistan and the degree to which there might be a spillover effect into Central Asia and Pakistan. We are focused on the question on whether the dynamics we are seeing in Central Asia and Pakistan will have an impact directly or indirectly towards the security situation in Europe as well.

Internally, I already mentioned the rise of violent right-wing extremism in the Member States. Of course, this is also a global issue. There are contacts with actors in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Another thing we focus on is new technologies, disruptive [tech]. First, what does this mean for all the terrorist actors? How could they use new technologies? And secondly, how could law enforcement take advantage? What legal changes might we need? It's always—especially for us good guys, if I may put it that way—a challenge that technological developments happen very, very quickly. We also have to make sure that our legislation then allows us to use all these technologies, keeping in mind privacy and other concerns linked to fundamental rights. To me, security is also a fundamental right, but nevertheless, we just have to strike the right balance.

**CTC: One of the concerns, as you were just alluding to, is the threat from Central Asia: the threat from Afghanistan in particular, the threat from Islamic State Khorasan, the Islamic State branch over there (known by the acronyms ISK, ISIL-K, and ISKP). According to the U.N., there is growing concern about the ability of Islamic State Khorasan to project a threat into Europe.<sup>6</sup> In April 2020, German police arrested a terrorist cell plotting attacks against U.S. and NATO bases in Germany that had allegedly received instructions from a high-ranking Islamic State figure in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> According to the UN, “on 5 January [2023], 15 individuals, reportedly inspired by ISIL-K instructions to carry out attacks against the Swedish and Dutch Consulates in Istanbul and Christian and Jewish places of worship, were arrested in Türkiye.”<sup>8</sup> In March 2023, U.S. CENTCOM Commander General Kurilla testified that his command assessed that the Islamic State Khorasan group “can do an external operation against U.S. or Western interests abroad in under six months, with little to no warning,” including in Europe.<sup>9</sup> *The Washington Post* subsequently reported that Islamic State leaders in Afghanistan had coordinated 15 plots across Asia and Europe as of February 2023.<sup>10</sup> What is your current concern about the threat to Europe from Islamic State Khorasan?**

**Salmi:** I agree that ISKP is a threat to watch, no question about that. At the same time, of course, I do believe that we have to keep an eye on what al-Qa`ida does in Afghanistan. My concerns about ISKP are twofold.

Firstly, we have the regional threat from Afghanistan posed by ISKP to Pakistan and Central Asian countries. We have to also keep in mind that in some Daesh-, but also al-Qa`ida-related organizations, we see Central Asian citizens having quite prominent roles. We also need to look at how porous the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan is.

Secondly, there might be individuals who already could be in Europe, who could travel to Europe—through Central Asia or elsewhere—who could be inspired by ISKP. I don't have bullet-proof evidence that there would be a strict control and command relationship between any individuals and the ISKP leadership in Afghanistan. I fear that there could be an attack by lone actors or a group of lone actors in Europe, inspired by ISKP, with a lower impact than a directed attack.

**CTC: In mid-October, we saw al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent call for attacks—in light of the events in Israel and Gaza—on the nationals of certain Western countries, which is obviously very concerning for all of us in the CT enterprise.<sup>11</sup> What is your degree of concern that groups such as al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State are going to exploit what is going on in the Middle East to make some kind of comeback?**

**Salmi:** These calls to attack or to engage in some terrorist activity spread extremely quickly on social media and that's why they could have a rapid and serious impact on the security situation. It reminds me of the days back in 2014-2016 when Daesh propaganda was at its high peak. The situation in Israel, combined with that sort of propaganda, could change the security situation in the E.U. quite drastically. That's why I also believe it's important to build on lessons learned from two recent attacks in Europe: one in France and one here in Brussels. What kind of contacts have been established? How were these people inspired by Daesh? And as Daesh is taking responsibility for the attack in Brussels,<sup>12</sup> is that really true or is it simply claiming an attack in which it had no real involvement? That's why we are looking forward to the outcome of the investigation into the background of the attack.

**CTC: One of the geographic areas that you mentioned as one that you were focused on intently is the Sahel region of western Africa. The jihadi threat has been on the rise there. There's been concern that some of the governments could be destabilized. The Wagner Group has played a very problematic role in the region, undermining the effort against terrorism over there.<sup>13</sup> What's your concern that there could be some spillover effects from Sahel into Europe, especially if jihadi terrorists operating in the Sahel could carve out some kind of territorial control in the region, which they haven't really done yet. Can you talk a little bit about that part of the problem set?**

**Salmi:** The successive military coups in the Sahel and West Africa region are indeed very worrying for the stability of the region, but also for the security. Since 2020, there have been six coups in total, the last in Niger has pushed the region further into political unrest and insecurity. The military juntas in command are less willing to cooperate with some Member States and they shift alliances. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are facing a serious security crisis that is being exploited by the juntas to justify their take-over vis-à-vis their population. However, the juntas have not proved that they are more capable of fighting terrorist groups in the region. On the contrary, over 1,800 terrorist attacks were recorded in the region for the first semester of 2023, resulting in nearly 4,600 deaths according to ECOWAS.<sup>14</sup>

This situation is a real concern as it could trigger increased security threats. All signals were already red: persistent insecurity

in the region, terrorist groups gaining territory, including towards West Africa, the spread of the influence of fundamentalist Islam as well as the lack of basic services for the population. The risk of another terrorist self-proclaimed caliphate cannot be ignored, especially in Mali and in Burkina Faso, in the tri-border area. However, I fear that al-Qa`ida and Daesh will take advantage of the current political instability in the Sahel countries to expand in the coming months. The coup in Niger has already hamper international cooperation efforts across the Sahel to combat terrorist groups, allowing them to extend their territories and influence. I am also afraid that if they manage to control more territory, they will begin to have the capacity to plan and project attacks towards Europe, as we saw from Iraq and Syria in 2015.

We need to be fully aware of this possibility and continue to support the countries that wish to do so, in order to curb the spread of the terrorist threat which primarily affects the African populations. The E.U. will continue to encourage the promotion of the civilian approach of the fight against terrorism, in addition to military action in the region. [These efforts were advanced by] a regional conference we jointly organized in May in Niamey with the official Nigerien authorities. The European Council also decided to establish a new joint civil-military mission in the Gulf of Guinea to support Benin, Ghana, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire.

**CTC: I want to talk about something your predecessor Gilles de Kerchove mentioned in a 2020 interview with us. He described the Al-Hol camp in Syria housing the families of Islamic State-linked individuals as “a time bomb for radicalization.”<sup>15</sup> There’s been some progress for repatriation since he did the interview, but there are still European passport-holders who are being held there.<sup>16</sup> Do you have a sense of how many European Union women and children are still assessed to be detained in northeastern Syria and what is the European Union doing to address the problem set?**

**Salmi:** For me personally, if there’s one thing that I would need to single out from my two and a half years in office, Al-Hol in Syria is definitely at the top of that list. I share the concern of my predecessor, Gilles. And I have to say the situation in Al-Hol and the other camps in the region is indeed an issue that we have to take extremely seriously. Because I do see that those camps could definitely be an incubator for the next generation of Daesh or other terrorist actors unless we get it solved.

To your question, since Gilles gave the interview more than three years ago, the situation has changed in this respect: Many E.U. Member States have returned or repatriated their citizens from those camps for different reasons. We still have a limited number of women and children in the camps. We’re probably talking about—I don’t have the exact number, but a couple of hundred E.U. nationals and their children in the camps—that gives the scope of where we stand today. One of the challenges, as you well know, is that no one knows for sure the identity of all the individuals who are in those camps. But this gives you an idea of the magnitude.

The main exercise that we have been trying to do, as the E.U., the E.U. institutions, is to support the Iraqi government to repatriate and reintegrate the Iraqis from these camps. And the reason for that is if you look at Al-Hol, for example, you still have around 50,000 individuals over there.<sup>17</sup> Half of them are Iraqis. So if we could assist the Iraqi government to repatriate their nationals then

the resulting decongestion of these camps would have immediate, in my understanding, impact first, on the security situation in the camps and in the region, and then secondly, of course, [on] the humanitarian situation in those camps. I have visited the region several times, and the conditions the inhabitants of the camps live in are appalling.

On my suggestion, the European Commission commissioned a study at the end of last year which was finalized in mid-March this year on concrete measures we could take to assist the Iraqis. One such measure is technical assistance for providing ID documents for those in the camps. We have lots of newborn babies over there, we have young children without any IDs. How can that be resolved so they can be repatriated? Because you can’t do that before they have some sort of IDs available. The second question is, how could we support these so-called Jeddah camps,<sup>18</sup> sort of halfway houses from Al-Hol back to the local community? What sort of psycho-social help, what sort of educational assistance might be needed there to help the U.N. or IOM [International Organization for Migration] in their activities with this? And then finally, how to support the U.N. in their reintegration exercises to take place in different parts of Iraq.

And of course, the question is also how could we help the Syrians in northeast Syria because the situation is probably even worse over there. I hope that would be the next phase that we could address as soon as the influx from Al-Hol and the other camps towards Iraq is moving forward. And the Iraqis are really committed in doing that now, which I’m very grateful for. The Iraqi Government do see the need to address this question.

**CTC: So it’s clearly a top priority for your office. Going back to that interview that Gilles de Kerchove did with us back in 2020, he stated that one cause for concern was the “hundreds of prison leavers convicted for terrorism-related offenses but who have served short sentences.”<sup>19</sup> How does your office see the threat of terrorist recidivism, and what work is being done to mitigate it?**

**Salmi:** Again, this is a major concern that I share. Now, three years after that interview, it’s a very timely question because we are now seeing, within the next 12 to 24 months, lots of individuals leaving prisons in Europe who have been convicted of terrorism-related offenses. The threat of terrorist recidivism is low compared to other forms of criminal recidivism, but any act of terrorism has such sweeping consequences that we should still make [every] effort we can to prevent former prison inmates from committing terrorist attacks. In this context, we should also bear in mind that many terrorists released from prison may not re-offend, but could still return to their old social circles, spreading violent extremist ideology and inspiring others to commit acts of violence. Moreover, there are also radicalized prison inmates who were convicted for offences other than terrorism and who pose a threat of terrorism either in prison or after their release. Under the Spanish E.U. Presidency, the E.U. is looking into this issue again.

Over the last 10 years, the E.U. has provided extensive funding to civil society organizations working on exchange of information and best practices among practitioners working with prison inmates and former detainees. This includes the Radicalisation Awareness Network<sup>20</sup> and EuroPris, the European Organisation of Prison and Correctional Services. The E.U. has also funded the development of



evidence-based tools that help prison and probation staff to assess the risk that a radicalized (ex-)inmate will use violence in the future.

But in my view, we need to do much more still. We have good examples from several Member States, places such [as] Denmark, the Netherlands, France, and Belgium; they have really paid attention to this. We need to intensify exchange of data among our Member States regarding inmates who are being released from prison but are still assessed to pose a threat. For this purpose, Member States need to use the E.U.'s automated databases, such as the Schengen Information System (SIS), to the fullest extent possible. Some Member States are currently much more likely than others to upload data into the SIS, which is a cause for concern.

On a much more positive note, I have to say the message that I hear from across the Member States is that until now, [while] there are issues definitely, [there are] not many former detainees who have re-offended. But as the numbers of those leaving prison will go up—it's mathematics—the likelihood of terrorist recidivism will go up. So we have to follow this very closely.

**CTC: And obviously in periods of raised tensions like we're going through now, that only increases the concerns about this part of the problem set, given the events in the Middle East right now. Another thing that Gilles de Kerchove talked about in his 2020 interview was the importance of the security community devoting more attention to disruptive tech. You mentioned your focus on this area. One area that's seen ultra-rapid advances is generative artificial intelligence, including deep learning models such as Chat GPT. There is concern this could be used for nefarious purposes with the Australian government eSafety Commissioner recently warning that "terrorist groups could use models to raise money, disseminate pro-terror content or generate instructions on making bombs or weapons."<sup>21</sup> How do you see this issue (the terror threat posed by generative artificial intelligence), and what is being done at the E.U. level and by your office to address it?**

**Salmi:** Firstly, I fully share that assessment by our Australian colleagues. In 2022, we wrote a paper on the Metaverse,<sup>22</sup> just to understand what that would mean for the terrorist actors: How could they use the metaverse in the future for training activities, radicalization activities, or recruiting activities. AI is the driving force behind the Metaverse and it shows how the new technologies could be used in very unfortunate ways. For the time being, I don't think that we have really seen AI being directly used for terrorism purposes, but it can and will be, and it probably already is used in information-gathering efforts. It is already used for the dissemination of radical views, hate speech as well as terrorist and violent extremism content online through AI-powered algorithms. Also, generative-AI, like Chat GPT, can be used for generating disinformation in order to spread extremist and terrorist ideologies. Using language-model[s] to generate encrypted messages can also be a mean of communication for terrorists and extremists.

What we have been trying to do in the E.U. is to set a precedent with a new framework [through] the [proposed] AI Act<sup>23</sup> and by trying to regulate issues such as the digital services. We have the relatively new Digital Services Act in place to address the dissemination of illegal content and the role play[ed] by algorithms. And based on the DSA, the E.U. is now investigating X's, Meta's, TikTok's and YouTube's activities on disseminating dis-

information concerning the conflict in Gaza, for example. So we are trying to come up with tools where we could address some of these challenges.

We have the Terrorist Content Online Regulation, which obliges tech companies to remove terrorist content on the internet within one hour after receiving a removal order from E.U. Member States' national competent authority. The evaluation on the functioning of the TCO [Terrorist Content Online] Regulation has proven to have [had] a positive impact to counter the dissemination of terrorist content so far.

I have basically three concerns when it comes to the social media platforms. My first concern is algorithmic amplification. How do these algorithms work? A new European Center for Algorithmic Transparency,<sup>24</sup> which comes from the DSA, has been established to see how that works. I fully understand that these algorithms are trade and business secrets of these different companies, but at the same time, we have to understand how to tackle this issue of the amplification of terrorist or violent extremist content or hate speech for that matter, which would often violate the terms and conditions of the service providers themselves.

The second issue that I'm also concerned about is content moderation. How well is that done? I know that AI is used to a significant degree in order to do that. Can we enhance that? I come from a country with a very small language group, namely Finnish. You could ask, how well are the Finnish messages moderated? I don't think that that's done to [the same] extent as English.

And then thirdly, when it comes to social media, especially social media platforms, the big ones, they do cooperate. We have the EU Internet Forum, for example.<sup>a</sup> I think they are very receptive and they really want to sort these issues out. The concern that I have is some of the smaller actors, who a) do not want to work with us, or b) who just don't have the resources to do that. So we also have to look into that.

For some time now, the question of cryptocurrencies and other transfer of funds using crypto-assets used by terrorist actors has been a new technologies-related topic that we have to pay attention to. Having said that, cryptocurrencies have been used by terrorist actors, but not at a scale that probably all of us were concerned or worried about a couple of years ago. At least, not until now, but we need to anticipate these risks, which is why the E.U. is currently in the process of strengthening its legislative framework on Anti-Money Laundering and Countering Financing Terrorism (AML/CFT), notably with the adoption in May of E.U. Transfer of Funds regulation with specific obligations on crypto-assets.

**CTC: In the August 2020 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, West Point scientists assessed that advances in synthetic biology and widening access to the technologies involved "is leading to a revolution in science affecting the threat landscape that can be rivaled only by the development of the atomic bomb."<sup>25</sup> In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, what is your view of the potential future threat posed by terrorist actors deploying**

a Editor's Note: "The EU Internet Forum (EUIF) launched by the Commission in December 2015, addresses the misuse of the internet for terrorist purposes through two main strands of action: reducing accessibility to terrorist content online [and] increasing the volume of effective alternative narratives online." "European Union Internet Forum (EUIF)," European Union Commission website, n.d.

### biological weapons, and what is being done to protect against this threat at the European Union level?

**Salmi:** I see the threat of terrorists using biological weapons as limited, mainly because other attack means are more readily available to terrorists, but also because terrorists know that the spread of pathogens could lead to mass casualties among their own in-group and not just among the out-groups that they despise. That said, we still need to prepare for biological attacks due to the very extensive consequences such an attack will have on our society if it occurs.

E.U. policies on biological risks are aimed at prevention of, and preparedness for, accidents as well as deliberate release of pathogens. They include both threats from non-state and from state actors. They are multi-disciplinary, involving a range of policy departments and executive agencies.

In 2017, the E.U. adopted an Action Plan to enhance preparedness against chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear security risks, focusing on increasing awareness of CBRN risks, preparedness for CBRN security incidents, reducing the accessibility of CBRN materials, and cooperation with international partners. The E.U. has set up the CBRN Centres of Excellence (CBRN CoE), a capacity building and cooperation mechanism with third countries on CBRN issues. In addition, the European Commission funds various projects on CBRN, notably to equip security practitioners with the expertise and means to counter biological threats, including for instance detectors to identify dangerous biological substances.

It's good that we already looked into this seven, eight, nine years ago, and we do have a toolbox available should a CBRN attack take place.

**CTC:** Between 2007 and 2011, you served as the director of Finland's Security Intelligence Service (SUPO). I imagine you did a lot of thinking about Russia in that role. Given the huge tensions between Moscow and Western capitals caused by the war in Ukraine, what's your concern that the Kremlin could provide support to far-right terrorist groups or other violent actors in Europe?

**Salmi:** The situation in Ukraine, even if it's not strictly speaking a terrorism issue, of course is an issue which has an impact on our security. Now the question is, what sort of a role would the Russians play directly in this? I think the answer is two-fold. Anything that would cause disruption or havoc in the E.U. is something that the Russians would not shy away from. Would they directly support such actors? Such actors within Europe have long had links with Russia—not the Russian government, but also like-minded individuals in Russia—and that could definitely play a role.

Some of the misinformation campaigns that have taken place in Europe originated in Russia as well, contributing to polarization of our societies. Back in 2016, there was this fake story about a girl named Lisa in Germany who had allegedly been raped by migrants and that message was amplified by different actors and most

likely also disinformation coming from Russia.<sup>b</sup> So, we definitely need to keep a very close eye on any sort of foreign influence and manipulation exercises that that could take place linked to violent right-wing extremism or otherwise.

**CTC:** A group with connections to Russia's military establishment is the Russian Imperial Movement.<sup>26</sup> According to the U.S. listing of the Russian Imperial Movement as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entity, "in 2016, two Swedish individuals attended RIM's training course; thereafter, they committed a series of bombings in Gothenburg, Sweden, targeting a refugee shelter, a shelter for asylum seekers, and a café, for which they were convicted in Sweden." The RIM has been gaining military skills and experience in the conflict in Ukraine.<sup>27</sup> What is your assessment of the possible future threat posed by the Russian Imperial Movement and its paramilitary arm the Russian Imperial Legion?

**Salmi:** The Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) is a white supremacist organization that spreads hatred against the West and other perceived enemies of Russia. We know of examples of E.U.-based white supremacists that were trained by the RIM and went on to commit serious acts of violence. As such, I see the RIM as a threat to the E.U.'s security. I am particularly concerned about recruitment activities undertaken by the RIM in the Western Balkans.

The extent of the threat posed by RIM to the E.U. in the future will depend on various factors, such as the outcome of the war in Ukraine, room for maneuver allowed to RIM militants by the Kremlin, and the degree of connectivity between Russia and the E.U. in the future.

**CTC:** Turning to another Russian actor, on September 15, 2023, the United Kingdom proscribed the Wagner Group as a terrorist group.<sup>28</sup> The French parliament has adopted a resolution calling for the European Union to designate Wagner as a terrorist group.<sup>29</sup> What is your view on the European Union designating the Wagner Group and what are the prospects for this?

**Salmi:** The European Parliament has called on the Council of the E.U. to designate Wagner as a terrorist organization. We should analyze whether some of the atrocities committed by Wagner could be classified as a form of terrorism and examine whether there is a solid legal basis for designating Wagner as a terrorist organization. Under E.U. law, designation requires a unanimous decision of the E.U. Council, consisting of the Member States, based on a decision of a national competent authority that meets the E.U.'s criteria for an act of terrorism.

Then of course, one question that we need to analyze is what

b Editor's Note: "The media storm surrounding a fake story about a Russian-German girl, who had reportedly been raped by Arab migrants, was a wake up call for German political elites [in 2016]. For the first time, they clearly saw the links between Russian domestic and foreign media campaigns against Germany and Russian politics at the highest level. The German government promptly advised the Federal Intelligence Service (BND) in coordination with the Foreign Office to check Russian sources of manipulation of German public opinion." Stefan Meister, "The 'Lisa case': Germany as a target of Russian disinformation," July 25, 2016.

additional tools would that bring into our toolbox? This is definitely something which is now discussed. Also looking into what the U.S. has been doing; it's listed or designated as an international organized crime group by the U.S.,<sup>30</sup> which gives them particular measures to use. We don't have a similar legislation in place in the E.U., so we can't go down that path.

The Wagner group is ultranationalist and poses a clear challenge to our values and our interests. That is why the E.U. has sanctioned Wagner under its Human Rights, Mali, and Russia sanctions regimes.

**CTC: Going back to the issue of Ukraine, there has been some concern over the years about extreme far-right foreign fighter mobilization. But since the 2021 Russian invasion this was described by one assessment in *CTC Sentinel* as “a trickle, not a flood.”<sup>31</sup> What is your assessment of the challenge posed by the extreme far-right individuals from Europe who have developed military skills while fighting in Ukraine?**

**Salmi:** First, on [the] Ukraine issue, it's not illegal in most of the E.U. Member States to travel to Ukraine to fight especially on the Ukrainian side of the frontline. It's very difficult to say exactly how many people have left and joined the ranks of armed forces.

I would say that it's an issue to be followed. Theoretically, it could be a very toxic combination to have someone who has links with violent right-wing extremism, for example, who gains combat

experience, who might get traumatized. This is not only for the law enforcement to look into, but also for other actors in our societies once these people return from Ukraine.

**CTC: Is there anything else you would like to add for our readers?**

**Salmi:** Just as a final remark, what we have been discussing for an hour or so underlines the necessity also to keep these counterterrorism-related topics high on the agenda of political decision-makers, be it in Washington or Brussels, London, Kampala, or Australia.

Since October 7, we have received a stark reminder that events overseas can impact the threat level in Europe. We have to keep an eye on those crises that might take place relatively far away from our capitals because they could have this sort of an impact directly or indirectly on our security.

We can't really draw any line between the internal and external dimensions. Everything is linked, and it's really global threats that we see these days. Anything that could take place somewhere in Australia could just as well happen here in Europe, be it a threat posed by jihadism, violent right-wing extremism etcetera. That also underlines the necessity for very good and enhanced cooperation by the security community, not only within Europe, but globally. We should make sure that we share a common threat picture and situational awareness of the challenges we collectively face. **CTC**

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: General (Ret) Stephen Townsend, Former Commander, AFRICOM

By Brian Dodwell and Caroline Morgan

*General (Retired) Stephen Townsend served as the Combatant Commander of the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) from July 2019 to August 2022. In this capacity, he was responsible for all U.S. military operations, activities, and investments in 53 African countries to protect and advance U.S. security interests. His previous leadership roles include serving as Commander of the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command, as Commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps, the U.S. Army's rapid deployment contingency corps.*

*General Townsend led and commanded troops at every echelon from platoon to corps and combined joint task force. His key staff assignments included service as a planner and operations officer at battalion, brigade, division and joint task force levels. At U.S. Pacific Command, he was the J-5 strategy and plans officer for China and later Special Assistant to the Commander. At U.S. Central Command, he was the Executive Officer to the Commander. On the Joint Staff, he was the Director of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Coordination Cell.*

*General Townsend's combat and operational experience include Operation Urgent Fury, Grenada; Operation Just Cause, Panama; and Operation Uphold Democracy, Haiti. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, he led 3-2 Stryker Brigade, Task Force Arrowhead, on offensive operations across Iraq during "the Surge." He served four tours in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom culminating as Commander, 10th Mountain Division (Light). General Townsend also led all U.S. and multi-national troops fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria as Commander, Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve between August 2016 and September 2017.*

**CTC: Looking back on your time as the commander of U.S. AFRICOM, that was a time period that we saw a shift away from some of the traditional battlegrounds of Iraq and Afghanistan and the broader war on terrorism. And we've seen some people suggest that Africa, in this timeframe, has become an epicenter for global jihadi terrorism.<sup>1</sup> Would you agree with that characterization? More broadly, how would you frame the current nature of the jihadi threat in Africa?**

**Townsend:** I think I would agree with that general characterization. It was in probably late summer of 2017, I was the commander of CJTFOIR [Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve], and I was doing a press conference and one of the reporters asked me, "General, when you're done here with OIR, where do the surviving remnants, elements of ISIS go?" And I said, "Well, I'm not sure. I'm no expert on Africa, but I think they're going to go to ungoverned or under-governed spaces where they have

room. And I think they're going to Africa." That was my answer in 2017. Then I got to live that from 2019 to 2022 in Africa. So I do think the epicenter of global jihadism is going to Africa.

I think you're still going to see key pockets [elsewhere]. ... al-Qa`ida are in Iran. We know that key leaders of ISIS and al-Qa`ida have some sanctuary in northwest Syria. I believe they're going to return to Afghanistan because I don't believe you can count on the Taliban to uphold their deal to keep al-Qa`ida out of there. But I do believe that the bulk of the effort and the fighters are moving to Africa. I think the current nature of that threat is probably regional today: not a global threat, not a threat to the United States' interests outside the region today. But they fully have the intent for that.

I believe ISIS' intent is to reestablish a new caliphate in West Africa. I think they want to do that in a lower-key way. They've learned from the War on Terror as well, and they're deliberately trying to keep that lower key. I think al-Qa`ida has a more dangerous, slower, more patient approach to increasing influence, but clearly, they're carving out space both in the Horn of Africa and in West Africa. And I think they're probably the largest threat to U.S. interests in the region today. And as they gain capacity, they'll broaden their picture to the region and globally, to include our homeland eventually, I think.

**CTC: You mentioned both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. In looking at those, do you see differences in their approach to the African continent? Obviously, they are two organizations that have competed, but share a very similar ideology. How has their approach differed, and do you see a potential for collaboration in the long term if they get past some of their strategic differences?**

**Townsend:** For ISIS, the approach has been much more direct, in your face, and aggressive in nature in Africa. And for al-Qa`ida, it's been a little bit more patient, [an] attempt to build influence and carve out space. For al-Qa`ida, they actually have a playbook ... they've said, "Hey, don't make the mistake of calling yourself al-Qa`ida." There's a group in West Africa and in the Sahel called JNIM. They were told, "Don't adopt al-Qa`ida in the Sahel. Don't adopt that name." So they have a deliberate playbook: Don't attack in cities for now; don't plant a flag and declare yourself a caliphate. So there's a very deliberate attempt to lower some of the things that they think will trigger Western interest and possible intervention. That's their approach.

ISIS has been more aggressive. Interestingly enough, when I first got to AFRICOM, we actually observed ISIS and al-Qa`ida elements working in cooperation in West Africa. Over those three years, that changed, and they came into competition pretty directly. We saw ISIS and Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region fighting. We saw ISIS and al-Qa`ida elements in the Sahel fighting. And that cooperation has waned a pretty good bit.<sup>2</sup> But their approach

generally [is] probably strategically the same: Carve out influence in the spaces that they think are safe enough for them in Africa and to lessen Western influence, drive the West out. [It's the] urban centers where the governments of African nations typically are and [the approach is to] lessen their influence—essentially contain them to major cities, and own the rural spaces in between.

**CTC:** To look at a couple regions more specifically now, in one of its recent reports, the U.N. monitoring group who tracks the global threat reported that the level of violence and threat was increasing in the Sahel specifically.<sup>3</sup> Given the recent political destabilization of Niger, to what degree are you concerned that jihadis could destabilize the Sahel and even take over large swaths of territory like they have previously in some regions?

**Townsend:** I agree with the U.N. report. I think the data shows—and this is data we tried to convey to Washington and the Department of Defense before I left command at AFRICOM almost exactly a year ago—that the level of violence and threat is increasing in the Sahel. No doubt about that. The data shows that clearly. With regards to the recent destabilization in Niger, am I concerned that jihadis could further destabilize in the Sahel? Absolutely. Yes, I am concerned. I think it's possible. I think it's even likely. This is a worst-case scenario for the West, particularly Europe, because I believe that any problems that manifest from the Sahel will appear in Europe first before they appear in the United States.

But as I conveyed to our leaders in Washington on numerous occasions, there are countries there that probably matter more significantly to the United States. What we see going on in Mali, we would not want to see going on, for example, in countries like Ghana or Senegal or Cote d'Ivoire, those littoral states. Do I think that's possible? Absolutely. It's very possible.

**CTC:** Speaking of Niger, what do you believe the impact of the recent coup could be for broader U.S. strategic interests in the region? Beyond even the CT issues, how does it impact our posture, presence, and operations in the Sahel or the broader region?

**Townsend:** That's to be determined. Bottom line up front, the short answer is I think it's not good for America's interests, presence, and posture and operations in that region. Now, I'm not involved in the conversations that are going on right now between the Department of Defense, Department of State, the administration, and AFRICOM as to what the plans are. In my own view, it's not going to necessarily drive us out of the region. It may not even drive us out in Niger.

In my opinion, we want to stay engaged in Niger. I know that we have a law and that will trigger Section 7008 restrictions and that we will have to significantly reduce our support since the administration has declared this is a coup. Because it's a coup, we will have to withdraw a lot of support to the regime there. I think we ought to try to find a way to stay engaged in the region because our engagement not only supports Niger, it supports our interests. So for that reason, we should try to find a way [to] thread this needle so we can stay engaged in the region.

I don't think that we have to abandon the region. We should not abandon the region. And in fact, I'm not even sure that it means we have to abandon our posture in Niger. Maybe we don't maintain a

posture in the capital; maybe we do. Maybe we maintain posture at our Agadez air base; maybe we don't. We have to try to find a way to stay engaged as much as possible and work with our partners across that region despite this coup.

**CTC:** Looking to the east little bit, you had highlighted in past testimony the nature of the threat from al-Shabaab, citing it as the greatest threat to the United States specifically to the homeland from that region.<sup>4</sup> How has this al-Qa`ida affiliate been able to maintain its strength in the face of a pretty persistent CT effort against it? It seems like a remarkably resilient organization. What are your thoughts on how they're able to maintain this presence and their pace of operations.

**Townsend:** First of all, I disagree with the characterization that we have maintained persistent CT pressure against al-Shabaab. In fact, we have not. For half of my command at AFRICOM, we had very intermittent CT pressure against al-Shabaab. When I arrived in 2019, I thought the CT pressure was pretty good. That was a result of several forces working in concert: U.S. CT efforts, the Department of State and the DoD, AFRICOM, but also at that time AMISOM operations were fairly aggressive and the Somali government was very focused on clearing certain regions of Somalia. I was pleasantly surprised by what I saw.

Very quickly, the wheels started coming off of that. After probably less than six months, the Somalis stopped operations. Essentially, all except for their higher-end SOF forces, the forces that we were partnered with—the Danab or Lightning battalions, the rest of the Somali army stopped major CT activities, and they turned inward and became very focused on political frictions internal to Somalia in the run-up to the election. That [election] was delayed significantly; [it] finally occurred well past President Farmaajo's mandate. As a result of the Somalis [having] stopped operating, the AMISOM forces stopped operating.

This became the status for another year or so, and then we—our [then U.S.] administration—in the late fall of 2020 directed AFRICOM to withdraw our forces from Somalia. We didn't have a lot there, several hundred forces in Somalia. We were told to pull them all out, and we could continue our advise and assist mission from bases outside of Somalia. We were just prohibited from maintaining bases in Somalia. So we started commuting to work. As a result, that CT pressure went from a pretty good level, I thought, in the fall of 2019 to very low by January 2021. And so there wasn't persistent pressure. I think al-Qa`ida had room to grow, and in that space, they got bigger, they got bolder, they got more aggressive.

Then we started turning that around. There were successive interventions with the new administration. The new administration started looking at this problem right after they took office. Around May 2022, we got the authorities to go back into Somalia and stay there.<sup>5</sup> That coincided with a shift in mission from AMISOM to ATMIS,<sup>3</sup> and that coincided with the election and inauguration of a new president, Hassan Sheikh Mohammed, in Somalia. And then we started working in concert again.

So, we haven't had persistent pressure against al-Shabaab. It has ebbed and flowed, waxed and waned, and only in the last year or so

a Editor's Note: AMISOM (African Union Mission in Somalia) was replaced in April 2022 by the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS).

has it been approaching the levels of what it was in the fall of 2019.

**CTC:** Given that, what is the strategy against al-Shabaab, both in terms of Somali government but also obviously our own longer-term strategy? As you just said, we've ebbed and flowed in terms of our level of engagement. There's also been lots of discussion about the type of engagement that's required from the U.S., debate over the effectiveness of an airstrike campaign versus boots on the ground. How do those different variables fit together? What do you see as the U.S.'s own long-term strategy in Somalia?

**Townsend:** In one word, our strategy in Somalia is containment. That's not satisfying certainly for the Somalis to hear, but that is our strategy. That's how we resource it. [There's] the euphemism [in counterterrorism]: 'mowing the grass.' You have to mow the grass every week. And you have to mow the grass indefinitely every week when you resource containment. Now that's OK, because I think we're really depending on the Somalis and the ATMIS efforts to address this problem. And the U.S. doesn't want to get drawn in so that we're responsible for solving that. I'm perfectly supportive of that idea. I think what we need to do is continue the military efforts that we're doing. Our effort there, in my view, needs to have more diplomacy and more whole-of-government efforts there.

We get criticized in the media for our strategy being primarily military. I don't know if that's a fair criticism or not. The thing that you see the most is military, but again, we didn't even insert back into Somalia the same number that we pulled out. [It was] probably a little over half. And so there's still a very small DoD footprint in Somalia, and they're focused on training and advising and assisting our partners and getting them out the door to go do operations. It is not Afghanistan; that's my point.

I think we've deliberately tried not to make the mistakes of Afghanistan and make our effort too ambitious. But I do think there's room there for more diplomatic support to the government and more whole-of-government support and international support for the government of Somalia to continue their fight against al-Shabaab. I think negotiations with al-Shabaab ought to be part of that. I think those negotiations ought to be led by the Somali government, supported by the United States and their Western partners. And President Hassan Sheikh Mohammed, right after he was elected, told me that he fully intended to negotiate with al-Shabaab at some point in the near future. But he wanted to do it from a position of strength. When he took office, he felt like he was at a position of relative disadvantage vis-a-vis al-Shabaab, and I agreed with him at that time. So we were coming back in with a persistent presence; he was coming into office with ideas to take [to] the fight. He wanted to do a couple things, and one of them was [to] improve relations with the federal member states, which I thought was good. He wanted to get the clans supportive and get the federal member states supporting the effort, and he wanted to take the fight to al-Shabaab and gain a position of advantage on the battlefield over there before he began these talks.

So, I think it's critical, absolutely critical, to maintain a U.S. military presence in Somalia, and I had this conversation with Hassan Sheikh Mohammed, during my first meeting with him, and he asked me, "How might I obtain more support from the West and from the United States?" This was several months after the start of the Ukraine war. And I told him, "Mr. President, be less like



*Now retired General Stephen Townsend, then commander of U.S. Africa Command, is pictured at Camp Simba in Manda Bay, Kenya, on October 27, 2021. (Senior Airman Andrew Kobiialka/U.S. Air Force)*

Afghanistan and more like Ukraine. And you will get more support." I think he has shown in his first year in office that that's what he's trying to do.

**CTC:** Looking a little bit to the south, Islamic State Central African Province has been a rising star for the Islamic State in Africa over the last several years, offering its recruits in the region a viable affiliate to join and also enabling regional attacks in Congo, Rwanda, Uganda, and other plots elsewhere in the name of the so-called caliphate. What do you think of that particular group's current capabilities? Do you see them as a significant threat in Central and East Africa?

**Townsend:** ISIS Central Africa and the Allied Democratic Forces, I think their capacity is relatively low compared to the sophistication and capacity of, for example, al-Shabaab or JNIM or ISIS Greater Sahara. I do think they have capacity relative to their adversaries there in the security forces in the region. One, that's a very tough region to operate in for anyone, so it's very hard to get back into those areas and get after any threat, because of rugged and remote nature of that threat. But as a result, that threat is somewhat contained.

Now, I'm looking at this from an international perspective, not a regional perspective. If you're DRC or you're Uganda or Rwanda, this is a huge threat for you. If you're the United States, I would

rank it a lesser threat, well after al-Shabaab, for example, or ISIS or al-Qa`ida in West Africa. I would rank it further down, and so as a result of that, my advice to Washington was that the U.S. [should] not do a great deal about that threat. Monitor it. I think it's within the capacity of the regional countries there to address it and to contain it, and at most, I think we offer some training and assistance. Some of those countries, relations with them can be kind of tough for the U.S. So not just the U.S., but their Western, international partners can offer training and help them address that threat. Again for us, for the U.S., it's more of a contain-and-monitor type [effort].

**CTC: This has been one of the challenges that we've had when we look around the world at how to address the global jihadi threat: How do we make decisions about where to engage and where U.S. national security interests really and truly are at risk? When we look at the African continent, a lot of these groups that are out there, they're affiliated with organizations that we know pose a broad strategic risk to the United States, but individually, they operate at more of a regional or even local level. In your change of command ceremony, leaving AFRICOM, you stated, "the continent is big, complex and diverse."<sup>6</sup> Regarding the threat, we see different groups that have different interests, different objectives. How do we assess those in terms of how they challenge our interests, both in the region and more strategically, and then how do we make decisions on where to engage, given that diversity of threat?**

**Townsend:** First of all, I want to highlight a point I kept making to Washington and the first Secretary of Defense that I worked for there. About the time I took command, Secretary [Mark] Esper was taking office, and I told him one day, in one of my first engagements with him, that in Africa, counterterrorism *was* 'global power competition' (GPC). I use that term specifically instead of 'great power competition' because I don't believe China and Russia are 'great' in the same way that the U.S. is. A member of my staff said, "Sir, stop saying great power competition. If you want to use the same acronym, use 'global power competition,'" and I went, "OK. I like that." So that became AFRICOM's thing: global power competition.

Counterterrorism in Africa is GPC. What is global power competition all about? It's about gaining access and influence. That's what it's about. How do you do that? You do that by helping your partner with the problem they have. Among many problems in Africa, our partners struggle with terrorism, violent extremist organizations. By helping them with that problem, the U.S. made gains and maintains access and influence—access and influence that can counter China or Russia, for example. Our counterterrorism efforts are not a distraction from global power competition. Maybe they are in other places of the world. I can't speak to that. I just know that in Africa, our counterterrorism efforts *support* our competition with China and Russia.

So, ranking the threats: Before you develop any strategy, you have to understand what the threat is. And in Africa, I rank al-Qa`ida as a higher threat than ISIS. In the Horn of Africa, that's very specific because al-Shabaab, which is a franchise and part of al-Qa`ida, is more prevalent and powerful and influential than ISIS. The presence of ISIS in Somalia is relatively small and smaller still since the raid on one of the ISIS financial nodes in Africa some

months ago.<sup>7</sup> Now, make no mistake: Al-Shabaab is part of global al-Qa`ida's efforts. Their emir, a guy named Diriye,<sup>8</sup> is on the Hattin committee of al-Qa`ida, the corporate 'Board of Directors' of al-Qa`ida. That just shows you al-Shabaab is an extension of al-Qa`ida. Some people like to say, "Well, they're just wannabes. They're naming themselves to get some local recognition, maybe some *wasta* or maybe some resources." That is true for a number of local and maybe even regional terrorist organizations on the continent. It's not true about al-Shabaab.

Then in the West, the Sahel—that's the number-two area that I'm concerned about [for] U.S. interests— it's al-Qa`ida there, in the form of AQIM and JNIM. And then ISIS, it would be a secondary threat. Although probably more numerous, they have less capacity today in my view in West Africa.

Then you've got competing groups in the north. It's mostly al-Qa`ida in Libya. Some ISIS there. Then further south, you've already mentioned Central Africa, ISIS Mozambique, for example; those are much lesser threats to the United States because of the geography and the geostrategic terrain.

The most important place I think we should focus is on the Horn of Africa because of the geostrategic terrain there, the Babel-Mandeb [strait], and the connections to CENTCOM there. And then West Africa would be our next concern because [of] our nation's allies and partners that operate in that area.

**CTC: Looking at how our competitors out there—namely Russia and China, but also Iran and others as well—how would you assess the challenge of them coming in and partnering with African governments where the U.S. does not? For example, what impact do we see in terms of a heightened Russian and Chinese presence in Africa?**

**Townsend:** My assessment of the global power competitors in Africa is similar to the assessment that we have of them globally. First of all, the acute threat is Russia. I worry about them less over the longer term. The longer-term threat is China. Now let me fill that out a little bit. You see very little Russian military activity in Africa. What you *do* see is the hand of Wagner, and we've called that out consistently at AFRICOM since, at least the last four or five years, pretty consistently calling out what Wagner's doing on the African continent. We've seen them active in Sudan, we've seen them active briefly in Mozambique, we saw them very active in Libya, supporting [General Khalifa] Haftar and the Libyan National Army. We've seen them very active in Central African Republic; Wagner and the Russians practically run the government in the Central African Republic.

And we see them active in Mali most recently. These interventions are not helpful. They're not good for anybody in Africa. That's for sure. I think they prop up regimes that probably wouldn't survive if it weren't for Wagner's support, and they give them some legitimacy. I think they probably might help in the short term with security challenges, but the Russian approach and Wagner's approach is exploitative and extractive. They're exploiting local conditions. They do have a strategic objective of lessening Western influence and they were successful in doing that. For example, they drove the French out of Mali. They reduced U.S. operations there. We weren't in Mali, but we operated there. And they have been successful now in getting the withdrawal of the MINUSMA [United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali]



mission that is happening now out of Mali. So reducing Western influence, increasing Russian influence, Wagner's influence, and then extracting natural resources as payment in kind. That's a short-term, acute threat. I worry less about the Russians longer term because one, it's not the government's effort ... it's the government through a mercenary proxy. Two, because their approach is exploitative and extractive, they're not gaining support there.

China, on the other hand, I think has a much longer-term view and approach. Their counterterrorism assistance is not in high demand in Africa. Quite frankly, U.S. and Western counterterrorism assistance is in high demand there. The Chinese assistance is not. They offer it, but I think that the Chinese have a much longer view that's more palatable in Africa, even with things like debt-trap diplomacy. As they get better and learn, they will get seek to gain more influence.

I think the bottom line is what the U.S. needs to do to counter these two global competitors is [to] stay engaged. Stay engaged in Africa. We don't have to engage at the same level in all 54 countries on the African continent and island countries. We have to pick and choose. There's geostrategic key terrain that we need to be focused on. We need to stay engaged.

**CTC: You talked about Wagner, about the broader challenge that they pose. Is there anything more specific other than maintaining our overall engagement that we can and should be doing to address the challenge posed by Wagner? And related to that, have you seen or do you expect to see their presence or their level of influence change given the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and some of the challenges that Wagner Group encountered there?**

**Townsend:** When Ukraine kicked off, [it] wasn't very long [before] we saw Wagner become more directly involved in Ukraine, and we saw lessening of their operations [in Africa]. It impacted their footprint, their posture in Africa and their operations in Africa. We could see that. It took a few months for that to unfold, but after a few months, we could actually see them drawing down in parts of Africa and maybe just marking time in other parts of Africa, holding their own. So, what does that mean now? Well, we all saw the late Mr. Prigozhin's—I don't know what to call it—coup attempt. He said he wasn't going after Putin. He was going after [Russian Defence Minister] Shoigu in Moscow, but we saw his brief march on Moscow and, before he was killed, we saw him relegated to Belarus and we saw him in the press telling his troops, 'Get ready for Africa.' I think they may get refocused there by the Kremlin. I don't know. Perhaps they'll go to Niger. I think they see an opportunity. I don't know of any evidence that says the Russians were behind the recent coup, or unconstitutional change of government, whatever we're calling it, so far in Niger. But I think they see an opportunity, much like Burkina Faso. Now, I tried to get the junta in Mali to shy away from increasing their ties with Russia. But they were committed to that already. Their president, Colonel Goita, essentially lied to my face by saying, 'We're not bringing in Wagner. We're bringing in Russian military.' Of course, we knew better, and we see who's there now. It's Wagner, not the Russian military. In fact, they didn't coordinate their messaging. The junta government in Mali announced, 'We don't have Wagner here. We don't have mercenaries here. We have the Russian military.' And the Kremlin, a few days later, said, 'There's no Russian military in Mali. We don't know what they're

talking about.'

So, do I think Wagner might try to take advantage of the lack of stability right now, the situation in general? Absolutely. I fear that they will try to do that. It's possible that they are helping one side more than the other in Sudan. In fact, I think they're supporting General Hemedti, and his Rapid Support Forces, in his struggle there with General Burhan and the Sudanese military. So I think that the Russians see an opportunity in Sudan to increase their influence through Wagner. I think they see an opportunity in Niger, at the expense of France, at the expense of the United States and several other European allies. They see an opportunity to expand their influence there, and I think that they will. I think that's the reason why earlier I said we should try to stay engaged in Niger. We should try to stay engaged in Niger, not for the benefit of the coup junta there, [but] for U.S. national interests.

**CTC: While AFRICOM commander, you drew attention to Iran's increased activities in Africa. How concerned are you that Tehran is continuing to make inroads on the continent? The president of Iran recently made a rare visit to Africa.<sup>9</sup> He was the first Iranian leader to do so since 2013. What do you see as the impact of this increased engagement?**

**Townsend:** When I first got to AFRICOM in 2019, I saw little evidence of Iranian activity on the continent. There were a couple of instances of low-level Quds Force activity that we saw going on, but [it] really didn't amount to much. After the targeted killing of Soleimani, we detected a significant spike in Iranian interest in Africa. In fact, there were targeting efforts there—and I'm not exposing this; this has been in open source, it's been in the media—[there was] at least one assassination plot targeting U.S. diplomats in Africa by the Iranians as potential revenge strikes after the death of Soleimani.<sup>b</sup> Since then, we've seen steadily creeping increase in Iranian interest in Africa. So it did not surprise me to see the recent visit to Africa. The impact of this engagement is probably 'to be determined.' It's too early to know. I'm not greatly concerned about what the Iranians are doing there, but I think it bears watching.

I do know this: When I asked an African leader once, why would he reach for the hand of Russian PMC [private military company] Wagner, he said: 'A drowning man will reach for any hand.' So there may be African leaders who feel like they're not getting the support they need from the West, or maybe even from Russia or China, and they might reach towards Iran. I think Iran can wield enough financial influence that they will find some traction somewhere in Africa. It's a big place, [there's] a lot of interest, and they will find some traction. We have to watch it.

**CTC: Speaking of an even broader potential threat, you've highlighted in some of your past testimony the threat of climate change in Africa.<sup>10</sup> Could you talk about that a little bit more specifically as it pertains to the violent extremist threat on the continent? How do you think that climate change may**

<sup>b</sup> Editor's Note: In September 2020, Politico reported that "the Iranian government is weighing an assassination attempt against the American ambassador to South Africa, U.S. intelligence reports say, according to a U.S. government official familiar with the issue and another official who has seen the intelligence." Nahal Toosi and Natasha Bertrand, "Exclusive: Officials: Iran weighing plot to kill U.S. ambassador to South Africa," Politico, September 13, 2020.

ultimately impact the rise or evolution of extremism on the continent? What can we do as the United States to mitigate some of these concerns?

**Townsend:** Drought, famine, locust plagues, desertification, deforestation, all of these things were problems even before climate change in Africa. Now with climate change, we see these phenomena moving around the globe. But in Africa, what you see is a quickening of that phenomenon. So, because of that, the challenge for the governments is even increasing. Just trying to feed the population and keep up with the water demands of some African countries was challenging enough. But with climate change, the problem is magnified.

How does that affect terrorism? Well, these become issues of governance, right? And they demonstrate the government's inability or challenge in delivering basic services like clean water to the people and agrarian societies see their livelihood vanish in front of them because of drought, because of desertification, deforestation, etc. So the governments come under increasing scrutiny; they couldn't handle the problem before, and now they are even less able to handle the problem. And so now that gives the jihadists, the terrorists, a foothold. They use this issue of 'the government can't even get you clean water, the government can't even ensure you have adequate food. We can do that.' Now, it doesn't matter if they can do it or not. They point out that the government can't do it, and then they make a strategic drop of water or food, or hand out some cash here and there, and people start believing in this mirage of 'the terrorist is a better source of support and services than my government.' And in some cases in local and rural areas beyond the reach of the capital, they're right. In some cases, al-Shabaab can provide them more help than Mogadishu can. In some cases, JNIM can provide more support than perhaps Niamey can out in the countryside. So it's not just a mirage. I think that long term, ultimately, it's a mirage. But in the short term, they can actually make it appear that way and gain support of the people. So climate change, in my view, just makes it harder to carry out effective governance.

On that point, by 2050, one-fourth of the world's population will be in Africa.<sup>11</sup> The bottom line is population growth is really expanding in Africa, so this is a real problem. Africa is a continent that some in our United States government would prefer to lessen our resources and others, I think, would prefer to ignore altogether, but we're not going to be able to. The problems there are going to manifest themselves and they're going to manifest beyond that continent.

**CTC:** Oftentimes these conversations about counterterrorism tend to focus on kinetic solutions, whereas it's fairly well accepted at this point that we have to think more broadly about the range of potential options we have to help address some of these challenges. Using climate change as a starting-off point, you mentioned some of the broader systemic challenges these governments face. As we think about CT, how do we need to balance kinetic and non-kinetic solutions to the underlying systemic governance issues that we see in the continent. We interviewed an African Union official in the past who talked about the need to listen more to the African countries' needs and not impose our own approach on what we think they

need.<sup>c</sup> So how do we address the range of kinetic to non-kinetic solutions, but also empowering African countries to combat these threats themselves?

**Townsend:** You just basically outlined AFRICOM's daily approach to the African continent every day, to the security challenges there in Africa. I agree completely with the AU official you mentioned. That is exactly what AFRICOM tries to do, and as a result, AFRICOM and the U.S. have a pretty good reputation on the African continent. I think we're viewed at least as honest brokers. I don't think people expect a whole lot from the U.S. because the U.S. has not really demonstrated a willingness to invest a whole lot. But I don't think we have to. I think we have to choose where we want U.S. influence to be successful there, and we have to invest in those countries. But the United States' approach to Africa is a whole-of-government approach. It's in our DNA at AFRICOM, the three Ds: diplomacy, development, defense. Even the defense part of that approach doesn't have to be very kinetic. In fact, we're not very kinetic anywhere in Africa. We almost never fire a shot in West Africa, and we rarely fire shots even in the Horn of Africa, where we have the authorities to do so. When you say defense efforts, kinetic is actually our last means of approach in Africa, even in Somalia. So training, advice, equipping, assistance, and only as a last resort do we go to kinetic means.

We listen to our African partners. We don't try to impose upon them our own approach. There is a negotiation about the types of assistance. We see that even in Ukraine today. The Ukrainians have been asking, for example, for tanks for a long time and they got them in time. They've been asking for F-16s for a long time, and it looks like they may be getting them soon. So there's a negotiation between the requester and the provider about 'I know you want that. I'm not sure you need that. I'm not sure I'm willing to give that to you. If I am, I'm not sure I'm willing to give it to you now, but maybe later.' So there's going to be this back and forth. It's not like we just listen purely to the needs of our partners, whether they be in Africa or Ukraine, and their requests and inputs. We take those on, we balance them against our own national interest and capacities, and then we try to meet them somewhere in the middle.

So, I do agree with the point that we should listen more, not just in Africa but globally, and we should give greater weight to their inputs. But in the end, it's our assistance. It's our help. It's our taxpayers' money. It's our service members and diplomats in harm's way. Our interests have to come first. I think we can meet the needs of U.S. national interest and meet the needs of our African partners at the same time. They're not mutually exclusive.

**CTC:** You discussed how CT can and should be coupled with security force assistance efforts. I was just wondering if you have anything else to add there in terms of specifically how we think about security force assistance and how we think about the objectives of that assistance. Is it for CT purposes? Is it

<sup>c</sup> In an interview with *CTC Sentinel* in June 2021, Idriss Mounir Lallali, the deputy director of the African Union's African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism, stated that "our partners need to listen more to African countries' needs, not try to impose on them their own approach or own assistance that they think they need." Jason Warner, "A View from the CT Foxhole: Idriss Mounir Lallali, Deputy Director, African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT)," *CTC Sentinel* 14:5 (2021).

**focused on strategic competition? Or is it both?**

**Townsend:** I think it's both. Security force assistance in some countries, it's purely equipping. In other countries, it's equipping and training or it's this plus advice or it's this plus advice and assistance, to include CT work. We are not doing CT work in all countries. For example, in a fairly advanced country like Morocco, there we provide equipment that they buy mostly with their own funds, and we provide training on that equipment and then we train beside them as partners. It's not so much security. It's not so much advising. There, we're training beside one another, learning and exchanging as equal partners. In other countries, like Somalia for example, primarily our assistance is CT-related because that is the problem that they need help with. In other countries, we do some equipping and training that's focused on U.N. missions. So country X wants to provide troops for a U.N. mission or an African Union mission, we support that. And so we're willing to kick in some equipment and some training so that that force can go do the A.U. or U.N. mission. So I think security force assistance in Africa is very broad and it looks very different depending on which of the countries you're in. I mentioned 54 countries earlier. Egypt falls under CENTCOM, so the other 53 fall under AFRICOM, but from north to south, east to west, that security force assistance looks very different. I think it's part and parcel of global power competition. Again, the outcome you're looking for, the purpose of GPC, is to have U.S. access and influence so that when a choice has to be made, [governments] side with the U.S. and the West. They vote in the U.N. in support of the U.S. and the West, and they don't support, when push comes to shove, Russia or China. That's kind of what global power competition is all about.

How do we get there? Around the world, we get there by supporting our partners with the challenges they have. That gets back to the question you mentioned earlier, the African Union official saying that we should listen more to our African partners. Absolutely, we should listen to our African partners and understand what they think their problems are and what they want to help solve that problem. We ought to try to meet them in that resolution because that will pay off in U.S. access and influence. That means we're winning the global power competition.

**CTC: What do you think is the most common misconception about counterterrorism in Africa. What should the U.S., the general public writ large, know about those efforts and their importance?**

**Townsend:** Probably the most common misconception about Africa from the American public, first of all, is, are we even there? Yes, U.S. forces are there. You go back to the disastrous ambush at Tongo Tongo, Niger, several years ago and probably most Americans got up that morning and saw the news and said, 'Where the heck is Niger? Do we have troops there now?' That's probably the first misconception, that the U.S. is not in Africa. We are in Africa; the U.S. military is in Africa.

Probably the other misconception, though, [once they understand our military is there] is that there are a lot of troops there fighting, [but actually] there really aren't any troops there fighting. Across the entire continent, unless we're having a big exercise like African Lion or something like that, there are less than 5,000 [U.S.] troops on the continent of Africa on a given day. So

that probably is also a misconception that most Americans have. So [that's] only 5,000 U.S. troops sprinkled across a continent three and a half times the size of the United States.

So, there are very low numbers of U.S. troops doing a very targeted task in very specific areas in Africa. It's very low visibility by design; it's low-resourcing requirements by design; and it's relatively low risk for U.S. forces. Every now and then, a troop will get harmed. They're in harm's way in Somalia. They're in harm's way in Niger and a few other places.

In most countries, U.S. troops are not in harm's way any more than they are training in the continental United States. In a few places, that's not the case, but it's relatively low risk. It's not Afghanistan, by any stretch of the imagination. So this low investment of U.S. military resources, troops, money, and equipment in Africa is very affordable by the United States and, I think, is well in our interest. A few troops and a few dollars goes a long way in Africa.

**CTC: More specific to your personal experience, I was wondering if you might be willing to reflect on what the most challenging mission or task was during your time as the commander of AFRICOM?**

**Townsend:** Probably a little bit tongue in cheek, but a little not: I would say my most challenging mission as the AFRICOM commander was maintaining an appreciation and a focus on AFRICOM issues and resources in Washington, D.C. That was probably my number one challenge. Once, a senior diplomat in Washington was in a meeting that I was in, and they said, 'You know, General Townsend, there seems to be great interest and support for all things Africa in Washington, D.C. Everywhere except in your department, the Department of Defense.' And this diplomat hit the target exactly in the center.

As we shifted in our NDS [National Defense Strategy] focus from counterterrorism to global power competition, and preparation for fighting near peer adversaries and major large-scale combat operations, as that became our shift and our focus, all things counterterrorism were deemphasized. And so there was a constant look to Africa Command to give up resources. I just mentioned, on any given day, less than 5,000 troops: You could take every dollar and every troop out of AFRICOM, and if you plopped them down in the Indo Pacific region, China wouldn't even notice. But those same resources in Africa have outsized impact. So really making that case over and over [was necessary]. Now, I have to credit my leaders in Washington for listening, because the truth is we maintained what small levels of resourcing AFRICOM had. Eventually the facts bore out, and we were able to maintain those resources because our leaders saw the value in keeping them there.

Probably the next greatest challenge in my command tenure was the exfiltration from Somalia. We got ordered to do that in late November 2020, and we had to have it complete by the 15th of January 2021. And so that was a very short notice for a cold start there. We had not been planning this for months. We hadn't seen it coming, and we got told to do it bolt-out-of-the-blue style, and we executed that and made that withdrawal while under pressure from al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab's leaders became aware of it through a bunch of feeds, to include open source, the media, and they desperately wanted to try to interdict that and get an image of a burning American airplane or base or something on the way out so they could claim to have driven us out. They were not successful. We

prevented them from doing that, but that effort over Thanksgiving and Christmas to get out our troops and equipment safely and rapidly, without any significant loss of equipment or personnel, was probably the biggest, most challenging few months of my tenure at AFRICOM. I'm proud that we pulled it off, and I'm equally proud that we were able to prevail on the next administration to put those troops back there so they could do the task more efficiently, more effectively, and more safely.

**CTC:** As a final question, what do you see as the greatest remaining challenge facing the U.S. in Africa today and what is our greatest opportunity? From a CT perspective, how would you define success in Africa in terms of the U.S. CT mission?

**Townsend:** I think probably the greatest challenge facing the United States is convincing Africans we actually care about them. That's the greatest challenge. The threats there from terrorism, the threats from China, the threats from Russia all kind of boil down to 'do the Africans believe that we care' and convincing them of that. It has to be more than just about U.S. national interests of the moment. Do they believe that we see them as valued partners? I think that the United States was able to, by and large, ignore Africa for much of the last century. I don't think that's true for the last couple of decades, and I don't think it's going to be true in the future because of the population growth, because of climate change, because of its geostrategic place on the globe, and because of strategic minerals, for example. Africa is going to grow increasingly important to the U.S., to the West, our economy, and our security. And so the sooner we start investing in Africa like that is the case, the better off we'll be and the more likely you will convince Africans that we actually do care about them. We care about them for us, but we also care about them for them.

What does success look like in our CT efforts there? In the short term, I'd say [it means] no successful attacks on U.S. interests

emanate from African terrorist groups. That's probably the short-term view of success. The longer-term measure is U.S. access and influence. Does the United States maintain its access and influence in Africa that we enjoy today? Does it grow or does it wane? I think that's the longer-term view of our success.

I'll just close with this: A conversation I used to have with the Department's leaders in Washington is that the National Defense Strategy says that we are an economy of force effort. The term these days in vogue is a 'posture-limited theater.' That is true. That's actually how AFRICOM was born, envisioned as an economy of force command theater from birth. And I'm not arguing that AFRICOM should be a main effort or even main supporting effort. I think an economy of force effort is about right for AFRICOM. However, even your economy of force effort must be resourced to accomplish its mission. So if you're a battlefield commander and you're focused on taking or seizing your main objective, you're usually worried about what might be happening on an exposed flank. And so you put an element over there to cover that exposed flank to let you know, to sense what's happening over there, and to take care of it within their capacity. You have to resource that covering force to do that task, so that you can focus on your primary objective. The National Defense Strategy calls for strategic discipline, that we have to have a strategic discipline to focus on our primary concerns and not be distracted by secondary concerns or tertiary concerns. So my point to our leaders in Washington is that's exactly what AFRICOM is doing: We're preventing strategic distraction. If you're really focused on China and you're primarily focused on China in the Indo-Pacific region, what you don't want to be distracted by is some crisis that's foreseeable or preventable occurring in Africa that takes you off that primary focus. So preventing strategic distraction from the priorities of the National Defense Strategy is one of the things that AFRICOM does every day and they need a little bit of resourcing and attention for that. **CTC**

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# The Beginning of a New Wave? The Hamas-Israel War and the Terror Threat in the West

By Tore Hamming

**On October 7, 2023, Hamas—in coalition with a range of other groups including Palestinian Islamic Jihad—initiated the group’s largest ever terrorist attack on Israel, killing 1,200 Israelis and taking more than 240 hostages. The subsequent Israeli air and land offensive in Gaza has resulted in thousands of Palestinians being killed, creating outrage across Arab and Muslim communities around the world of the kind that terrorist groups can exploit. Three factors are likely to determine the impact of the ongoing events on the trajectory of the terrorism threat in the West: the length of the war, the scale of Israel’s offensive in Gaza, and the degree of support from Western nations to Israel.**

**W**ith the events in the Middle East creating the kind of anger in Arab and Muslim communities around the world that can be readily exploited by violent Islamist extremist actors, there is growing concern about a resurgence in the terrorist threat in the West. In congressional testimony on October 31, 2023, FBI Director Christopher Wray stated, “the ongoing war in the Middle East has raised the threat of an attack against Americans in the United States to a whole other level.”<sup>1</sup> French President Emmanuel Macron, for his part, on October 17 stated there was a “resurgence of Islamist terrorism” with all countries in Europe being “vulnerable.”<sup>2</sup>

Already, there are signs of a new wave of Islamist terrorism. On October 16, just nine days after the Hamas attack on Israel, Abdesslem Lassoued, a 45-year-old Tunisian living in Brussels, attacked and killed two Swedish soccer fans while wounding another.<sup>3</sup> Lassoued initially managed to escape, but after an extensive manhunt, he was killed the following morning in a café in the Schaerbeek district of the city. While it appears that his motivation for specifically targeting Swedish nationals, identified through their Swedish soccer shirts, was the Qur’an burnings that took place in Sweden over the summer and fall,<sup>4</sup> postings on his social media profile including images of the Dome of the Rock suggest that the war in Gaza was a contributing factor or at least a

matter of concern for the perpetrator.<sup>5</sup> Immediately following his attack, Lassoued posted a video to his Facebook account pledging allegiance to the Islamic State, and two days later, the group issued a claim of responsibility.<sup>6</sup> Reminiscent of the type of attack seen in the wave of terrorism between 2014 and 2018 in the West, this was the first attack claimed by the Islamic State in a Western country in almost three years, with the previous one being a November 2, 2020, attack in Vienna.<sup>7</sup>

While Lassoued’s killings appear to have only been marginally associated with current events in Gaza, his actions were not the only recent example of violence in the West likely connected to the war. On Friday, October 13, 2023, Hamas called for protests in what they wanted to be a ‘day of rage’ for Muslims around the world. Whether connected or not, on the same day a man stabbed an employee at the Israeli embassy in Beijing,<sup>8</sup> and just a few hours later, Mohammed Mogouchkov, a 20-year-old Chechen man living in France, entered the Lycée Gambetta high school in Arras in northeastern France carrying a knife and killed a teacher and wounded another person. It was later revealed that Mogouchkov had recorded a video pledging allegiance to the Islamic State.<sup>9</sup>

Several other Western countries have also been affected. In Berlin, on October 18, a synagogue was attacked with two petrol bombs, but fortunately, no one was wounded.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in a number of Montreal suburbs, Jewish institutions have recently been targeted by gunfire and fire bombs.<sup>11</sup>

In the United Kingdom, an asylum seeker reportedly carried out a terrorist attack, and although few details were disclosed by authorities, the perpetrator explained his actions were the result of the fact that “Israel had killed children in Gaza.”<sup>12</sup> While the United States has not witnessed any Gaza-related terrorist attacks as of the time of publication, the U.S. authorities issued a warning to citizens to “exercise increased caution” when traveling abroad.<sup>13</sup>

In reaction to the attack in Arras, France raised its threat level to Emergency Attack Level, which is the highest on its threat scale,<sup>14</sup> while Belgium in the wake of the attack there raised the threat level in Brussels to the top level four before lowering it to level three again.<sup>15</sup> The rising threat to the European continent is not that surprising according to terrorism expert Marc Sageman, who says that Europe is most at risk because of its “proportionately

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a On October 19, a 20-year-old Jordanian national living in Texas was arrested on a federal firearms possession charge. According to federal investigators, the man allegedly trained with others of a “radical mindset” to “possibly commit an attack” after he illegally obtained firearms. A law enforcement source told CNN that the man was “plotting to attack a Jewish gathering.” It is important to note that much of the Jordanian man’s alleged threatening activity took place before October 7. Robert Legare and Anders Triay, “20-year-old Jordanian national living in Texas allegedly ‘trained with weapons to possibly commit an attack,’” CBS News, October 31, 2023; Alisha Ebrahimji, John Miller, Sabrina Shulman, and Raja Razek, “Jordanian arrested in Houston supported killing ‘individuals of particular faiths,’ judge’s order said,” CNN, November 13, 2023.



*A police car is parked near the house in the Schaerbeek area of Brussels on October 17, 2023, where the suspected perpetrator of the attack in Brussels was shot dead during a police intervention. (John Thys/AFP via Getty Images)*

larger Muslim populations and more porous borders,” which makes “the number of possible lone actors ... hard to track.”<sup>16</sup> In France, Minister of Interior Gérald Darmanin in early November reported a stark rise in anti-Semitic acts in the country with more than 480 people arrested since October 7,<sup>17</sup> and on November 4, a Jewish woman was stabbed in the stomach in what appears to have been an anti-Semitic attack.<sup>18</sup> A similar increase in anti-Semitic violence has been witnessed in the United Kingdom<sup>19</sup> with London’s mayor, Sadiq Khan, expressing a concern over a “rise of extremism.”<sup>20</sup>

Reports to the United Kingdom’s anti-terror hotline between October 7 and 15 doubled compared to the same period the previous year, with the number of reports containing information classed as significant quadrupling. U.K. police say the Israel-Gaza conflict could have an “energising effect” on those considering attacks. Although the U.K. threat level has not been raised from its current level of substantial since the Israeli offensive into Gaza, Deputy Assistant Commissioner Laurence Taylor of Counter Terrorism Policing has said the resulting increase in tensions “can have an energising effect on people who may be considering, or even planning, to commit violent acts on UK soil.”<sup>21</sup>

In his October 31 congressional testimony, FBI Director Wray stated that “we assess that the actions of Hamas and its allies will serve as an inspiration the likes of which we haven’t seen since ISIS launched its so-called caliphate years ago. In just the past few weeks, multiple foreign terrorist organizations have called for attacks against Americans and the West. Al-Qaeda issued its most

specific call to attack the United States in the last five years. ISIS urged its followers to target Jewish communities in the United States and Europe.” He added: “Here in the United States, our most immediate concern is that violent extremists—individuals or small groups—will draw inspiration from the events in the Middle East to carry out attacks against Americans going about their daily lives. That includes not just homegrown violent extremists inspired by a foreign terrorist organization but also domestic violent extremists targeting Jewish or Muslim communities.”<sup>22</sup>

This article assesses how the war between Hamas and Israel is likely to affect the Islamist terrorism threat in the West with a specific focus on Jewish targets. It first discusses the position of Israel/Palestine in violent Islamist ideology, and the potential mobilizing power within Muslim communities in the West of the war in the region. It then assesses potential threat actors before ending with an assessment of the threat and how it might evolve in the coming weeks and months.

### **The Mobilizing Power of the Palestinian Issue**

Few issues have the potential to radicalize and mobilize Islamist extremists as much as their desire for the ‘liberation’ of Palestine and the destruction of Israel. For Islamist extremists, these objectives are core narratives in their ideology, and for a broader segment of Muslims around the world, the political tensions between Israel and its Palestinian neighbors are a powerful source of anger and frustration.

Jerusalem is the third holiest place in Islam. Jews, and specifically Israel, are considered by Islamist extremists as staunch enemies of Islam. Within this worldview, the United States is regarded as either being controlled by Jews or the protector/enabler of the Jewish State, or all the above and is thus singled out for particular animus. When the United States in December 2017 recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, a range of jihadi groups threatened the U.S. homeland.<sup>23</sup>

The Israel-Palestine issue has always been a central feature of jihadi ideology across its various iterations. For one of the godfathers of the jihadi movement, Abdallah Azzam, a native of the West Bank, the liberation of Palestine was always the primary objective, but due to the "inaccessibility of the battlefield after 1970 combined with Azzam's distaste for the leftist PLO," he headed east to Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> Azzam's mentee, Usama bin Ladin, similarly viewed the liberation of Palestine as a key priority at first, identifying the struggle and the fight against Israel in both of his major statements relating to jihad in 1996 and 1998.<sup>25</sup> In terms of operational activities, however, bin Ladin's al-Qa`ida never really dedicated its focus to the cause, but the late al-Qa`ida leader would regularly refer to the liberation of Palestine and the fight "against the Zionist occupiers" as a means to win support and to mobilize his followers.<sup>26</sup>

Bin Ladin's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, would employ a similar exploitative use of the Palestinian issue, although he publicly degraded its importance in 1995 by claiming that "the road to Jerusalem passes through Cairo."<sup>27</sup> As others have noted, al-Zawahiri nonetheless endorsed "every operation against Jewish interests" and promised to "strive as much as we can to deal blows to the Jews inside Israel and outside it."<sup>28</sup> In reality, however, al-Qa`ida rarely targeted Israel or Jewish interests, but the constant references to the liberation of Palestine and the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem served as a useful propaganda tool.<sup>29</sup> The Islamic State and its predecessor organizations adopted a similar, albeit less intense, rhetorical focus on Palestine and Israel through occasional articles in its publications focusing on the imperative to liberate Palestine and striking Israel and its allies across the world.<sup>30</sup>

A September 2023 *CTC Sentinel* analysis of the global jihadi threat to Israel and Jewish communities around the world found that the "Palestinian issue and specific 'trigger events' related to the Arab-Israeli conflict tend to generate favorable declarations on the part of both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, but that jihadi rhetoric is rarely translated into violent attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets. The relative dearth of successful operations, however, has not deterred global jihadi organizations from regularly leveraging the Palestinian issue for political gain, and in order to reinforce their stature as powerful actors in the Middle Eastern and global arenas."<sup>31</sup>

The emotional resonance of the Palestinian issue means that the current conflict is creating anger among much broader segments of Muslims than salafi jihadis. As was evident with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, such conflicts can radicalize and mobilize individuals who are not otherwise sympathetic to violent Islamist ideologies due to the feelings of anger and frustration that they produce. This is even more so the case with the political conflict relating to Palestine and Israel. Jihadi groups thus hope to reach a broader audience with their releases of extremist propaganda and their calls to act.<sup>32</sup>

The loss of life at the al-Ahli Arab hospital carpark in Gaza

on October 17 is illustrative of how specific events can have deep emotional affect and possibly mobilize individuals to action. While Hamas blamed the strike on Israel, Western governments, including the United States, assessed it to be a failed Palestinian Islamic Jihad rocket that caused the tragedy.<sup>33</sup> Many, however, in the Muslim world saw it as an Israeli attack, creating the kind of anger and emotional outrage that jihadi groups can exploit. At the time of writing, according to the United Nations, since the beginning of the Israeli military offensive more than 11,000 people have been killed in Gaza.<sup>34</sup>

### Assessing Potential Threat Actors

This section identifies the potential terror actors in the West that may look to exploit the war between Hamas and Israel. While there should be concern that sympathizers of groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida could launch attacks, the threat landscape in the West is more complex than that due to ideological specificities and the broad resonance of the Palestinian conflict within Muslim communities.

#### *Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad*

In his October 31 testimony, FBI Director Wray stated that the FBI "cannot—and do not—discount the possibility that Hamas or another foreign terrorist organization may exploit the current conflict to conduct attacks here on our own soil. We've kept our sights on Hamas and have multiple ongoing investigations into individuals affiliated with that foreign terrorist organization. And while historically our Hamas cases have identified individuals located here who are facilitating and financing Hamas' terrorism overseas, we're continuing to scrutinize our intelligence to assess how the threat may be evolving."<sup>35</sup>

Notwithstanding the fact that the group's extreme brutality on October 7 shattered previous assumptions about the approach of the group, it seems unlikely that Hamas would call for or be involved in attacks in the West. Hamas is, despite its radical ideology and historic connections with a myriad of extremist actors, a nationalist Islamist group with its focus at least until now exclusively dedicated to the historic land of Palestine. According to its 2017 charter:

*Palestine is the cause of a people who have been let down by a world that fails to secure their rights and restore to them what has been usurped from them, a people whose land continues to suffer one of the worst types of occupation in this world. Palestine is a land that was seized by a racist, anti-human and colonial Zionist project that was founded on a false promise (the Balfour Declaration), on recognition of a usurping entity and on imposing a fait accompli by force. Palestine symbolizes the resistance that shall continue until liberation is accomplished, until the return is fulfilled and until a fully sovereign state is established with Jerusalem as its capital.*<sup>36</sup>

Ideologically, Hamas is very different from even more extreme groups such as al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State.<sup>37</sup> Besides substantial differences in their interpretation of creed, Hamas differs in its nationalist agenda and its acceptance, albeit nominally, of democratic processes. The group won a majority of votes in Palestinian legislative elections in 2006.<sup>38</sup> Hamas has never been associated with any terrorist attacks in the West, and because its focus has been exclusively on Palestine, it remains very unlikely that Hamas would orchestrate or call for attacks outside the region.

Despite its more extreme ideological leanings and clandestine nature, Palestinian Islamic Jihad is similar to Hamas: a nationalist group whose focus is explicitly on the occupation of Palestine and the group has also never been involved in attacks in the West.

### *Al-Qa`ida*

Al-Qa`ida continues to support terrorism in Western states, including against Jewish targets<sup>39</sup> such as Mohamed Merah's killings of a rabbi and three Jewish children in Toulouse, France, in 2012.<sup>40</sup> For al-Qa`ida, the anger within Muslim communities in the West presents an attractive opportunity to incite terrorism by offering religious and political justification and through direct calls for attacks. However, al-Qa`ida's continued leadership debacle with no new leader after al-Zawahiri publicly announced may hamper its ability to take advantage of the situation.

Al-Qa`ida's central media organization, Al-Sahab, and all al-Qa`ida affiliates have already issued formal statements of support for Palestinian armed groups fighting against Israel,<sup>41</sup> while both the affiliates in Yemen (AQAP) and in Pakistan (AQIS) have called for attacks in the West in support of the Hamas war against Israel,<sup>42</sup> with the latter, according to the NYPD, "calling for attacks on Americans, British and French nationals."<sup>43</sup> On October 29, 2023, AQAP posted a one-hour Arabic-language video entitled: "Questions and Answers Regarding Operation Al-Aqsa Flood" featuring the group's leader, Khalid Batarfi, praising the Hamas attack. Reciting well-worn themes articulated over the years by bin Ladin and other al-Qa`ida leaders about the need to fight back against a Jewish/ Crusader conspiracy against Islam, he stated that Israel depended on American support, depicted Israeli actions in Gaza as part of a broader war on Islam, exhorted Muslims to remove their rulers, and called for attacks against Jews around the world as well as American, British, and French nationals. He concluded: "Our ummah is under occupation. We must rise up and fight for the sake of Allah. We must get our ummah from the state of loss. This duty is not limited to the mujahideen of Al-Qaeda and other groups, but it is the duty on all Muslims without exception."<sup>44</sup>

These exhortations come only two months after al-Qa`ida issued a call for attacks against Sweden and Denmark in retaliation for the recurring burnings of the Qur'an in the two Scandinavian countries.<sup>45</sup> While these statements of solidarity with Palestinian fighters in Gaza and calls for attacks indicate al-Qa`ida's clear intention to exploit the war to instigate terrorism in the West, it seems unlikely given the current state of its capabilities that al-Qa`ida will be able to orchestrate significant attacks in the near future.

In recent years, after its attack-plotting capacity was eroded in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region and Yemen, the al-Qa`ida network has mostly looked to terrorist entrepreneurs and sympathizers to engage in terrorism in the West on its behalf. Such 'outsourcing' of terrorism is likely to continue. Yet, al-Qa`ida understands the power of its propaganda in encouraging individuals to act and the propaganda's resonance among a broader segment of Muslims than simply its own supporters. Hence, there is a real risk that sympathizers of al-Qa`ida or individuals following its propaganda will respond to its calls to carry out attacks in Western states supporting Israel and specifically against Israeli interests.

### *The Islamic State*

For the Islamic State, the current situation represents a conundrum.

The group considers Hamas and most other militants in Palestine as apostates and, in contrast to al-Qa`ida, it has largely remained quiet on Hamas' war with Israel, with one exception being an October 20 editorial in its al Naba newsletter. Like other violent Islamist groups, the Islamic State views Jews and Israel as existential enemies that can and should be fought, and the group has previously claimed attacks in Israel,<sup>46</sup> though, as noted above, it never really prioritized the fight against Israel or the liberation of Palestine.<sup>47</sup>

Praising Hamas for its attack and rallying to its support against a common enemy is out of the question for the Islamic State. In the Al Naba editorial, the group wholeheartedly supported the struggle for Palestine but criticized the ongoing war because of its limited nature. Rather than focusing exclusively on Israel/Palestine, the Islamic State editorial framed the battle as a global struggle targeting Jews and their interests and allies across the world.<sup>48</sup>

It is likely that the Islamic State will continue to seek to exploit the radicalization and mobilization caused by the war in Gaza. In Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State is currently suffering from repeated leadership decapitation, and it is nowhere near its previous strength. While this arguably limits its ability to take full advantage of the volatile political situation in the region, it may also provide it with the kind of environment in which it can escalate its activities and, in the event the conflict turns more regional, reclaim some of its prominence. The Islamic State will likely also strive to exploit the conflict by trying to inspire further attacks in the West. As already noted, prior to this October, the group had not managed to plausibly claim ownership of an attack in the West since the Vienna attack of November 2020.

As the author outlined in a recent article in *CTC Sentinel*, the Islamic State's institutionalization of external operations planning and execution has undergone revision in recent years but despite these changes, the group has not recently been successful in orchestrating any attacks.<sup>49</sup> In the current highly charged atmosphere, the Islamic State is now in a position to take advantage of growing radicalization and polarization in Western societies and call on its supporters to act in its name. Already, in the wake of October 7, there have been two attacks linked to support for the group in France and Belgium. They will likely not be the last.

### *Hezbollah and Iranian Actors*

There should be concern that Hezbollah, which is already involved in clashes with Israel across the Israel-Lebanon border, could launch attacks in the West because of its history of terrorism and attack planning against Jewish and Israeli targets in Western countries.<sup>50</sup> This includes the 2012 bombing of a bus carrying Israeli tourists outside the airport in the Bulgarian Black Sea city of Burgas, killing six.<sup>51</sup> There will also need to be vigilance about Iranian actors directly carrying out acts of violence in the West.

In his congressional testimony, FBI Director Wray stated, "As the world's largest state-sponsor of terrorism, the Iranians, for instance, have directly, or by hiring criminals, mounted assassination attempts against dissidents and high-ranking current and former U.S. government officials, including right here on American soil. And, along those lines, Hezbollah, Iran's primary strategic partner, has a history of seeding operatives and infrastructure, obtaining money and weapons, and spying in this country going back years."<sup>52</sup> In August 2022, the U.S. government released details about an Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) plot to kill former U.S.



National Security Advisor John Bolton. It was reported the plot also targeted former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.<sup>53</sup>

In a February 2022 study for *CTC Sentinel*, Matthew Levitt documented how over a 40-year period Iran has pursued “international assassination, abduction, terror, and surveillance plots in a very aggressive fashion.” As noted in the study, “in February 2021, a Belgian court convicted Assadollah Assadi, an Iranian diplomat based in Vienna, of organizing a July 2018 plot to bomb the annual convention of the National Council of Resistance of Iran—the political wing of the Mujahedeen-Khlaq, MEK—near Paris.”<sup>54</sup> In another *CTC Sentinel* study, Levitt noted that “in September 2019, the FBI arrested Ali Saab, an alleged Hezbollah operative who underwent military and bomb-making training in Lebanon and later collected intelligence on potential targets in New York, Boston, and Washington, D.C. Saab allegedly provided details on targets including the United Nations headquarters, Statue of Liberty, and New York airports, tunnels, and bridges—including detailed photographs and notes on structural weaknesses and ‘soft spots’ for potential Hezbollah targets ‘in order to determine how a future attack could cause the most destruction,’ according to the U.S. Department of Justice.”<sup>55</sup>

On November 8, 2023, Brazilian police thwarted an alleged Hezbollah plot to target Israeli and Jewish targets in Brazil. A total of three suspects have been arrested. Israeli authorities stated that the plot was “planned by the Hezbollah terrorist organization, directed and financed by Iran.” A Brazilian official with information about the plot told the Associated Press that the two suspects were recruited and financed by Hezbollah. Local media reported that police arrested one of the suspects when they flew into Sao Paulo from Lebanon with information to carry out the attack. Brazil’s justice minister said the Brazilian investigation started before October 7.<sup>56</sup>

Notwithstanding the plot in Brazil, in recent years, Hezbollah’s main activities in the West appear to be related to funding and propaganda rather than plotting attacks.<sup>57</sup> While the group controls extensive networks in both the United States and in Europe, its immediate priority remains activities in Lebanon and neighboring countries. In this author’s assessment the risk that the group will utilize its Western-based networks to execute attacks is currently small but it could change depending on how the war evolves. Any connection to terrorism in the West, including orchestrating or sponsoring an attack, would undoubtedly result in strong political and military pressure on Hezbollah, but the group’s calculus could change if either Israel escalates its operations against Hezbollah or in the event that the United States gets involved and targets the group if Hezbollah carries out large-scale strikes into Israel.

In a November 3, 2023, speech, Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah signaled that Hezbollah would only significantly escalate against Israel if Hamas looked like it was on a path to defeat in Gaza or if Israel intensified its strikes into Lebanon.<sup>b</sup> In a worst-case scenario in which Hezbollah all-out escalates against Israel, the United States militarily intervenes against the group, and Hezbollah decides on striking in the West or against Western interests in

retaliation, it could employ a strategy of virtual entrepreneurs in the West similar to what the group has used to mobilize for violence in Israel.<sup>58</sup>

### ***Frustrated and Radicalized Individuals***

Arguably the most worrying threat does not stem from a planned or coordinated attack from a specific terrorist group, but from radicalized and frustrated individuals with no organizational affiliation. A string of such attacks, including the beheading of the French school teacher Samuel Paty, took place in 2020 in the aftermath of the re-publication of the drawings of the prophet Muhammad in France. These attackers acted in revenge against perceived humiliation of their religion.<sup>59</sup>

The emotional resonance of the Palestinian issue risks radicalizing significant numbers of individuals to violence in the West. Because such individuals do not necessarily have a history with extremism or any known extremist organization, they are typically much harder for security and intelligence services to identify and track. Illustrative of this trend, after Israel began launching airstrikes in Gaza in the wake of the October 7 Hamas attack, MI5 Director-General Ken McCallum stated there was a danger that “self-initiated” individuals who may have been radicalized online could react in “spontaneous or unpredictable ways” in the United Kingdom.<sup>60</sup>

### **Assessing the Threat Landscape**

While there is no shortage of actors who are interested in exploiting the current tense political climate to either execute or instigate terrorism in the West, there are three specific factors that are likely to determine the evolving threat level: how long the war continues, the intensity of Israel’s offensive in Gaza, and the degree of support from Western nations to Israel.<sup>61</sup>

*Continuation of the war:* The longer the war continues, the greater the risk that it manifests in terrorist attacks in the West. A prolonged war scenario will have a stronger radicalizing effect on Western-based individuals and thus heighten the risk of mobilization to violence. This is especially true if the war escalates in terms of brutality as it evolves, which is typically the case and hard to avoid in the context of urban warfare.

*Israel’s offensive against Gaza and its exposure:* The scale and character of Israel’s ongoing air and land offensive in Gaza will have a major impact on how Muslim communities worldwide are likely to react and the degree to which there will be fertile conditions for jihadi groups to inspire violence and recruit. Social media will play a central role in terms of transmitting the impact of the offensive to an external audience. Previous conflicts have demonstrated how the exposure to war and extreme episodes of violence through social media can push people to act. Hamas, Hezbollah, and global jihadi groups are all seeking to exploit this potential with extensive misinformation about the war shared on their online channels.

*Western support to Israel:* There will also likely be some degree of correlation between the level of support that Western states offer to Israel and the terrorism threat that they experience. Attacks have previously been carried out to *punish* a certain foreign policy—for example, Omar Mateen’s June 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting<sup>62</sup>—or in an attempt to *affect* states’ future behavior such as the Madrid bombing in 2004 that intended to pressure Spain to withdraw from Iraq.<sup>63</sup> It should therefore be anticipated that Islamist terrorists would execute attacks to influence a given state’s level of support

b Nasrallah stated: “What determine[s] our front are two things: first, the course of events in Gaza, and second, the behavior of the Zionist enemy towards Lebanon.” “Hezbollah Secretary-General commemorates martyrs, discusses Al-Aqsa Flood operation’s legitimacy,” LBC International, November 3, 2023.

to Israel.

In assessing the terrorism threat, security and intelligence services typically look at the prevalence of *intent* and *capability* to execute attacks. As argued in this article, the war between Hamas and Israel, and specifically the three factors above, will likely raise the level of intent within radicalized and extremist communities to act on their frustration. While 'simple attacks' as those executed in recent weeks require few skills, the capability to execute more complex attacks rely on networks and the involvement of established terrorist groups and are less likely in the short term because the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida networks are at a low ebb in many places.

Although global jihadis have a significant presence in East and West Africa (e.g., al-Shabaab and JNIM<sup>c</sup>) as well as Afghanistan (e.g., Islamic State Khorasan), no group has extensive territorial

c The al-Qa`ida affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin

control similar to the Islamic State during the height of its power in Syria and Iraq nor the kind of safe haven enjoyed by al-Qa`ida in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region and in Yemen in the decade or so after 9/11, which is crucial to groups' capability to direct and organize terrorist attacks in the West.<sup>d</sup> There is a real risk, however, that the recent attacks are just the beginning of a new wave of Islamist terrorism in the West. **CTC**

d In congressional testimony on October 31, 2023, NCTC director Christine Abizaid stated: "In addition to lone actors, hierarchically organized groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS remain of concern, they are seeking to capitalize on this moment to galvanize supporters and organize for attacks. Their ability to do so from their core operating arenas is much diminished after years of counterterrorism pressure. But we are monitoring closely any attempts to leverage this crisis to rebuild or refocus against the United States. Of particular concern are the ISIS and Al Qaeda affiliates in West and East Africa, the Al Qaeda branch in Yemen, and the ISIS branch that is operating out of Afghanistan." "NCTC Director Christine Abizaid, Opening Statement, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs," Office of the Director of National Intelligence, October 31, 2023.

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# Texts or Praxes: How Do We Best Understand Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad After October 7?

By Erik Skare

**There is a renewed focus on Palestinian armed movements in general and on Hamas in particular following the October 7 attacks and the ensuing Israeli military offensive in the Gaza Strip. How one understands the Palestinian actors involved is of utmost importance because they inform policy recommendations and choices with real consequences on the ground. This understanding necessarily depends on the approach chosen and the sources relied on; solely examining the literary production of Hamas and PIJ, their texts and ideology, or solely looking at their actions is methodologically flawed. Only by approaching Hamas and PIJ holistically can one appreciate the movements' complexities, *modus operandi*, ideology, and contradictions.**

**H**amas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) are two of the most important factions in the Palestinian struggle in terms of military power and political influence. While the former has governed Gaza since 2007, the latter has developed into the second-largest armed movement there. Although other conflicts such as the Syrian civil war, and other military non-state actors such as the Islamic State, have caught the attention of Western analysts and policymakers, Hamas (and to a lesser extent PIJ) have reclaimed the spotlight following the October 7 attacks, which caused the death of 1,200 Israelis—the largest death toll in Jewish history since the Holocaust. The shock does not merely pertain to the quantitative but also the qualitative aspect of the attack: Civilians were brutally executed at point-blank range, coupled with disturbing reports of children having been tortured.<sup>1</sup> The Israeli military offensive in Gaza, which, at the time of writing, the United Nations assesses has killed more than 11,000 (40 percent of them children) and internally displaced 1.6 million Palestinians (70 percent of the total population of Gaza),<sup>2</sup> means that the relevance of Hamas and PIJ will remain strong for the foreseeable future.

Yet, in an endeavor to understand and analyze these Palestinian actors, is it better to rely on the texts of Hamas and PIJ (their

political and ideological literary production), or to rely on their actions (what they actually do)? The question matters because earlier studies and analyses on Hamas and PIJ have traditionally fallen into each of their own respective methodological pitfalls throughout the years—by either focusing too heavily on their texts or focusing too heavily on their actions. For example, although the pioneering academic research on Hamas has nuanced our analysis of the movement,<sup>3</sup> there has nonetheless been an issue of critics reading the movement's texts—specifically its 1988 charter—as proof of the movement's inflexibility or its anti-Semitism, thus essentially ignoring the actual pragmatic maneuverability of Hamas in its daily political practice.<sup>4</sup> As journalists and academics try to analyze Hamas following the atrocities, they can fall into the same pitfalls.

Ironically, the problem has been the opposite for PIJ, as research has predominantly limited the movement to its actions while essentially ignoring its ideological and political texts. What differentiates PIJ and Hamas is supposedly the degree of militancy, that PIJ has no interest in being a social movement, and that it differs in its approach to governance and political participation.<sup>5</sup> Others refer to PIJ's lack of social and political agenda beyond armed struggle.<sup>6</sup> Limiting the movement to nothing but its actions, without looking at its texts to understand how it sees the world, how the movement justifies itself and its praxes, and without analyzing the symbolism and significance behind its actions, makes it difficult to see the movement as anything more than the more radical and more violent 'little sister' of Hamas.

The question is also relevant because it is not a methodological issue limited to the study of Islamist movements in general or of Palestinian ones in particular. Instead, there are similar problems in political science and economics, mentioning just two. Revealed preference theory in economy is one pertinent example, and it can be described as the following, although simplified. Because actors may not be honest, either consciously or unconsciously, and there is an inconsistency between what they say and what they do, the former is largely irrelevant. It is thus more methodologically sound to study what actors actually do, because if an actor's behavior is consistent over time, then it must be possible to explain that behavior without reference to anything other than that particular behavior.<sup>7</sup> One may then argue that a political actor can be best understood by assessing how it votes with its feet.

The central argument of this article is that researchers are best served by a textual analysis combined with an action-based approach in order to obtain a greater understanding of Hamas and PIJ. The following methodological discussion demonstrates that one obtains a greater understanding of both PIJ and Hamas by combining the two approaches as Hamas has traditionally come forth as far more radical if one limits oneself to its texts, while PIJ is portrayed as one-dimensional and dogmatic if one only analyzes its praxes.

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*Palestinian members of the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of the Hamas movement, are pictured on January 31, 2016, in Gaza City. (Mahmud Hams/AFP via Getty Images)*

This article is divided into four main sections. In the first section, the author explores the limitations of using textual analysis and advocates for an action-oriented methodology as a more effective means to gain insight into the real-world activities of both movements. The second part delves into the dual significance of actions, while the third section highlights the advantages of employing textual analysis to uncover subtle ideological distinctions between Hamas and PIJ. Despite the merits of an action-oriented approach, the author asserts that the study of ideology remains crucial because ideas are translated into actions. Finally, the concluding section discusses the October 7 attack and what it means for our understanding of Hamas.

### Analyzing Text Without Context

Islamist movements tend to have end goals that essentially are “very vague, similar and utopian”—all of which can be used to rationalize a vast range of political and military strategies. Just like the declared aim of a “better world” reveals very little about the political preferences of Western political parties, Islamist slogans such as “establishing the Caliphate” are too vague to disclose anything about the expected political behavior of a group in the short- or mid-term.<sup>8</sup> Alluding to what Islamist actors have in common semantically shows just how fragile analyses of this Islamist lexicon are, simply because one cannot infer from their discourses the complex and changing modalities according to which they behave: “whether

[these modalities are] social or political, local or international, facing the ethical, social, or political challenges of their centuries.”<sup>9</sup> A semantic analysis is in other words insufficient because there is a significant gap between the apparent unity of Islamist rhetoric and the extreme diversity of its followers.

Precisely because research on Islamist movements and actors has traditionally depended too heavily on their texts, Islamists have mostly, if not exclusively, been portrayed as being driven by rigid and ‘out of context’ ideological ideals. Because the ideology of these movements is characteristically orthodox, allowing little room for negotiation with surrounding and changing contextual conditions, a strict textual interpretation thus often leads to an “ideologization” of Islamists that ignores their pragmatic maneuverability.<sup>10</sup>

Hamas is symptomatic of these methodological limitations as early analyses of the movement often restricted it to its infamous 1988 charter with its polemical tone, religious determinism, conspiratorial thinking, and anti-Semitism. The communiqués produced by Hamas during the commencement of the Oslo Agreement further cemented the image of a movement rejecting the peace process on ideological or theological grounds coupled with a fiery rhetoric. Hamas stated, for example, that “the only way and the only method that the occupying enemy understands, is the method of force, through the escalation of the blessed intifada, and by raising the banner of jihad and resistance.”<sup>11</sup> PIJ, on the other hand, described in this period the necessity of obtaining Palestinian

Islamist unity to counter the peace process as an effort despised by the idolaters and the infidels.<sup>12</sup>

These communiqués were employed by critics of Hamas to ‘prove’ its fundamentalism. Yet, while the peace process and the narrowing of Palestinian Islamist opportunities contributed to their fiery rhetoric and violence in the 1990s, it did also cause Hamas to vacillate in its approach to the changing realities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. After Hamas’ initial two years, for example, it softened its former uncompromising positions to avoid political isolation. While Hamas, on the one hand, cooperated with rejectionist PLO currents such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) against a political and diplomatic settlement, it also discussed the possibilities of participating in elections under the Oslo Agreement, on the other.<sup>13</sup>

Equally important, while Hamas has remained ideologically inflexible by stressing the liberation of Palestine in its entirety, the movement has in the past nonetheless offered pragmatic concessions when dealing with the conditions of renouncing violence, recognizing Israel, and accepting past diplomatic agreements. Hamas has, for example, first, issued repeated offers to end its violence in return for Israeli reciprocity. Second, despite the ideological resistance to the Oslo Agreement, Hamas has previously made great strides to accept past agreements, offering to abide by whatever outcome a reformed and representative PLO put forward, and the movement declared in 2007 its willingness to respect international agreements and defer to the PLO in negotiations with Israel.<sup>14</sup> Third, while Hamas has refused to recognize the legitimacy of Israel, the movement has nevertheless in practice recognized its existence by repeatedly indicating its willingness to accept the creation of a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders.<sup>15</sup>

Put differently, Hamas’ ideology calls for uncompromising activism and a focus on maximalist gains. Yet, the practice of the movement shows how it has adopted a policy that is more pragmatic than dogmatic and more reformist than revolutionary. Indeed, Hamas has in practice shown itself capable of distinguishing between a permanent and temporary settlement; and between a short-term policy temporarily delaying its ultimate goals and a long-term strategy. Additionally, Hamas has shown itself capable of distinguishing between its willingness to accept ad hoc arrangements of coexistence and its denial of the legitimacy of the PLO and of the Palestinian National Authority. In other words, focusing too selectively on Hamas’ ideological tenets would mean missing its actual pragmatic maneuverability, and Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela have consequently suggested that adjustment has become the main feature of Hamas’ political conduct.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, PIJ extols martyrdom in the path of God as one of the greatest virtues and one of the great honors one can obtain. A deed rewarded with blessings in the hereafter, PIJ describes martyrdom as the lifeblood of the Islamic *umma*.<sup>17</sup> Yet, immediately preceding the Israeli military invasion of Jenin in 2002, the leadership of PIJ ordered its militants to leave the camp because they knew that to stay and fight would equal certain death—thus weakening the organization in the northern West Bank. When the local militants chose to remain in the camp, they were severely reprimanded by their leader, Ramadan Abdallah Shallah, for not focusing on the well-being of the overall movement.<sup>18</sup> In the choice of martyrdom for its militants or the survival of the organization, the leadership opted for the latter. It thus seems unwise to read its militant strategy from its texts on martyrdom, though the two are closely related in

subject matter.

### The Double Symbolic Significance of Action

This author does not suggest that Islamist texts and ideology are unequivocally ambiguous—with researchers desperately attempting to decipher their actual, true meaning—while actions are easily understood and straightforward to analyze. On the contrary, it is not always clear how one should read the practices of Islamist actors, how one should analyze their significance, or how one should weigh their importance. While Matthew Levitt, for example, has analyzed the praxes of Hamas’ social services as little more than economic and moral support for violence, Sara Roy perceives the social work of the movement as a civic restoration stressing the well-being of Palestinian local community.<sup>19</sup>

The ambiguity of actions is not limited to Palestinian Islamist actors. The Shi’a in Iraq, for example, were not simply targeted by militant Sunnis because of their religious belief, but because they were also perceived as representatives of the Iraqi government.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the attempted assassination of the Christian Iraqi Minister of Environment, Sargon Sulaywah, was quickly employed as a symptom of an Iraqi religious minority’s predicament. It is, however, unclear whether the attack was carried out because he was a Christian or because he represented the Iraqi government.<sup>21</sup>

Because actions may have double symbolic significance, one must analyze what actors are saying about their own struggle,<sup>22</sup> and an actor’s political practice cannot be understood without a thorough understanding of its political theory given that ideas are translated into action.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the questions and problems confronting Islamist ideologues are not simply philosophical or theological abstractions, but specific problems created by specific historical stages, practical activities, social relations, grievances, and conflict. The production of ideology is, as such, not merely a theoretical exercise. Due to the pervasiveness and durability of certain texts and doctrines (whether Marx and Engel’s *The Communist Manifesto* or Qutb’s *Milestones*), one may generally assume that they encode, in however mystified a way, genuine needs and desires<sup>24</sup> that one would otherwise miss if one only focused on the actions on the ground.

The feasibility of studying Islamist actors’ literary production extends beyond ideology, or even communiqués. Jihadi poetry, for example, matters because it is central to the self-fashioning and self-presentation of jihadis and because it “[lies] at the core of their identity as well as their ideology;” it provides “a window onto the movement talking to itself.”<sup>25</sup> The same applies to the martyr biographies of Islamist movements, such as the ones produced by PIJ—providing researchers the opportunity to investigate the common background characteristics of a group or an actor through the collective studies of its members’ lives. While these biographies have clear propagandist purposes, there seem to be few ideological restraints for PIJ to honestly report socioeconomic background, which is reflected in the spectrum of employments and economic situations reported: from student to unemployed.<sup>26</sup>

### Discovering the Ideological Nuances in Armed Palestinian Islamism

The analytical benefits of delving into texts should then be no different for PIJ and Hamas—unless they are somehow exempt from the dynamics of other groups—as the two Islamist movements interpret ideological and theological notions differently in order to

justify their respective actions. For example, both Hamas and PIJ believe Palestine is blessed by God, because the land is so heavily referenced in the Qur'an; because it was the departure point of Prophet Muhammad's midnight journey to the seventh heaven; and because it was the first *qibla* of Islam.<sup>27</sup> The Palestinian cause is thus for them a sacred one.

Yet, the two Palestinian Islamist movements drew two distinctively different conclusions on the role of religion in the struggle based on the analysis of the blessedness of the Palestinian cause. Although the religious discourse of Hamas diminished from the early 1990s, the movement's heritage from the Muslim Brotherhood nevertheless caused the movement to stress the importance of religious values and education. An integral part of Hamas' practice was thus proselytization (*da'wa*) and upholding community values (*hisba*). As such, Hamas Islamized the Palestinian cause through the emphasis of religious observance and morality in the struggle and the movement "subsume[d] Palestinian nationalism within one or another form of Islamic identity."<sup>28</sup>

PIJ, on the other hand, concluded that the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis was predestined by God—as was the future destruction of Israel. Yet, from reading the texts of PIJ theoreticians and leaders such as Anwar Abu Taha and Ramadan Abdallah Shallah, one also finds the conclusion that the destruction of Israel would not only lead to the Islamization of Palestine, but also, from their perspective, to Islam's global victory over all other religions.<sup>29</sup> PIJ thus essentially turned the priorities of Hamas upside-down. Instead of stressing Islamization for liberation, PIJ stressed liberation for Islamization. As such, PIJ essentially "Palestinianized" Islam by stressing the blessed land of Palestine not only as the launching pad but as the very precondition for the desired commencement of Islam's global victory.

These two differing conclusions on the sacredness of Palestine influenced, and still influence, the political behavior of Hamas and PIJ. Hamas, for example, has traditionally struggled against moral and behavioral impropriety (primarily directed against women) and with its activists patrolling the streets of Gaza. PIJ, on the other hand, has not concerned itself with cinemas in Gaza or stores selling alcohol, what clothes Palestinians have been wearing, or whether sexes have intermingled. Ironically, PIJ's "activist, confrontational and outcome-oriented tactical style," with its strict focus on armed struggle against Israel, has made Palestinians perceive the movement as a more moderate player than Hamas, which has, at times, caused annoyance from the Palestinian civilian population.<sup>30</sup>

Another example is the issue of electoral participation, democracy, and a future Palestinian state. If one simply looks at PIJ's boycott of the Palestinian Legislative Elections (PLC) in 1996 and 2006 (Hamas participated through unofficial representation in the former before participating fully in the latter<sup>31</sup>), it is easy to simply reiterate the claim that the movement is little more than the angrier 'little sister' of Hamas as it does not engage in democracy, social work, or grassroot initiatives. Yet, turning to the movement's actual ideological works, one sees that the rejection of participation is not constructed on exegesis or theological claims but instead framed by references to the structural constraints and deficiencies of Palestinian parliamentary democracy.<sup>32</sup> Further, while Hamas envisions a strong state implementing perceived Islamic values from the top-down, PIJ envisions a weak state with perceived Islamic values maintained and preserved through civil society.<sup>33</sup>

Essentially, analyzing PIJ's ideology is beneficial precisely

## **“October 7 likely signifies the victory of those in the movement who have grown frustrated with an excessive focus on politics, advocating instead for a renewed emphasis on violence to reach their long-term goals.”**

because Islamism, also the Palestinian variety, has undergone important theological diversification, and the diversity of Islamist movements goes far beyond the strategies and tactics they employ to maneuver in their political environment.<sup>34</sup> By limiting analysis to the violence of an actor, important points of distinction between Hamas and PIJ are lost.

### **Analyzing Hamas after October 7**

The need for analysts to combine an action-based approach with a thorough understanding of the two Palestinian Islamist movements' texts and ideology is required, first, because Hamas, traditionally, comes forth as far more radical if one limits oneself to its texts, while it comes forth as far more pragmatic if one assesses its actions. PIJ, on the other hand, comes forth as a rather one-dimensional organization if one focuses on its actions alone, while its complexity lies in contextualizing and combining its *modus operandi* with its literary production in order to uncover the underlying double significance of its actions.

One reason for the feasibility of understanding Hamas through its actions, is perhaps because it has shown a greater measure of 'context answerability'—quickly responding and adapting to new challenges and threats.<sup>35</sup> This does, on the other hand, not seem to apply to PIJ to the same extent, and the benefit of an in-depth textual analysis lies in the fact that it is often described as an ideologically strict movement, but seldom as an intellectual one.<sup>36</sup> Partly, this difference may be explained by the importance of organizational structure and size—whether this concerns a mainstream movement or a small fringe group—because, to a certain extent, it may determine the maneuverability with which actors may ignore, circumvent, amend, or stick to the ideological tenets proposed. The meager support for PIJ in the 1990s could also be a blessing in disguise for the movement as "the organization was less constrained by cost-benefit considerations and ideological questioning," and it was thus afforded with less pragmatic maneuverability without losing its base.<sup>37</sup> The grassroots movement Hamas, on the other hand, has always been more sensitive to various popular pressures.

The question nevertheless remains: How does one make sense of Hamas after October 7 and how does one analyze the movement? Some attribute the attack to the 'terrorist' nature of Hamas when explaining the attack, while others interpret it as a product of the Israeli occupation. Some also use the attack to settle old scores and ask—almost displaying *Schadenfreude*—how anyone could be so gullible to believe Hamas had actually moderated itself the last 16 years when ruling Gaza. Regardless of their soundness, all analyses share that they are post hoc rationalizations; all analysts share the collective failure to predict the attack and its level of brutality. This applies to those who view Hamas as a terror organization

and those who see it as a pragmatic group utilizing terrorism as one among several means to achieve its objectives. Like all post hoc rationalizations, the author's is also based on preexisting assumptions about Hamas and its internal dynamics.

To the knowledge of this author, Hamas has not published any document foreshadowing the attack. Could, for example, researchers have anticipated the attacks when Hamas announced its new charter on May 1, 2017? Clearly, the answer is no. Still, as Khaled Hroub notes, the 2017 charter was carefully worded and with the deliberate inclusion of opacities on key issues such as a two-state solution and the legitimacy of the State of Israel; the Oslo Agreement and the legitimacy of the Palestinian National Authority (PA); and the diversification of means and tools of resistance. Instead of considering the charter *moderate*, as was the common perception in 2017, it would be more accurate to regard it as *flexible* given how it operated with a number of gray zones that provided Hamas the necessary flexibility to adapt its political and military strategies in response to changing realities on the ground.<sup>38</sup>

It is, as such, worth noting that Hamas has always been the product of the continuous internal debates between the social change thesis and the armed struggle thesis. The movement has always experienced power struggles between moderates and hardliners and between those who favor political work and those who favor violence. The influence, or control, over Hamas' strategic course has oscillated between the two depending on the situation on the ground. Because Hamas' hardliners were weakened after the Second Intifada, the moderates gained prominence. That entailed ending its campaign of suicide bombings and participating in democratic elections in 2006, initiating reconciliation efforts with Mahmud Abbas' PA in the West Bank, and revising its charter in 2017. During this period, Hamas employed a strategy of restrained violence to secure concessions from Israel. Yet, this approach has yielded few notable victories for Hamas, and October 7 likely signifies the victory of those in the movement who have grown frustrated with an excessive focus on politics, advocating instead

for a renewed emphasis on violence to reach their long-term goals.

Although one must maintain humility and acknowledge that our understanding of the attack is still limited at this stage, this article is nevertheless one input in the debate on whether it is what you say or what you do that defines you. Illustrating this dilemma is Carrie Rosefsky Wickham's study of the Muslim Brotherhood from 2013, where she described how the emergence of Islamist actors as a leading force in Arab politics has triggered competing reactions around the globe. While some have witnessed this development with calmness, others have reacted with dismay. As Wickham argued, such different reactions reflect the fact that the motives of these actors are, in fact, hard to fathom because the information available about Islamist groups is often patchy and incomplete, and observations rely on conflicting interpretations.<sup>39</sup>

No matter how incomplete our understanding is, it should not serve as an excuse for not attempting to draw a more nuanced and complex picture of Islamist movements in general and of Hamas and PIJ in particular. That is particularly the case now that researchers' analysis may be especially clouded and biased from the shock of the October 7 attacks. Data does not become, ipso facto, neutral in the absence of the Islamist movements' own understanding,<sup>40</sup> and the information researchers collect is still colored by the ideological horizons and interests of those carrying the analysis. These conflicting interpretations do not merely pertain to the analysis of these movements' texts, but also, as noted, to the nature of what they do, with Hamas' social services used as an example in this article.

Even if one, for the sake of argument, approaches the literary production of Hamas and PIJ as truthful representation of the movements, the two are nonetheless human organizations, and the internal practices of both imperfectly reflect their ideals while simultaneously suffering from the contradictions within those respective ideals.<sup>41</sup> Thus, what they say or write must be placed in context of what they do.<sup>42</sup> CTC

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# Commentary: No Good Choices: The Counterterrorism Dilemmas in Afghanistan and Pakistan

By Asfandiyar Mir

Two years into Taliban rule, what are the key choices and tradeoffs for U.S. counterterrorism strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan? Policymakers face the dilemma that a critical subset of counterterrorism concerns related to Taliban-allied terrorist groups may not be addressed if the Taliban become stronger; however, the terrorism threat will likely increase under a weaker Taliban regime. Concessions to the Taliban are unlikely to persuade the Taliban to curtail terrorists any more than they will of their own volition. If the Taliban do not sufficiently contain threats, the primary tool will be over-the-horizon military action. However, the current over-the-horizon approach is under-resourced and lacks a clear logic for mitigating threats. Three alternative coercive postures are possible: 1) stepped-up monitoring and occasional targeting to dissuade terrorist activities 2) a denial campaign against terrorist capabilities or 3) punishment threats to Taliban in case of terrorism against U.S. interests. Each of these postures require additional resources and also present a higher risk of Taliban retaliation, which will constrain their adoption. Finally, a new counterterrorism question is the extent to which the rising threat of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) affects U.S. interests. The TTP's immediate threat to the United States is ambiguous, but there are plausible pathways by which it can metastasize into a future threat for U.S. interests. Should policymakers decide to contain it vigorously, they can step up capacity-building, intelligence-sharing, and targeting assistance to Pakistan. Of these options, intelligence-sharing may offer the most upside with manageable political and legal challenges, whereas capacity-building may prove ineffective and targeting assistance presents the risk of blowback against the United States.

When the United States withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021, there was considerable uncertainty on the future of terrorist threats from the country and concern about the Taliban's political direction. Two years after the U.S. withdrawal, some dimensions of the threat have crystallized: As a regime, the Taliban remain allied with various terrorist groups; they are also resisting the international community's demands on moving toward a more inclusive political system while denying human rights to girls and women in the country. Among transnational threats, Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) remains the main near-term challenge for the United

States.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, as per U.S. government assessments, al-Qa`ida has not resurged<sup>a</sup> in the country as was widely feared, and the Taliban seem to be restricting the group while targeting ISK. Still, al-Qa`ida senior leadership appears to maintain relations with the Taliban.<sup>2</sup> The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP's) escalating campaign of violence from cross-border safe havens is also a potent threat to Pakistan.<sup>3</sup>

This is a dynamic threat landscape. The Biden administration is taking comfort in the fact that the current trajectory of threats, in particular the threat of al-Qa`ida, falls short of the worst fears on the eve of the withdrawal. The administration also appears assured by Taliban actions against ISK. Yet, it will be a mistake to write off the overall threat. Afghanistan continues to offer a range of opportunities for terrorist groups—and American visibility on those opportunities remains limited. The global environment is also permissive for terrorism. The Israel-Hamas conflict, in particular, may catalyze global jihadism, fostering new motivations and grievances fueling jihadi activities worldwide. Al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State are pivoting to exploit Hamas' October 7 terrorist attack on Israel and the civilian harm in Israel's military campaign in Gaza since—and al-Qa`ida core and al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent have threatened attacks against the U.S. homeland, embassies, bases, and citizens.<sup>4</sup> Policymakers should take seriously the risk of a surprise terrorist provocation from Afghanistan.

For counterterrorism strategy, this means that even if a radical reformulation of the current policy and counterterrorism approach to Afghanistan is not required, sustained vigilance and mitigation effort remains essential. However, what such an effort at vigilance and mitigation should look like is not clear. U.S. officials consistently identify terrorism and counterterrorism to be their top policy priority in Afghanistan but do not specify how they hope to manage the terrorist landscape in the near to medium-term beyond withholding normalizing the Taliban regime.<sup>5</sup> More generally,

a According to the current director of NCTC, "Twenty-two years later, a new intelligence assessment states al-Qa`ida is at its historical nadir in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and its revival is unlikely. It has lost target access, leadership talent, group cohesion, rank-and-file commitment, and an accommodating local environment." "9/11 Statement from National Counterterrorism Center Director Christy Abizaid," Office of the Director of National Intelligence, September 11, 2023. See also Natasha Bertrand and Katie Bo Lillis, "New US intelligence suggests al Qaeda unlikely to revive in Afghanistan, but officials warn ISIS threat remains," CNN, September 8, 2023, and David Ignatius, "In Afghanistan, the Taliban has all but extinguished al-Qaeda," *Washington Post*, September 14, 2023.

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while there is a vibrant debate<sup>6</sup> on the U.S. approach toward Afghanistan, there is little consensus around realistic tradeoffs and counterterrorism policy choices that can help manage and reduce terrorist threats.

This analysis contributes to the debate on counterterrorism issues in Afghanistan and Pakistan by identifying the key policy choices and the dilemmas associated with those choices. To do so, it systematically answers three inter-related questions: What policies toward the Afghan Taliban are both viable and likely to reduce terrorist threats from the country? Should the U.S. over-the-horizon military approach to Afghanistan be modified, and if so, what are some options to adjust the posture? How much should the U.S. government worry about the threats facing Pakistan from both inside Pakistan and Afghanistan-based terrorist groups, and what are some options to counter those threats?

Three sets of propositions emerge. First, U.S. strategists face the dilemma that a stronger and stable Taliban regime may not be sensitive to critical U.S. counterterrorism concerns. A stronger Taliban regime may target ISK more effectively; however, stability and strength may also embolden the Taliban into ramping up their support for allied groups such as al-Qa`ida and the TTP. At the same time, a weaker Taliban regime does not solve the counterterrorism problem either; instead, the threat of terrorism from Afghanistan may only increase if the Taliban become weaker. Some analysts have argued for concessions to the Taliban, such as deprioritizing inclusion and rights concerns or lowering expectations for a Taliban crackdown on allied terrorists in exchange for action against ISK. However, it is unlikely that such concessions will influence the Taliban's calculus on supporting terrorist groups, as that decision is not rooted in limitations, capacity constraints, or any kind of incentives those groups are offering. The Taliban will do as much counterterrorism as they want, and it is unlikely positive incentives can fundamentally change the Taliban's calculus on their alignment with a major subset of terrorist groups in Afghanistan.

Second, the administration believes, and continues to hope, the Taliban will curtail some terrorist threats—in the words of President Biden, “I said we’d get help from the Taliban.”<sup>7</sup> Yet, even as the Taliban fight ISK, ISK has actively plotted<sup>b</sup> attacks against U.S. and allied interests.<sup>c</sup> Additionally, some top ISK leaders identified by the administration for involvement in attacks against the United States and external plotting have neither been arrested nor neutralized by the Taliban; al-Qa`ida elements identified by the U.S. government

since the withdrawal also appear to be in the country.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, if the Taliban do not sufficiently curtail terrorist groups and instead continue to enable some of them, the primary tool available to U.S. strategists to manage terrorism threats will be over-the-horizon military action. However, the current over-the-horizon approach is challenged due to shortfall of resources. In his 2023 hearing of Senate Armed Services Committee, CENTCOM Commander General Michael Kurilla confirmed this, noting, “In Afghanistan, the reduction in collection, analytical resources, and Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance assets means our campaign against Al Qaeda and ISIS Khorasan is challenged; while we can see the broad contours of attack planning, we lack the granularity to see the complete threat picture.”<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the administration has not publicly outlined a theory of over-the-horizon action beyond occasional leadership decapitation efforts to deliver justice to terrorist leaders—and the publicly observable dimensions, such as frequency of kinetic strikes relative to the number of targets and the level of surveillance activity in country, suggest no clear political or military logic for mitigating threats.<sup>d</sup>

If policymakers want to improve the military approach to reducing threats, the over-the-horizon approach can be adjusted by adopting one or a combination of three coercive approaches.

1) Detection posture: Monitoring of and use of force against detected terrorist activities to dissuade the Taliban from providing support and leaving space for terrorist activity. To signal credible monitoring, publicize detected activity, and carry out occasional strikes.

2) Denial posture: Threats of and use of force specifically against transnational plotting capabilities specifically to limit the opportunities and resources necessary for transnational terrorism. To signal, political leadership will publicly communicate intent to target those engaged and assisting in plotting activity while publicizing detected activity on plots through disclosures and sanctions.

3) Punishment posture: Threat of retributory attacks against the Taliban in case of terrorism against U.S. interests to dissuade the Taliban from providing support and leaving space for terrorist groups, communicated by the political leadership publicly.

It is challenging to predict whether these counterterrorism postures individually or in combination will influence the Taliban's calculations given their high threshold for pain and costs. But the Taliban's desire to ensure their sovereignty over Afghanistan, protecting leadership, and minimizing domestic political backlash suggests sensitivity to military pressure. At the same time, to be effective at coercing the Taliban, the adopted posture must be well-resourced, which will require an increase in CENTCOM's budget but without substantially offsetting the Department of Defense's Integrated Deterrence-related spending. They should also be paired with appropriate signaling measures, such as public threats, declassified intelligence, pre-positioned assets and carefully executed use of force. Policymakers should also be mindful of the risk of Taliban retaliation under each posture, which is significant.

Finally, the rising threat of the TTP has unclear implications for U.S. interests. It is defensible to argue that the group does not currently pose a threat to U.S. interests because of its local focus and

b According to the National Counterterrorism Center, “ISIS-Khorasan's increased external focus is probably the most concerning development. However, the branch has so far primarily relied on inexperienced operatives in Europe to try to advance attacks in its name.” National Counterterrorism Center's Senior Analysts, “Calibrated Counterterrorism: Actively Suppressing International Terrorism,” *CTC Sentinel* 16:8 (2023). According to reporting by *The Washington Post*, “Pentagon officials were aware in December of nine such plots coordinated by ISIS leaders in Afghanistan, and the number rose to 15 by February.” Dan Lamothe and Joby Warrick, “Afghanistan has become a terrorism staging ground again, leak reveals,” *Washington Post*, April 22, 2023. For more on one previous plot, see Nodirbek Soliev, “The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany: The Tajik Connection,” *CTC Sentinel* 14:1 (2021).

c According to the Defense Intelligence Agency, ISK has attracted “Central Asian recruits and supporters from Europe despite the Taliban's counterterrorism efforts.” “Operation Enduring Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2023 - March 31, 2023,” Office of Inspector General, May 2023.

d The Biden administration has not released an official public counterterrorism strategy for Afghanistan.

that no action is therefore currently required. It is also defensible to argue that the group is on a trajectory to pose a future threat to U.S. interests both by gaining power to target U.S. interests much like in the past as well as seriously destabilizing Pakistan, and that preventive action is therefore needed. If policymakers determine that the TTP poses a threat to U.S. interests, they can step up capacity-building, intelligence-sharing, and targeting assistance to Pakistan. However, capacity-building to shore up Pakistan's political and security response will face steep challenges, and targeting assistance will present the highest risk of blowback against the United States; intelligence sharing will encounter both political and legal challenges, but those are likely to be surmountable.

This article proceeds in three parts. First, the article describes the policy debate on how the U.S. government can best obtain better counterterrorism outcomes from the Afghan Taliban. Second, the article discusses the current over-the-horizon posture, the three possible adjustments to it, and the resource and risk tradeoffs associated with each of the adjustments. Third, the article evaluates the implications of the TTP's threat to Pakistan for the United States and the viability and politics of options available to counter the TTP. The author draws on a combination of open-source materials and consultations on counterterrorism issues with the analytic community.

### Part One: Counterterrorism Policy Toward the Afghan Taliban

The debate on policy toward the Afghan Taliban revolves around the nature of the Taliban regime—whether it is pragmatic, extremist, or divided—and implications of the Taliban's internal political character for a range of policy outcomes, including counterterrorism.<sup>10</sup> In these debates, an important strand across key arguments points to a stark trade-off for U.S. counterterrorism interests. It suggests that given the extremist nature of the Taliban, U.S. policy priorities, including counterterrorism, are likely to be undermined by a stable and/or stronger Taliban regime.<sup>e</sup> Some analysts have challenged this framing and argued that concessions to the Taliban are necessary for progress on issues of concern to the international community, including counterterrorism.<sup>11</sup> There are two main types of arguments advocating concessions. One argument is that current U.S. policy prioritization, like political inclusion and rights for girls and women, impedes progress on other issues like counterterrorism, and so policy needs to drop the focus on inclusion and rights.<sup>12</sup> Second, some analysts argue

e According to Dipali Mukhopadhyay, "A more powerful Taliban, wrapped in unmatched glory, might make room for other extremists to flourish, just as they did in the 1990s." See "The Taliban Have Not Moderated," *Foreign Affairs*, March 28, 2022. According to Thomas Joscelyn, "We should be clear about the nature of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate. It is an authoritarian regime that will impose its draconian laws on the Afghan population. The Taliban and al-Qaeda fought for two decades for this very purpose — to rule according to their version of sharia." Thomas Joscelyn, "Afghanistan's Future: Assessing the National Security, Humanitarian and Economic Implications of the Taliban Takeover," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, October 5, 2021. According to Laurel Miller, a weaker Taliban regime presents different risks: "It is clearly in U.S. national security interests to keep Afghanistan from becoming a failed state that international terrorist groups could use as a training ground and safe haven. There is also the risk of an internationally isolated and impoverished Taliban becoming reliant on heroin sales for income, turning the country into a narco-state." Rachel Oswald, "Work with, or Isolate, the Taliban is a Tough Choice for US," *Roll Call*, November 3, 2021.

that to persuade the Taliban to cooperate against ISK and other international terrorist threats, the U.S. government needs to lower the bar on what it expects the Taliban to do against allied terrorist groups.<sup>13</sup>

### CT Goals and Taliban Regime Strength

The view that U.S. counterterrorism goals are incompatible with a stable and strong Taliban regime is rooted in the belief that the Taliban are an extremist movement, joined at the hip with various terrorist groups, which consistently privileges "fidelity to their hardline ideology over the possibility of legitimate membership in the international community."<sup>14</sup> This view implies more stability and strength will embolden the Taliban into implementing their hardline ideology as well as their support of allied terrorist groups, which will undermine U.S. interests in a more profound way. A key implication of this view is that isolating the Taliban is essential for managing terrorism threats in addition to realizing goals related to inclusion and human rights.<sup>f</sup>

Concerns that a stronger and more stable Taliban regime will provide greater opportunity for terrorists and incubate terrorist threats are well-founded. For one, despite their repeated stated commitment to not allow their territory to be used by terrorists against other countries, the Taliban remain supportive of several terrorist groups in the country, providing them both sanctuary and material assistance. This includes al-Qa`ida senior leadership and al-Qa`ida's South Asia arm, al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS); anti-Pakistan groups such as the TTP and the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group; Central Asian militants with political aims against Uzbekistan and Tajikistan such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ), and Jamaat Ansarullah; and the anti-China Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP).<sup>15 g</sup>

The Taliban's policy of supporting the range of these terrorist groups is not borne out of weakness or capacity constraints. The Taliban are a formidable political movement, and their top leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, appears committed to the agenda of implementing an Islamic Emirate that protects his interpretation of the religion, prepares an army, and wages jihad.<sup>16</sup> The Taliban also appear to align with the aspiration of their allies against their respective adversaries, even if they do not partake in their acts of violence at every turn, at least directly. The Taliban view jihadi foreign fighters as political dissidents with legitimate political causes who deserve their support. There is the possibility that

f According to Lisa Curtis and Nader Nadery, "Getting tougher on the Taliban would . . . mean working closely with the United Nations and like-minded countries to impose consequences on the Taliban for their unacceptable behavior and withholding high-level engagement with the group until its leadership pursues more moderate policies." See Lisa Curtis and Nader Nadery, "Time To Get Tough on the Taliban," *Foreign Affairs*, September 19, 2022. See also Annie Pforzheimer and Shabnam Nasmi, "Thanks to the Taliban, Afghanistan is once again a hotbed of terrorism," *Hill*, July 6, 2023, and Luke Coffey, "US Has an Opportunity to Support the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan," *Hudson Institute*, September 21, 2022.

g U.S. official sources, similar to the Defense Intelligence Agency, have noted as recently as 2023 that the Taliban are supporting elements of both al-Qa`ida core and AQIS while noting that the two entities are limited in capacity: "This quarter, the Taliban almost certainly provided covert sanctuary to legacy al-Qaeda members and their families residing in Afghanistan, according to the DIA . . . According to the most recent estimates, AQIS has about 200 members in Afghanistan." See "Operation Enduring Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2023 - March 31, 2023."

the Taliban see allied groups as a source of leverage for their own regional security and broader foreign policy objectives, though evidence on this being a motivation remains thin. Nevertheless, the Taliban see advancement of jihadi ideas through social and education policies as one of the main projects of their statehood.<sup>17</sup> A stronger and more stable Taliban regime may thus lean into these logics and be emboldened into supporting various armed groups in the country instead of backing off from them.

At the same time, even if concerns about a stable and strong Taliban regime fostering terrorism are valid, the policy decision on how to deal with the Taliban depends on what the alternative to the Taliban's current trajectory will look like and their implications for terrorism and counterterrorism. There are two alternative scenarios to consider: either a weaker, more isolated Taliban regime or a scenario in which the Taliban lose power.

When it comes to counterterrorism concerns, a weaker Taliban regime can only be a better outcome if weakness compels the Taliban to distance from terrorist groups and does not result in a strengthening of ISK or other terrorist groups. One mechanism by which this can happen is if the weakening shifts the internal balance of power within the Taliban toward those who are more pragmatic in their engagement with the outside world and more receptive to international counterterrorism concerns. It is unclear if a weaker Taliban regime will move in such a direction.

Instead, it is arguably more likely that upon weakening, the Taliban leadership may move closer to terrorist groups. Research on political violence suggests that amid the turmoil of a civil war, political elites have incentives to move toward more extreme positions as opposed to pragmatic or moderate ones.<sup>18</sup> Political moderates can also face the "dilemma" that if they voice their pragmatic positions, they may be discredited by their hardline rivals.<sup>19</sup> There is precedent for the Taliban moving closer to terrorist groups in the face of internal turmoil. In 2015, when the then Taliban leader Mansoor Akhtar, assessed by various analysts at the time to be relatively pragmatic, faced an internal political challenge from within his movement, he was quick to seek help from al-Qa`ida and break from the tradition of not acknowledging al-Qa`ida's pledge of allegiance by publicly doing so.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, in the case of Taliban weakening to a point of fragmentation, the political consequences will be highly unpredictable and may well be dangerous. In theory, Taliban regime fragmentation will provide an opening to pro-Western opposition in Afghanistan to reemerge, but given the weakness of Afghan opposition, the more likely outcome is that it will create a crisis of state authority in the country and pave the way for civil war. Such a return to conflict would create much greater space for terrorist groups such as ISK and Taliban-allied terrorists such as al-Qa`ida and the TTP. As a result, terror threats in Afghanistan may easily end up increasing. Given that, analysts and policymakers who believe that weakening the Taliban regime can advance U.S. counterterrorism priorities need to make the case for why and how such an approach will alleviate terrorism risks from Afghanistan.

### ***Concessions, Normalization, and Counterterrorism***

The other end of this debate suggests that in order to obtain counterterrorism assurances and help from the Taliban, in particular against ISK, the U.S. government should offer concessions, such as reducing the priority accorded to human rights concerns, dropping the demand of making Afghan politics more inclusive, and backing

away from the demand of a Taliban crackdown against their allied terrorist groups.<sup>h</sup> According to this view, the Taliban have shown some flexibility on counterterrorism issues, such as by agreeing to restrain al-Qa`ida and demonstrating the will and ability to counter ISK in Afghanistan.<sup>i</sup> In contrast, political inclusion and social policies in the country are much more central to their domestic political standing. There have been signs of debate and differences among Taliban elites on some of these social issues and how to approach them, with some leaders dissenting from the hardline positions. However, Taliban emir Hibatullah Akhundzada has not budged on these issues, and dissenting leaders have mostly backed off from pushing their case. As a result, the Taliban remain firm on the issues of political inclusion and social policies in the country and appear unlikely to change those due to American or broader international pressure.

This perspective has two implications. First, the argument suggests that more pressure on the Taliban over rights and inclusion will likely lead to the Taliban digging in further and making it harder for even pragmatic leaders to cooperate on counterterrorism.<sup>21</sup> Second, if the U.S. government wants more help and cooperation on counterterrorism, in particular against ISK, they have to offer a more normal relationship to the Taliban, including potential recognition.<sup>22</sup>

In this author's view, this perspective is correct in seeing Taliban intransigence on political inclusion and denial of rights for women and girls for what it is: a domestic political issue of premium importance from which the Taliban are unlikely to back off. Yet, it is unclear what kind of further movement by the Taliban is possible on counterterrorism issues (beyond the limited covert exchanges) should the United States or the international community look the other way on rights and inclusion, including by offering normalization.

On al-Qa`ida, for instance, the Taliban do not appear open to breaking from the group in exchange for concessions. In July

h According to Ahmad and London, "The United States needs to confront this radical reality with an equally radical response ... Such an engagement with the Taliban's true powerbrokers in Kandahar should require conditions ... These should include guaranteeing the safety of foreign personnel who work on the ground with the Afghan people, delegating control of humanitarian aid disbursement to neutral parties, cooperating against the Islamic State, and taking credible actions to constrain, if not expel, al Qaeda. In return, the U.S. government could tie the easing of sanctions to improved behavior. But the United States would be on shaky ground demanding that Kandahar meet conditions about women's rights and democratic ideals as a first step, given Washington's record in overlooking such matters with partners such as Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia." Javid Ahmad and Douglas London, "It's Time To Recognize the Taliban," *Foreign Policy*, May 23, 2023.

i This view is important to consider as it is reportedly espoused by parts of the U.S. government. According to David Ignatius, "Part of the bargain for the U.S. withdrawal from Kabul was that the Taliban would stop al-Qaeda from using Afghanistan as a platform for foreign operations. U.S. officials say they have generally lived up to that commitment ... Against the renegade ISIS-K, the Taliban has conducted a brutal but effective campaign. 'The Taliban has intensified [counterterror] operations this year, which prompted some ISIS-K leaders to relocate to outside of Afghanistan,' notes the declassified intelligence findings, adding that 'Taliban raids in Afghanistan have removed at least eight key ISIS-K leaders.'" Ignatius, "In Afghanistan, the Taliban has all but extinguished al-Qaeda." According to a 2022 declassified National Intelligence Estimate, "Thus far, the Taliban's strictures have by and large been observed by al-Qa`ida." "Prospects for al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and Globally Through 2024," National Intelligence Council, September 16, 2022.

2022, the government of Uzbekistan organized an international conference and hoped that at the conference the Taliban would break from al-Qa`ida.<sup>23</sup> The Uzbek government initially seemed confident of securing such an agreement, but in the end, the Taliban appear to have refused further discussion on al-Qa`ida and shortly after al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was located and targeted in Kabul. Ever since, the Taliban have not indicated that they are open to breaking from or denying haven to al-Qa`ida and other allied groups should the United States concede on political inclusion and human rights concerns.

It is also important to note that the Taliban do not need incentives to target ISK. Their crackdown against ISK is rooted in self-preservation.<sup>24</sup> The Taliban see ISK as the main opposition to their rule and legitimacy in the country. Thus, the Taliban are likely to counter ISK irrespective of where the U.S. government stands on inclusion and human rights.

It is also unlikely that U.S. concessions in the form of deprioritizing political inclusion and human rights issues can help forge trust and create cover for joint counterterrorism activities, such as strikes against ISK and a counterterrorism finance system to counter the *hawala* system. Part of the problem will be on the side of the U.S. government. U.S. domestic law prohibits U.S. personnel from engaging or conspiring in assassination directly and indirectly under Executive Order 12333, also referred to as the assassination ban.<sup>25</sup> Such assassinations include killings in violation of the laws of war, including collective punishment practices—which the Taliban, by targeting the country's salafi population for ties to ISK, are complicit in.<sup>j</sup> Given how deep-seated security sector pathologies driving civilian harm tend to be, it is unlikely that the U.S. government's deprioritizing political inclusion and human rights concerns on gender issues will lead to the Taliban adhering to the laws of war for the sake of enhanced counterterrorism cooperation.

On the side of the Taliban, it is plausible that some in the group might be motivated to partner or collaborate with the U.S. government to degrade ISK but that motivation may be trumped by competing considerations. Taliban leader Akhundzada continues to frame the Western world as a long-term adversary, and thus, the appearance of working with the United States, in particular against ISK, is likely to be unacceptable to a core group of the Taliban's elites, key rank-and-file and supporters, and Taliban-allied terrorist groups. In case of public exposure of cooperation, ISK is also likely to exploit the optics of U.S.-Taliban cooperation to sow divisions in the Taliban. The risk of internal political turmoil and the concern over broader U.S.-Taliban counterterrorism cooperation among Taliban allies may prevent Taliban leadership from going beyond the limited covert information exchanges that have taken place

between the CIA and the Taliban.<sup>k</sup>

Besides political inclusion and human rights issues, another concession implicit in some policy suggestions is that the U.S. government should require less of the Taliban in terms of counterterrorism against terrorist groups allied with the Taliban. This view suggests that pressuring the Taliban into not providing any kind of safe haven and material support to al-Qa`ida among other allied groups hurts American ability to get the Taliban to go after ISK. A core assumption of this view is that the Taliban face an insurmountable domestic political challenge in distancing themselves from jihadi groups, who effectively constitute a key part of their political constituency.<sup>26</sup> According to this view, the Taliban also view ISK as positioning to capitalize on any fissures in Taliban ties with their jihadi allies, such as the TTP. Thus, Western pressure on the Taliban to go after Taliban-allied groups risks cohesion stresses and political problems, which further restricts the limited space for cooperation against ISK.

The implication of this view is the U.S. government needs to accept that the Taliban will always provide some kind of haven, even support, to allied terrorist groups, including perhaps al-Qa`ida. The best outcome then is that in exchange for more moderate expectations on counterterrorism focused on one key terrorist group, ISK, the Taliban will compel their allied groups based in Afghanistan to not attack Western and regional countries and cooperate against shared threats like ISK.

The problem with a bargain that settles for the Taliban's assurances of restraining allied militants is that it will be challenging to trust or enforce for the U.S. and other governments. It is unclear, for instance, what steps and guarantees short of a crackdown might give confidence to any government, in particular the United States, that the Taliban are restraining their militant allies in good faith and the risks remain manageable. Even before the 9/11 attacks, Taliban leaders privately insisted to U.S. officials that expelling al-Qa`ida from Afghanistan was difficult but that they were going to restrain it—an assurance that ultimately did not hold up.<sup>27</sup> The Taliban have also provided assurances to Pakistan on the issue of the TTP; however, the TTP's violence has only grown over time.<sup>28</sup>

### **Policy Implications**

If the United States remains as concerned as it is about Taliban's allied terrorist eco-system, U.S. counterterrorism priorities are likely to become more challenged as the Taliban become stable and stronger. In case U.S. concern about ISK significantly grows relative to Taliban-allied terrorists, a stable and/or stronger Taliban regime able to fight ISK more effectively may prove to be more desirable. On the other hand, a weaker Taliban regime is also unlikely to advance U.S. counterterrorism priorities; if weakening the Taliban creates a crisis of state authority in the country or paves the way for a civil war, that will create additional risks. Concessions to the Taliban in a bid to empower pragmatic leaders in the Taliban or alleviate the challenge of working with the international community are also unlikely to change this dynamic. The Taliban's calculus on counterterrorism is, to a significant degree, insulated from

j According to the International Crisis Group, "Because IS-KP members are mostly Salafis, the Taliban imposed blanket restrictions on that religious minority, inflaming tensions with its members. Following IS-KP attacks in late 2021, the Taliban partially closed down Salafi madrasas in the IS-KP strongholds of Nangarhar, Nuristan and Kunar provinces, and some farther away in Kunduz, Takhar and Balkh provinces. Some Salafi scholars and seminary teachers turned up dead with notes pinned to their bodies accusing them of being IS-KP supporters." "Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban," International Crisis Group, August 12, 2022.

k Press reports suggest that the CIA's information sharing with the Taliban does not include targeting data. According to *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius, "The CIA shares counterterrorism information with the Taliban, the senior administration official said, but not targeting data or 'actionable intelligence.'" See Ignatius, "In Afghanistan, the Taliban has all but extinguished al-Qaeda." This might be due to EO 12333 considerations.

incentives by outside powers.

## Part Two: Over-the-Horizon Military Action

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the Biden administration has asserted that over-the-horizon action is part of its overall counterterrorism approach.<sup>29</sup> Yet U.S. counterterrorism targeting tempo in Afghanistan has dropped to the lowest point in 20 years. Since the U.S. withdrawal, there has been one drone strike in Afghanistan (against al-Qa`ida leader al-Zawahiri in July 2022). According to CENTCOM, until March, it had carried out two other “non-kinetic” actions<sup>30</sup>—which possibly is a reference to aerial shows of force or cyber actions—but no other targeting actions.

This limited targeting tempo is not because of diminished threats from Afghanistan. The administration continues to assess a growing ISK threat of external attacks from Afghanistan compared to the pre-withdrawal period.<sup>31</sup> In his 2023 Senate hearing, CENTCOM Commander General Kurilla noted a high risk of ISK attacks enabled from Afghanistan against U.S. citizens, allies, and partners in Europe and Central Asia and lower risk of attacks against the U.S. homeland.<sup>32</sup> The Biden administration relies on the Taliban to curtail at least some of the terrorist threats—and observes that Taliban crackdown against ISK has become more effective. However, despite the Taliban targeting some ISK operatives and the United States and the Taliban collaborating against ISK, top ISK leaders still remain at large. One of those leaders is the emir of ISK, Shahab al-Muhajir, who sanctioned the August 2021 attack at the Hamid Karzai Airport in Kabul airport during the U.S. military evacuation. Additionally, the U.S. government has detected the presence of al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) operatives in Afghanistan,<sup>33</sup> who have the support of the Taliban.

One explanation for the low targeting tempo of last two years, despite these persistent threats, is that the current posture is constrained by limited surveillance resources and the resulting lack of intelligence in Afghanistan to locate high-value targets, such as ISK leader al-Muhajir. Indeed, since the U.S. military drawdown from Afghanistan, the U.S. government’s intelligence resources inside the country stand considerably reduced. CENTCOM Commander General Kurilla has publicly noted that intelligence collection capabilities in support of over-the-horizon mission are deficient in human sources, technical collection, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets.<sup>34</sup> Kurilla has emphasized the shortfall in available ISR resources, noting that they are spending most of their time in “transit”—most likely a reference to the long travel time between military bases in the Middle East via Pakistani airspace into Afghanistan. He has also noted the ISR coverage degradation is greater than 80 percent compared to the pre-withdrawal period.<sup>35</sup> Such a degradation in ISR coverage not only diminishes imagery-based intelligence collection but

also signals and communication intelligence collection through sensors hoisted on ISR platforms. Kurilla has also indicated gaps in analytic capabilities required to process the available intelligence due to redirection of analytic talent under the 2022 National Defense Strategy. The net effect is that the U.S. military “lacks the granularity to see the full picture,” which possibly precludes the timely detection of threats and, in case where threats are located, their reliable targeting.<sup>36</sup>

The low targeting tempo may also be driven by restrictive policy on counterterrorism action outside of areas of active hostilities under the Biden administration’s international counterterrorism strategy. The new strategy, formulated in 2022, narrows the scope of military action in support of counterterrorism operations, raising the bar on unilateral military action and the approval required for kinetic activity to unspecified imminent level of threat.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, both the U.S. military and the CIA are required to obtain advance permission from the president to target terrorists.<sup>m</sup>

The ongoing level of resourcing and policy restriction may also intend to reinforce the administration’s political goal of not exacerbating tensions with the Taliban.<sup>38</sup> The administration appears to want tensions with the Taliban and the broader conflict in Afghanistan to not be a distraction amid intensifying strategic competition with China and Russia. A higher tempo of operations in Afghanistan will likely bring greater domestic political attention on Afghanistan and raise uncomfortable questions about the U.S. withdrawal in 2021 and whether Afghanistan is once again a safe haven of international terrorists—conversations that the administration prefers to avoid.

## Adjusting the Over-the-Horizon Approach

Senior U.S. officials have noted that the United States retains the capability to use force over-the-horizon, citing the strike against al-Qa`ida leader al-Zawahiri in July 2022 as evidence of that.<sup>n</sup> However, beyond the general claim of possessing such a capability, the administration has not publicly outlined a concept of operations or a doctrinal approach of how the over-the-horizon approach can protect U.S. interests. For instance, it is not clear what the end-state of the current approach is beyond occasional leadership decapitation, which a large body of research shows is ineffective against mature, older groups.<sup>39</sup> Partly for that reason, in over-the-horizon campaigns over the last decade, the United

m “U.S. military and C.I.A. drone operators generally must obtain advance permission from President Biden to target a suspected militant outside a conventional war zone, and they must have ‘near certainty’ at the moment of any strike that civilians will not be injured, newly declassified rules show.” Charlie Savage, “Biden Rules Tighten Limits on Drone Strikes,” *New York Times*, July 1, 2023.

n According to Undersecretary for Defense Policy Colin Kahl, “But the other thing the President believed was that we could withdraw thousands of troops Afghanistan and still protect our vital national interests when they are threatened from something emanating from Afghanistan. And, you know, frankly, a lot of our critics didn’t believe that was possible, they didn’t think that you could do things over-the-horizon, that we couldn’t achieve, you know, counter-terrorism objectives, at least the objective of protecting the American homeland if we didn’t have thousands of boots on the ground in -- in Afghanistan. That’s not what the President’s view is and I think, in the last 10 days, in the strike that was carried out on Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Al Qaeda and the most wanted terrorist on planet Earth and one of the two co-planners for the 9/11 attacks, what we’ve demonstrated to Al Qaeda, but also to other terrorist organizations is that we can still reach out and touch them.” “USD (Policy) Dr. Kahl Press Conference,” U.S. Department of Defense, August 8, 2022.

l After the U.S. government’s designation announcement, the United Nations Monitoring Team also noted AQIS leaders Osama Mehmood, Atif Yahya Ghouri, and Muhammad Maruf to be in Afghanistan. “Fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2665 (2022) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan,” United Nations Security Council, May 2, 2023. Mehmood was one of the masterminds of the 2014 plot to hijack and attack U.S. and Indian navies in the Arabian Sea. See Osama Mehmood, “Operation against the American Navy by the Mujahideen: Reasons and Objectives,” *Resurgence* 1 (Fall 2014): pp. 8-9 and “Press Release Regarding Targeting of American and Indian Navies,” As-Sahab Subcontinent, September 27, 2014.

States moved beyond a decapitation-centric approach and outlined relatively concrete logics of limiting terrorist capabilities, such as degrading the transnational terrorist network (Pakistan) and disrupting the external plotting capability (Yemen).<sup>o</sup> It is possible that the administration has similar logics of how the ongoing military approach can reduce threats, but the publicly observable dimensions of the over-the-horizon approach, such as the frequency of kinetic strikes relative to targets in the area of operation, the level of surveillance activity in the country, and the communication approach accompanying the over-the-horizon mission, do not indicate a clear logic for mitigating threats.

How can the current posture be adjusted? To exert more pressure on and mitigate the terrorist threat from Afghanistan, one set of options involves moving the over-the-horizon approach toward an explicit coercive approach. As Alexander Downs has argued, “[Coercion] utilizes force — or threats of force — to propel a target to take an action, or to stop taking an action it has already started.”<sup>40</sup> In the context of Afghanistan, such a coercive approach can seek to prevent terrorism by combining threats and actual use of force to compel the Taliban to restrain and limit the activities of its terrorist allies and also act against ISK. Doing so requires identifying a specific target set, adequate resources, and clear and credible signaling measures, which are discussed in the next section.

Will such a coercive approach be effective? The outcome of any coercive exercise depends on the coercer understanding the target’s “fears, vulnerabilities, and interests — as well as its willingness to endure pain on behalf of those interests.”<sup>41</sup> In line with that, analysts argue that coercive efforts against the Taliban are likely to fail as they have a high threshold of pain, having proven insular to military pressure as an insurgency and even now remain resistant to external pressure. This is an important argument against a coercive approach resting on military tools, and thus, it is challenging to confidently say whether these counterterrorism postures individually or as a combination might work. However, the Taliban, as a state actor, appear more vulnerable to targeting pressures. By repeatedly asking for the names of their top leaders to be dropped from U.S. “blacklists” and complaining about aerial surveillance in country, the Taliban indicate a desire to alleviate such risks.<sup>p</sup> The Taliban also seek to project sovereignty and security over Afghanistan, protect their leadership and stabilize their regime, and worry about domestic political backlash in case of American targeting—goals that are likely to be compromised by calibrated military pressure. This suggests there are pathways to bring pressure on the Taliban.

o For example, on the U.S. campaign against AQAP in Yemen, then Advisor to President Obama John Brennan noted, “Our counterterrorism approach involves many different tools -- diplomatic, intelligence, military, homeland security, law enforcement and justice. With our Yemeni and international partners, we have put unprecedented pressure on AQAP. Recruits seeking to travel to Yemen have been disruptive -- disrupted. Operatives deployed from Yemen have been detained. Plots have been thwarted. And key AQAP leaders who have targeted U.S. and Yemeni interest have met their demise, including Anwar al-Awlaki, AQAP’s chief of external operations.” See Rikita Singh, “Transcript of John Brennan’s Speech on Yemen and Drones,” *Lawfare*, August 9, 2012.

p The Taliban made this demand during the intra-Afghan talks before their takeover of the country in August 2021 and have since continued to raise it: “It is imperative for mutual trust that names of individuals associated with the Islamic Emirate (Taliban) be completely, and not conditionally or temporarily, be removed from black and reward lists.” Ayaz Gul, “Taliban Link Progress in Afghan Peace Talks to Delisting of Top Leaders,” *Voice of America*, May 5, 2021.

### Three Options

Policymakers can choose one or a combination of three different types of coercive postures to mitigate threats from Afghanistan: 1) monitoring of and use of force against detected terrorist activities in Afghanistan to dissuade the Taliban from providing support and leaving space for such activity (detection posture); 2) threats of and use of lethal and non-lethal actions against specific transnational terrorism plotting capabilities to limit the opportunities and resources necessary for transnational terrorism (denial posture); 3) threats of punishment against the Taliban in case of terrorism against U.S. interests to dissuade terrorists and the Taliban engaging in undesirable behavior (punishment posture). In addition to their distinct logic of coercion, each posture also purports to hold different targets at risk, presents different resourcing choices, involves unique set of signaling measures, and generates varied risks of Taliban retaliation. These dimensions are discussed for each posture individually and summarized in Table 1 (see Appendix).

### Detection Posture

Under this approach, coercive effects are sought primarily through credible monitoring efforts.<sup>42</sup> The logic behind the approach is that “potential transgressors are less likely to transgress if they believe they are being watched.”<sup>43</sup> Such beliefs can be influenced through a robust signaling approach to influence both the Taliban and the terrorist groups into believing that they are being monitored. It is possible that some elements of this posture are being implemented under the current over-the-horizon posture. However, what distinguishes the proposed posture is its resource levels, which are higher compared to the current level, and public signaling features, which are absent in the ongoing approach.

A detection approach requires regular monitoring of geographies where terrorist groups are generally active. An intensive posture can be intended for “real-time, persistent situational awareness in key geographic areas,” which requires orders of magnitude increase in various surveillance resources, including drone orbits for Afghanistan.<sup>44</sup> A cost-effective approach can aim for periodic monitoring cycles with visible increase in surveillance activity from the current level to monitor different parts of the country. In both cases, the U.S. government will be able to supplement its collection of communication and signals intelligence through sensors on ISR platforms. In case the U.S. government is not already gathering Afghanistan’s cellular network, such a collection effort may also be required.

To credibly signal that terrorist activity is being monitored, the U.S. military needs to communicate that monitoring of the terrorist activity in the country remains underway and that there is no place for terrorists to hide. Such statements can be validated by declassifying details on detected terrorist activity, similar to the declassification of information of Russian activities in Ukraine. Other measures to improve the credibility of monitoring include persistent visible surveillance as well as limited strikes against terrorist activity in country. A proximate regional base to fly drones from will improve monitoring by reducing ISR degradation in transit times and in turn signal the credibility of the detection posture.

One of the main constraints on realizing such a posture is the availability of funds and policymaker interest and attention. The level of resourcing outlined above would require an increase in CENTCOM and the intelligence community’s budget for the over-the-horizon mission, redirection of some pre-existing capabilities



(such as MQ-9s) and induction of new ones (such as alternate airborne ISR platforms and armed overwatch aircraft, among others), as well as investment of political capital to negotiate basing with a regional country. Amid the resource needs for intensifying strategic competition, such additional demands for a counterterrorism mission will be met with considerable policymaker skepticism. At the same time, the ongoing level of resourcing for the over-the-horizon posture appears relatively affordable and with space for spending increase. For example, U.S. CENTCOM and AFRICOM CJTF-Horn of Africa's total budget has decreased from around \$50 billion for FY2021 to around \$20 billion for FY2024 (requested)—a fraction of which is likely devoted to the over-the-horizon mission in Afghanistan.<sup>44</sup> Moderate spending increases from this level to support additional capability and security cooperation expenses to implement an improved even if sub-optimal posture is difficult but not impossible—and that too without offsetting the Department of Defense's major program priorities related to Integrated Deterrence. Nevertheless, it requires policymakers to trade resourcing both in cost and capability as well as attention from some other priority.

The other constraint to such a posture is the risk of Taliban retaliation. That risk is likely to be higher than the risk of the current posture but not acute. While the Taliban have complained about U.S. surveillance flights over Afghanistan and the strike against al-Qa`ida leader al-Zawahiri in their dialogue with U.S. diplomats, they have not specified a clear public response to either the surveillance activity or the threat of occasional strikes in the country—which suggests that the Taliban have not determined a threshold of surveillance and kinetic activity beyond which they will engage in retaliatory action.<sup>45</sup> Still, it is possible that as surveillance activity over Afghanistan expands under a detection posture, the Taliban clarify the acceptable threshold of ISR activity beyond which they will retaliate against the United States. And they may not view occasional strikes to signal credibility of monitoring as merely a limited defensive action.

### ***Denial Posture***

A denial posture requires threats of strikes and actual strikes against key terrorist leaders involved specifically in plotting activities and any Taliban leaders who might be assisting those terrorists. The logic of doing so is that it will dissuade terrorists from plotting and the Taliban from supporting, allowing, or letting those involved to plot from the country. A denial posture requires bringing monitoring and, at times, targeting pressure against specific nodes of terrorist groups engaged in transnational operations and plotting (including al-Qa`ida and ISK) as well as against Taliban leaders and operatives enabling terrorists in the country (like Taliban leaders known to

have supported al-Qa`ida, such as Sirajuddin Haqqani).<sup>r</sup>

The resource requirements for such a posture are likely higher than the current level of resources but not necessarily higher than the detection posture. A denial posture requires an increase in intelligence and surveillance resources to identify and then locate key leaders and operatives involved in transnational operations and plotting. In order to bring the targeted surveillance against the accurate nodes within terrorist groups and the Taliban leadership assisting and supporting terrorists, higher levels of human intelligence resources in addition to signals and imagery intelligence through ISR platforms are likely required to locate the leaders and operatives. Such precise information generally requires diligent and sustained efforts at infiltrating terrorist networks. The aggregate level of ISR resources may end up lower than what might be deployed as part of the detection posture.

Under this posture, the U.S. military needs to sustain significant pressure against terrorist leaders and operatives involved in transnational plotting in order to limit the opportunities available to them for transnational terrorism. Washington also needs to convey to the Taliban not only privately but also through public statements the details on detected plotting activity. Other measures to improve the credibility of denial efforts include persistent surveillance of terrorist nodes suspected to be involved in plotting as well as occasional lethal and non-lethal actions against them. Lethal actions can include strikes against terrorists engaged in plotting or the facilities being used by them to plot terrorist actions. Non-lethal actions can include offensive cyber actions against the terrorists' command-and-control infrastructure.

Much like the detection posture, this posture will be constrained by the availability of funds and, in turn, policymaker skepticism to devote additional resources and attention. However, if we assume ISR-related increases to be the biggest expenses in additional resourcing, the spending increase for a denial posture from the current level may be lower than what might be required under a monitoring posture. Still, ramping up human intelligence capabilities in support of the posture may prove to be harder—not for reason of cost but for how scarce such capabilities are and their relative importance in other theaters relevant to strategic competition priorities.

The risk of attacks to a denial posture, including Taliban retaliation, is high, which may constrain the adoption of the posture. Taliban leadership reportedly worries about American targeting.<sup>46</sup> While such sensitivity is indicative of the coercive potential of a denial posture, it also creates the risk of a spiral of escalation. One possibility is that after strikes and non-lethal actions disrupting plotting activities, the Taliban, instead of backing off from assisting terrorist groups in the country, would escalate attacks against U.S. interests through direct or proxy means. Similarly, terrorist leaders of al-Qa`ida and/or the Islamic State involved in live plots may act preemptively and expedite their plots upon becoming a focus of

q The FY2024 request as reported by DoD Comptroller is \$20.9 billion, which includes overseas operations requirements for theaters from South Asia, the Middle East to Africa. For more details on each year, see budget request documents for FY2022, 2023, and 2024. "Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request," Office of the Under Secretary of defense (Comptroller)/ Chief Financial Officer, April 2022 and "Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Request," Office of the Under Secretary of defense (Comptroller)/ Chief Financial Officer, March 2023.

r Al-Zawahiri was protected by Taliban leader Sirajuddin Haqqani: "The house Al-Zawahiri was in when he was killed was owned by a top aide to senior Taliban leader Sirajuddin Haqqani, according to a senior intelligence official." Matthew Lee, Norman Merchant, and Aamer Madhani, "Biden: Killing of al-Qaida leader is long-sought 'justice,'" Associated Press, August 2, 2022. According to U.S. Special Envoy Tom West, "Ayman Al-Zawahiri was living in downtown Kabul under the shelter of the Taliban leadership and we took him out." Fatema Adeeb, "US Accuses Islamic Emirate of Violation of Doha Deal," Tolo News, March 5, 2023.

persistent U.S. surveillance.

### ***Punishment Posture***

A punishment posture requires the U.S. government to credibly threaten retributive punishment in the form of major damage to the Taliban leadership and/or infrastructure in case of attacks against the United States or U.S. interests. The logic of doing so is that such punishment threats will dissuade the Taliban from supporting and materially assisting their allied terrorist groups and also compel the Taliban to take limit space for terrorists in the country.

A punishment posture does not require a visible increase in surveillance activity or human intelligence resources for coercive effect. However, it requires the threat of punishment to the Taliban—that in case of an attack, there will be major consequences for the Taliban and their leadership—to be credible. This may be achieved in one of two ways. First, it can be obtained through explicit and credible messaging that in case of a major attack from Afghanistan, military consequences will follow. American political leadership will have to affirm such threats publicly, signaling to the Taliban that by making a commitment before the American public to punish them, they have “tied their hands” and will have to hit back in case of terrorist activity from Afghanistan because that is a promise made before the American public. Second, credibility of the posture can be conveyed by signaling “sunk costs”—for example, by pre-positioning assets at bases closer to Afghanistan, either in Pakistan or Central Asia, and making it clear to the Taliban that the United States remains both resolved and optimally positioned to strike against them.<sup>47</sup> For now, the U.S. government has not signaled availability of such basing access, possibly because it lacks access for such basing in the region.<sup>5</sup>

The resource requirements and the operating costs of a punishment posture will be significantly lower than detection and denial postures. In case the threat of punishment is reinforced with sporadic shows of force through manned or unmanned aircraft over Afghanistan, it may be more resource intensive than the current posture. The main cost of a punishment posture is likely to be the political capital required to negotiating a basing arrangement for pre-positioning assets closer to Afghanistan; that may also require a one-time investment to develop a base. In addition, the risk of Taliban retaliation against the United States as well as the country that will agree to host a U.S. military base, possibly Pakistan or a Central Asian republic, may be significant. The Taliban may look to coerce that country into closing down such access to the United States by targeting it through attacks via allied terrorist groups. However, pre-positioning of assets near Afghanistan is not vital to the credibility of the posture, so long as the U.S. government has reliable air space access into Afghanistan.

### **Part Three: The Threat to Pakistan**

Pakistan faces an increasingly formidable threat from the

insurgency of the TTP.<sup>48</sup> This threat is driven by the safe haven and support the Taliban are providing the TTP, as well as an expanding cadre of fighters who have relocated to Pakistan from Afghanistan over the last two years.<sup>49</sup> It is also a function of Pakistan's historical support for the Taliban as an insurgency, which created space for the TTP to operate, and longstanding governance challenges along the country's western border, which sustain the group. A fundamental question on this threat is: To what extent is the TTP a counterterrorism challenge for the United States? And what should U.S. response strategy be to the TTP's growing threat? There are three possible views on the nature of the TTP threat with varied implications for the United States and the kind of policy effort required in response.

The dominant view on the TTP among policymakers and analysts is that the TTP is not a threat to the United States.<sup>50</sup> This view is partly rooted in a sentiment of *schadenfreude*. U.S. officials remember Pakistan's efforts to undermine the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan and the country's dangerous brinkmanship with terrorist proxies, such as the Haqqani Network and the anti-India Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammed.<sup>51</sup> But it goes beyond lack of sympathy for Pakistan's troubles due to Pakistan's past behavior. There are objective reasons for policymakers and strategists to view the threat of the TTP to U.S. interests as being minimal compared to the past.

In the decade after its formation, the TTP threatened the United States in several ways. For much of the period, it was fighting with the Taliban in the insurgency against the U.S. military in Afghanistan. It also targeted U.S. personnel. In December 2009, it conducted a joint operation with al-Qa`ida to infiltrate a suicide bomber at a forward base in eastern Afghanistan, which killed multiple CIA officers.<sup>52</sup> In May 2010, the TTP attempted an attack in New York City's Times Square, which failed.<sup>53</sup>

However, over the last few years, the TTP has not targeted U.S. personnel or citizens. The group's messaging has distanced itself from transnational aims, claiming that it has no direct aims against the United States and is primarily focused on the local agenda against Pakistan.<sup>54</sup> This shift and the ongoing local focus of the TTP is best summarized by Tore Hamming and Abdul Sayed in their May 2023 *CTC Sentinel* analysis: “Another defining feature of the TTP's early history was its simultaneous external focus ... However, under its current emir, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, the TTP publicly [has] disowned any transnational or regional agenda.”<sup>55</sup>

The policy implication of this assessment is that the United States should steer clear of backing Pakistan against the TTP, or at least limit its support, because it poses no direct threat to U.S. interests. A related implication is that the best way for the United States to preserve its own security is by not getting entangled in Pakistan's fight against the TTP or, for that matter, Pakistan's escalating confrontation with the Taliban over the safe haven problem.<sup>56</sup> Such prioritization also comports with the Biden administration's broader counterterrorism strategy, which seeks to ruthlessly prioritize threats relevant to U.S. interests.<sup>57</sup>

A second view on the TTP is that it remains an unpredictable medium- and long-term threat. This view holds that even though the TTP's ongoing threat to the United States is ambiguous for now, that can easily change in the future. This may happen if there is a leadership change in the TTP, major geopolitical event, or incident that compels the TTP to rethink its aims. It is also possible that once the group gains territory in Pakistan, it may revise its currently limited aims and expand targets to U.S. citizens and interests. This

<sup>5</sup> According to response furnished by CENTCOM, the U.S. military did not have such access until second quarter 2022: “The Over-the-Horizon Counterterrorism (OTH-CT) Task Force, the DoD entity responsible for conducting counterterrorism in Afghanistan, reported no change in the operational challenges related to the conduct of that mission during this quarter. These challenges include long flying times and limited air corridors to reach landlocked Afghanistan and dependence on aviation assets to collect intelligence in the absence of robust human intelligence networks.” See “Operation Enduring Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2022 - June 30, 2022,” Office of Inspector General, August 2022.

view questions the assumption that growing capabilities of jihadi groups with local aims stay localized. Indeed, such assumptions have been proven wrong in the past. For example, when al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula emerged in 2009, it was viewed as a problem local to Yemen.<sup>58</sup> Yet, the group quickly ramped up plotting against the United States and attempted several attacks. In the same period, the TTP was seen as a local threat before it went on to directly plot and target the United States. Afghanistan and Pakistan's militant ecosystem is rife with narratives of both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State on the importance of transnational attacks. Thus, the matter of which jihadi groups in the region, as they gain power, will threaten U.S. interests and which ones will not is not always clear and predictable.

Additionally, even as the TTP claims to have become more local in its focus, the group continues to incubate direct threats to the United States. Elements of al-Qa`ida and its South Asia affiliate, AQIS, continue to shelter behind the TTP in Afghanistan.<sup>59</sup> This has been also pointed out in recent reporting of the United Nations Monitoring Team on al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, and is indicated in AQIS' propaganda output, which backs the TTP's campaign in Pakistan.<sup>60</sup> If the TTP gains territory in Pakistani tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan, it is plausible that al-Qa`ida and AQIS as well as other groups of foreign fighters in Afghanistan may also find a haven in Pakistan in TTP-controlled territories. More generally, there is little reason to trust TTP's public positions. It is possible what the group states publicly reflects its true intentions, but it can also be a strategic choice to deflect U.S. pressure for now.

The policy implication of this second view is that the U.S. government should look to contain the TTP preventively instead of waiting for its threat to metastasize and become more potent.

Another plausible view is that beyond the direct threat that the TTP may pose to U.S. territories, interests, or persons, an important way in which the TTP can threaten U.S. interests is by seriously destabilizing Pakistan and becoming a regional security threat. A longstanding American priority in Pakistan has been to ensure the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and materials and preventing them from falling in the wrong hands. In September 2022, this priority was affirmed by Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner, who stated that "U.S. interest associated with our defense partnership with Pakistan ... is primarily focused on counterterrorism and nuclear security."<sup>61</sup> Such a concern is not limited to the United States. According to the U.N. monitoring team, multiple countries are concerned that the TTP can become a regional security challenge "if it continues to have a safe operating base in Afghanistan."<sup>62</sup>

The policy implication of this view is also that the United States should look to contain the TTP before it morphs into a bigger regional security challenge.

### ***Options, Limits, and Tradeoffs***

If U.S. policymakers conclude that the TTP does not present a threat to the United States or its interests, they will believe no major policy effort is required. Some policymakers might see counterterrorism assistance to Pakistan as buying them leverage in the bilateral relationship with Pakistan, which continues to become narrower compared to the past. If so, they might turn to some of the options discussed in the capacity building section below. On the other hand, if policymakers assess that the TTP presents an unpredictable, medium-term threat to U.S. security or see the TTP

as threatening the stability of Pakistan and therefore needs to be vigorously mitigated, they can choose among or a combination of three options: capacity-building, intelligence-sharing, and targeting assistance. Among these, intelligence sharing may offer the most upside at mitigating the threat of the TTP with manageable political and legal challenges, whereas capacity building may prove ineffective and targeting assistance will present the highest risk of blowback.

### ***Capacity Building***

This line of effort requires provision of some type of security and civilian assistance to boost Pakistani capacity to counter such threats. Civilian assistance can support governance and law enforcement capacity building in Pakistan's northwest and security assistance can range from provision of counterterrorism hardware, such as counter-IED equipment, to training programs that improve Pakistan's counterinsurgency and counterterrorism capabilities.

However, there will be abundant skepticism of providing greater civilian and security assistance to Pakistan given ineffective efforts over a decade ago when the U.S. government was engaged in a largescale effort to support Pakistan's governance reform and boost the country's counterinsurgency and counterterrorism capabilities.<sup>63</sup> Policymakers will correctly view Pakistan's governance and security approach as an obstacle to capacity-building efforts. The country's economy and domestic politics remain in a tailspin. Governance along the country's northwest has deteriorated instead of improving and failed to address local grievances, which have fueled the insurgency. Pakistani state policies have also alienated local population due to coercive counterinsurgency methods and crackdowns against nationalist political actors, adding to domestic political dysfunction that benefits the TTP.

There will be other concerns, such as security assistance programs not being implemented by Pakistan. Policymakers will also be very sensitive to the possibility that security assistance intended for counterterrorism might be repurposed in military operations against India, which has happened in the past.<sup>64</sup> And if assistance efforts require U.S. personnel to be on the ground in Pakistan, especially in the country's northwest, the TTP can attack U.S. persons, similar to what the TTP has done against Chinese workers in the past.

Finally, policymakers will be right to question the marginal impact of assistance on Pakistan's campaign against the TTP. Given the scale of the challenge Pakistan faces and the limited capacity-building assistance the United States may be willing and able to offer at a time of intensifying strategic competition, the impact of U.S. capacity-building efforts in mitigating the TTP's threat will likely be minimal. Thus, even after provision of the assistance, the Pakistani government will ultimately have to manage the crisis on its own—and policymakers may view Pakistan's leverage on the Taliban, who are backing the TTP, as much more useful than any capacity building the United States could provide.

### ***Intelligence Sharing***

Another option to assist Pakistani action against the TTP can be intelligence sharing. Potential information that the United States may be able to share includes intelligence on battlefield awareness, TTP leadership locations and activities captured directly and incidentally in U.S. surveillance operations in Afghanistan, and areas with civilian presence. There is ample precedence of intelligence sharing between the U.S. government and Pakistan on the TTP over

the last two decades, and some exchanges might still be ongoing. When the TTP's insurgency first emerged in the late 2000s, the United States shared intelligence, including ISR information, with Pakistan.<sup>65</sup> Some of this was done by the CIA as part of the U.S. drone war in Pakistan.<sup>66</sup> A different line of intelligence sharing was maintained by the U.S. military; U.S. surveillance aircraft flew into Pakistan airspace, feeding information to Pakistani intelligence fusion centers that the U.S. military helped develop.<sup>67</sup> Other forms of technical and human intelligence were also frequently shared with Pakistan, which fed into Pakistani targeting, and allowed Pakistan to weaken the TTP.<sup>68</sup>

American intelligence would offer significant value to Pakistan on the battlefield, allowing Pakistani forces to improve its defensive posture and act more precisely in offensive actions against the TTP. As such sharing will not be visible by dint of being covert and targeting actions are unlikely to be attributable to the United States, the risk of retaliation against the United States is likely to be minimal. However, it is unclear if the two sides are interoperable enough for meaningful intelligence exchanges. U.S.-Pakistan intelligence-sharing mechanisms have significantly diminished over time, partly due to distrust in the relationship over Pakistan's support for the Afghan Taliban.<sup>69</sup> Still CENTCOM appears to have some infrastructure in place for intelligence sharing.<sup>70</sup> For example, in August 2023, Pakistan renewed an interoperability agreement with the U.S. military called the Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement, or CISMOA, which can enable some intelligence sharing, but it is unclear if that will be sufficient for sharing of ISR data.

Intelligence sharing with Pakistan will confront political and legal challenges, but those can be manageable. In the past, the U.S. government worried about Pakistan passing intelligence to its militant allies like the Haqqani Network; such concerns will apply for a broader sharing arrangement covering a range of groups but may be less acute if the focus of the exchanges is the TTP. Additionally, there will be concerns that intelligence shared with Pakistan can lead to violations of U.S. domestic law, in particular if the shared intelligence results in Pakistan actions that contravene the law of armed conflict in the form of intentional civilian harm or extrajudicial actions against combatant detainees. The most relevant restriction is the assassination ban under Executive Order 12333, which prohibits U.S. government personnel from engaging or conspiring in assassination and prohibits U.S. intelligence community personnel from indirectly participating in assassination.<sup>71</sup> The executive order does not define assassination, but it has been interpreted to include killings that violate the law of war such as the summary execution of detainees or the targeting of civilians.<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, intelligence sharing that contributes to precise Pakistani targeting of the TTP will not be in violation of Executive Order 12333 so long as the U.S. government determines that Pakistan is in an armed conflict with the TTP such that the law of war applies. As per the DoD's past interpretation of the law, lawful measures by a partner force in self-defense or targeting consistent with the law of war (e.g., against enemy fighters/soldiers) do not constitute "assassinations."<sup>73</sup> This might explain how, a decade and more back, legal concerns over U.S. information sharing to Pakistan were navigated and the U.S. government shared different types of information, which enabled Pakistani targeting actions.

### *Targeting*

The highest form of help the United States can extend to Pakistan is targeting the TTP. From 2004 till 2018, the United States targeted leaders and operatives of the Pakistani Taliban in hundreds of strikes in Pakistani tribal areas and Afghanistan.<sup>74</sup> These strikes led to the killing of the TTP's top leadership, including all three top leaders of the TTP: Baitullah Mehsud in 2009, Hakimullah Mehsud in 2013, and Mullah Fazlullah in 2018.<sup>75</sup> When the threat escalated against Pakistan in the late 2000s, the U.S. government also carried out strikes on Pakistan's requests.<sup>76</sup> The TTP, in turn, came to fear American surveillance and targeting pressures. In his writings, TTP chief Noor Wali Mehsud admitted that the decline of the TTP from 2011 to 2017 was due to the targeting pressure of U.S. drone strikes, arguing that the strikes greatly weakened the group.<sup>77</sup>

In line with past efforts, the United States can target the TTP in lethal action. Whereas previous targeting against the TTP was focused inside Pakistan with limited targeting in Afghanistan, this time, given much of the TTP leadership is in Afghanistan, any potential targeting effort will have to be geared toward Afghanistan. This will require expanding the over-the-horizon posture's targets, covering the TTP in addition to al-Qa`ida and ISK. A non-lethal mode of targeting to disrupt the TTP's operations can be cyber actions. The U.S. government can use offensive cyber actions to thwart the TTP's command and control methods as well as propaganda, which remains prolific.<sup>78</sup> Both lines of effort have significant potential to be effective at degrading the TTP's capabilities.

However, under the Biden's administration's Presidential Policy Memo on counterterrorism, targeting decisions require an approval by the president himself, and it is unclear whether President Biden will view the TTP's threat in Pakistan as important enough to sanction targeting and take on the risk of the TTP's retaliation against U.S. interests—which can be significant.<sup>79</sup> Last year, President Biden opined<sup>80</sup> that he continues to worry about the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, but he has given no indication whether he will be willing to sanction direct action in an attempt to alleviate threats to and from within Pakistan.

Moreover, given the possibility that such targeting can invite retaliatory action by terrorists against U.S. presence in Pakistan, the cost of securing U.S. personnel and hardening the U.S. presence in Pakistan and the broader region against TTP threats will have to be ascertained. However, the United States may have to harden its security posture in Pakistan and the broader region regardless of the TTP threat given that there are various other threats, including AQIS and ISK. If targeting against the TTP takes place in Afghanistan, it will also add to U.S. tensions with the Taliban. The risk of civilian harm in any campaign of strikes in the region may also be considerable.

There is also the question of whether the administration has the legal authority for targeting the TTP, given ongoing congressional efforts to reform war authorizations.<sup>81</sup> Over the last two decades, the administration has relied on the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (2001 AUMF), which is the main statutory authority for military action against "associated forces" of al-Qa`ida and the Taliban and later the Islamic State, to target the TTP. This justification was possibly substantiated by the TTP's targeting of U.S. personnel in 2009 and plotting against the U.S. homeland in 2010. In recent testimony, CENTCOM chief General Kurilla observed that the 2001 AUMF remains the basis for

counterterrorism operations in the region,<sup>82</sup> but it is unclear if that still extends to the TTP. Overall, U.S. targeting of the TTP remains a challenging proposition, facing several political and legal obstacles.

## Conclusion

A responsible counterterrorism approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan merits sustained vigilance and mitigation effort—but two years into Taliban rule, such an approach is far from straightforward. Policymakers should be clear-eyed about the challenging trade-offs in options available toward the Taliban. Military options that can enhance the current over-the-horizon posture demand increased resources and entail politically risky adjustments. Addressing the threat in Pakistan also presents substantial resourcing, political, and legal challenges.

In the face of these difficult choices, policymakers may be tempted to downplay the salience of the terrorism challenge for U.S. interests. They may point to the current level of threat, in particular that posed by al-Qa`ida, falling short of the worst-case scenarios that were feared at the time of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, they should remain mindful of the medium-to long-term challenge to U.S. interests if the threats continue to metastasize at the current rate, which is concerning enough. Indeed,

as the terrorist attack by Hamas in Israel on October 7, 2023, demonstrates, the U.S. government's ability to predict a surprise terrorist attack from an area with limited on-the-ground presence is weak and thus, the risk of a surprise attack is considerable.

To justify the current level of investment and the overall lack of emphasis, policymakers can also lean into the belief that terrorism and counterterrorism are inconsequential to the broader strategic competition agenda with China and Russia and need to be deprioritized to advance strategic competition priorities. Ongoing events in the Middle East clearly show that such a binary approach may ultimately prove short-sighted, as terrorism risks can present major challenges on their own and in turn come in the way of the strategic competition agenda.

Ultimately, policymakers also should remain mindful of the terrorism risk acceptable to the American people and whether they, given the lingering shadow of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, will accept reduced vigilance against the threats emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Americans may not actively demand vigilance as they have in the past yet expect to be protected from the threats of violence emanating from overseas, including from Afghanistan and Pakistan. **CTC**

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## Appendix

Table 1: Summary of Alternative Coercive Postures for Over-the-Horizon Strategy

Posture	Logic of Coercion	Hold at Risk	ISR Requirement	Signaling Approach	
				Communication	Military Activity
Detection	Threat of detection that can trigger strikes, validated by publicizing detected activity and occasional strikes, will dissuade the Taliban from allowing terrorist activity in the country.	General area of terrorist activity	High	Publicly communicate U.S. monitoring terrorist activity; prove by publicizing declassified intelligence reports; pre-position assets close to Afghanistan	Persistent visible surveillance; limited strikes against terrorist activity
Denial	Threat of strikes and actual strikes against key terrorist leaders involved in external plotting and Taliban leaders assisting will dissuade terrorists from plotting and Taliban from allowing those involved in plotting to be in country.	Terrorist leadership involved in plotting activity; Taliban leaders supporting such terrorists	Moderate	Political leadership publicly threatens the Taliban that the United States will target terrorist leaders engaged in plotting activity and Taliban leaders assisting them; publicize detected activity on plots and Taliban leadership involvement through sanctions	Select lethal and non-lethal actions against terrorist leadership and plotting activity and infrastructure (such as safe houses or training centers) in country
Punishment	The threat of major damage in retaliation in case of terrorist attacks will dissuade Taliban support for allied terrorists and compel Taliban action against ISK.	Taliban infrastructure in country	Low	Publicly threaten the Taliban that they will be hit in case of terrorist attacks from Afghanistan; pre-position assets close to Afghanistan	None