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“ON THE HORIZON” FEATURE ARTICLE

The Future of the Jihadi Movement

BARAK MENDELSON

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Mitchell D. Silber

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, COMMUNITY
SECURITY INITIATIVE OF DEFENSE

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FROM THE EDITOR

In this month’s feature article, Barak Mendelsohn examines the future of the jihadi movement. His article is the second in a new recurring series in *CTC Sentinel* entitled “On the Horizon” that examines emerging counterterrorism challenges and long-term developments. Mendelsohn writes that over 20 years after 9/11, “jihadi violence in the West is low, but the number of Sunni jihadi outfits around the world has increased. And while the central leaderships of both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State appear in tatters, many of their affiliates are experiencing expansion.” He argues that “anti-regime grievances, the appeal of religious ideology, and the ability to hurt, are likely to maintain jihadism as a viable resistance ideology.” He further warns that “jihadism is still a powerful force and is making inroads in various regions” and that “a more modest jihadi strategy with a regional focus is offering jihadis a new path forward.” But, he notes, “a sustainable jihadi success would require moderation that is simply antithetical to the nature of the ideology.”

Our interview is with Mitchell D. Silber, the executive director of the Community Security Initiative, an initiative “created by the leading organizations in the Jewish community in New York to protect the Jewish population and Jewish institutions in the Greater New York City metro area.” He previously served as Director of Intelligence Analysis at the New York City Police Department.

Silber describes how in the months since the October 7 attacks in Israel, there has been a surge in antisemitic threats and violence in the greater New York area. “This is kind of like a category five storm. Five times the amount of hateful postings that our intelligence desk had to vet through,” he says, adding that “since October 7, 2023, there have been at least 23 anti-Jewish assaults in New York City.” He outlines how in response to these grave threats, the Jewish “community, leadership, and organizations have rallied, have risen to the occasion, and are now creating the security architecture that we never had before in the United States in order to meet the moment.”

Finally, Caleb Weiss and Ryan O’Farrell examine how Operation Shujaa, launched in late 2021 by the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Uganda against the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) in the border regions of the DRC near Uganda, has degraded the ability of the group to disseminate propaganda via the Islamic State’s central media apparatus. They write: “While still a serious and deadly threat inside Congo and beyond, [ISCAP’s] propaganda output is a shell of its former self. This decline is, in part, thanks to the current joint Ugandan-Congolese operations against it.”

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Cover: A member of the Iraqi security forces removes a banner bearing the logo of the Islamic State in eastern Mosul, Iraq, on January 19, 2017. (Mahmud Saleh/AFP via Getty Images)

On the Horizon: The Future of the Jihadi Movement

By Barak Mendelsohn

Following the 9/11 attack, the United States led the international community to fight jihadi terrorism. Over 20 years later, jihadi violence in the West is low, but the number of Sunni jihadi outfits around the world has increased. And while the central leaderships of both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State appear in tatters, many of their affiliates are experiencing expansion. This article takes a holistic view of the jihadi movement, examining all of it—not just its two heavyweights, al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, and their affiliates. It argues that factors of continuity, such as anti-regime grievances, the appeal of religious ideology, and the ability to hurt, are likely to maintain jihadism as a viable resistance ideology. It is true that the global ambitions of transnational jihadi groups have suffered setbacks in recent years and their actions have been hindered by material weaknesses, the power of nationalism and of sub-national identities, as well as internal conflicts among the movement's leaders. However, jihadism is still a powerful force and is making inroads in various regions. The article warns that a more modest jihadi strategy with a regional focus is offering jihadis a new path forward, but also suggests that a sustainable jihadi success would require moderation that is simply antithetical to the nature of the ideology.

Recent years have been hard on the central leaderships of the jihadi movement's heavyweights, the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida. The Islamic State lost its territorial possessions in the Middle East and has been cycling through leaders, losing three in less than two years.¹ Meanwhile, al-Qa`ida has not carried out a spectacular terrorist attack in the West in nearly two decades, and in July 2022 lost its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in an American strike. Over a year later, it has yet to announce a successor.² Other jihadi groups had better fortune: The Taliban has returned to power in Afghanistan, while jihadi groups operating in Africa and affiliated with al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State have been making gains, especially in the Sahel.³ How does one make sense of these diverging trends and what do they reveal about the future of the jihadi movement?

Several scholars have warned that both policymakers and many academics are prematurely dismissing the potency of the jihadi threat.⁴ This article does not reject these warnings, but seeks to assess the future of Sunni jihadism in a more comprehensive manner, not looking only at the transnational jihadi groups, their affiliates, or a particular region, but at the broader jihadi movement. The guiding logic behind this choice is that the state of jihadi groups is not merely a function of their confrontation with enemy states,

but also of the appeal of dissimilar jihadi objectives and strategies. Consequently, while transnational jihadi groups appear in decline, jihadism is here to stay. Factors of continuity, such as anti-regime grievances, the appeal of religious ideology, and the ability to hurt, are likely to maintain it as a viable resistance ideology. The hopes for better lives and greater freedoms expressed by millions during the Arab uprisings failed to translate to significant change, but they did not die. In fact, as long as some Muslims continue to strive for change, jihadism will remain a natural ideological resource. In the West, jihadism will also remain attractive for some struggling young Muslims.

At the same time, jihadis are hindered by perennial material weaknesses, the power of nationalism and of sub-national identities, and internal conflicts among the movement's leaders.⁵ Such factors seem particularly detrimental for al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, but might be less consequential for jihadi groups with narrower focus. Indeed, though the transnational model of jihadism, with its universal goals, has likely hit a wall, events such as the Gaza war may offer jihadis a chance to rejuvenate. Additionally, a more modest strategy with a regional focus, such as what is happening in the Sahel, seems to offer jihadis a new path forward. Moreover, contrary to Usama bin Ladin's conclusions, the cases of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria's Idlib province demonstrate that local jihad could result in some success. However, sustainable jihadi success—at the state, regional, or international level—would require moderation that is simply antithetical to the nature of the ideology and is more likely to produce criticism by other forces within the movement than to serve as a model for imitation.

Although the United States has begrudgingly accepted jihadi rule in some locations (e.g., post August 2021 Afghanistan), the United States and the international community continue to fight jihadis elsewhere (e.g., Somalia). This variation does not necessarily indicate misguided policies. However, it raises the suspicion that the U.S. and its Western allies have not developed a holistic view of the threat posed by the jihadi movement, and a coherent position on how much tolerance jihadism may receive. Now, when the

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jihadi threat to the West is in decline, and concomitantly, political pressures on governmental strategic planning are low, it would be wise if the United States planned for a possible upcoming jihadi resurgence.

This article^a is divided into five sections. In the first, the author offers background about the jihadi movement from its inception as a transnational movement during the 1980s. The second section focuses on the manner in which anti-regime grievances, framed through a religious lens, and the continued ability to hurt enemies, are likely to sustain jihadi violence for years to come. The third section focuses on the weakness of the jihadi movement, highlighting jihadis' material weakness, their focus on bound-to-fail social engineering, and their proclivity for internal conflicts. The strategic options available for jihadi groups are explored in the fourth section, before the fifth section concludes with a discussion of the jihadi movement's path forward.

The Jihadi Movement

Though jihadi groups operated in different Muslim countries (notably Egypt) prior to the 1980s, the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan brought together members of jihadi groups and unaffiliated foreign volunteers, ultimately turning disparate actors into a social movement. This jihadi social movement includes multiple actors pursuing dissimilar objectives and using diverse strategies. Today's jihadism involves established local, regional, and transnational groups alongside independent radical scholars, unaffiliated foreign fighters, cell-sized small leaderless groups, online sympathizers, and lone wolves. What unites Sunni jihadis and allows seeing them as components of one movement is their belief that an armed jihad is not only an instrumental necessity in order to restore 'Islamic' glory and helping oppressed Muslims, but is also a value in its own right. Some jihadis even elevate jihad further, claiming that there is no act of worship equal to jihad.⁶ Like other social movements, the jihadi movement features an important layer of agreement (the centrality of jihad), but also great variation between its numerous components.

Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, jihadis sought to harness the power of the movement and continue to operate elsewhere. They did not agree, however, on where they should direct their energies. Consequently, the 1990s were characterized by two jihadi strategic directions: one focused on fighting local regimes deemed insufficiently Islamic ('the near enemy') and the other focused on fighting non-Muslim forces occupying Muslim lands. Both strategies had important adherents, but success was elusive and, when experienced (in the cases of Bosnia and Chechnya), short lived.⁷ Bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida offered a way out of the rut, proposing a third strategy that put the United States—'the far enemy'—at the center. Al-Qa`ida proposed jihadis would be able to attain their objectives in Muslim countries only after dealing with the American backers of Middle Eastern regimes. This strategy was based on provoking U.S. overreach, drawing the United States into a war of attrition it could not win, and using American excesses to mobilize a large number of Muslim sympathizers.

Despite two large scale attacks—on the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (1998) and on the USS Cole (2000)—only after the 9/11 attacks did a deeply wounded and enraged United States shift its focus to jihadi terrorism. The United States swiftly shifted from underestimating the jihadi threat to exaggerating it, for a while making it the country's main strategic priority. Shocked by the devastation, it acted as if 9/11 reflected the true scale of jihadi capabilities, rather than a fluke success attributable primarily to failures of the U.S. intelligence community and lax security conditions that are unlikely to be repeated. The U.S. response produced dubious results, which exposed the limits of its power. Although it did not experience another large-scale jihadi terrorist attack on its homeland, the United States came far from eliminating jihadi terrorism. In fact, since 9/11 and the subsequent U.S. quagmires in Afghanistan and Iraq, the jihadi movement has increased in size, geographical reach, and number of attacks.⁸ Moreover, as one observer notes, U.S. actions may have even increased instability throughout the world.⁹

Sustaining Factors

Though it has been about four decades since its emergence, some of the conditions that facilitated the rise of the jihadi movement are unlikely to change significantly. Some Muslims are likely to 1) retain anti-regime grievances; 2) find a religious frame to understand their grievances and to suggest a response; and 3) maintain the ability to hurt their enemies. Together, these factors suggest that the claimed decline of the jihadi movement in recent years is hardly a harbinger of the movement's end.

1. Continued Anti-Regime Grievances: A significant number of Muslim-majority countries have long suffered from repression, corruption, and poverty, producing numerous popular grievances against their rulers: It is no wonder jihadism emerged first in localized national contexts. The Arab Spring uprisings—the clearer expression of public dissatisfaction over the direction their countries are heading—brought a brief period of optimism, but no functional democracy has emerged in the Middle East and many lives have only further deteriorated under corrupt leaders and declining economies. Even Tunisia, long hailed as the one success story of Arab democratization, has since returned to its authoritarian ways.¹⁰

One may find cause for optimism in the success of Saudi Arabia (in pursuit of its Vision 2030) and other Gulf states in adopting more liberal policies and promoting economic development. These efforts have been received positively by many young Muslims, weakening jihadis' ability to capitalize on what they see as "un-Islamic behavior" for increased recruitment. Deradicalization programs, especially in Saudi Arabia, also offer some promising ways to reduce the appeal of jihadis. However, the applicability and sustainability of these developments is unclear. There is still a not insignificant number of Saudi zealots who could be motivated to fight the regime for what they see as violation of Islamic tenets. Moreover, what may work in rich Arab countries could fail in poorer Muslim states that either would not take such expensive endeavors or would fail to implement them, assuring that anti-regime grievances that lead to jihadi mobilization will persist.

Recruitment could also be bolstered by dissatisfaction over governments' reaction to external events (for example, Muslims' displeasure with their governments' responses to the ongoing war

a Editor's Note: This article is the second in a new recurring series in *CTC Sentinel* entitled "On the Horizon" that examines emerging counterterrorism challenges and long-term developments.



An Islamic State billboard is seen destroyed in the middle of the road in Qaraqosh, Iraq, on November 8, 2016. (Chris McGrath/Getty Images)

in Gaza). While jihadi attacks and challenges are not necessarily expected in all Muslim countries, and are not necessarily imminent, their continued potential must be recognized.

Similarly, Muslims residing in non-Muslim countries, particularly in the West, are likely to retain grievances against the non-Muslim majority and state authorities. These grievances may not be based on actual religious discrimination, but often will be framed in this way, whether by jihadi proponents or by populist right-wing parties in the West. For example, though many of the problems faced by French Muslims living in poor suburbs reflect societal ills, they were often portrayed and understood by politicians and even scholars as reflecting Muslims' inability to embrace Western values.¹¹ Rising tensions in the Middle East, particularly between Israel and the Palestinians, serve as another mechanism that could increase jihadi attacks in the West,¹² primarily via lone wolves or through small groups of aggrieved individuals who came together as a by-product of the mobilization for pro-Palestinian demonstrations. Such attacks are likely to focus on Jewish targets but may also seek to target states viewed as overly supportive of Israel. Ultimately, between governments' failed integration efforts, populist right-wing parties promoting Islamophobia, and jihadi entrepreneurs who frame grievances in religious terms, some Muslims in the West are likely to be hostile to, and to take action against, their states.

2. Religious Frames and Solutions: Jihadism is likely to remain an available ideology to guide those seeking to fight over their grievances. Though Islam is not the only ideological resource that anti-regime activists could use to challenge their rulers, it is a natural reservoir of ideas about how to understand the reality of the inhabitants of Muslim countries or of Muslims in non-Muslim countries and about what sort of action must be taken to remedy

injustices. This is especially the case in Muslim-majority countries that rely on the country's religious identity to legitimize the regime's rule, such as Saudi Arabia. The use of Islam for regime legitimacy is a double-edge sword: It can strengthen regime stability, but it also exposes the regime to attacks by religious extremists challenging its understanding of Islam. Even when a regime in a Muslim-majority country does not seek religious legitimacy, Islamically appropriate behavior may still be important for large percentages of the population. Jihadis thus offer a religious alternative to failing secular systems.

It is true that the overwhelming majority of Muslims reject jihadi views of Islam.¹³ Furthermore, as the cases of Saudi and other Gulf regimes show, states may gain domestic legitimacy through economic development and social change, rather than based on religion and piety. However, the sustainability of that model and the reforms it is based on are still in doubt. It is also doubtful it is a viable option for poorer Muslim countries. Moreover, even if most Muslims accepted the new direction their countries are taking, all it would take for a jihadi threat to emerge is a small group of dedicated operatives holding a religiously extreme ideology. In fact, reforms that would be viewed as undermining the Islamic nature of states, could serve as a cause for jihadi violence. Finally, given that Islamic texts, like those of all religions, can be interpreted in a radical way and some Muslims adhere to radical understandings of Islam, the jihadi movement should be able to survive.

In Western countries, a jihadi ideology could be particularly salient. In Muslim countries, jihadis debate about what constitutes "proper" Islam. In the West, however, both Islamists and right-wing populists seek to highlight the distinctions between Muslims and the rest of the public. One of the Islamic State's objectives in its attacks in the West was to 'erase the gray zone' that allowed Muslims in the West to ignore the fact that they live among non-Muslims.

These were designed to increase Islamophobia so that Western non-Muslims would view all Muslims as a threat and make their living in the West unbearable, even impossible. The Islamic State hoped that by triggering further Islamophobia, it could persuade Western Muslims to either immigrate to the Islamic State's territories or stay in the West to commit terrorism in its name.¹⁴ Events such as the war in Gaza may further alienate some European Muslims,^b dissatisfied by their countries' responses, and push them to join the jihadi efforts.

3. The Ability to Hurt: The 9/11 attack was a tremendous, but catastrophic, success for al-Qa`ida. The United States and many other countries treated 9/11 not as an exception, but as a reflection of al-Qa`ida's prowess. For that reason, the United States focused considerable attention and resources on preempting a second strike.¹⁵ In reality, 9/11 relied on U.S. intelligence failures and lots of luck.¹⁶ The attack shows an actor may occasionally punch above its weight, even if only briefly.

Jihadi actors seem incapable of repeating 9/11-scale attacks, but their ability to hurt is hardly insignificant. Indeed, technological advances make planning attacks, as well as obtaining or producing means of violence, easier. There are also many low-tech options for jihadis that involve the easy repurposing of objects as weapons (for example, using a car to run over people or rigging toy drones with explosives). In the United States, easy access to firearms ensures that determined jihadis could cause lots of damage.

Meanwhile, states' abilities to stop non-state violence is limited. Many states, especially in the West, are well positioned—with the aid of technological advancements—to prevent the worst terrorist attacks, and they often succeed in reducing jihadis' access to lethal weapons. But such success only mitigates the threat; it does not eliminate it. Small-scale attacks, especially by previously unknown perpetrators, are notoriously hard to stop.¹⁷ Though the strategic value of such attacks is in doubt, many jihadi perpetrators are content to carry out attacks with a low fatality count because they still provide them with a sense of contribution to the general fight and assurances about their imagined place in heaven.

The impact of the ability to hurt depends not only on the level of violence, but also on how states perceive the damage they suffered (often informed by the public's response to the attack). Attacks producing the same number of fatalities can result in varied levels of public pain and public pressure for a particular type of state response. Prior expectations also matter. A state accustomed to a certain level of violence may feel lesser pressure to react to jihadi attacks.

Ultimately, the long odds jihadis face will not necessarily discourage their operations. Under the guise of religion, many see victory over the 'infidels' as inevitable, even if it takes a long time, because it is divinely ordained. Religious precepts are also used to explain away defeats.¹⁸ Moreover, jihadi actors focusing on short-term objectives, such as preventing a regime from establishing

“Ultimately, the long odds jihadis face will not necessarily discourage their operations. Under the guise of religion, many see victory over the ‘infidels’ as inevitable, even if it takes a long time, because it is divinely ordained.”

order, releasing prisoners, or avenging fallen comrades, may continue operating even when the chances of achieving their long-term political objectives are slim.

Though the motivation for anti-state action, extreme Islamic precepts, and the ability to hurt are likely to remain relevant, these are not the only factors determining the magnitude of the jihadi threat. States' perceptions often miss the true objective scale of the threat. States that ignored the rise of jihadism, or that, like Pakistan, tried to ride the jihadi tiger, paid a heavy price.¹⁹ On the other hand, states that overreacted to jihadi attacks caused chaos that ultimately benefited jihadi groups. The U.S.-led 2003 invasion of Iraq, for example, brought new life to the jihadi movement, which was on the ropes at the time. Thus, states' actions, especially responses to jihadi violence, could counterproductively impact the appeal of jihadism and encourage jihadi mobilization.

The Weaknesses of the Jihadi Movement

Though anti-regime grievances, the centrality of Islam, and the ability to hurt point to the potential longevity of jihadism, the movement simultaneously suffers from endemic problems that reduce its appeal and effectiveness. First, jihadis tend to be weak actors, relatively small in numbers, and lacking in resources compared to their state enemies. The more encompassing the political entity they seek to create, the less likely they are to produce a winning strategy and the more likely they are to trigger a foreign intervention. Capabilities are, thus, a primary challenge. Second, jihadis seek to reorganize society. However, the more their success depends on social engineering, the less likely they are to succeed. Third, the more encompassing a group's objectives, the more likely they are to trigger internal conflicts within the movement.

1. Power and Strategy: Jihadis face problems similar to other armed non-state actors challenging state authorities. In almost all cases, the state is stronger than its non-state challengers. In fact, the use of terrorism is often indicative of non-state actors' weakness.²⁰ Stronger groups may be able to turn to insurgency tactics, but even they face long odds. Moreover, even weak states are not easy to beat, especially when they receive foreign aid. Jihadis' revisionist goals and their violent and repressive ideology often lead states to view them as an international problem and thus trigger external involvement in a way other non-state actors do not.²¹

Before 9/11, jihadis, having failed in their limited struggles against the 'near enemy,' were unprepared for large-scale initiatives. Bin Ladin nonetheless opted for an ambitious strategy, taking on the greatest power in the international system.²² Al-Qa`ida's lack of sufficient resources was only part of the problem: Tailoring an appropriate strategy to jihadis' political objectives magnified the

b In theory, large protests by non-Muslim fellow European citizens against the war in Gaza could create bonds of solidarity between Muslims and non-Muslims. However, even the creation of such bonds would be irrelevant for Muslims who are already jihadi sympathizers because their religious doctrine of "Association and Disavowal" strictly prohibits any friendly bonds with non-Muslims. On the doctrine, see Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli eds., *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 206-234.

challenge,²³ and the greater the ambition, the harder it was to design an effective strategy.

In al-Qa`ida's case, bin Ladin's America-first strategy required attacking the United States in a manner that would force it to abandon its Muslim allies. The strategy was linked to notions of U.S. hegemony and was ripe with misperceptions about the United States' role in the world, Muslim regimes' agency, and jihadi power and appeal. The Arab Spring uprising exposed the strategy's flaws. Contrary to bin Ladin's predictions, Arab publics brought down oppressive regimes, including American allies, but the United States did not intervene. In Libya, the United States even actively contributed to the regime's downfall.²⁴

The Islamic State's caliphate-based strategy offered a means to unite Muslims against their non-Muslim enemies while de-emphasizing the United States' centrality to jihadi plans. As a caliph has authority over all Muslims, no matter where they reside, the caliphate was conceived to unite the *umma*, the Muslim nation, in general, and the jihadi movement in particular, behind the Islamic State. Such a strategy allowed maximizing the '*umma*'s' potential to protect Muslims from non-Muslim enemies and launching a campaign to expand the territory under 'Islamic' rule.²⁵ However, the group's leaders exaggerated their ability to force unity on all jihadis, let alone appeal to the Muslim masses. Importantly, it did not have a successful strategy to link together islands of jihadi rule and create a viable contiguous state.²⁶

Although the Islamic State achieved more than any other jihadi group, its success was still very limited and short-lived, exposing the group's limitations and, more generally, the limits of the jihadi project. Transnational jihadis seek to bring Muslims of different states together under one political authority. Such a goal requires not only scoring success in several geographical locations, but also linking them together to create a bigger and more powerful entity that can proceed the expansion process.²⁷ But the Islamic State, even at its peak success (2014) was unable to aggregate its different operations. Under near ideal conditions (weakness of the Iraqi regime and military, no U.S. forces present in Iraq, and turmoil across the border in Syria due to civil war), it was able to erase, at least for a while, the borders between Iraq and Syria, but go no further.²⁸ Elsewhere it relied on isolated islands of territorial control, only to reveal that its expansion efforts were quickly being met by its opponents' power.²⁹

Central to jihadism's weakness is its inability to offer a solution for its vulnerability to air power. The Islamic State's greatest success took place before the United States joined the fight. Once the United States brought its airpower, the Islamic State's ability to expand was curtailed, as became evident in the battle for the Syrian Kurdish border town of Kobani (fall 2014). U.S. airpower forced the Islamic State to move away from deploying battalion-size formations to using much smaller units that would be less vulnerable to attacks from the air.³⁰ But such a reorganization also meant the Islamic State lost its ability to conduct large-scale conventional operations whenever a credible aerial threat existed.

Given these shortcomings, jihadis are more likely to succeed when fighting in the periphery, and especially in weak states that feature multiple fighting forces and the disinterest of great powers. Jihadis have a track record of linking themselves to local conflicts. In weak states, where state authorities have little control, society is fragmented, and order lacking, jihadis can take advantage of regimes' limits to establish bases of support (including local safe

“Jihadis are more likely to succeed when fighting in the periphery, and especially in weak states that feature multiple fighting forces and the disinterest of great powers.”

havens), gain resources, and more generally, fill power vacuums left by failing governments.³¹ However, jihadi power is constrained in such locations as well because jihadi groups often get entangled in tribal rivalries. Furthermore, each jihadi success increases the threat of a foreign intervention, as shown by the 2013 French intervention that destroyed jihadi rule in northern Mali. Jihadis may have an easier time if they quickly topple a local regime and assume control over its military assets, especially airplanes (and in Pakistan, the holy grail—nuclear weapons). However, quick success is extremely rare. Moreover, locations where such a jihadi strategy may succeed are not likely to supply jihadis with sufficient capabilities (airpower in particular) and trained manpower to effectively use against technologically advanced militaries.

2. Social Engineering: In jihadi eyes, religion trumps all other identity markers and should be the primary factor informing individual and communal behavior. Initially, jihadi groups focused on toppling local regimes and establishing, in their stead, sharia rule. These are objectives that may change the nature of individual states, but not of the international system. Following the rise of al-Qa`ida and then the Islamic State, jihad has undergone an upward scale shift. No longer mere lip service to the global *umma*, transnational jihadi groups have taken the fight against the 'infidels' to the global level, envisioning jihad as mandatory until Islam reigns supreme. Such a vision conflicts with the state-based order and the quest for interstate peace and stability.³²

Instead of settling for power within the existing society of states, the transnational variants of the jihadi movement that have come to dominate the movement are seeking to overturn the system. They seek a shift from a state-based order to radical Islamist order; from one encompassing multiple actors holding equally legitimate rights and obligations to one dominated by a caliphate in which there is no room for other states (let alone non-Muslim states); and from one in which all people are deemed equal to one in which non-Muslims are inferior. This attitude, elevating religious above national identity, is also manifested in the call on Muslims to become foreign fighters.³³

The rise of transnational jihadi groups complicated the activities of localized jihadi groups as well. The United States' failure to make sense of the diversity within the jihadi movement led to the capture of many non-al-Qa`ida jihadis, even though they did not seek to fight the United States.³⁴ Unable to escape the trap, some jihadi groups, such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG),³⁵ issued long revision documents and abandoned violence.

Others formed relations with al-Qa`ida, which began branching out in 2003, incorporating local jihadi groups. The Islamic State followed suit in the following decade, incorporating localized conflicts into the jihadi transnational campaign. Such expansion gave localized conflicts a stronger religious flavor. But it came with a price, weakening the ability of these new al-Qa`ida and Islamic

State outfits to use nationalistic tropes as a way to strengthen their local appeal. Expansion also boosted the anxieties of external actors, increasing the threat of external intervention. Ironically, notwithstanding the global aspirations of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, and the statements their branches have been issuing in response to events outside their immediate conflict zone,³⁶ their branches still maintained their focus on local enemies (to the chagrin of al-Qa`ida leaders), producing internal incoherence as both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State faced conflicting impulses.³⁷

The formation of al-Qa`ida and Islamic State branches essentially coopted local jihads into the grand vision of a global caliphate. Over time, however, it became evident that these affiliates did not abandon their local focus, even as they maintained their formal allegiance to their organizations' transnational leadership. As the examples of al-Qa`ida and Islamic State affiliates JNIM, ISWAP, and ISCAP show, a formal affiliation with the two transnational jihadi heavyweights could aid—or at the least, does not necessarily harm—the armed expansion of local jihadi groups. However, while the benefits of affiliation might be sufficiently great for jihadi groups in the periphery, they are more limited in areas of greater strategic significance in the heart of the Middle East. Perhaps the greatest disadvantage of affiliation with al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State is that such affiliation denies jihadi groups international political legitimacy, needed for sustainable political gains. Facing this dilemma, HTS signaled a shift back to the model of local jihad, when it abandoned, by 2017, its affiliation with al-Qa`ida and stated its disinterest in fighting outside of Syria.³⁸ Even bin Ladin recognized the costs of affiliation for local groups, advising the Somali al-Shabaab to keep its close relationship with al-Qa`ida a secret.³⁹

Jihadis' social engineering efforts went beyond the intended shift from a state-based order to a religiously based order. It required radical change in the way people, especially Muslims, perceive themselves and their religion. The transnational jihadi groups envisioned a world in which Muslims prioritize their religious identity, relegating other identity markers to inferior significance, or all together to oblivion. This is a problem for many Muslims who are attached to their national and tribal identities. It is much worse for non-Muslims who would end up relegated to the bottom of the social ladder.

Transnational jihadis' plans for such a transformation proved detached from Muslims' realities. Most Muslims still see their state or clan, not their religion, as their primary political identity marker. And as the Saudi case, noted above, reveals, when the state delivers on its social and economic promises, popular public opinion strengthens its position, while reducing the appeal of religious zealots. Moreover, even Muslims who prioritize religion tend to hold much more moderate views of Islam than jihadis. They may hope for more Islam in family affairs, but not in politics.⁴⁰ In fact, the overwhelming majority of Muslims worldwide reject jihadism, especially its transnational variant, as too extreme.⁴¹ A majority of Muslims also dislike the idea that Islamic scholars (even non-jihadis) would assume a greater role in government.⁴² These Muslim attitudes reduce the potential of jihadi mobilization and indicate that jihadis must overcome not just non-Muslim opposition but also Muslims' attitudes, effectively rendering the achievement of their political objectives pipe dreams.

3. Intra-Jihadi Conflicts: Though internal disagreements are

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common in social movements, their impact is greater in armed extremism. This is especially true in the jihadi movement because the material weakness jihadis face in attaining their more expansive objectives requires considerably greater cooperation. But the jihadi camp is plagued with internal conflicts that not only prevent collaboration but also produce fratricidal violence.⁴³ Often clothed as religious differences, these internal conflicts tend to become a matter of binary choice between good and bad, rather than a legitimate difference of interpretation. Moreover, viewed as a matter of 'Islamically' correct behavior, jihadis often reject other jihadis' position as incompatible with Islam, thus making a compromise much harder and escalation likelier.⁴⁴

Internal divisions have characterized the jihadi movement since the 1980s, especially as veterans of the war in Afghanistan contemplated their next fight. The main disagreement was between fighting the 'near enemy' and fighting a 'defensive jihad' against foreign occupiers.⁴⁵ It was a source of tension during that time in part because jihadis competed over the same funding sources: bin Ladin and his Saudi connections.⁴⁶ While during the 1990s jihadis pursued both goals, they still argued about which was a priority; jihadis especially disagreed about the Islamic legitimacy of the Taliban regime.⁴⁷

The appearance of transnational strategies made direct conflict among jihadis more likely. Transnational strategies conflicted with those focused on fighting the 'near enemy.' Moreover, viewing intramovement relations through the lens of authority and allegiance escalated disagreements as they were often seen as a manifestation of some jihadis' apostasy (punishable by death), rather than a matter of normal difference of opinions. The Islamic State's declaration of a caliph and a caliphate magnified jihadi internal conflict. Claiming global authority, the Islamic State was unwilling to tolerate diversity within the movement and sought to dominate it. Instead of accepting the promotion of multiple jihadi projects simultaneously as legitimate, the Islamic State sought to control all jihadis, demanding they dismantle all groups and accept its sole authority. Those refusing the caliph's authority were labeled enemies and even apostates. As a result, rather than uniting all jihadis under one group, the Islamic State increased internal divisions and led jihadis of different groups to be preoccupied with each other, sometimes at the expense of the original reason for their formation, fighting against their adversaries.⁴⁸

Strategic Options

Looking to the future, what strategic options are available to the jihadi movement? Thus far, the movement has presented five main strategies:

- fight the ‘near enemy.’ Although in theory jihadis could pursue a military coup (an approach the Egyptian Islamic Jihad favored), fighting the ‘near enemy’ usually meant organizing the masses against the regime.⁴⁹
- fight non-Muslim countries that invaded a Muslim country (‘defensive jihad’);⁵⁰
- fight the ‘far enemy,’ primarily the United States, seen as preventing jihadis from toppling the local regimes;⁵¹
- form a caliphate to mobilize the *umma* for both ‘defensive jihad’ to protect Muslims and their lands, and for ‘offensive jihad’ to expand the territory under Muslim control;⁵²
- rely on lone wolves producing numerous attacks.⁵³

Although all these strategies were tried and failed, they did not all lose their appeal. Some could be revived if perceptions change about their past utility and there are new conditions more conducive to their success. Ironically, the America-first strategy, which bin Ladin championed and resulted in the expansion of the jihadi movement, appears the least suitable at present. In addition to its shortcomings noted earlier, one wonders how relevant this approach is given shifts in the global balance of power and emerging multipolarity. Due to these systemic changes, this strategy could neither provide a solid story why and how fighting the United States would resolve the *umma*’s problems, nor account for the expanded role of other actors in the international system. China, in particular, must now be incorporated into any transnational jihadi narratives. It increased its involvement in Muslim countries considerably in the past decade,⁵⁴ while at home China is engaging in what U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken called “ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity” of its Uyghur Muslim minority.⁵⁵

Notwithstanding the shifts in the global balance of power, which weakened the strategic justification for attacking the United States, successful attacks on the United States might still be attractive as a way to signal audacity to fellow jihadis and attract new recruits. Sara Harmouch offers a compelling argument that under al-Qa`ida’s new leadership, it has been building capacity and planning for such attacks.⁵⁶ It will not be a surprise if al-Qa`ida will wait until it is ready to carry out a new spectacular attack before announcing a new leader. Although a strategy focused on the United States is bound to fail, strong and lingering anti-American sentiments make hurting the United States still highly appealing to jihadis. U.S. support for Israel’s war on Hamas provides additional incentives for attacking American targets. However, while the will is there, al-Qa`ida’s ability to inflict priorities-changing attacks on the United States is in doubt.

The caliphate-based strategy that the Islamic State promoted saw early success, but the collapse of the caliphate exposed the model’s shortcomings. Islamic State rule never resembled the ideal visions of life under a caliphate, but its ultimate failure did not destroy jihadis’ dreams about its future restoration. Moreover, though this grand vision suffered a severe hit when the Islamic State lost its territories in Iraq and Syria, ideas about islands of jihadi rule that would over time be consolidated into fewer and larger political entities are likely to remain appealing. Although the Islamic State could not hold its possessions in the strategically important Middle East, the periphery (especially Africa), where disorder and military coups are common, state control is weak, and borders are porous, offers much better prospects of growth and success as evidenced by the expansion of al-Qa`ida’s JNIM and the Islamic State’s Sahel

“Jihadis are more likely to succeed where the power of nationalism is low, and where the state is essentially a quasi-state, demonstrating many of the symbolic trappings of a state, yet internally hollow with very little capacity to service their citizens. Africa, then, appears the most promising location for jihadi success. In Africa, jihadis are demonstrating their ability to take advantage of inter-ethnic or inter-tribe conflicts to gain power.”

branch.⁵⁷ But the Islamic State’s attempt to create an enduring caliphate also reveals that attempts to foist a caliph on Muslims will be poorly received. Moreover, appropriating the caliph position and demanding subservience from other jihadi groups could produce infighting and consequently undermine the movement’s goals.⁵⁸

More limited strategies may have better chances of success. Though the international community proved wary of jihadi states, when these states appear sufficiently constrained and unlikely to be used to destabilize other (especially neighboring) countries, they could be tolerated. Indeed, HTS in Syria is ruling a small emirate in the Idlib’s governorate and the Taliban is ruling Afghanistan. Though they do not enjoy international recognition, they may provide a more sustainable model for jihadism. It must be noted, though, that the inferior status of these two unrecognized regimes, and in general jihadi actors’ inability to accept the state-based order as legitimate, make even their success uncertain. HTS’ emirate is in a particularly perilous position, controlling only a small part of Syria, lacking international recognition of its statelet, and susceptible to collapse without Turkey’s backing.⁵⁹ The Taliban’s situation is somewhat better; the international community’s rejection of the Taliban makes its rule more difficult and essentially invites internal challengers to confront the regime,⁶⁰ but the state they control, Afghanistan, has long enjoyed international recognition.

Jihadis may also go bigger, aiming for regional emirates, especially in areas where the state has failed to put down strong roots and areas of limited strategic importance for the great powers. Jihadis are more likely to succeed where the power of nationalism is low, and where the state is essentially a quasi-state,⁶¹ demonstrating many of the symbolic trappings of a state, yet internally hollow with very little capacity to service their citizens. Africa, then, appears the most promising location for jihadi success. In Africa, jihadis are demonstrating their ability to take advantage of inter-ethnic or inter-tribe conflicts to gain power. Their Islamist message offers the public a set of beliefs and ideas to unite around when national identity fails. Jihadis may also link themselves with some tribes to capture the state and impose their views through their ally ethnic group. Reflecting increased worries about jihadi activities in Africa, the most recent U.N. report tracking the jihadi global terror threat

stated: “In West Africa and the Sahel, violence and threat have escalated again, and the dynamics have become yet more complex. Some Member States are concerned that greater integration of terrorist groups in the region, and freedom of manoeuvre, raises the risk of a safe operating base developing from which they could project threat further, with implications for regional stability.”⁶²

But jihadi efforts to take advantage of local cleavages could also backfire. Jihadis may end up being identified with a particular tribe or ethnic group, and generate opposition from other ethnic groups and tribes.⁶³ Jihadis might also find their struggle hijacked by non-religious interests.^c

Looking Ahead

The war in Gaza, following Hamas’ October 7 attack on Israel, has increased concerns about a resurgence of jihadi terrorism, especially in the West.⁶⁴ It is certainly a “galvanising cause” for transnational jihadis,⁶⁵ and one al-Qa`ida has already used to support its old narrative about the need to center the fight against the United States as Israel’s sponsor, and about the betrayal of the Arab regimes, which requires pious Muslims to step in and assume their ‘Islamic’ responsibilities.⁶⁶ There is little doubt that the war has already radicalized some Muslims. There has been an uptick in lone wolf attacks by jihadis,⁶⁷ and the war will likely boost recruitment to jihadi groups (especially to those groups who could persuasively link their work to the plight of Palestinians).

However, one must not exaggerate the likely impact of the Gaza war on the jihadi scene. For one, relations between jihadi groups and Hamas (associated with the Muslim Brotherhood strand within Islam) have been shaky at best, and at times hostile.⁶⁸ Second, as Tricia Bacon argues, the current lack of compelling leaders within the jihadi movement undercuts their ability to take advantage of the emerging new opportunities.⁶⁹ Third, although the war clearly upsets the Muslim street, at least among the rich Gulf states social and economic reforms, alongside efforts to counter the jihadi narrative, constrain jihadis’ ability to take advantage of the public outrage.

At the bottom line, though the jihadi movement is resilient, it is also weak. Although its end is not in sight, the movement’s prospects of success are dim and the war in Gaza is highly unlikely to change that. In the West, the jihadi threat is real, but small. It often reflects societal problems of integration, inequality, and racism, clothed in a radical Islamist discourse. The threat is focused on terrorist attacks (mostly by lone wolves or small-scale directed attacks) that may cost lives, but would have little strategic impact, at least as long as the attack’s target avoids overreaction that would turn, unnecessarily, a tactical jihadi success into a strategic event. Otherwise, jihadism’s impact on developed countries is mostly indirect, usually taking the form of waves of migrants escaping war zones and jihadi brutality for the safety and economic potential of the West.

In the Muslim world, the picture is more complex: After attempts to overthrow the regimes of more established Muslim states (such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Algeria) failed, the main jihadi threat is in the Muslim periphery, primarily in Africa. Conflicts in such

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locations tend to be so muddled, with numerous actors complicating the fight,⁷⁰ that external intervention by the West becomes less likely. And when it does take place, the interveners’ staying power is limited, as it often becomes clear that staying the course is unlikely to produce success but, rather, lead the intervener into a quagmire. For example, France abandoned its missions in Mali and Burkina Faso after seeing its influence waning and the likelihood of bringing stability to the region greatly diminished by military coups in its partner states and the hiring of Wagner mercenaries, notorious for human rights violations.⁷¹

The Sahel may also be the harbinger of a new jihadi strategy that is regionally focused, as different jihadi groups are gradually coalescing into one large arena encompassing Mali, Benin, Niger, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Nigeria. Operating from different directions and taking advantage of the weak institutionalization of the region’s states and porous borders, jihadis of al-Qa`ida and Islamic State branches may slowly connect the different arenas and advance toward the Atlantic coast. But there is an important caveat: Such a regional model might work only in regions with low strategic significance for the great powers and while the international community is preoccupied elsewhere. Moreover, the durability of the jihadis’ success is in doubt: jihadi actors might thrive in chaos, but their ultimate objective is the production of a jihadi order and they are far from being able to achieve it.

Additionally, it is not clear to what extent jihadi organizations in Africa reflect jihadi beliefs and goals. Often jihadism is superimposed on local cleavages (ethnic, clans).⁷² In some cases, local actors would turn to jihadi discourse as a way to gain public support, donations from rich Muslim donors, support from existing jihadi groups, volunteers, and moral authority. For example, the successful al-Qa`ida Sahelian sub-branch, JNIM, is currently led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a Tuareg politician turned jihadi, and Amadou Koufa, a Fulani, not well credentialed jihadis, but latecomers to jihad. One may wonder whether a successful establishment of an emirate in Mali would present the world with a jihadi state, or, as this author finds more likely, ethnic-based government in jihadi clothes that could be stripped of its extreme religious commitments for political recognition and external aid. The needs of these war-torn countries suggest that any sustainable success would require the emerging jihadi ruling class to abandon jihadism and seek their country’s re-incorporation into the society of states.

The regional model of jihadi activity is also compatible with fighting the ‘near enemy.’ After all, the regional model assumes a region in which states suffer from severe control problems. To some extent, the regional model is built on bringing together local jihads. However, if in the past jihadis tried to topple strong regimes in the heart of the Middle East, the new local jihads take place in

c Bin Ladin expressed such worries regarding Yemen, Ayman al-Zawahiri regarding Iraq. See “Letter to Abu Basir,” and “Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi, 9 July 2005,” Bin Ladin’s Bookshelf, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, October 11, 2005.

countries that suffer from severe control problems. This also means these struggles are less likely to be based on urban terrorism, and more on guerrilla tactics.

Although the jihadi brand name makes it unlikely that the international community would offer external recognition to a jihadi state (especially if the successful jihadi group were affiliated with al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State), in some cases jihadi groups could still run a country or an entity resembling a state, the way HTS is ruling Syria's Idlib governorate.⁷³ However, such jihadi rule remains at the mercy of state actors. Jihadis' foray into governance may ease their acceptance by the international community: bothered with the provision of daily public service, groups will have fewer resources to dedicate to expansion and violence. Moreover, by providing services, perhaps even through cooperative enterprises with foreign NGOs, ruling groups could demonstrate to the international community that they are ready to become responsible actors within the state-based order. Jihadi entities may also demonstrate their ability to contribute to international order by taking steps against al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, as HTS has been doing in recent years.^d

And here lies the ultimate dilemma for the jihadi movement:

^d It should be noted, though, that the threat to its primacy in Idlib has been the primary reason for HTS' actions, not the hope of international acceptance. See Aaron Zelin, "Jihadi 'Counterterrorism': Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Versus the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel* 16:2 (2023).

the closer it gets to attaining political objectives, the greater the pressure it would face to conform to 'normal' politics and abandon much of what makes it a jihadi movement.

This dilemma also requires the United States to reconsider its approach to jihadi success. Painful as the 9/11 attack was, American overreaction helped the expansion of the jihadi movement. The United States has learned some important lessons since. It understands not only the need to keep an eye and prevent, when possible, the emergence of jihadi safe havens, but also how its own actions may enhance the appeal of jihadism. Consequently, although in principle the United States rejects all jihadi groups, in practice it has tolerated some form of jihadi rule. In this manner, the United States has revealed that it learned to make distinctions between (and within) jihadi groups and arenas, as well as its greater proclivity for more nuanced response to dissimilar jihadi threats.

The current decline of the major transnational jihadi groups may lead the United States to reduce its attention to the jihadi threat. This would be a mistake. Instead, the United States and its international allies should take advantage of the opportunity to refine their strategy to dealing with the jihadi movement while tensions are still relatively low and political considerations less weighty. It should embrace that opportunity. The jihadi movement is still here, it is still dangerous, and it is going nowhere. The United States and the international community should be ready for this reality. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Mitchell D. Silber, Executive Director, Community Security Initiative

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Silber is the author of The Al Qaeda Factor: Plots Against the West, published in 2012 by the University of Pennsylvania Press, and more recently, co-authored "Iran and Hezbollah's Pre-Operational Modus Operandi in the West," Studies in Conflict in Terrorism 44:2 (2021).

CTC: Tell us about the Community Security Initiative and what your role is within it.

Silber: The Community Security Initiative is a startup security program, now in its fifth year, created by the leading organizations in the Jewish community in New York to protect the Jewish population and Jewish institutions in the Greater New York City metro area. And in some ways, it's an American version of the types of programs that Jewish communities in Europe have instituted, like the Community Security Trust in the U.K. or the SPCJ [Service de Protection de la Communauté Juive] in France and these are programs that provide an extra layer of security for the community and in a sense serve as connective tissue between law enforcement and government and the community and their institutions and organizations.

CTC: What is your geographic area of responsibility?

Silber: Our area is greater New York City metro. It now runs from the tip of Long Island in Montauk all the way up through Albany, and we estimate that that covers a Jewish population of about 1.7 million people, which is about 25 percent of the entire Jewish population in the U.S., and in excess of 2,600 institutions. An institution is a synagogue, a school, a community center, a museum, a camp, all of those things are in our area of responsibility between Montauk and Albany.

CTC: How and why was this organization created to protect the Jewish community in this area?

Silber: The 'why' is really a series of deadly events, terrorist attacks in the United States from October 2018 through December 2019, first and foremost being the attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in October of 2018 that left 11 dead. Then there was a deadly attack at a synagogue in Southern California in Poway six months later.¹ And then in December of 2019, two deadly attacks in the New York area: one in Jersey City that left three [people in a grocery store] dead² and one in Monsey, New York, that left one dead.³ Over the course of 14 months, you had four deadly attacks, leaving 15 Jewish American fatalities for no other reason than they went to synagogue or a grocery store. With that in mind, the UJA, which is the umbrella organization in the New York area, and the JCRC, another community organization, wanted to create the security umbrella for the community. So that's the 'why' part. When we look at Tree of Life, it's kind of like the 9/11 event for Jewish communities in the United States. Nothing would ever be the same after Tree of Life. That sense of security, for the Jewish community in America, was shattered.

The 'how' was a little bit more than four years ago. I took the role of executive director, and we hired a team of five regional security directors. So, we took our initial territory; we divided into five zones, and each one of those security directors was given responsibility for every Jewish institution in that zone. And we recruited the best and brightest, elite former law enforcement—both from NYPD, counterterrorism, intelligence—from the Shin Bet, from regional intelligence centers—and now I've added to the team people from the New York State Police, Central Intelligence Agency, as well as from the NYPD's tactical unit, the Emergency Services Unit.

CTC: And this is a privately funded effort, correct?

Silber: Right. That's really innovative here. The federation, which you can make a rough comparison [to] the archdiocese for Catholicism, has a regional responsibility for the community, and they were approached by significant Jewish philanthropists who were very concerned about security in the New York area. Some of the names are in the public domain: Paul Singer, Marc Rowan, Daniel Loeb, we're talking billionaire Jewish philanthropists who said, 'We want to fund a program specifically to protect the community here; so our funds need to be earmarked for this designated role to start up this program from scratch,' in early 2020. So you've got this interplay between philanthropists from non-profit organizations like the Jewish Federation (UJA-NY) and New York's JCRC creating this program that now, four-plus years later, has 18 people, has a fully staffed intelligence desk, has an operational side, cyber security, and has been super busy since October 7th.

CTC: Can you talk about your career in counterterrorism, including as director of intelligence analysis at the NYPD? How did that help prepare you for your current role and the lessons that you learned along the way that are applicable to what you're doing now?

Silber: I'm unashamed in saying that I've stolen many of the playbooks from the NYPD counterterrorism and intelligence library to help create this program, taking some of the best practices from that program. One of them worth highlighting is the importance of intelligence, and this initiative didn't necessarily have an intelligence component out of the gate. The idea was 'Well, just harden all targets.' But if we look back at something like the Tree of Life attack and plenty of other terrorist attacks, having the intelligence ahead of time would have given the community, the institution a much better shot at protecting itself, if not thwarting the attack itself. So, we added this threat intelligence component where our team is knee-deep in the sewers of the dark web and the deep web looking for—on 4Chan and 8kun and Telegram and Gab, as well as the surface web—individuals who are talking about carrying out violent extremist acts against the community here in New York. So that's a program that we had at NYPD, and we've basically recreated it here at the Community Security Initiative.

And the other element is having people who were at NYPD, were in those units who are out in the field. Our sort of field commanders, the regional security directors, many of them have a counterterrorism background. So, when they're in the field visiting a synagogue or visiting a community center, they're looking at all the vulnerabilities. How strong is the door? Can the windows withstand a blast? Are there CCTV cameras there? Where are the guards? How are they positioned? Taking talented people and mixing this operational and the intelligence together where the intel piece is the hub and everything from the field comes into the intel desk to be vetted and then goes back out to the field, that dynamic—the interplay between the field and the intel desk—[is] another piece taken from my experience and NYPD and seeing what works.

One other thing I'd add to that from NYPD is that one of the great things about the department under Ray Kelly and David Cohen is that when an attack happened around the world, they wanted to learn a lesson. So one of the lessons from the 7/7 attacks is that London couldn't be protected unless you looked out 180 miles north to Beeston and Dewsbury and places like that. And so NYPD created this partnership with other law enforcement agencies in that 200-mile radius around it, thinking that New York City is the most likely target. We've done a similar thing. We have a relationship with the New Jersey security directors, with Boston, with the Anti-Defamation League, with the Community Security Service. We've created these concentric circles to try and protect New York City, ever-widening around us to make sure we have the best chance of detecting something as far out as possible.

CTC: On October 7, you were in Israel with a visiting delegation of American law enforcement officials. Can you describe what you were doing and how that day went? What were your takeaways and reaction to those horrific events?

Silber: We had been invited by Israel's Ministry of Diaspora and Antisemitism to bring two dozen senior law enforcement officials



Mitchell D. Silber

from the greater New York area—NYPD, Nassau County, Suffolk County, Westchester police chiefs, Rockland police chiefs—to Israel for a week of training about antisemitism and counterterrorism. We had arrived in Israel on the morning of October 6th, and we were put up in a hotel in Ashdod, which is in southern Israel about 10 miles from Gaza. And at 6:30 in the morning on the 7th, we were awakened by a high-pitched sound that we quickly figured out were sirens. Many of us scrambled out into the hallway of our hotel and saw people running towards the stairwells. In Israel, all hotels have to have safe rooms, but also the stairwells are reinforced. So [we] immediately ran to the stairwell, ran into some members of the delegation. There had already been a couple of sirens that had happened. You wait in the bomb shelter for a couple minutes. Somehow, the Israelis seem to know when it's safe to come out, so you follow them. We went back to the room and then another siren, back into the shelter. Go grab a cup of coffee. Another siren. So, over the course of three hours from 6:30 to 9:30 AM, we were in and out of shelters 20 different times.

We knew about Iron Dome as an anti-missile defense or some of us did, but talk about the fog of war. We really did not know what was going on. The best we could do is jump on Twitter and try and figure out what Israeli commentators, war correspondents were saying, but we didn't have any idea of the bigger picture. We had no idea of the ground invasion that Hamas had launched not more than 10 miles away from us. And to be honest, our hotel wasn't particularly well protected. We had one security guard at the door. Later in the day, Israeli government officials said they thought the program was still going to be on; by evening time and a couple more missile/rocket attack warnings, they said the program was over. And we had to find a way out. There was almost like an "Argo"

moment where we had to meet in the lobby and we bought tickets for the whole delegation to fly to Dubai, told everyone to pack up their stuff at 12:30 in the morning, and the next day, by midday we were on a flight to Dubai and to Dubai back to New York.

We saw Iron Dome in action over the hotel. There's an app called Red Alert—most Israelis have it on their phone—that shows you specifically where rockets are expected to land. You have 45 seconds to seek shelter. But, if it's not in the area where you are, you don't have to shelter. We were in Ashdod. It's so specific that when rockets were targeting Ashdod North or Ashdod South, we could be outside and watch the interceptions literally above our head.

You asked what the effect on the delegation was: I think two of the most telling moments [were] one, the night of October 7th, we had Israeli police, border police commandos staying at our hotel, doing patrol on the beach across the street for fear of naval incursion by Hamas speedboats. So that was a clarifying moment. And then, as we were on the bus heading to the airport on October 8th, seeing as far as the eye could see on Israeli highways, cars pulled over by the side of the road, none of us knew what that meant. Those were reservists already showing up for duty before they're even called up, and I think that resonated with the law enforcement team we were with, to see that idea of public service that when the call goes out, they show up, drop whatever they're doing, leave their families behind, and show up for their government, for their communities.

CTC: And the events of that day on October 7 really do underline the importance of what you do and the stakes involved. What are your reflections on the significance of October 7, in the bigger picture as someone who is so engaged in all these issues?

Silber: If we widen the lens a bit, we have to think of Hamas as a proxy organization, one of the proxy organizations for Iran. And it's hard to believe that there wasn't some type of coordination with Iran for the timing of this event because it really happened seemingly on the cusp of normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which would have been a breakthrough event in Arab-Israeli relations. We know Indonesia was about to establish normalization with Israel.^a So this attack was meant to thwart all of those regional dynamics. That's the wider lens: Iran's larger war against Israel and their positioning for themselves for supremacy in the region.

If we drill down a little bit more, here we have a terrorist organization that totally surprised the Israeli intelligence community, Western intelligence agencies in terms of their capabilities and intentions. Not to get too deep in the weeds here, but the fact that they were able to gather so much intelligence on the Israeli border defenses, blind them using drones, know where their command bunkers were, understand where the troop positions were, so that if they were going to attack those small groupings of troops that are actually still on the border, they could do that early

“Our regional security directors have just been overwhelmed with requests for assistance ... Everyone has been moving at a much higher operational tempo here, and we've had to add staff since 10/7.”

on in the assault, I think it really was a game changer in terms of how *anyone* thought about Hamas and their capabilities and their intentions.

CTC: Let's pivot to the New York situation. The greater New York area is home to the largest Jewish population outside Israel, and even before October 7, Jews were the victims in the majority of hate crimes in New York City.⁴ And at the Community Security Initiative, you were monitoring at least 100 potential security threats a day even before October 7.⁵ How has the threat to the Jewish community here in the New York area evolved since October 7? What is the data telling you?

Silber: We came back from Israel and essentially [were] out of the fire and into the frying pan. Let's talk about the online world. This is kind of like a category five storm. Five times the amount of hateful postings that our intelligence desk had to vet through, and they're using artificial intelligence, web-scraping tools to comb through the sewers of the internet, but to try and identify what is noise and what is a potential threat. So you're totally overwhelmed, a tidal wave of extremism and hate on online.

We've also had more than 140 bomb threats against Jewish institutions in the New York area since 10/7. Every bomb threat potentially requires a response by the local police, an investigation and eventually clearing of the location that was threatened. That's been a huge toll on law enforcement, on the anxiety in the community as well as our team.

Also [there's] protest activity. There have been more than 300 anti-Israel protests, [and] some of them have actually turned violent. There's been vandalism, there have been assaults, there have been arrests. One of the missions of our organization is to detect when these sometimes spontaneous protests are going to happen and make sure that law enforcement has the information so that they have the resources to control the civil disorder that's happened on the streets of New York City.

Moreover, according to NYPD data, while in 2022 there were 262 antisemitic hate crimes against Jewish New Yorkers, in 2023 there were 325—a 24 percent increase—and more specifically, after 10/7, from October to December 2023, the number of hate crimes targeting Jews in New York City equaled that of the entire previous nine months.⁶ Lastly, since October 7, 2023, there have been at least 23 anti-Jewish assaults in New York City.

Our regional security directors have just been overwhelmed with requests for assistance: 'Can you come and relook at our security?' 'Can you make sure that the local police know we're having this event on Tuesday night?' 'Can you help us apply for a security grant? We really want to do that now.' Everyone has been moving at a much

a Editor's Note: On February 28, 2024, *Jewish Insider*, citing three sources involved in the negotiations, reported that "Israel and Indonesia had planned to announce the establishment of diplomatic relations in October 2023, a move that was delayed by the Hamas terror attack on Israel and subsequent war in Gaza." Lahav Harkov, "Israel, Indonesia were on track to normalize ties before Oct. 7: sources," *Jewish Insider*, February 28, 2024. A senior aide to Indonesia's president subsequently denied that this had been the case. See "Jokowi aide quashes report Indonesia was set to open ties with Israel," *Jakarta Post*, March 5, 2024.

higher operational tempo here, and we've had to add staff since 10/7.

CTC: At NYPD, you previously played an important role protecting New York City and have a lot of very strong relationships. Tell us about the importance of that coordination with law enforcement on a day-to-day basis.

Silber: We could not do what we're doing without those relationships, and it's a key reason why as we recruited this team, we recruited heavily from local law enforcement agencies like NYPD, like Westchester police departments, intel centers, because there's a limit to what we can do. We don't have any arrest authorities, any street authorities. So we have to work through the police and other law enforcement agencies. Within the last 24 hours, I've had to meet with both the Special Agent in Charge of the JTTF and the Deputy Commissioner of Counterterrorism and Intel at NYPD on sensitive security matters. They've opened their doors to this collaboration with us, whether it's talking about terrorist threats with JTTF— briefing them, them sharing concerns with us—or coordinating with NYPD intel and counterterrorism about events that are happening in the city, and frankly, passing intelligence to both these organizations. Things that we've passed on to the NYPD and FBI have resulted in more than a half dozen arrests of people who were in the process of turning to violent extremism. So, these relationships are invaluable, and we're so grateful for the partnership with the NYPD, FBI, and other local police agencies.

CTC: What are the challenges in tracking online threats given the sheer volume of threatening posts being made on social media? How do you figure out which threats warrant the most serious attention?

Silber: For all the technology that exists out there, at the end of the day, it requires really savvy intelligence analysts to be able to make a subjective judgment and discern whether we think someone is just threatening but not going to actually do anything, [just] 'talking,' or someone who we think is actually going to act. The last thing we want to do is send law enforcement leads that we think aren't going to pan out and then we're wasting their time. We want to make sure we send them things that we really think have a likelihood. But on the other hand, you don't want to not send something that ends up becoming a real threat. So, we use artificial intelligence tools to scrape the web, and I don't want to go too much into our techniques and tactics and procedures, but let's just say that helps us look at New York-related phenomena that we should be concerned about.

And then it's really the analytic team vetting these types of threats and trying to do some digging in terms of who is this person, what else have they posted, who else are they connected with online, are they part of a group? Maybe even finding out if they ever had a criminal record. [So it's] all that deep dive investigative work, and we're always experimenting with some new technologies. We're looking at some of the facial recognition tools because you might have someone's face online as part of their avatar but not have their real names. So we're experimenting.

CTC: And the stakes are really high here. One of the things that you've provided the Jewish community in the New York area is active shooter training. Can you talk through that a little bit?

“For all the technology that exists out there, at the end of the day, it requires really savvy intelligence analysts to be able to make a subjective judgment and discern whether we think someone is just threatening but not going to actually do anything, [just] ‘talking,’ or someone who we think is actually going to act. The last thing we want to do is send law enforcement leads that we think aren’t going to pan out and then we’re wasting their time.”

Silber: With the Tree of Life attack in Pittsburgh in mind—and so many other active shooter attacks in the United States, not only against the Jewish community—counter-active shooter training has really become something that's required and necessary for houses of worship, for schools, for community centers, for the workplace. So, every member of our operational team is trained and certified to provide this training, and over the course of an hour, hour and a half, they'll go to a location, talk through what active shooter means, what one should do in those type of incidents, and they'll cite past incidents.

One we've talked about in the past, the [January 2015] Hypercacher attack in Paris against a Jewish grocery store, there are aspects of that that after the fact one can analyze and say, 'Run, hide, fight: When was there an opportunity to run? How do people react during stress?' Because you can look at the CCTV footage of what happened inside that location. When people hide, where are places that one might not think to hide? And fight: What are things that you could use to fight in a place that [you] might not think would provide that? And I always think about the video of the Hypercacher, where there's a French man who picks up a bottle of red wine. He's going to use whatever he has to defend himself against this armed assailant. And that's the message that we're trying to convey to the community. If you think back that about two years [ago] to this hostage situation in Texas where the rabbi threw a chair at the hostage taker in order to free himself and the two other hostages, he was taking a page out of that playbook.⁷ Use whatever you have. If you can't run, if you can't hide, then fight with what you've got. He had a chair. He threw the chair and used that as the way to escape and get to safety. So those are the types of things that we're teaching in schools, in synagogues, in community centers, and offices.

CTC: You've created a real time emergency communication system that links the Jewish institutions in New York City and further afield in the greater New York area. Talk us through that.

Silber: Given the types of threats that that we're talking about—a

lone gunman, an active shooter, a bomb threat—we wanted to be able to communicate with all of the institutions within a certain area: maybe a certain borough, maybe two adjacent boroughs or counties or maybe the whole area simultaneously. So we've partnered with some private sector companies who have these capabilities, so that in a moment's notice, we can send out an email and text message to every synagogue, school, community center in Brooklyn; or in Brooklyn, plus Queens; or Brooklyn, Queens, and Long Island; or our whole area. And we can provide them advice: There's an active shooter, shelter in place; there's a bomb threat, evacuate, whatever the particular instructions are. And over the last few years, from time to time, there have been incidents—fortunately, not necessarily ones that were deadly—active shooter incidents that we've been able to provide those alerts and prepare people so they could take the appropriate action.

CTC: Hezbollah has a track record of targeting the Jewish community around the world including in Europe⁸ and South America.⁹ And there are indications that Iranian-enabled terrorists are again looking to target the Jewish community in Europe.¹⁰ When it comes to the potential Hezbollah threat in the United States, as noted by Matthew Levitt in this publication “in June 2017, the FBI arrested two alleged Hezbollah operatives, Ali Kourani and Samer El Debek, for carrying out surveillance of U.S. targets in the United States ... Kourani reported Hezbollah operatives like him would be called upon to act in the event that the United States and Iran went to war, or if the United States were to take certain unnamed actions targeting Hezbollah, Nasrallah himself, or Iranian interests.”¹¹ Given the current high degree of tensions in the Middle East, including the possibility that the United States could get drawn into a war with Hezbollah and Iran, how do you see the threat from Hezbollah in the greater New York area? How can you prepare for this kind of threat?

Silber: At NYPD, we had open investigations into Hezbollah-affiliated individuals in the greater New York area. I've brought that concern to the Community Security Initiative. This past summer, we took a look at a scenario where we woke up one morning and Israel had struck the Iranian nuclear sites, and the question was what would the blowback be here in the United States? We were coming off some meetings, as you said, in Europe where there has been maybe more examples of Hezbollah/IRGC-type reconnaissance, surveillance on possible targets. And we plugged that into a New York/American model to think about which high-profile individuals, which high-profile organizations might be subject to targeting in that scenario. It hasn't been just a theoretical exercise because we did have a situation that's still somewhat classified, but someone from New York area who was targeted overseas by Hezbollah and Iran, and we've had individuals here in New York we're aware of who've also been targeted by Hezbollah and Iran. So that put a further impetus to this effort.

We're currently looking at what might happen if the United States or Israel goes up the escalation ladder. Obviously, there have been a number of kinetic strikes against Iranian proxy organizations in Iran and Syria, and the ongoing strikes in Yemen, is there a threshold with which an American strike would trigger retaliation by Iran or Iran proxies, i.e., Hezbollah, in the United States. That's the scenario that's on the table right now that we're talking to our

law enforcement partners about: What should we do if we think a strike of such magnitude has happened? What do we expect local law enforcement to do? What do we expect the FBI and JTTF to do and making sure we've got a plan that we can put into action if that comes to pass?

[Then there is] the targeting of Iranian dissidents, which we see as just being one iteration of targeting prominent people, prominent organizations, Jewish community. There was that plot to kidnap Masih Alinejad, the Iranian female dissident in Brooklyn.¹² Even more recently, the plot to use the Hell's Angels to target an Iranian dissident in Maryland.¹³ So, these are just two examples of Iran plotting against individuals here in the U.S. So, we have to assume that they don't have hesitation. And we know that Iran has continued to plot against U.S. government officials¹⁴ who they believe were responsible for the strike against Soleimani. So Iranian retaliation in the U.S. to us is not theoretical.

CTC: Pivoting to Hamas, in congressional testimony several weeks after the Hamas October 7 attack in Israel, FBI Director Christopher Wray stated: “We also 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.”¹⁵ How do you see the threat from Hamas in the greater New York area?

Silber: Up until a couple months ago, I looked at it the same way as I looked at it when I was at NYPD. We didn't really find Hamas operatives here in New York in the same way that we found Unit 901 Hezbollah^b operatives here. We found people who maybe had a brother or cousin who was in Hamas in the West Bank or in Gaza and they were here in New York. So as Director Wray talks about the heightened threat level from a terrorism perspective in the U.S., I have to say it was very notable that there were those recent arrests of Hamas operatives in Europe—Germany and Denmark¹⁶ where, for example, it looks like those arrested in Germany were commanded and controlled out of Lebanon, so really operatives sent to carry out action on behalf of the central organization, that's new to the Hamas model. And we're all still trying to digest that, but it means that here in the U.S., we can't assume that it'll just be loosely associated people. It is possible that there might be operatives here that are commanded and controlled from some type of Hamas central command in Lebanon or somewhere else.

CTC: Switching now to the far-right extremist side of the ledger, as you noted a pivotal event was the Tree of Life Synagogue attack that killed 11 congregants by a man prosecutors described as having “white supremacist, antisemitic and bigoted views.”¹⁷ What do you see as the evolving threat from the extreme far-right to the Jewish community in the United States?

Silber: Before October 7th, I really would say and our intelligence desk would say based on the volume of what they were looking at

b Editor's Note: Hezbollah unit 901 “coordinates the group's foreign operations.” “Lebanon's Hezbollah detains 'Israeli spy' in its ranks,” Al Arabiya, December 25, 2014.

social media, far-right extremism was the predominant threat. I would say upwards of 75 percent of the hateful postings that suggested violence before October 7th were coming from the white supremacist, neo-Nazi, accelerationist type perspective. Since 10/7, that has changed. Unfortunately, I don't think the white supremacist side of the ledger has gone away. It's really just a question of other different types of threat emanating from the Islamist or anti-Zionist side of the ledger. Those all jumped up, so it's kind of a perfect storm where you already had white supremacists at this level, and now the others have jumped up as well, which means that you're looking at this panorama of threats from different type of ideological origin points.

When we think about it here in the greater New York area, our concerns go to more rural communities further upstate, Pennsylvania, eastern Long Island, as being places where you have people who are more amenable to this ideology. There is probably less frequency of attack in New York, but a higher likelihood of deadliness.

There was this plot in November 2022 where two individuals were looking to attack a synagogue on the Upper West Side [of New York City], and when they were arrested at Penn Station, they had a Nazi swastika armband and they had been mobilized by white supremacist ideology.¹⁸ There was an attack not against the Jewish community, but against the Black community up in Buffalo by a white supremacist motivated by this ideology. In his manifesto, he talked about Jews as much as he talked about Black Americans.¹⁹ It's one of the things that I don't sleep well about.

CTC: And with regard to that November 2022 white supremacist plot against a synagogue in New York City, the Community Security Initiative detected early signs of that plot and alerted police, basically telling them that “We know you get a lot of incoming, but you should pay attention to this.”²⁰ Can you walk us through that case and the role that your team played in it?

Silber: It was a Friday morning in November, and our intelligence analysts, using their web scraping tools, had detected a series of tweets by an individual saying that he wanted to attack a synagogue. He was ready to die for the cause and suggested that it was going to be that day, that Friday. Our initial assessment was that the origin of the tweets [by] the individual who posted them was in Long Island, so we informed Nassau and Suffolk County police departments, FBI Long Island, and continued to investigate. As we gathered more information, our team made the decision to alert the NYPD because Long Island is only a short railroad or car drive to New York City, and we brought them into the equation.

Both NYPD and FBI then ran with this and approached Twitter and said that they needed to know via court order who was behind this particular avatar who had posted the tweets. The investigation was on that Friday afternoon. We had handed everything that we had over to law enforcement, and at that point it was a bit of a waiting game.

And then in kind of dramatic fashion, about 7:30 that Friday night, one of our regional security directors was told that NYPD has issued a BOLO—a ‘be on the lookout’— alert for all of New York City for this individual. When we looked at who they were putting [as] the picture of the individual, we said, ‘Wow, that’s our person we just flagged to law enforcement earlier in the day.’ This

alert went out to 25,000-plus NYPD, FBI, Port Authority, MTA police, and we confirmed with NYPD and FBI that yes, in fact, the manhunt was on in a city of eight million people for this individual on this Friday night.

Around midnight, plus or minus, we got a call from the FBI and they told us good news: They’d been arrested. To which we responded, ‘They? We thought there was only a single actor.’ And they said, ‘No, actually there was a co-conspirator.’ The MTA police had the picture of this individual on their phone, and they arrested them at Penn Station, and as we know, they had already procured a weapon, ammunition. They had an axe, a hunting knife, and a Nazi swastika armband. We think that we interrupted a potential Tree of Life-type attack in process. For us, we felt like, ‘OK, this system that we’ve built worked.’ The whole process from detection to notification to hand-off to law enforcement worked in a great way—12 hours from detection to arrest, roughly.

CTC: In 2019, you wrote an important article for *CTC Sentinel* examining terrorist attacks against Jewish targets in the West. You wrote that “Europe has become the focal point of the jihadi terror threat to Jews in the West and second, the United States has become a new, emerging focal point of the extreme right-wing terror threat to Jews in the West.”²¹ You’ve spoken a little bit about this already in terms of how things have changed since October 7. What’s your assessment of these trends today?

Silber: The assessment I made then was that in the U.S., the right-wing threat, white supremacist [threat] was predominant, but I think what 10/7 has put into sharp relief is that it can be multiple threats simultaneously.

As we’ve seen over the years, when organizations, whether it be al-Qa`ida or ISIS, are in decline overseas because of kinetic efforts by the U.S. military and coalition allies, those organizations are, in a sense, less popular to individuals in the West who might be radicalized to violence. I think there’s almost a bandwagon effect. But when those organizations are popular and are seen as being on the ascent, which I think is how Hamas was viewed in the wake of October 7th, then there’s this rush of interest of people who are intrigued and in a sense ‘jump on the bandwagon’ of that type of ideology. And we are seeing this significant revival of interest of Islamist-driven actors in the U.S. That violent Islamist threat to the Jewish community is probably on par with the white supremacist threat to the Jewish community in the U.S. right now in March of 2024.

CTC: There has been an explosion of antisemitic attacks in Europe since October 7, with attacks hitting an all-high time in the U.K.²² How closely do you keep tabs on the threat in Europe, and how can lessons learned in New York be helpful for the Jewish community in Europe? And how can lessons learned in Europe be helpful to you? At NYPD you had a lot of connectivity with the Brits and Europeans on the jihadi terror side of the ledger. What’s your interaction and dialogue with the Jewish community and the folks working to protect them in Europe?

Silber: I’ve always operated in my career in counterterrorism looking at Europe as a predictor of what’s going to come to the U.S. With Jewish security, it’s really no different. These organizations that we talked a little bit about earlier, the Community Security

Trust in the U.K. and the SPCJ in France and other similar type organizations, they've been dealing with violent threats against the community in a way that the U.S. never had to until October of 2018 and Tree of Life. So, we're talking on a regular basis to the Community Security Trust in the U.K., which is considered the gold standard of this type of Jewish security; we're talking to the newly formed Nordic Jewish Security Council, which covers Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland, who have a similar mission that that we do. And we're also talking to similar organizations in Australia—Sydney and Melbourne who've got strong Jewish communities—also have community security organizations. And there's a free flow of both intelligence sharing because we're all, for the most part, looking at the English-language extremist sphere. And we're also discussing different innovations and technology, trying to share best practices where we can to make sure that every community has what they need. So yes, Europe remains a focal point. Anytime something happens in Europe, we're trying to learn what that might look like if you map it to the U.S.

CTC: What keeps you up at night?

Silber: I'd say two different scenarios. One is a replay of what happened in Buenos Aires in 1994: a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device, a truck bomb in front of a Jewish community center.^c Very much Hezbollah, Iran, their tactics and techniques. My concern for that type of action here in New York, that's one scenario that keeps me up at night.

The other is the lone active gunman that shows up at a house of worship, at a school during dismissal, something along those lines, motivated by either white supremacist or Islamist ideology and looks to carry out a deadly attack. So those are the two scenarios that I'm always trying and our team is trying to think about: How

c Editor's Note: "On 18 July 1994, 85 people were killed and hundreds more wounded in a Hezbollah-perpetrated bombing attack of the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) building. This was the deadliest terrorist attack in Latin American history as well as against any Jewish target outside of Israel." "This week in Jewish history | Bombing at AMIA building in Buenos Aires kills 85 people and wounds hundreds more," World Jewish Council, July 18, 2022.

do we thwart that? How do we prevent that? How do we harden the target versus that threat?

CTC: How can efforts to protect the Jewish community in the United States be further strengthened?

Silber: The U.S. is different from European countries in that we're so decentralized whereas many European countries, they can create a program like this and it just covers the whole country. Here in the U.S., we've got lots of different players. We've got the Anti-Defamation League, we've got SCN, which is a national Jewish organization. We have the Community Security Service. We've got independent cities and federations with their security programs like New York. So, we're trying to weave this patchwork together so that everyone is coordinating, and everyone figures out what lanes that they should have so that they're not in each other's lanes. That's a work in progress. We're not there yet. From time to time, some of these organizations stray into the other lanes, and we haven't worked out the exact design of the architecture yet. But I'm hopeful that with renewed focus on it, we can figure that out.

CTC: What makes you most hopeful?

Silber: In response to these grave threats, the community, leadership, and organizations have rallied, have risen to the occasion, and are now creating the security architecture that we never had before in the United States in order to meet the moment. Our program is certainly an example of it, but there are other cities in the United States—take Boston or Los Angeles or Cleveland and Cincinnati—that are stepping up in similar ways, have already stepped up to create robust security programs in the U.S. Seeing those start to come to fruition does give me a sense of optimism that that the community is mobilizing.

The other thing that makes me hopeful is just the tremendous partnerships with law enforcement, both at the federal level and the local level, there's an openness to collaborate, partner, and share that I never would have envisioned as possible with a non-profit security organization by FBI, NYPD, and other organizations. And that's remarkable. That's another reason to think positively. **CTC**

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Media Matters: How Operation Shujaa Degraded the Islamic State's Congolese Propaganda Output

By Caleb Weiss and Ryan O'Farrell

Just three years ago, the Islamic State's Central Africa Province was the poster child for the Islamic State's efforts to maintain a constant and lingering threat across the globe. That year, the group conducted a series of regional terrorist attacks across Central and East Africa, and expanded inside the Democratic Republic of the Congo. More importantly, it produced a plethora of propaganda releases, making it one of the most active Islamic State's affiliates on the continent. Today, this has largely changed. While still a serious and deadly threat inside Congo and beyond, its propaganda output is a shell of its former self. This decline is, in part, thanks to the current joint Ugandan-Congolese operations against it.

In 2021, the Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP), which is known locally as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), witnessed a meteoric rise in its propaganda output. Three years later, this output is a shadow of its former self. Though this could quite possibly change in the future, over the last year, and particularly over the last six months, the Islamic State's central media apparatus has struggled to release media from its Central African affiliate.¹

For example, in 2021, as previously outlined by the authors and their colleagues at Bridgeway Foundation for this publication, the Islamic State produced around 280 photos and four videos that were originally taken by its Congolese affiliate.² The following year, another 256 photos and nine videos were published from Congo.³ It was not until 2023 that this output started to decline significantly, with the entire year seeing just 92 photos from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).⁴

To be clear, attack claims have continued on a relatively steady pace, with an average of 10.5 claims per month over the last six months.⁵ But whereas ISCAP was previously able to back up many of these claims with photographic evidence, it has only released 29 photos in the same timeframe, with only eight of those coming in the last three months.⁶ Hardly any of its claimed operational activity now receives any photographic evidence.

The explanation for this significant decline is likely twofold. First, the joint Ugandan-Congolese military campaign, Operation Shujaa,⁷ has pushed ISCAP out of many of its former strongholds, keeping the jihadis on the move, and into areas with poor internet/mobile internet connections.⁸ The steady pace of operations has

likely impacted ISCAP's ability to provide a steady stream of media back to the Islamic State's central apparatus. Second, the Islamic State's global media production was at a nadir in 2023 wherein propaganda from most of its global affiliates has been down.⁸ To caveat, however, this lasted until earlier this year when the Islamic State's spokesman, Abu Hudhayfah al-Ansari, announced a new global campaign on behalf of Muslims suffering in the current war in Gaza, dubbed the "Kill Them Wherever You Find Them" campaign.⁹ Since this campaign, Islamic State's global media production has been somewhat revived.

Declining ISCAP Media

As noted, ISCAP propaganda output since it first began publishing such material is at an all-time low. In the first three months of 2024, just eight photos have been released from the DRC. Almost all of this media has been released within the Islamic State's weekly Al Naba newsletter,¹⁰ which compiles the Islamic State's global operations over the previous week. As a result, these photos have thus often been published a week (or more) after the initial attack. In the past, ISCAP was able to send such media back to the Islamic State's media apparatus for publication either on the same day as an operation or the following day.¹¹ It is possible that ISCAP has sent the images in a more timely fashion and the Islamic State itself is saving the images for the next week's Al Naba issue, but this seems unlikely as it would negatively affect the Congolese affiliate as it delays the release of additional propaganda it could use to back up its claims.

It is also important to point out that in addition to the decline in the sheer number of media products released, there has been a noticeable decline in the overall quality of what gets published. For instance, in a previous article for this publication, the authors and others noted that much of ISCAP's propaganda in 2021 clearly tried to mimic the overall aesthetic of media typical of the Islamic State, such as dressing in a uniform manner in black *kanzus*, the hyper-violence of beheadings and other executions, and highlighting 'Islamic' virtues in everyday camp life.¹² These are now gone. With the exception of the deadly bombing in Kasindi, DRC, in January 2023, which killed 17 people,¹³ and the October 2023 killing of two foreign tourists in western Uganda,¹⁴ ISCAP's media over the last year has been relatively lackluster. What is mainly shown to

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a The area of Mambasa, a territory in Congo's Ituri Province, is densely forested with minimal cell coverage that helps to limit ISCAP's ability to effectively communicate quickly.



Congolese soldiers patrol the village of Mwenda, which was attacked by Islamic State militants, in Rwenzori Sector, northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo, on May 23, 2021. (Alexis Huguet/AFP via Getty Images)

the world now is sporadic captured weapons from the Congolese military (FARDC), an occasional FARDC barracks on fire, or a killed civilian.¹⁵ Large photo sets attempting to mimic the grandeur of the Islamic State's media from the heyday of its territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria are no longer produced by ISCAP. Instead, the little media that trickles out appears utilitarian, meant only to check a box that some media gets back to the central apparatus showing that ISCAP was active over the previous week.

To note, this article largely deals with ISCAP's public facing media output, or rather, the media officially released by the Islamic State on its behalf. As such, it does not take into account more local propaganda channels, such as those operated by ISCAP on both Telegram and WhatsApp.¹⁶ However, while those channels serve an important purpose in propagating internal lectures, sermons, cell phone recordings, and photos taken by ISCAP members themselves, and any media produced by other Islamic State affiliates,¹⁷ they no longer otherwise appear to release any unofficial media produced by the group. Whereas ISCAP once had its own internal propaganda outlets, such as Ashabul Kahf Media or Mujahideen TV,¹⁸ especially between 2019 and 2021, videos under these internal labels are no longer produced and its media for outside consumption is wholly through the Islamic State.^b So though this article does not account for the group's local propaganda channels on popular encrypted messaging apps, it still provides for a good understanding of the

group's current dynamics in relation to its official media output.

Understanding the Decline

Launched in late 2021 following a triple suicide bombing in Kampala, Uganda, Operation Shujaa, was at first slow to make effective gains against ISCAP. Though initially targeting the group's leadership and more historical camps, this did little to prevent violence perpetrated by the group. In the first 10 months following the launch of Operation Shujaa in late November 2021, the number of civilians killed by ISCAP averaged 115 per month, with more than 100 civilians killed in each month except one.¹⁹ Moreover, while initial operations pushed ISCAP out of some areas, such as Watalinga chiefdom near the border with Uganda or near Boga and Tchabi in southern Ituri,²⁰ the group has frequently reappeared in those areas in subsequent months as Operation Shujaa has shifted focus elsewhere.²¹ Starting in September 2022, however, Operation Shujaa appears to have begun to show some results. Between September 2022 and October 2023, only three months have seen civilian fatalities over 100, while 14 of 20 months prior to September 2022 saw a civilian death toll over 100.²² ISCAP's capacity to inflict deadly violence against civilians remains extremely high—local civil society recorded 23 killed in seven attacks over four days in one area alone in late January 2024²³—but the rate of civilians killed by the group does appear to be trending downward overall.

It is thus likely that the nature of the military pressure faced by ISCAP, and how the group has reacted to that pressure, has been a key factor in the precipitous decline in its media output. As Operation Shujaa has repeatedly forced the group's camps to relocate, the constant movement has likely disrupted the group's

^b It is likely that the Islamic State central leadership, or at least leaders within its media apparatus, directed ISCAP to stop producing unofficial media in order to be uniform in propaganda output.

ability to collect and transmit reports and media of their attacks. And as the group has been forced farther into Congo, it has entered areas with more limited mobile network coverage than its historical strongholds in Beni. In one part of Mambasa territory where ISCAP has established a presence, for example, only one mobile phone tower provided service.²⁴ The tower had been damaged during an ISCAP attack in October 2022, and persistent insecurity has since prevented its repair.²⁵ With claims and media being transmitted to the Islamic State's central media apparatus through encrypted smartphone apps, ISCAP's movement into areas with limited mobile network coverage almost certainly hinders the group's ability to transmit reports and media to the propaganda cells that publish them, even as violence remains significant.

At the same time, it is also likely that the Islamic State's overall global decline in its propaganda output played a role in ISCAP's propaganda decline. As noted by Mina al-Lami at the BBC's Monitoring Service, the Islamic State's overall output suffered greatly throughout 2023 with less propaganda being produced across the board.²⁶ Since the aforementioned "Kill Them Wherever You Find Them" campaign, however, the Islamic State's daily media output has again picked up pace.²⁷ The best example of this resurgence can be seen by ISCAP's sister organization, the Islamic State's Mozambique Province.^c Since the beginning of the year, in the same timeframe that ISCAP has only released eight photos, Islamic State Mozambique has been able to produce 179 photos and one video.²⁸ The Mozambique Province, which for a period of time had a very limited output, particularly between September and December 2023, now leads the Islamic State's global propaganda output so far for 2024.²⁹ ISCAP propaganda has not recovered in the same way; suggesting its current predicament in the DRC is a

bigger factor in its media messaging problems than the weakening of the Islamic State's central media apparatus in recent years.

Conclusion

Although this article documents and assesses the sharp decline in ISCAP's propaganda output, it is important to state emphatically that this does not mean the group is no longer a threat on the ground. It very much is a real threat to those communities surrounding its ever-changing areas of operation. For instance, in the last several months, dozens of people have been killed in a series of massacres in North Kivu's Beni territory and Ituri Province's Irumu and Mambasa territories.³⁰ While it appears that Operation Shujaa has had success in creating significant impact in the digital realm, Ugandan and Congolese government forces must not be complacent on the ground. Additional efforts must be made with regard to civilian protection as the counterinsurgency effort seeks to take over more territory from ISCAP and take out its key commanders. This dynamic is not dissimilar to the threat ISCAP posed prior to undertaking its first public media output in 2016, in that it remained a deadly threat with virtually zero propaganda publicizing such atrocities.³¹ The fact that it is no longer producing propaganda at the same capacity as previous years does not mean that the group is itself moribund or on the verge of inactivity.

This should not take away from the significance of the impact military operations had in the digital space. This is a so-called battlefield of its own, which is especially coveted and highly prioritized by the Islamic State. The Islamic State needs this propaganda to feed its violent expansionist ideology, attract support, and show the world it remains a threat across much of the globe. Without the key digital ammunition that is propaganda, the Islamic State and its global branches appear weak. This decline could very well change in the future, as in the case of the Islamic State's Mozambique Province, but as of the time of publication, the joint Ugandan-Congolese Operation Shujaa appears to have significantly eroded the Islamic State's Central Africa Province propaganda capabilities. **CTC**

c Prior to May 2022, the Islamic State's Mozambique affiliate was under the purview and ostensible command of ISCAP. As part of an Islamic State central reorganization effort that month, the Mozambican affiliate was granted its own so-called provincial status and is now autonomous of ISCAP, though the two likely still coordinate on some issues.

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