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CTC SENTINEL

OBJECTIVE · RELEVANT · RIGOROUS | JULY/AUGUST 2024 · VOLUME 17, ISSUE 7

FEATURE ARTICLE

A Decade of Islamic State Gendered Violence

Devorah Margolin and Gina Vale

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

William Braniff

Director, Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships, U.S. Department of Homeland Security

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Ten years ago, in August 2014, the Islamic State began its genocidal campaign against the Yazidi community. In our cover article, Devorah Margolin and Gina Vale evaluate how the group's gendered violence has manifested during and after its caliphate years. "Even without its caliphate," they write, "the Islamic State's gendered violence continues, as its supporters and ideology remain. Arguably, the lack of timely and appropriate responses has perpetuated this violence."

Our interview this month is with William Braniff, director of the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships at the Department of Homeland Security. In it, he describes his office's efforts to utilize a public health-informed approach to preventing targeted violence and terrorism.

Edward Lemon and Noah Tucker examine Central Asians' prominent role in recent global terror plots and attacks. They argue that analysis should focus more on "the factors that led to mobilization to Syria and Iraq a decade ago and that have been exacerbated in recent years, especially in Tajikistan, including crackdowns on religion, corrupt ineffective governance, high levels of migration, and well-established terror networks that are holdovers from the peak of the Islamic State" as a way to understand this evolving threat area.

When news reports appeared earlier this summer suggesting that the leader of the Islamic State in Somalia, Abdulqadir Mumin, may have quietly become the "worldwide leader" of the Islamic State last year and may have been killed in a recent U.S. airstrike, the news created far more questions than answers. Austin Doctor and Gina Ligon take a nuanced look at what the developments—if true—could mean for the group.

Jessica Davis provides analysis of the Islamic State's post-caliphate financial strategies. "The future of the Islamic State's financial infrastructure," she writes, "is networked, resilient, and adaptive." This reality, she warns, portends "a grim future for efforts to combat the group's international presence."

Finally, in June, the U.S. State Department designated the Nordic Resistance Movement, the largest neo-Nazi group in Sweden, as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist, only the second white nationalist organization on its terrorist list. Peter Smith outlines the development of the group and considers what the designation could mean for its future.

Colonel Sean Morrow, *Director, Combating Terrorism Center*

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Cover: An Iraqi Yazidi woman walks near buildings destroyed during the 2014 attack by Islamic State fighters in the village of Solagh in the Sinjar region of the northern Iraqi Nineveh province on May 6, 2024. (Safin Hamid/AFP via Getty Images)

In the Shadow of the Caliphate: A Decade of Islamic State Gendered Violence

By Devorah Margolin and Gina Vale

Throughout its rule, the Islamic State employed an ideologically driven system of control and persecution, resulting in widespread gendered violence perpetrated by and against men, women, and even children. On the 10th anniversary of the start of the group's genocidal campaign against the Yazidi community, Islamic State ideology persists, and its members have yet to be held fully accountable for crimes against civilian and minority populations. This article explores the Islamic State's gendered violence during and since its caliphate years, and it considers how a diverse spectrum of responses from local and international actors have aided or hampered efforts to achieve justice, peace, and security.

The 2014 declaration of the Islamic State 'caliphate' set off a decade of highly gendered violence perpetrated by and against men, women, and even children.[a] While the group's epicenter lay within Iraq and Syria until its territorial collapse in 2019, the group's brutality and the responsive international campaign against it has stretched globally. A decade later, on the eve of the 10th anniversary of the start of the Yazidi genocide (on August 3), this article examines Islamic State gendered violence committed during and since its caliphate years, and it considers how local and international responses have aided or hampered efforts to achieve justice, peace, and continued security.

Gendered Violence in the 'Caliphate'

Central to the Islamic State's governance in Iraq and Syria was a strategy of 'divide and conquer.' Established as a 'utopia' for the *ummah* (global Muslim community), adherence to Sunni Islam was a prerequisite for inclusion in the Islamic State's newly envisioned society. This resulted in a distinction between in- and out-group identity that had vital implications for policy and treatment within the 'caliphate.'[b] More specifically, the Islamic State's military and governance practices were driven by its salafi-jihadi ideology, the integrity and authenticity of which rested on a reconstruction of a traditionalist gender order.[1] Within its territorial borders, the Islamic State implemented an ideological-legislative system of control that stipulated binarized and gender-essentialized roles, often simplifying its message to: men in public spaces, women in private spaces.[2] Convergence or divergence from these ideals determined each individual's position within the Islamic State's society, and legitimized the behavioral regulation of the in-group and the victimization of the out-group.[c]

a Gendered or gender-based violence is any form of violence (physical, psychological, verbal, emotional, sexual, socio-economic) directed against a person on account of their gender or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately. Despite misconceptions that gendered violence is an issue affecting only women, that is not the case. As noted by the UNCTED, while "women and girls are disproportionately affected by [sexual and gender-based violence], such acts of violence are also committed against men and boys and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community." See "Towards Meaningful Accountability for Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Linked to Terrorism," United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, November 2023.

b For men and boys, in-group membership was determined and documented by formal military enlistment or pledge of allegiance. For women and girls, affiliation was less clear-cut, though scholarly consensus points to ideological adherence and active participation in the movement beyond reluctant acquiescence or compliance as means of survival. See Devorah Margolin and Charlie Winter, "Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence," The ISIS Files, The George Washington University, June 24, 2021, pp. 6-7; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State and its Treatment of 'Out-Groups': A Comparative Analysis," Center for Justice and Accountability, August 2023.

c This was undertaken on an individual level dependent on intersecting identity factors. Thus, Gina Vale argues that the Islamic State implemented an intra-gender stratified system of governance to facilitate and legitimate the group's control. See Gina Vale, *The Unforgotten Women of the Islamic State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024 forthcoming).

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Against the In-Group

Islamic State-affiliated men and boys were lauded for their military prowess and public leadership as state-builders,[3] with the group instilling masculine ideals amongst its population from an early age.[4] Toddlers and preschoolers were encouraged to wear military fatigues, wave Islamic State flags, and even act as informants on their own relatives.[5] Pre-teen and teen boys were forced to adopt more active roles through the "Cubs of the Caliphate" training program.[6] In both public and private spaces, violence became ingrained in boys' upbringing—whether through school curricula and training camps,[7] public preaching and propaganda viewings,[8] or forced attendance of amputations and executions.[9] Between 2015 and 2018, more than 70 boys conducted camera-recorded executions on behalf of the Islamic State.[10] Boys' indoctrination into and forcible participation in the Islamic State's violence was a product of the group's gendered ideology, reflecting the group's militarized expectations for male recruits and its ambitions of intergenerational endurance through the creation of its "lions of tomorrow."[11]

In contrast to men and boys, the Islamic State's ideal "Muslimwoman"[12] was expected to embrace hyper-feminine attributes in the private sphere.[13] Enforced domesticity[d]—coupled with the sex segregation of all public institutions[14]—placed gendered obstacles to access basic goods and services.[15] In particular, women and girls (across in- and out-group populations) faced acute deprivation of education and health care. While primary education for Sunni Muslim girls was considered critical for the Islamic State's state-building project,[16] prioritization of female modesty introduced severe restrictions as girls became older. Secondary schools only permitted same-sex teaching,[17] and admission of both female staff and students was dependent on conformity with the group's ultra-conservative dress code.[18] The result was girls' school closures on account of a shortage of female teachers deemed qualified by the Islamic State,[19] the impact of which was felt so acutely by local communities to spark high-risk female-led street protests.[20] Many university degrees were open only to male students,[21] and (ideological) schooling was largely limited to Sunni Muslim (and—by force—some Yazidi) boys.[22] Similarly in the health sector, segregated hospitals and clinics failed to provide tailored care. The prohibition on male doctors' treatment of female patients demonstrated the Islamic State's emphasis of its self-defined morality over providing care to its citizenry.[23] Eventually, the increasing costs of treatment,[24] prioritization of treating Islamic State militants and their families,[25] and shortage of female doctors[26] meant that healthcare standards plummeted.[27] Local civilian women reported traumatic botched procedures by untrained female medical students and even operations without anesthetic.[28] Thus, in practice, for many women in the caliphate, the Islamic State's public institutions were either inaccessible or the source of their gendered violence.

Women and girls—even those in the in-group—were seemingly forcibly erased from the public sphere altogether, often through violent means.[29] These campaigns did not target men's sexual desire, but rather women's bodies and their "characteristics of immodesty."[30] Among the first signs of the Islamic State's territorial governance were billboards instructing (Muslim) women to wear the *shari'i* (legally mandated) attire.[31] Over time, the dress code evolved to cover the entire body and face, including a twin-layered veil over the eyes.[32] Violations of the Islamic State's behavioral codes were met with punishments meted out by the group's *hisba* (morality police) brigades.[33] All-female *hisba* units were established in 2014 to enable law enforcement through intra-gendered violence.[34] Sentences ranged from lashings for inappropriate attire, imprisonment for 'security reasons,' and even death by stoning for adultery.[35] While men were not immune from dress and sexual conduct regulations[36]—with particularly theatrical public brutality reserved for LGBTQ+ persons[e]—the Islamic State's administrative documentation emphasizes men's responsibility to enforce women's "correct" behavior.[f] Fulfilling the role of the *mahram* (guardian), the Islamic State required a male relative to accompany a woman on all travel within the caliphate to avoid illicit intermixing.[37] However, this policy was later extended to forbid women from leaving the house altogether.[38] For many women, the cascade of regulations on the familial unit restricted any and all freedoms, thereby converting the individual home into an extension of the Islamic State's public surveillance.[39]

The Islamic State presented the restriction of basic freedom for women and girls as a positive return to the fundamental roles of wife and mother. Yet, this enforced domesticity created an enabling environment for gendered violence.[40] Islamic State marriage contracts emphasize the custodial responsibility of men over women, requiring financial provision in the form of bride price and confirmation of the bride's "sexual purity."[41] Moreover, forced and child marriage from age nine were integral to the Islamic State's societal revisioning.[42] Seven Syrian and Iraqi women interviewed by Amnesty International said they had been forcibly married to Islamic State members when they were 15 or younger, with the most common age reported being 13.[43] Gender inequality is the root of early marriage for girls, which under the Islamic State was facilitated by uninformed assent or consent by proxy of a male

d For example, all 23 of the articles specifically directed at women in English-language Islamic State magazines since 2014 talk about the home as an 'ideal' place for women. See Devorah Margolin, Forthcoming Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, King's College London. See also "Abide in your homes," in Rumiyah Issue 3, Al Hayat Media Center, November 11, 2016; "Sisters: The woman is a shepherd in her husband's home and responsible for her flock," in Rumiyah Issue 9, Al Hayat Media Center, May 4, 2017.

e Between 2014 and 2016, OutRight International reported 41 incidents of targeted killings for men "guilty" of "sodomy." Most often, these were conducted by throwing individuals from a high building followed by public (forced) participatory stoning. To the authors' knowledge, Islamic State documentation does not include cases of criminalization for lesbian women or other LGBTQ+ persons. However, with reporting difficulties and societal norms concerning queer identity preventing victim identification, the 41 cases are likely to be a significant underestimate of the total death toll of LGBTQ+ persons at the hands of the Islamic State. See "Timeline of Publicized Executions for 'Indecent Behavior' by IS Militias," OutRight International, June 23, 2016; Joshua Tschantret, "Cleansing the Caliphate: Insurgent Violence against Sexual Minorities," *International Studies Quarterly* 62:2 (2018): pp. 260-273; Graeme Reid, "Islamic State's war on gays," Human Rights Watch, June 8, 2015.

f For example, male taxi drivers transporting female workers had to sign pledges to abide by Islamic State rules regarding women's dress, and male shopkeepers were forbidden from selling products to women who did not have an appropriate escort. See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents," Specimens 8F: Regulations for clothes shop owners imposed by Diwan al-Hisba (Albukamal area): September 2015 and 10R: Regulations for shops in Raqqa province, January 27, 2015; Islamic State, "Written Pledge: Raqqa Province," NMEC-2017-110372, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Harmony Program, n.d.

Iraqi Yazidi worshippers arrive at the Lalish temple in a valley near the Kurdish city of Dohuk, northwest of Baghdad, Iraq, on May 21, 2015. (Safin Hamid/AFP via Getty Images)

guardian.[44] While the group officially prohibited forced marriage (for Sunni Muslim women),[45] pressure for women and girls to marry into the movement was unrelenting, with policies of polygamy and remarriage disarming the excuse of potential widowhood.[46] On occasion, this pressure escalated to extreme intimidation or physical violence, with reports of death threats against parents and even rape of non-compliant women in front of their family.[47]

Against the Out-Group

The Islamic State arguably exacted its greatest ire and gendered brutality upon out-group populations. Its propaganda and supporters consistently glorified the pursuit of territorial expansion into "infidel" lands, lauding victories of bloodshed, and even genocide, of ethno-religious minorities.[48] The treatment of Shi`a Muslims—viewed by the Islamic State as "apostates"[49]—was clear-cut: Those found would be killed on sight.[50] The most heinous example of this practice is the June 2014 Camp Speicher massacre, in which approximately 1,700 mostly Shi`a adult male Iraqi soldiers, air cadets, and volunteers were captured, tortured, and murdered by the Islamic State.[51] Available evidence does not elucidate the fate of Shi`a women and girls beyond their protection from enslavement.[52] By contrast, Christians were initially afforded protection under the classical Islamic *dhimmi* pact to safeguard *kitabiyat* (people of Abrahamic faiths).[53] However, shortly after the declaration of the caliphate, the Islamic State issued an ultimatum, stating that the Christians of Mosul must either pay the *jizya* (non-Muslim) tax or face the sword.[54] Four months later, the group declared that Christian women could be held as slaves.[55]

On August 3, 2014, the Islamic State launched devastating attacks on the Yazidi community in the area of Sinjar, Northern Iraq. The group's strategy was premeditated and legitimized by its ideology, with the clear aim of eradication of non-Muslims through conversion or death.[56] An estimated 9,900 Yazidis were either killed or kidnapped in a matter of days,[57] and a further 400,000 were displaced in Iraqi Kurdistan.[58] The Islamic State's persecution of the Yazidis has been highly gendered. An estimated 3,100 Yazidis died in the initial siege of Sinjar, with nearly half—almost entirely teenage and adult males—executed *en masse*.[59] A further 6,800 Yazidis—predominantly women and young children—were abducted, trafficked, and enslaved within Islamic State-held territory.[60] In the initial months of occupation, some families were able to live "freely" as "Muslims," dependent upon compulsory proclamation of conversion and conformity to the Islamic State's religious codes and practices.[61] Eventually, all captured Yazidis were enslaved and sold as chattel through a system of provincial markets.[62] While boys were often forcibly separated for conversion to Islam and military training,[63] women and girls were destined to be 'owned' and abused as *sabaya* (female prisoners-of-war).

The sexual exploitation of young (mostly unmarried) Yazidi women and girls was central to the Islamic State's invasion of Sinjar, serving to boost camaraderie and troop cohesion in "lawful" access to multiple sexual partners.[64] Representing the most innocent and pure members of the 'infidel' community, the youngest virgin girls commanded the highest value. Their purpose was unmistakable and pre-planned. Emphasis was consistently placed on acts of symbolic and ideological "conversion" through forced religious education, marriage, and rape.[65] An Islamic State pamphlet even stated that "it is permissible to have intercourse with the female

slave who hasn't reached puberty if she is fit for intercourse."[66] Once brought within the unregulated private Islamic State family home, Yazidi captives were frequently subject to victimization that contravened the group's own slavery policies.[67] While forced impregnation was an expected, and even celebrated, by-product of the group's campaign of genocidal rape,[68] some cases of forced abortion and violent miscarriage reinforced the dehumanization of the Islamic State's captive population.[69] Moreover, as supporters and even accessories to militants' sexual abuses, reports of liberated Yazidi women and girls also highlight the role of Islamic State-affiliated women in their detention and subjection to psychological and physical violence.[70] The self-containment of the Islamic State family home space within its territorial borders enabled grave and illicit abuses against captive women and girls. With some violence perpetrated by women, the Islamic State's genocide was in part "gendered oppression – *by the oppressed*."[71]

Responses to Islamic State Gendered Violence

In 2017, the Islamic State lost its grip on Iraq, and in 2019, the group fell at Baghouz, Syria. Yet, even without its caliphate, the Islamic State's gendered violence continues, as its supporters and ideology remain. Arguably, the lack of timely and appropriate responses has perpetuated this violence. As such, the situation of both perpetrators and victims has remained in a sort of limbo since the end of the group's territorial control.

Syria, Iraq, and the international community have sought to address the perpetrators of the Islamic State's gendered violence in a variety of ways, including prosecutions utilizing international and domestic laws, granting amnesty or focusing on reconciliation, and, in some cases, ignoring the issue altogether and allowing for indefinite detention. Responses to Islamic State-affiliated individuals (including repatriation and accountability) have been dependent on location, legal frameworks, scope of the issue, and desire to act.[72] Moreover, these responses are highly gendered themselves and, as explored below, have exacerbated and even created new forms of gendered violence in the years since the caliphate's collapse.

Responses to Islamic State victimization also vary widely, with programming largely focused on specific out-group communities at the local or international level. More recently, with an eye on long-term reintegration, international responses have also sought to wrestle with the psycho-social and rehabilitative needs of affiliated men, women, boys, and girls. The concentration of responsive efforts focusing on minority group victims, and even perpetrators, stands in stark contrast to the deprioritization of local Sunni Muslim civilian populations, whose private and undocumented victimization by the Islamic State evades recognition and justice.[73]

Syria

Following the Islamic State's final defeat in Baghouz, thousands of affiliated men, women, and children were transferred to "pop-up" detention facilities and securitized camps, under the control of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) and its military arm, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).[g] Once peaking at over 80,000 individuals,[74] today more than 54,000 remain in indefinite detention in northeast Syria in at least 27 detention facilities (including women's prisons and two teenage "rehabilitation centers") and two detention camps.[h] The division of these detained populations and the treatment afforded to them reflect highly gendered assumptions concerning ideological commitment and risk—largely informed by the Islamic State's own binarized ideals and stipulated roles within the caliphate.[75]

"Even without its caliphate, the Islamic State's gendered violence continues, as its supporters and ideology remain. Arguably, the lack of timely and appropriate responses has perpetuated this violence. As such, the situation of both perpetrators and victims has remained in a sort of limbo since the end of the group's territorial control."

In detention camps, like Al-Hol and Roj, the majority of residents are women and young children, with more than 62 percent of the population under the age of 18.[76] The situation has been deemed a humanitarian crisis, with limited access to water, health care, sanitation, and education,[77] as well as pervasive insecurity.[78] Specifically, gendered violence has continued in these detention camps in three main ways: 1) exploitation and abuses of camp residents by aid workers and security forces;[79] 2) resident intra-female violence to enforce continued adherence to Islamic State ideology and behavioral codes;[80] and 3) sexual exploitation of young boys by women residents in order to reproduce the next generation of the Islamic State.[81] Younger residents are especially vulnerable to indoctrination and exploitation in these camps, with recent videos shared on social media of boys chanting Islamic State slogans and creating make-shift flags and toy weapons.[82] By not repatriating children to remove them from this situation, the international community is putting them at greater risk of violence and continued Islamic State ideological influence.[83] Moreover, years later, Yazidi victims of the Islamic State have been found still among the population in Al-Hol—some remaining there by choice for fear of being separated from their children,[84] while others may have been forced to stay in hiding by Islamic State-affiliated women.[85] The DAANES' non-state status and geopolitical distractions, including Turkey's threats of incursions and Syrian normalization,

g Not a country, the DAANES gained its de facto autonomous status in 2012 during the Syrian civil war. The DAANES operates with the support of the United States and the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.

h In August 2023, Amnesty International assessed that Iraqis comprised 42 percent of the detainee population in northeast Syria, while Syrians made up 37 percent and third country nationals made up 21 percent. See "Syria: Aftermath: Injustice, torture and death in detention in north-east Syria," Amnesty International, April 17, 2024, p. 45 and "Operation Inherent Resolve and Other U.S. Government Activities Related to Iraq & Syria January 1, 2024-March 31, 2024," U.S. Department of Defense, April 30, 2024, p. 31.

coupled with the international community's fatigue regarding indefinite detention in northeast Syria, have hindered responses to the ongoing detainee crisis and accountability, and in doing so perpetuating many forms of (gendered) violence and injustice.[86]

By contrast with women and girls, and on account of the perceived threat resulting from Islamic State indoctrination and training, the SDF has separated teenage boys as young as 14 from their families for imprisonment in facilities with adult men.[i] In 2022, it was reported that 539 detainees in the Ghuwayran Detention Facility were younger than 18 years old when they were initially detained in 2019.[87] Since then, as young boys have aged into adolescence in detention camps like Al-Hol, the SDF has continued to transfer them to prisons in what has been termed a "conveyor belt of incarceration."[88] After backlash over the policy, the SDF began to move younger boys to "rehabilitation centers," including Orkesh and Houri, rather than prisons.[89] The DAANES has argued that "the children who arrive at the ['rehabilitation'] center[s] are considered victims who have been manipulated by ISIS,"[90] and thus, authorities have attempted to provide some medical, educational, and psychosocial services to the teenage boys held there.[91] In 2023, the DAANES noted that young boys were removed from detention camps for three reasons: "1) youth engaged in criminal and violent activities, 2) youth becoming ideologically indoctrinated and trained to act on behalf of [IS], or 3) 'victimhood', including physical and sexual violence at the hands of IS."[j] These "rehabilitation centers" are an improvement from prison settings, where male adult and juvenile inmates face inhumane conditions of disease, malnutrition, and even torture.[92] Yet, without repatriation or a long-term solution to indefinite detention, this offer of "rehabilitation" is only a passing phase until inevitable transfer to prison at age 18.[k] The DAANES has thus failed to appropriately hold to account many boys and men that did commit crimes under the Islamic State, while furthering the victimization of countless others.

In response, there have been considerable efforts to relieve the detainee burden, with more prompt release for Syrian and Iraqi nationals.[93] For Syrians, only residents of SDF-controlled areas have been able to return due to the ongoing civil war.[94] The DAANES has implemented a policy of amnesty for low-level militants and "IS [Islamic State] families" with an estimated 10,000 Syrians (mostly women and minors) released from Al-Hol camp in a "lengthy and opaque process, which entails providing a vetted named male guarantor to the camp administrator, often associated with tribes."[l] This dependency—on a male relative or even a stranger—increases the vulnerability of unaccompanied women to gendered risks including forced marriage and exploitation.[95] In addition to returning populations, the DAANES brought 8,650 Syrian nationals (men and some women) to trial in its "people's defence court," resulting in 1,881 convictions for association with the Islamic State as of June 2020.[96] However, no trials of third-country nationals (TCNs) have been held, and the DAANES has not utilized international law in its prosecutions, or prosecuted for gender-based crimes.[97]

The non-state status of the DAANES has also further complicated the situation in northeast Syria. Without the power to deport foreign citizens or put foreign individuals on trial (despite the threats to do so[98]), authorities have resorted to highly gendered means to manage the stagnated detention of Islamic State-affiliated persons. Also lacking proper funding to run victim-focused programming, reported cuts to even basic medical care have resulted in preventable deaths.[99] Overall, the DAANES remains largely unable to proactively and meaningfully address accountability for Islamic State-related crimes,[100] and instead risks embedding further violence through constrained inaction.

Iraq

With the support of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, Iraq was able to retake its territory in 2017. In the wake of mass arrests, by March 2018 Iraq had detained approximately 19,000 men, women, and minors accused of Islamic State affiliation or other terror-related offenses,[101] and sentenced more than 3,000 of them to death.[102] Iraq's anti-terrorism legislation is all-encompassing, criminalizing membership of a designated organization with the same penalty applied irrespective of an individual's role or crimes committed therein.[103] The country's justice system has thus been highly criticized for arbitrary detention, flawed trials, insufficient evidence, prosecution of minors, and use of the death penalty.[104] Mass executions, paused after November 2020, restarted in December 2023.[105] Iraq also holds foreign nationals in its custody, including women, whose countries have revoked their citizenship or refused to take them back.[m] Once also reluctant to bring back its own citizens, Iraq has now repatriated approximately 9,500 individuals from Syrian detention camps to Jeddah 1 transit camp and 1,200 from Syrian detention facilities to Iraqi prisons since 2021.[106] [n] While a step in the right direction, these policies have

i How these minors are held in prison facilities is not fully clear, as access to third-party evaluators is limited. There are some juvenile-only facilities, while others hold minors in the same facilities (or even cells) as adult men. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, "Gendering the Boy Child in the Context of Counterterrorism: The Situation of Boys in Northeast Syria," Just Security, June 8, 2021; "Syria: Aftermath: Injustice, torture and death in detention in north-east Syria."

j Claims have arisen that Islamic State-affiliated women in Al-Hol are sexually abusing young boys in the hopes of becoming pregnant and continuing to give birth to more Islamic State-affiliated children. For more information, see "Draft AANES Policy Statement and Procedures for Selection and Removal of Foreign ISIS-Affiliated Youth from the Camps, February 2023" on file with Amnesty International (cited in "Syria: Aftermath: Injustice, torture and death in detention in north-east Syria.")

k For example, in 2022, 203 Iraqi juvenile detainees were repatriated from military detention facilities to Iraq. See "Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress April 1, 2022-June 30, 2022," U.S. Department of Defense, July 29, 2022, p. 70.

l Many have argued that this population mostly included victims of the Islamic State that were in the camp prior to the 2019 fall of Baghouz. See "Punishing the Innocent: Ending Violations Against Children in Northeast Syria," Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, March 19, 2024, p. 13; "Hidden Battlefields: Rehabilitating ISIS Affiliates and Building a Democratic Culture in Their Former Territory," Rojava Information Center via the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, December 2020.

m For example, in May 2019, an Iraqi court put 11 French nationals on trial, and nine were sentenced to death. See Simona Foltyn, "Inside the Iraqi courts sentencing foreign Isis fighters to death," *Guardian*, June 2, 2019; Murad Shishani and Nick Sturdee, "Islamic State: Hundreds of women on hunger strike at Iraqi prison," BBC Arabic, May 5, 2023.

n The SDF and Iraqi government operate under an unofficial deal that for every 150 families Iraq repatriates from Al-Hol to Jeddah 1, they also repatriate 50 men from prisons in northeast Syria and put them into prisons in Iraq. Simona Foltyn, "'The people don't want us': inside a camp for Iraqis returned from Syrian detention," *Guardian*, June 15, 2023.

gendered consequences.[107]

The conviction rate in Iraq for cases involving Islamic State affiliation is 98 percent, with widespread application of the death sentence.[108] Amnesty International has raised concerns for individuals repatriated to Iraq from Syrian prisons on terrorism charges who face all-but-guaranteed convictions (if not death sentences) upon their return.[o] To date, Iraq has not yet utilized international law to prosecute any Islamic State crimes,[109] and despite U.S. urging, Iraq has not passed legislation to prosecute international crimes in its territory.[110] Owing to the victim-witness testimony of Ashwaq Haji Hamid Talo, Mohammed Rashid Sahab is the only person convicted in Iraq of Islamic State membership and "the rape and abduction of Yazidi women."[111] This case sadly remains an exception, and the charges fall short of the international crimes of slave trade and sexual enslavement.[112] Moreover, the United Nations mission to collect and preserve evidence of crimes committed by Islamic State in Iraq (UNITAD) is due to shut down in September 2024 before the completion of its mandate, creating difficulties for those seeking justice for the Islamic State's undocumented crimes or abuses perpetrated within private spaces.[113] This decision thus strikes a further blow to reparations and recovery for civilian populations, who must continue to turn to civil society and community-led programs for recognition and assistance,[114] compounding frustrations that funds and programming are available for Islamic State-affiliated individuals but not those victimized by the group.[115]

Many displaced Iraqis—including ethno-religious minorities persecuted by the Islamic State—have been accommodated in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps.[116] The International Organization for Migration estimates that between 2014 and 2023 there were over one million IDPs in Dohuk alone, adding to the endemic mental health and psychosocial support needs of the Ninewa region.[117] Sinjar was officially liberated from Islamic State control in November 2015. However, owing to Yazidis' continued sense of insecurity and the area's infrastructure still lying in ruins, thousands are unable or unwilling to return.[118] With many men and adolescent boys killed or kidnapped by the Islamic State, the majority of camp residents are women and children reliant upon scarce humanitarian aid.[119] For the few Yazidi men who did escape Islamic State occupation, even less consideration has been paid to their recovery needs. They have effectively become "living ghosts."[120] Studies of the trauma and rehabilitation of the Yazidi community have overwhelmingly focused on former child soldiers and (female) survivors of sexual violence.[121] This oversight or omission of Yazidi men extends beyond Iraq to international support initiatives. Indeed, in a study of the Baden-Württemberg 'Special Quota' program for Yazidi (female) refugees in Germany, Thomas McGee notes that the women's male relatives were prohibited from accompanying them to the rehabilitation sessions or even accommodations.[122] In 2021, Iraq passed the Yazidi Survivors Law as a more inclusive step toward helping victims return and reintegrate,[123] though Human Rights Watch has criticized its flawed implementation.[124] Furthermore, despite early U.S. condemnation of Islamic State violence against Christians as a "genocide,"[125] the 2021 visit of Pope Francis to Iraq—the first in the nation's history[126]—as well as a push to rebuild churches once destroyed by the Islamic State,[127] significantly less attention has been paid by local authorities to the psycho-social recovery of, and justice for, Iraq's Christian community.[128] Despite these limited efforts, many minority communities in Iraq have felt that there have been inadequate steps toward achieving justice, peace, and continued security.

Moreover, over the years, Iraq has systematically closed IDP camps across the country, with the last camps set to close in July 2024.[129] Many of these former camps have now become informal settlements where IDPs remain without access to government assistance, leaving behind vulnerable populations.[130] What remains is the Jeddah 1 camp in Nineveh Province, a transfer center for individuals (mostly female-headed households) who have been repatriated from Al-Hol as they reintegrate back into Iraq. Families seeking to leave Jeddah 1 must obtain a security clearance and approval from local authorities in the area they seek to resettle, and in some cases a local sponsor to vouch for behavior.[p] A U.N. study in 2022 found that sponsorship requirements were employed much more frequently for female-headed households (57 percent), compared to male-headed households (four percent).[131] The study also found that female-headed households received local sponsorships at much lower rates compared to men due to factors such as poor family ties and social relationships and the perception that women were more closely affiliated with the Islamic State.[132] These gendered obstacles derive from local norms to further constrain release and reintegration for women and their families.

While Iraq has seemingly worked to repatriate and reintegrate Islamic State-affiliated individuals, the country has taken questionable steps related to its sweeping justice system, and is lacking proper oversight and evaluation of its reintegration programming.[133] Moreover, its policies toward minority communities victimized by the Islamic State, specifically the Yazidis, remain inadequate, as both avenues for justice as well as reintegration are insufficient to address the gendered nature and implications of their victimization by the Islamic State.

International Community

While TCNs from more than 60 countries remain detained in Syria alone,[134] the international community has responded in a variety of different ways. While there was an initial spike in repatriations and returns in 2019,[135] many countries have been slow and reluctant to repatriate their citizens. For example, some researchers have argued that between May 2018 and January 2023, Canada "adopted a strategy of non-responsiveness and delay in an effort to avoid making any progress on facilitating the [repatriation] of Canadians."[136] Other countries have revoked (or threatened to revoke) citizenship of Islamic State-affiliated individuals,[137] though some European courts have put pressure on countries to repatriate.[138] To date, at least 35 countries with citizens in detention

o While Iraq has applied the death sentence to women, it has not been at the same scope and scale as applied to men. See "Urgent Action: Iraqi Women Facing Execution," Amnesty International, July 21, 2009; "Syria: Aftermath: Injustice, torture and death in detention in north-east Syria."

p Sponsors are typically a relative, though sometimes heads of villages or tribal leaders act as sponsors to constituents. While gender is not explicitly stated, it can thus be assumed that sponsors are predominantly male. Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw with Siobhan O'Neil, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, and Melisande Genat, "The Road Home from Al Hol Camp: Reflections on the Iraqi Experience," United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research and United Nations University, December 2022, pp. 27-30.

have not conducted any repatriation operations.[139] In doing so, these states have neglected their responsibility to hold the Islamic State responsible for its gendered violence while also increasing further risk for a new generation of vulnerable populations that continue to be held in indefinite detention, as explored above.

Since 2019, an estimated 3,600 TCNs have been returned or repatriated from Syria and Iraq to 40 different countries.[140] But the process remains too slow and inappropriately gendered. While in 2020 the United Nations warned too few women were being repatriated and facing accountability,[141] today the opposite is true: The majority of individuals repatriated between 2019 and 2024 are women and minors.[142] Due to domestic political considerations, many countries remain extremely reluctant to repatriate men and teenage boys held in prisons.[q] This means that teenage boys, who as minors according to international law were victims of the Islamic State, continue to be lumped together with adult men, perpetuating the gendered violence against them.[r] This is not to say that a threat does not exist, but most countries choose to approach this group of individuals as homogenous, rather than addressing them on a case-by-case basis.

However, repatriation is just the first step in a long process that for some countries includes accountability (for adults). Countries such as the United States, Germany, and the Netherlands have taken a prosecutorial approach. Yet, even within criminal justice efforts, variations have emerged. For example, the majority of adults repatriated by the United States have been prosecuted for involvement with the Islamic State using local terrorism legislation.[143] Conversely, Germany has led the way in utilizing international law with successful war crime prosecutions against Jennifer W. (2021),[144] Nurten J. (2021),[145] Sarah O. (2021),[146] Omaima A. (2021),[147] Jalda A. (2022),[148] and Nadine K. (2023).[149] These women faced accountability for crimes against Yazidis, though their victims had a long wait for justice. The first of these cases was concluded more than five years after the United Nations declared the Islamic State's atrocities against the community as genocide.[150] Interestingly, Germany's first war crime prosecution for the Islamic State was against an Iraqi man, Taha A.J. (2021).[s] Since then, most countries that have utilized international law charges have largely used them against female defendants.[151] Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the majority of the cases repatriated, and thus prosecuted, are adult women.[152] Gender disparities in

"Few countries have yet to utilize international law to expand Islamic State-related prosecutions beyond generic group membership. Siloed approaches to accountability—plagued by narrow investigative strategies, evidentiary challenges, and the exclusion of victims—have hamstrung efforts to achieve meaningful justice."

holding individuals accountable become even more apparent when taking into account that women were often relegated to peripheral roles under the Islamic State's gendered system of control. As such, some analysts have pointed to prosecutorial persistence and innovation to secure convictions against women for diverse charges beyond membership, including war crimes against property, as well as gendered crimes of abduction of a minor and "failure to fulfill duty of care and education."[153] To date, to the authors' knowledge, no man has been charged with similar offenses concerning the welfare of their own children born within or taken to the caliphate.

Some countries have taken a different gendered approach to accountability, charging and sentencing adult men, while never charging (or in some cases granting amnesty to) adult women. While Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia have repatriated citizens and prosecuted men, charges have not been brought against women.[154] Kosovo, on the other hand, has brought charges against women, but has either placed them under house arrest or issued suspended sentences following conviction.[155] The full implications of gendered justice related to Islamic State crimes across the international community have not yet been fully studied. However, academics and practitioners have recently sought to build up this body of research[156] and share information on holding Islamic State-affiliated persons accountable with considerations across gender, age, and ethno-religious identity.[157] In doing so, the international community has sought to remedy some of the problems related to accountability and the Islamic State's gendered violence, but there is still a long way to go.

Once Islamic State-affiliated individuals are returned or repatriated (and, in some cases, held accountable), most countries around the world focus on resettlement and reintegration.[t] The breadth of reintegration programming across the international community is vast (and deserves its own article), but the wide consensus appears to address the importance of proper reintegration programs for minors,[158] to include consideration of

q "Only the United States, Iraq, and certain Western Balkan and Central Asian countries have regularly repatriated individuals from prisons." Devorah Margolin and Camille Jablonski, "Five Years After the Caliphate, Too Much Remains the Same in Northeast Syria," Policy Watch 3847, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 19, 2024.

r The risks of this homogenizing and gendered approach to detention came to fruition in an attempted jailbreak in Hasaka involving 700 boys held hostage, with some foreign teenagers even killed in the crossfire. See Ben Hubbard, "The ISIS Hostages: 'These Children Should Not Have Been There,'" *New York Times*, January 26, 2022.

s On November 30, 2021, Taha A.-J. was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes following his enslavement and abuse of Yazidis in Fallujah, Iraq. Although Taha A.-J. and his victims are not German nationals, and his crimes were not committed on German soil, German courts have jurisdiction over the crimes of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity under the principle of universal jurisdiction. For more information, see "German court hands down first genocide conviction against ISIS member," Doughty Street Chambers, November 30, 2021.

t The vast majority of countries have moved from repatriation to rehabilitation for minors, without criminal justice proceedings. Some countries, including the United States, have brought charges against individuals who traveled to Syria and Iraq as minors but committed crimes under the group as adults. See Tanya Mehra, Merlina Herbach, Devorah Margolin, and Austin C. Doctor, "Trends in the Return and Prosecution of ISIS Foreign Terrorist Fighters in the United States," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism and the National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center, August 2023.

their gendered experiences and recovery needs.[159] Indeed, for the reintegration process to avoid the pitfalls of further embedding gendered violence, it must "frame itself around families, take a gendered approach, and provide trauma-informed care."[160] For many of the minors reintegrating into their countries of origin, both boys and girls, focusing on the trauma that they faced at the hands of the Islamic State is key to their reintegration success.[161] As such, these initiatives offer a hopeful break in the cycle of violence experienced by minors during and since Islamic State control.

One Decade Is Long Enough

Gendered analysis of Islamic State rule revealed the group's creation of a society that was built upon the centrality of men and preoccupation with feminine 'honor.' While in-group men and boys were brutalized in their forced conformity to jihadi masculine ideals, women and girls were deprived basic rights and freedoms, with control focused on erasing their bodies from the public sphere. Islamic State-affiliated women served to bridge the physical divide that resulted from the group's sex-segregation policy, facilitating ideological influence and intra-female violence against Sunni Muslim civilians and captive Yazidis. Women and girls thus disproportionately suffered under Islamic State control, not only as a result of their gender, but also through a hierarchy dependent on ethno-religious identity and group affiliation.

Despite the 2016 confirmation to the Human Rights Council that the Islamic State had carried out a genocide against the Yazidi community, few countries have yet to utilize international law to expand Islamic State-related prosecutions beyond generic group membership. Siloed approaches to accountability—plagued by narrow investigative strategies, evidentiary challenges, and the exclusion of victims—have hamstrung efforts to achieve meaningful justice.[162] However, before the thousands of Islamic State-affiliated persons can even reach a courtroom, the biggest barrier to accountability is repatriation.[u] As U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken reminded the international community in June 2023, "We know that repatriation is the only durable solution."[163] Alleviation of the detention burden in Syria and Iraq is also vital in order to refocus resources on reconciliation and recovery for local populations. While much attention has focused on affiliated individuals, a critical gap remains related to communities victimized by the Islamic State. Moreover, efforts must move beyond treatment of Islamic State victims as a monolith, and instead work to include, recognize, and respond to the needs of marginalized communities, including "widows and orphans, LGBTQ+ persons, and the disabled."[164]

It is now 10 years on from the establishment of the Islamic State caliphate and the initiation of the genocidal campaign against the Yazidis and persecution of other minority groups. As the continued U.S. presence in Syria and Iraq remains in question, addressing the Islamic State's gendered violence during its caliphate years, and ensuring that gendered violence does not continue to be perpetuated through local and international responsive efforts—or lack thereof—are vital for achieving justice, peace, and continued security. The cycle of violence—and its global ripple effect—is untenable.[165] In order to avoid further decades of gendered violence directed or inspired by the Islamic State's ideology, efforts to achieve security and accountability must address the group's fragmentation of communities and work to fully engage victims and perpetrators. CTC

u For states that are unwilling or unable to accept their citizens' return, the option to try Islamic State-affiliated persons through an International Criminal Court (ICC) tribunal is politically appealing. However, scholars have noted complications including the lack of ICC jurisdiction within Syria and Iraq, evidentiary challenges to prosecution under the Rome Statute, and conflicts with pending national prosecutions. See Pieter Omtzigt and Ewelina U. Ochab, "Bringing Daesh to Justice: What the International Community Can Do," *Journal of Genocide Research* 21:1 (2019): pp. 71, 79.

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A View from the CT Foxhole: William Braniff, Director, Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships, U.S. Department of Homeland Security

By Kristina Hummel and Samuel Bowles

William Braniff is the director of the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3) at the United States Department of Homeland Security. Within this capacity, he leads the Department's efforts to strengthen the country's ability to prevent targeted violence and terrorism. Braniff previously served as the START director and a professor of the practice at the University of Maryland, the director of practitioner education at West Point's Combating Terrorism Center, and an instructor in the Department of Social Sciences at West Point. Braniff is a graduate of the United States Military Academy. Following his Company Command in the U.S. Army, he attended the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies where he received a master's degree in international relations. Braniff then served as a foreign affairs specialist for the National Nuclear Security Agency.

Braniff previously served as a member of the editorial board of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism-The Hague, the RESOLVE Network Research Advisory Board, the Prosecution Project Advisory Board, the Hedayah Center International Advisory Board, and the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism Independent Advisory Committee, as well as serving as a non-voting advisor to the Board of CHC Global. He was also a founding board member of We the Veterans and Military Families, an organization dedicated to strengthening American democracy.

CTC: You have been working in the terrorism studies and counterterrorism fields for more than 15 years, including time at the Combating Terrorism Center as Director of Practitioner Education, as Director of the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), and in your current role as Director of DHS' Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3). How would you characterize the arc and evolution of the terrorism studies field and the United States' approach to CT over the past decade and a half?

Braniff: I think you could argue that the decade after 9/11 was largely about integrating our special operations community with our intelligence community. We were trying to figure out how to find, fix, finish the enemy and then exploit and analyze data captured on the battlefield to increase our ability to action the next series of targets in a way that was as debilitating as possible to our adversaries.

The decade *after* the decade after 9/11, we started to really integrate our federal law enforcement efforts so that we could find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and prosecute here in the United States. This is in part because we weren't just focused on overseas contingency operations; we were also focused on homegrown violent extremists here in the United States inspired by al-Qa`ida and its global movement, and then the Islamic State and its movement. Involving our federal law enforcement community became really essential.

In this decade, I would like to see us really turn our resources to prevention, not just responding to already mobilizing violent actors. Counterterrorism alone, no matter how exquisite, is reactive. It's not strategy. It's certainly not grand strategy. The closest thing we have to grand strategy in terms of decreasing the volume of targeted violence and terrorism over time is a public health-informed approach to prevention. It's not that I would like to integrate our public health community *into* the counterterrorism apparatus, but I would like to bring our public health-informed approach to targeted violence prevention to maturity here in the United States so that there is less need for traditional counterterrorism and law enforcement responses in the first place.

This proactive approach involves mental health professionals, behavioral health professionals, social workers, school counselors—individuals who already do violence prevention work, such as suicide prevention, prevention of violence against children, and intimate partner violence prevention. I would like to bring them into the targeted violence and terrorism prevention space as a way to decrease the volume of individuals who ever get to the point where they see violence as an attractive way to solve a particular problem, address a grievance, or advance a goal.

CTC: What are the advantages of a public health-informed approach to preventing terrorism and targeted violence?

Braniff: Since the mid-1980s, the public health community has treated violence as a public health issue. Over the last three-plus decades, they've funded research into the underlying factors that either increase or decrease the likelihood of violence, they've created evidence-based violence prevention programs, and they've measured and evaluated the effectiveness of those programs. By building our targeted violence prevention work on top of the existing body of literature on violence prevention more broadly, we're really standing on three decades of evidence and practice. We're not starting over, and through measurement and evaluation of our programs, we can continue to improve that evidence base specifically as it relates to targeted violence and terrorism prevention. Additionally, these principles apply equally well to different forms of targeted violence that plague Americans, including terrorism, pre-meditated hate crime, and grievance-based violence like school shootings, making this an efficient approach. Further, it allows us to benefit from a highly skilled and experienced population of violence prevention

Levels of Prevention	Partner Examples	Programs
Primordial Advocating to Prevent the Development of Risk Factors	Policy Makers; State & City Government	Civic Engagement, Youth Resilience, Law Enforcement Community Engagement
Primary Fostering resilient communities	Public Health Workers; School Admins & Social Workers	Training and Awareness, Bystander Training, Social Cohesion Programming
Secondary Providing services to people at risk	School Counselors; Mental Health Providers; BTAM Teams	Referral Services, BTAM, Intervention Services
Tertiary Supporting offenders to facilitate positive community re-entry	Judges, Prosecutors, Defense Attorneys; Re-Entry, Parole & Probation Officers	Rehabilitation and Reintegration Services, Post-Attack Recovery

The public health-informed approach to prevention work utilizd by DHS' Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships

providers[a] for the first time. This approach is the fastest way to build our national capacity for targeted violence prevention. And that's exactly what we're doing.

CTC: Tell us about CP3's mission. What are its goals?

Braniff: The mission of CP3 is, in short, to build the national capacity to prevent targeted violence and terrorism. To do so, we have five lines of effort. We have a research and content development team because our work is evidence based. We have field staff who build partner capacity through technical assistance. We have a grants program to provide financial assistance to partners. We have a strategic engagement team that builds strategic partnerships internationally, at the interagency level, and with other national-level organizations from different sectors. And we have a strategic communications team to help normalize a culture of targeted violence and terrorism prevention nationally.

It's important to note that CP3 does not conduct interventions directly. We work with partners and build their capacity to do prevention work, ranging from societal-level interventions to individual-level interventions. From the public health community, we understand that there are interventions that operate at different levels and rely on different partners to achieve different goals, but like a defense in depth, they work together to help reduce the risk of violence.

Primordial prevention is about creating laws, policies, or norms that decrease the likelihood of violence. We work with state governments to help them write targeted violence prevention strategies, for example.

Primary prevention is about building on the strengths of individuals, relationships, and communities so that individuals in those contexts are empowered. They don't need violence as a solution to a problem, to advance an agenda, or to address a grievance. Primary prevention programs often occur at the community level. You can imagine a primary prevention program in a high school that helps build a mentorship program to decrease risk factors for violence like social isolation and bullying. In a primary prevention context, you're not tackling violence directly, but you're addressing risk and protective factors, typically through strengths-based programming, to decrease the likelihood of violence in the future.

Secondary prevention programs are safety nets. If an individual is at risk of engaging in violence, you wrap your arms around that person before they've committed any criminal act, create a case management plan to address whatever risk factors might be in their lives, and build protective factors to buffer against those outcomes. These are what people typically think of when you think of the word 'intervention,' similar to a suicide intervention. If someone exhibits concerning behaviors, for example, by ideating about 'beating the Columbine score' or 'starting a racial holy war,' there is an opportunity for an intervention. These verbal ideations occur frequently in instances of targeted violence. Eighty-three percent of school shooters leak their intention, 47 percent of mass casualty

a Editor's Note: According to the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships: "For the purposes of CP3, a prevention provider is a skilled and knowledgeable professional who directly or indirectly prevents violence by helping people develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to achieve safe, positive, healthy outcomes."

attackers leak their intention, over 80 percent of the foreign fighters who join the Islamic State and other similar groups exhibit observable indicators like leakage.[1] CP3 supports the creation of non-punitive and multidisciplinary behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) teams to create these safety nets.

Then there's tertiary prevention, and these are the rehabilitation and reintegration efforts that occur after someone has engaged in some sort of violent extremism or predicate crime. In some instances, these are individuals coming out of prison. In other instances, these are people who are trying to exit violent extremist movements and need help in exiting. Tertiary prevention is really important from a risk reduction standpoint. We know who these individuals are, they are relatively small in number, and they're at the highest risk of engaging in a violent outcome. Investing in their rehabilitation and reintegration is cost-effective, pragmatic risk reduction. It's also socially challenging—think NIMBY[b]—and not something that the U.S. has historically invested in. We are trying to change that.

CTC: What entities is CP3 collaborating with to pursue this public health-informed approach?

Braniff: One of the things that I'm really excited about at the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships is that as we have adopted a public health-informed approach to our work, we have hired an incredibly diverse set of professionals to improve our ability to collaborate. We have experienced former law enforcement and individuals with homeland security backgrounds. We also have trauma-informed child counselors and public health officials who have run public health programs at the city and state level. We have social workers. We have mental health professionals who spent their careers doing co-response with law enforcement. We have talented researchers and effective communicators. We've built a multidisciplinary team that reflects the multidisciplinary network of prevention providers that we're working with around the country.

We work every day with local offices of public health, mental and behavioral health professionals, social workers, school counselors, and select law enforcement partners like school resource officers and crisis intervention teams. We also work with national organizations that have local representatives like the Safe States Alliance,[c] NGOs like the Strong Cities Network,[d] and national communities of practice like the Prevention Practitioners Network.[e] Just to give you a metric: In the first five months of this calendar year, we created 184 new partnerships with prevention providers around the country.

William Braniff

CTC: In your remarks at a CTC conference in April, you said the goal is to "get people help before they self-medicate on violence." This necessarily means getting far enough upstream in the radicalization process to prevent bad outcomes. What are the challenges in getting sufficiently upstream?

Braniff: When we talk to partners around the country and explain our approach, generally speaking, we're getting a really warm reception. They are looking for violence prevention solutions. They understand that we're not securitizing the conversation; we're not trying to collect intelligence or get people into a prison pipeline. We're trying to improve the health and wellness of communities. So, while there are challenges, demand from American communities is not one of them. I'll give you an example: the Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant Program. Over the last three years, we've had a more than linear increase in the demand for those grants, such that this last year we had 178 eligible applicants requesting $99 million worth of funding for an $18 million grant pool. We will fund about 20 percent of the organizations that are seeking to prevent violence in American communities.

While partner organizations are engaged, one challenge that we have is convincing individual Americans that targeted violence is preventable. You turn on the news every day, and it feels as if this violence is inevitable, that there's nothing that I can do about it, and that it's ubiquitous. And of course, if people think that, they can

b Editor's Note: NIMBY ('not in my backyard') is a term to describe opposition to a project or effort close to one's own neighborhood or community because it is considered undesirable.

c Editor's Note: A non-profit organization and professional association, "Safe States Alliance is composed of over 800 injury and violence prevention (IVP) professionals and students from across the country ... Safe States members work in a variety of public health settings, including federal, state, and local government agencies; hospitals; non-profit organizations; and colleges and universities." "Join Us," Safe States Alliance, n.d.

d Editor's Note: "The Strong Cities Network is an independent, apolitical, global network of more than 220 cities dedicated to addressing all forms and manifestations of hate, extremism and polarization that can lead to violence, within a human rights-based framework." "Information Guide," Strong Cities Network, July 2024.

e Editor's Note: "The Prevention Practitioners Network (PPN) is a national network of over 1,200 interdisciplinary professionals dedicated to using public health approaches to prevent hate-fueled violence." "Who are we?" Prevention Practitioners Network, n.d.

become resigned to the 'fact' that it's just something that we have to live with. That is not the case. So, our first challenge is to convince Americans that targeted violence is preventable so that they will take an active role in prevention, including making referrals for individuals they are concerned about.

The second challenge is creating the capacity to conduct interventions: building and resourcing the behavioral threat assessment and management teams, creating and marketing the referral mechanisms, identifying clinicians who are willing to take a referral for a potential perpetrator of targeted violence, and managing those cases over time. For 20-plus years, we have held the public health community at arm's length and said, 'We've got it. This is homeland security, national security stuff.' Now what we're saying is, 'We need your help. Targeted violence is not some exotic form of violence. The skills that you've developed for other forms of violence prevention are relevant and can be applied to targeted violence prevention because the underlying risk and protective factors are very, very similar. You have an essential role to play in this work.'

The third issue is convincing decision makers to allocate limited resources to prevention when it is hard to demonstrate that a specific prevention program prevented a specific number of incidents of violence. I believe we will overcome this challenge because the return on investment [ROI] for prevention is actually quite compelling. RAND has demonstrated that just the amount of money saved by engaging in fewer investigations, prosecutions, and incarcerations pays for prevention programs very, very quickly.[2] In addition to that, there's the human and financial cost of violence averted. A mass casualty attack has direct and indirect costs that can measure in the hundreds of millions of dollars. And then there's the positive return on investment from getting an individual access to services so that they can become more productive students, employees, and members of society.

The commissioner of the New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services, Jackie Bray, recently wrote an op-ed for the *New York Daily News* in which she recounts the last year of work that New York State has done in terms of prevention.[3] We helped fund their initial behavioral threat assessment and management team, and we supported their state strategy development process. They now have behavioral threat assessment and management teams in every county and in New York City. They've conducted 1,200 interventions in less than a year, and she says that every one of those county behavioral threat assessment and management teams has recorded 'saves,' meaning lives saved. She recounts an example where an individual and that person's family got access to support that they otherwise wouldn't have had, and that now they're thriving. She has also recounted publicly that in one of those instances, an individual had written a manifesto and had access to a stockpile of weapons. Convinced of the ROI of prevention, New York State now makes $10 million of their own grant funding available per year to pay for their county-level programs. And I would argue they have covered the cost for their programs for the next three decades, let alone the lives that they've saved and improved.

Sharing those success stories and ensuring everyday Americans, violence prevention providers, and policymakers understand that this is a pragmatic, cost-effective, *and* scalable way to reduce risk is really important if we're to overcome these three challenges.

CTC: Speaking of the Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant Program, can you walk us through what CP3 is looking for, broadly speaking, in terms of recipients of that funding?

"At the macro level, success is creating a culture of violence prevention in the United States akin to our culture of suicide prevention—having individuals understand that this form of violence is preventable and that they have a role play. That's a cultural change, and it's a really important one. We're working to normalize targeted violence prevention, and that will go a long way to reducing the level of violence in the United States."

Braniff: The Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant Program is guided by our notice of funding opportunity, which spells out exactly what we're looking to fund. We have priority categories that we announce each year to drive innovation in certain areas where we think the country needs to develop new promising practices. We also encourage applicants to apply for funds to replicate promising practices to increase the national capacity to prevent targeted violence.

CP3 is looking for grantees who are diverse by every measure. Grantees are diverse geographically; they come from all over the country, from urban and rural settings. They are diverse in terms of the communities they represent and work with, whether those are religious communities or minority communities or the LGBTQ+ community. They are organizationally diverse, including state, local, tribal, territorial organizations as well as universities and non-governmental organizations. We think it's really important to build capacity across the whole of society because all of these different organizations and actors can serve as prevention providers. They all have a role to play in this work, and in fact, none of them can do this work alone.

We enlist support from dozens of civil servants across the Department of Homeland Security and interagency to help us evaluate the grant applications according to a rubric. All of the grant applications that we select are made public. As grantees wrap up their work, we publish the results—the deliverables from those grants—on our Grantee Results website[4] to ensure that we're fostering transparency throughout that process.

CTC: When you consider targeted violence and terrorism prevention efforts, what does success look like to you and how would you define a successful outcome in this space?

Braniff: At the macro level, success is creating a culture of violence prevention in the United States akin to our culture of suicide prevention—having individuals understand that this form

of violence is preventable and that they have a role play. That's a cultural change, and it's a really important one. We're working to normalize targeted violence prevention, and that will go a long way to reducing the level of violence in the United States.

At a more tactical level, when we invest in primary prevention programs, we want to see that we've enhanced protective factors that we know from the research are associated with a decrease in the likelihood of violence. We want to know that we've helped establish meaningful relationships between youth and an adult, that we've decreased bullying, that we've increased social inclusion. We want to know that we've increased access to mental health, behavioral health, and social services. We want to know that communities have a greater level of awareness of behavioral indicators associated with targeted violence. There are a whole host of positive outcomes that can be measured, even if you can't prove that they have resulted in a specific act of violence *not* happening. Just like with diet and exercise, we know the benefits of health markers even if we understand that improvements in our health do not guarantee we will avoid a medical issue in the future.

In the context of secondary and tertiary prevention programs, we want to know that through case management we have increased access to protective factors and we've decreased risk factors for that individual and their social network. We also want to understand outcomes in that case: Did people get access to services? Did they have to be suspended or were they able to stay employed or stay in the classroom? Have they stopped exhibiting concerning behaviors, like fixating on violence? Did they receive an equitable outcome? These are, again, all measurable outcomes.

Just as it is important to define what success is, it is also important to define what failure isn't. It is important to reject the idea that if a prevention program isn't 100 percent successful, then it's a failure. We don't think like that in any other arena of risk reduction. We don't say that the fire department, fire safety codes, or smoke alarms are useless because there was a fire. We know that they help reduce the likelihood of fires generally. In the targeted violence and terrorism prevention space, we sometimes see these strawman arguments suggesting that if a prevention program doesn't work in one instance, then the whole enterprise is a failure. That is a really self-defeating double standard, and I would encourage us not to go down that road.

Instead, it's important to benchmark the success of prevention programs against the alternative—their absence. Data from START at the University of Maryland demonstrates that 57 percent of domestic violent extremist plotters who intend to kill or injure somebody succeed in killing or injuring someone.[5] The success rate is really high for domestic violent extremist plots in part because the law enforcement community alone cannot conduct a disruption if someone has not yet broken the law or presented an imminent and likely threat. While they may not be successful every time, early and non-punitive interventions can fill that structural gap and save lives.

CTC: So often, effective intervention in specific cases involves bystander intervention. But as we know, very often, there is hesitancy from the bystander to get involved—fear of mistaken judgment, fear of negatively impacting someone's life, fear of retribution, and so on. How does CP3 work to overcome bystander hesitancy?

Braniff: That's a great question. Bystander hesitancy is a byproduct of individuals thinking they only have one option when they witness concerning behavior, and that is to call the police. What we're trying to do at CP3 is create non-punitive opportunities for multidisciplinary interventions in which the person you're concerned about gets access to help. If you're concerned about someone, you ask him a caring question: 'Are you thinking about hurting someone, or is there something else that's got you upset?' The question really is, can we create opportunities for non-criminal justice interventions before someone gets to the point of crossing a criminal threshold, hurting themselves, or hurting others?

The answer is 'absolutely.' There is peer-reviewed research on behavioral threat assessment and management teams in schools by authors like Dewey Cornell, for example, who highlights that these programs have been running for many years with thousands of outcomes, and they result in fewer suspensions, fewer investigations, fewer incarnations, fewer incidents of violence, and more equitable outcomes for students of color.[6] This is because these teams used structured protocols that reduce implicit bias, allow for early non-punitive interventions from helping professionals, and keep kids in school where they have a support system and access to resources. These programs work and gain traction over time.

In Colorado, there is a program called Safe2Tell. It's an anonymous tip line to support school communities. They triaged over 22,000 reports last year regarding a wide range of concerns, and they refer individuals who need support to trained professionals.[7] The more that becomes a norm—non-punitive interventions, including when someone makes an offhand comment about engaging in an act of targeted violence—the more individuals will *turn* to these non-punitive opportunities. And that's really important—that we *normalize* targeted violence prevention.

When I was a kid, if I said, 'I don't know if I can deal with this anymore,' the common wisdom was 'don't ask Bill a question about suicide. You might push him over the edge.' It was a taboo topic, and we didn't talk about it. Today, when 83 percent of school shooters leak their intent, it's a taboo topic and people rationalize putting their head in the sand: 'I don't really take him seriously. I don't want to get him in trouble. He was probably just blustering.' If we can normalize interventions from care teams—teams that actually care about supporting these individuals—we can decrease bystander hesitancy.

CTC: One of the stated priority areas for the TVTP Grant Program is efforts that address exploitation of the online realm. In recent years, there's been increased focus in the CVE community on the gaming space as an environment that extremists can exploit, particularly via gaming adjacent platforms like Reddit, Discord, Twitch, and Steam. Do you share this concern over exploitation in the gaming space, and if so, how does CP3 think about gaming as a newer source of exploitation by bad actors?

Braniff: CP3 is primarily in the solution space. And so, when we look at games, we see an opportunity to create prevention programs. Games are a place where people have fun. They create relationships. They teach skills. So, the question is, are we going to compete for youth in those spaces and channel that opportunity into pro-social behavior, or are we going to cede that terrain and let a violent extremist recruiter use the same positive attributes of games to

convince people to engage in violent behavior? We do see gaming platforms as incredibly important given the market share that they possess and the amount of time that individuals—not just young people—spend playing games.[f] But we see it as an opportunity for positive interventions, and that's how we invest our resources.

I have one employee who focuses on games and game-adjacent platforms as part of his responsibilities, and we have funded organizations through our Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant Program that focus on the gaming space. For example, we fund an organization that helps to create Esports clubs in schools.[8] Like other sports teams, these Esports clubs have a coach and each player has teammates. By creating an environment where youth have access to meaningful relationships with an adult mentor and peers, they can build a healthy culture around their gaming lifestyle.

CTC: Earlier, you mentioned that CP3 works to develop strategic international partnerships. What are those relationships, and how do they work?

Braniff: We work most closely, but not exclusively, with our Five Eyes[g] partners; they each have offices similar to the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships. We share lessons learned and best practices. We try to create opportunities for practitioners in the United States to engage with practitioners in Canada, for example.

We also work closely with the Five RD network, which is the research and development arm of the Five Eyes partnership. Collectively, the DHS Science and Technology Directorate and their counterparts fund meaningful research that all of us benefit from as practitioners. CP3 takes a public health-informed approach to targeted violence prevention in large part due to research funded by DHS S&T and the Five RD network.

CTC: When you look at the domestic threat landscape, what keeps you up at night more? Is it the threat from domestic violent extremists? Or the threat from homegrown violent extremists? Or do you not view the threat landscape that way, in that you're trying to prevent violence from as many individuals as you can irrespective of the type of ideology they've ascribed to?

Braniff: It's more the latter. The Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships is intended to prevent targeted violence, and targeted violence is a broader categorization of violence that would include terrorist actors, whether they are motivated by a foreign designated terrorist organization or a domestic violent extremist movement. But we're also addressing premeditated hate crimes and grievance-based violence like many acts of school or workplace violence. That's a really broad spectrum of violence. One of the virtues of a public health-informed approach to violence prevention is it's not predicated on any specific ideology, grievance, or bias. It's really looking at underlying risk and protective factors before they manifest as any of the above. The value here is that when individuals have better coping skills, healthy relationships, and are part of communities that are more empowered, you're decreasing the likelihood of any one of those violent outcomes. Individuals who don't have access to those protective factors might wind up self-medicating on this bias, that ideology, or that grievance. But that fixation usually comes as part of a process; it's not necessarily the impetus for why the person starts down a pathway to violence.

That being said, we engage with communities around the country and listen to the things that they're concerned about. A lot of what our partners care about are the more frequent forms of violence, whether those are school shootings and instances of workplace violence, acts of premeditated hate crime or domestic violent extremism. International terrorism and homegrown violent extremism are just much less frequent forms of violence in the United States.

CTC: You are an Army veteran and a West Point graduate. You served as a founding board member of We the Veterans and Military Families, which is a nonpartisan, non-profit organization with a mission to "empower the veteran and military family community to strengthen America."[9] One of the organization's projects is Vet the Vote. Can you tell us about that initiative and your work for the veterans community?

Braniff: When explaining the public health-informed approach to targeted violence prevention, one of the things I mentioned is that we can take a strengths-based approach. We can invest in building the protective factors that crowd out the attractiveness of violence as a solution, and We the Veterans and Military Families has a similar philosophy. They are building on the strengths of the veteran and military family population to strengthen American democracy, harnessing their patriotism, professionalism, and sense of civic duty. In the face of anti-democratic threats against our volunteer poll workers, Vet the Vote simply asks veterans and military family members to volunteer to help their neighbors vote and make sure our elections run smoothly. And veterans and military family members have answered. They've agreed that this is a great way to serve their local community and to continue serving the nation out of uniform. It's positive. It's empowering. And the results have spoken for themselves. In three months in 2022, We the Veterans and Military Families recruited 65,000 poll workers, which was half of the national shortage at the time.

I did it in 2022, and it's the closest I've felt to putting the uniform back on, to be honest. It was really nice way to connect with my sense of public service and my community. And even though I recused myself from the board of We the Veterans when I took this job at DHS, I have signed up to Vet the Vote again this election, and I'm not alone. Already, We the Veterans and Military Families has recruited over 140,000 poll workers[10]—making this form of public service a new norm in our community, and ensuring we'll never have a shortage of poll workers in the future. It's a testament to the fact that when you ask veterans and military family members to serve in a positive way, they deliver. CTC

f Editor's Note: "There are approximately 3.32 billion active video gamers worldwide [and today,] the video game market is worth an estimated $282 billion." Josh Howarth, "How Many Gamers Are There? (New 2024 Statistics)," Exploding Topics, June 11, 2024. For more on extremist exploitation of gaming-adjacent platforms, see Kristina Hummel and Madeleine Biscaichipy, "A View from the CT Foxhole: Jessica White and Galen Lamphere-Englund, Co-Conveners, Extremism and Gaming Research Network," *CTC Sentinel* 16:3 (2023).

g Editor's Note: The Five Eyes (FVEY) is an intelligence alliance of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

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3 Editor's Note: Jackie Bray, "Preventing domestic terror and violence," *New York Daily News*, May 18, 2024.

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A 'Hotbed' or a Slow, Painful Burn? Explaining Central Asia's Role in Global Terrorism

By Noah Tucker and Edward Lemon

After a string of terrorist attacks in Russia, Iran, and Afghanistan involving Central Asian citizens, as well as foiled plots and arrests in the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and Turkey, Central Asia is once again in the spotlight as a supposed center of terrorism. But this narrative of a constantly growing threat does not fit well with reality. Compared to only a decade ago, when over 4,000 Central Asians traveled to Syria and Iraq to join militant organizations, the levels of recruitment and volume of messaging have decreased substantially. To explain terrorism from Central Asia or measure the potential threat, the authors contend it is important not to overly focus on the narratives in slick recruiting videos that only reach a few hundred people. Given the lack of evidence for a new wave of mass recruiting, the authors suggest that the recent spike of attacks and arrests is the 'long tail' of the Islamic State. After the collapse of the Islamic State's territorial holdings in Syria in 2019, many operatives migrated to Europe, forming sleeper cells, some of which have been disrupted in the past year. Mobilization of Central Asians also remains primarily an issue tied to migration. With the notable exception of Kazakhstan where internal migration and displacement play key roles, Central Asian participation in terrorist groups remains primarily an issue that manifests itself outside the region. Instead of focusing primarily on online recruiting, the authors argue one should focus on the factors that led to mobilization to Syria and Iraq a decade ago and that have been exacerbated in recent years, especially in Tajikistan, including crackdowns on religion, corrupt ineffective governance, high levels of migration, and well-established terror networks that are holdovers from the peak of the Islamic State.

After a string of terrorist attacks in Russia,[1] Iran,[2] and Afghanistan[3] involving Central Asian citizens, as well as foiled plots and arrests in the United States,[4] Germany,[5] the Netherlands,[6] Italy,[7] and Turkey,[8] Central Asia is once again in the spotlight as a supposed center of terrorism. Most of the incidents were linked to Islamic State Khorasan (ISK), and the majority, including the Crocus City Hall attack in March 2024, involved citizens of Tajikistan. Much of the analysis frames Tajikistan as an "utter hotbed of ISIS activity"[9] that has "suffered from a long-running extremist Islamist insurgency"[10] and points to the more prominent role of Central Asians in global terrorism as evidence of ISK's "increasing efforts to build support within Central Asia."[11] This analysis further paints Central Asia as a region being bombarded with terrorist messaging.[12] For many years, such "discourses of danger" have framed Central Asia as peculiarly vulnerable to Islamist insurgency due to it being "obscure, ethnically and politically fractious, essentially Oriental."[13]

But this narrative of a constantly growing threat does not fit well with reality. Compared to only a decade ago, when over 4,000 Central Asians traveled to Syria and Iraq to join militant organizations,[14] the levels of recruitment and volume of messaging have decreased substantially. To explain this problem or measure its potential threat, one should not overly focus on the narratives in slick recruiting videos that reach only a very small dedicated audience. Telegram channels that reach only several dozen people, for example, are not a reliable indicator for population-level threats in a region of just under 80 million.[a]

In order to make a more accurate assessment, it is important to put recent ISK activity into the context of three decades of terrorism, insurgency, and conflict migration in the region.[15] Factors that led to mobilization to Syria and Iraq a decade ago have been exacerbated in recent years, especially in Tajikistan where the government has continued to expand its brutal crackdowns on practicing Muslims and on civil society writ large that along with economic factors displace large portions of its population.[16] Rehabilitation programs for people who were in Syria, including

a Numbers here and throughout are derived from datasets that a collection team at the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs has been building on violent extremism content in Central Asian languages through consistent monitoring for the past three years. Researchers within the team have done similar monitoring for a variety of different projects since 2012. The authors also note that media shared between individuals in private communication is not captured by this monitoring, and some ad-hoc sharing of materials may also not be captured. But they feel it is important to note that opinion pieces and popular press reports that describe official recruiting groups, such as the now defunct *Khuroson Ovozi* in Uzbek, as "growing" fail to include numbers for context and when independently verified are found to have "grown" from around a dozen to a few dozen followers.

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children and teens who returned deeply traumatized after years of war and displacement, are quietly being closed.[17] Reintegration or even demobilization efforts never extended to individuals who did not return to their home countries, including hundreds of former militants and conflict migrants who fled Syria for Europe. Given the lack of evidence for a new wave of mass recruiting, the authors suggest that the recent spike of attacks and arrests of Central Asian migrants is the 'long tail' of the Islamic State—that after the collapse of the Islamic State's territorial holdings in Syria in 2019, many operatives migrated to Europe, forming sleeper cells, some of which have been disrupted in the past year.[18] In other words, what remains is a small but resilient contingent of individuals dedicated to the cause and still determined to carry out attacks. There are now well-established networks of enablers to facilitate fake passports, safe houses, and support for operations, including classic insurgency-style, network-based recruiting.

This article begins with an analysis of the threat of terrorism within Central Asia and the role that Central Asians have played in attacks and networks outside of the region. It goes on to highlight how the volume of online messaging from violent extremist organizations targeting Central Asians has decreased over the past decade along with the level of recruitment. It argues that recent attacks are the product of a 'long tail' of the Islamic State and the result of unaddressed push and pull factors that drive a small number of Central Asians toward terrorism. The article concludes with an assessment of how the threat may evolve going forward.

The Rarity of Terrorism in Central Asia

Contrary to alarmist rhetoric about the region being a hotbed of terrorism, Central Asia itself has not experienced much terrorism.[19] Central Asia is home to one percent of the world's population and accounts for only 0.001 percent of entries in the attacks recorded in the Global Terrorism Database since 1970. There have been 19 attacks in the region since 2008, according to the author's (Lemon's) own data.[b] And since 2008, 155 individuals have died in terrorist attacks in Central Asia. The majority were members of law enforcement (80) and terrorist groups (64). There have been 11 civilian casualties (mostly collateral damage). Half of these incidents have occurred in the region's most prosperous state, Kazakhstan, with over half of the deaths occurring in Tajikistan.

Most of this violence is not so much a part of global terror networks as it is rooted in local political struggles, corruption, and repression. A string of violent events between 2008 and 2011 that the government of Tajikistan labeled terrorism were, in fact, more linked to power dynamics between local warlords given power over local communities as part of the peace deal that ended the civil war and the central government seeking to take back control.[20] Kazakhstan's first suicide bombing in 2011 was conducted by a lone wolf actor who had links to organized crime and targeted the local security services headquarters "in order to evade responsibility for criminal offenses as part of an organized criminal group."[21]

Three of the world's least-free countries are in Central Asia according to the 2024 *Freedom in the World* report, and all five Central Asian countries are now classed as consolidated authoritarian regimes.[22] To be sure, a great deal of violence has rocked these societies in the past 30 years. Tajikistan was torn by civil war for five years (1992-1997), and life in southern Kyrgyzstan has been shaped by recurring rounds of deadly ethnic conflict. In between, however, most of the violence experienced by Central Asians has come from their own states. In only three incidents combined in 2022, roughly twice as many citizens of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan were killed by police or security forces for participating in protests in the span of a few days than the total killed by all attacks attributed to terrorism over the past 20 years.

Notably, more acts of terrorism perpetrated by Central Asians have manifested outside of the region as Central Asians pushed and pulled out of their home communities were inspired by or found common cause with armed Islamist groups that promised to build a utopia for oppressed Muslims or fight back against what they claim are the root causes of the suffering that Central Asians experience. Central Asians have been involved in a range of attacks outside of the region, at the Karachi airport in Pakistan in 2014, in Stockholm, New York, and Istanbul in 2017—the latter three of which were all lone-wolf attacks justified as vengeance against those who supported military efforts to destroy that pseudo-utopia and for the deaths of women and children allegedly killed in the process.[23] Very often, however, Central Asian recruits are co-opted by international militant groups for their own purposes.

Unique aspects of the Central Asian mobilization to Syrian conflict, especially the frequency with which recruits brought extended families with them, offer some clues to what they were seeking. After the start of the Syrian civil war, and particularly after the declaration of the Islamic State's pseudo-utopian 'caliphate' in 2014, when over 4,000 Central Asians traveled to Syria and Iraq to join armed groups, they often did so with their whole families—from great-grandchildren to elderly matriarchs—seeking a new life and a future they could not see for themselves at home.[24]

The Decline in Terrorist Messaging

The authors' research from 2012 to the present indicates that Uzbek-language messaging has fallen precipitously over the past decade, and while Tajik-language material has seen an uptick over the past year, it remains nowhere near its peak 2014 levels. Three years of working with a team of local-language analysts to monitor the volume and content of jihadi messaging in Uzbek, Tajik, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Russian[c] has shown that overt recruiting has far less resonance and reaches a much smaller audience than it did during the Syrian conflict, and that operators have shifted from direct recruiting to messaging that seeks to build longer-term support for the project they sell as an alternative to Western-style

b Defined as events initiated by a non-state group (counterterrorism operations are excluded) and those labeled "terrorism" by the government. These are updated figures based on Edward Lemon, "Kennan Cable No. 38: Talking Up Terrorism in Central Asia," Kennan Institute, Wilson Center, December 2018.

c The monitoring project built and continually updated databases of both official and 'sympathizer' or unbranded jihadi messaging operations in all of these languages, from websites to all social media platforms on which activity was detected. At the beginning of that period, Telegram was by far the most important, but over the course of three years, activity has shifted heavily to YouTube and Instagram with some tentative efforts being made on TikTok as well. Resonance is measured in engagement (likes, dislikes, and comments) and voluntary resharing beyond the initial groups or channels in which the message appeared. Data collection focused on the efforts in these languages by the Islamic State and its affiliates, including ISK, as well as Central Asian-led groups such as Tavhid va Jihod Katibasi and al-Bukhoriy Katibasi, and their efforts to promote Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Taliban, their respective sponsors.

Members of emergency services work at the scene of the attack at the Crocus City Hall concert hall in Krasnogorsk, outside Moscow, Russia, on March 23, 2024. (Stringer/AFP via Getty Images)

democracy, building on the success of the Taliban just across the border. The analysis produced the following takeaways:

- **Audience sizes are very small and do not appear to be growing.** In three years of consistent monitoring, official ISK groups messaging in Uzbek have failed to reach an audience larger than around 60 subscribers and have an average lifespan of less than a month before being flagged and shut down. Each time a group is recreated, it loses subscribers and rarely gains ground with new ones. Groups in Tajik attract larger numbers, but mostly less than 1,000. For reference, the largest general al-Qa`ida-Taliban-Hayat Tahrir al-Sham-supporting mixed Uzbek group the authors identified on Telegram three years ago had more than 15,000 followers at its peak just after the Taliban retook Kabul. Today, it no longer exists, and the largest similar channel monitored by the authors currently has less than half of that 2021 level. During the Syrian conflict, Uzbek and Tajik language recruiting videos at times reached audiences of over a million viewers through several hundred identified channels. Today, there are no more than a few dozen channels in both languages that reach a sharply diminished total audience.
- **Small pockets of ISK dissenters from the Taliban spend most of their energy in Central Asian languages trying to convince people the Taliban are illegitimate and part of the global '*kaffir*' conspiracy.** ISK media in Uzbek, for example, focuses on trying to convince followers that the Taliban are in the pocket of Iran, receiving plane-loads of cash from the CIA, or sponsoring new synagogues across Afghanistan. Even the small audiences of Central Asians these messages reach are indifferent to these conspiracy theories or find them ridiculous, and ISK messaging or even these general narratives rarely break out of their siloed channels on Telegram.
- **Tajik-language materials are slightly more prominent.** While it focuses on sectarian divisions and criticizes the Taliban, ISK's more developed Tajik-language messaging echoes local grievances held by many Tajiks, criticizing the government of Tajikistan and framing it as a corrupt, immoral enemy of Islam that is controlled by Russia.
- **The primary change in terrorist messaging in Central Asian languages has been the shift away from recruiting to 'adjacent' messaging channels that try to shift public opinion in the longer term away from democracy and toward Taliban-style Islamic governance.** This evolution responds to several new developments: the changing realities of what the groups can get away with publishing on platforms such as Telegram and YouTube and a new geopolitical reality with what they promote as the Taliban's victory over the rest of the world. It also signals a shift in strategy. As Central Asian-led groups such as the Tavhid va Jihod Brigade and

the al Bukhariy Brigade found themselves pinned down in an increasingly small sliver of territory in northern Syria, the logistics of recruiting became much more difficult. Most al-Qa`ida or Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)-aligned battalions shifted their messaging operations to celebrating what they saw as the Taliban's victory over ISAF forces. Their messages continue to focus on touting the Taliban's everyday governance such as anti-narcotics crackdowns, law-and-order policing, and a system of government they say better reflects the indigenous cultures and values of Central Asians than European or American-style liberal democracy they argue was imposed by force.

- **Touting the Taliban's victory is incompatible with recruiting.** Central Asian violent extremist groups that support the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan want to portray the Taliban as a powerful force that has transitioned from war to peacetime governance; they cannot simultaneously need help from the outside. Instead, messaging operations have shifted heavily to unbranded 'pseudo-news' platforms that draw far bigger audiences than branded recruiting operations and are working on a long-game strategy, interpreting or falsifying current events in the region and beyond to fit with the broader narrative that a Taliban-style caliphate is a better, more just social model for the historically Muslim peoples of Central Asia. In some ways, these messages fit in well with the global trend of populist anti-liberalism embodied by Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Sadyr Japarov in Kyrgyzstan.

Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and ethnic Uzbek communities in Kyrgyzstan have become the focus of recruitment efforts in the region from both armed and purely political Islamist groups that emphasize the argument that Western democracy has failed to deliver on the promises of the 1990s for the former Soviet states. Tajikistan remains at the center of the mobilization in part because all the other Central Asian countries have had leadership changes that in different ways have worked as a pressure-release valve and allowed some grievances to at least be expressed. In Uzbekistan, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev released thousands of religious prisoners, relaxed some restrictions on religion such as allowing the call to prayer, and set in motion a broader set of changes that punished corruption among local officials and relaxed some everyday repressions.[25] After Kazakhstan erupted in fiery protests in January 2022 that finally toppled the cult of Nursultan Nazarbayev, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has promised a "New Kazakhstan."[26] Hollow though these promises may be, they have allowed grievances to be channeled in different ways. Meanwhile, under Japarov who came to power in 2020, Kyrgyzstan has turned toward illiberal populism and ethnonationalism.

ISK does not have mass appeal in Central Asia; its sectarian messaging falls on largely deaf ears, and its grievances against the Taliban and Russia are not shared by most in the region. Their continued, albeit limited, presence is in many ways a holdover from a decade ago, when the larger Islamic State did manage to recruit thousands of aggrieved Central Asians into its ranks with its vision of an Islamist utopia. Connections with those who were part of the original wave of recruits remain important. According to the authors' colleagues working on the ground in these regions, hotspot communities that sent disproportionate numbers of people to Syria and Iraq appear still to have some sympathy for the Islamic State that may extend to ISK. Some of those involved in recent foiled or executed attacks have relatives who fought in Syria, including Crocus suspect Dalerjon Mirzoev.[27] Three other suspects arrested or killed in Europe and Russia had links to returnee women, though at this stage it is not clear whether those links were the cause of suspicion or discovered after suspects were identified in their own right. The authors have found in field assessments during projects supporting returnee reintegration that pockets of disaffected, isolationist Islamist communities continue to exist in the hotspots that returnees came from and are returning to in at least Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where the same problems that pushed people into the Islamic State remain unresolved.

Risk and Protective Factors Remain Unaddressed

The unexpected scale of mobilization to the Syrian conflict and the response from U.S. agencies and international organizations led to a similarly unprecedented investment in research such as USAID's Central Asia Secure and Stable Societies project (CASSS) in which both authors were involved as lead investigators. From this and other projects, including monitoring efforts that involve fieldwork in hotspot communities and projects supporting returnees seeking to reintegrate into the communities they left, significant evidence is available on the push/pull or risk and protective factors that contributed to that mobilization and remain risks for future vulnerability, not only to far-off groups such as ISK but to explosions of protest and conflict such as those that erupted in 2022 in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

Systemic factors that terrorist groups have used to drive recruitment are not hard to identify and have remained consistent over the last two decades. Authoritarian governance, corruption, and violations of religious freedoms, such as hijab bans, crackdowns on beards, and restrictions on religious education are perennial themes.[28] These grievances are particularly acute for certain communities that have been hotspots of recruitment, such as ethnic Uzbeks from the south of Kyrgyzstan who have witnessed discrimination and ethnic violence, especially since 2010; the Rasht Valley in Tajikistan, which the central government has brutally suppressed since the civil war; and 'rust belt' towns like copper mining monotown Zhezkazgan in Kazakhstan, areas that are far from economic hubs where opportunities are lacking and where strikes and organized labor have been brutally suppressed.[29] Unresolved grievances against the government for its corrupt, repressive rule and the lack of opportunities helped make these communities particularly vulnerable.

Another important factor is how the governments of the region have politicized religion and sought to control it. Not only have these policies generated grievances that terrorist groups have capitalized on, but they have limited the population's access to mainstream religion. Restrictions on religious education exist across the region but are particularly prominent in Tajikistan, where all madrassas were closed by 2016, and religious education abroad and even basic religious instruction for children have been severely restricted since 2011.[30] Many citizens lack the knowledge and critical thinking skills to challenge the simplistic 'good versus evil' narratives of violent extremist organizations. Positive religious networks—trusted imams and elders to whom a young person can turn to ask questions about a video they have seen or a narrative they have heard—have been decimated, leaving those young people to pursue their religious interests alone online and afraid of asking

questions or discussing what they find there with others in their community.

Gender also matters. Around 15 to 20 percent of those who mobilized to Syria and Iraq were women.[31] Women often lack any access to formal religious education. This means they lack the knowledge to engage with violent extremist narratives critically and, similarly to men, lack supportive trusted networks they can turn to for advice. Respondents in the authors' research regularly pointed to the gendered nature of restrictions on religious freedom, such as the prohibition of the hijab in schools and government offices and the lack of sanctioned opportunities for women's religious education.

On a more personal level, push factors include personal crises or trauma, from losing a job or marital breakdown to domestic or sexual violence. Under such circumstances, particularly when social support networks are degraded or lacking entirely, such as in migration, individuals have found themselves vulnerable to groups that can offer an alternative life. This possibility of an alternative life seemed particularly to resonate when the Islamic State controlled territory, an organized network of support, and a means of channeling their anger. A common trajectory following these traumatic events is the rapid 'rediscovery' of religion and recruitment into terrorist organizations of those seeking a meaning-making mechanism and a network of support. This is seen, for example, in the profiles of the Crocus City Hall attackers, none of whom were particularly religious according to their families.[32]

Another pull factor—though often the authors have found arguably the least important—is the attractiveness of the ideology and messaging of violent extremist organizations. Much of the messaging draws on grievances related to religious freedom and shows the success of these groups in operations globally. But at the same time, much of the online messaging is positive. It shows the organizations' brotherhood, sense of community, and 'pure' life that is ordered, predictable, and—with deadly irony—safe, if not for the individual, then for their broader community through sacrifices made by the one for the many. These narratives have become less appealing as groups such as the Islamic State have lost territory, but they are still prominent and resonate with some Central Asians, offering them a chance to become part of something bigger and portrayed as powerful enough to push back against forces that seem hopelessly beyond their control.

But here especially, there are key differences between recruitment dynamics a decade ago and today. In 2014, the Islamic State and the al-Qa`ida-aligned groups were 'winning,' taking about a third of the territory in Syria and Iraq at its peak; this offered Central Asians a place to go to build a new life, attracting a much broader group of people than terrorist organizations without control over a territory. With that territory largely gone, these groups have been fragmented. The online space has also changed, with a significant crackdown by governments and platforms on violent extremist content.

Assessing the Terrorist Threat and Approaches for Prevention

The world is unlikely to see mass mobilization by Central Asians to terrorism for several reasons. No group has emerged to replace the Islamic State or emulate its success. Central Asian-led rivals to the Islamic State have effectively stopped recruiting and have transitioned to a different, long-game strategy. Furthermore, the online environment is more controlled. And although there has been an uptick in online recruitment efforts by ISK, particularly in local languages, these channels are reaching a small audience in the low hundreds.

Very few Central Asians have become involved in terrorism partly because they have tight-knit communities and extended families that form key systems of social support, despite widespread corruption, authoritarian governance, the collapse of social support from the state, and few economic opportunities. These help protect them and help them cope with injustices. Existing research has indicated that in communities where these networks are lacking or have been disrupted, such as in migrant communities in Russia, conflict-affected regions of southern Kyrgyzstan or areas where perceived injustice and institutional violence have become entrenched across generations, recruitment has been far more successful in the series of mobilizations tracing back to the late 1990s when the jihadi threat first emerged in the region. In all countries except Kazakhstan, where internally displaced migrants play an important role, the process of recruitment and mobilization has largely occurred among migrant and diaspora communities outside of Central Asia.[d]

Since the threat of the Syrian conflict has waned, both the international community and local governments have failed to build resilience against the resurgence of the Islamic State. It would be a serious mistake to assume that messaging or propaganda is the primary cause of terrorism and should be the focus. ISK publishing magazines in Tajik that very few people read is unlikely in itself to cause more violence, but failure to address the root causes that inspired so many people to migrate to Syria in search of a new state or to pay a smuggler to get them across the U.S. border thousands of miles away[33] has much wider effects than even this year's deadly attacks. Focusing narrowly on disrupting ISK's messaging is akin to applying a band-aid on a fingertip when the whole arm is broken. Instead of looking primarily at the content and volume of messaging with the assumption that it plays a causal role in mobilization, one should look first at the drivers that displace and disconnect Central Asians from the protective networks that help ameliorate against both the push factors and grievances that can otherwise drive conflict.

In addition to intelligence tools that help identify and monitor small cells and person-to-person recruiting (online or off), in terms of predicting further mobilization, one may be better served monitoring changes in these root factors such as displacement, discrimination, crackdowns on religious expression, and disruption of networks of social support to predict and assess the continued threat from terrorist networks.

The world is already witnessing a crackdown on violent extremism in the region in the wake of the Crocus City attack. While this will target those who are genuinely linked to terrorist organizations, it will also see governments continuing to use counter-extremism to

d For example, despite the frequent characterization of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) as rooted in the Fergana Valley in the early 1990s, it was created in fact in Afghanistan only in the second half of the 1990s in the early salafi-jihadi milieu when the Taliban offered safe haven to Usama bin Ladin and other ideologues who influenced the IMU's founders years after they were displaced from their homeland. Adeeb Khalid, I*slam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014); Noah Tucker, *Violent Extremism and Insurgency in Uzbekistan: A Risk Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: USAID, 2013).

target pious Muslims, independent journalists, political opposition, and others with heavy-handed tactics. This will generate grievances that will continue to drive small-scale recruitment and lone wolf attacks, and will exacerbate the same issues that in time lead to the next round of protests and deadly crackdowns. Each cycle pushes Central Asians out of their homes seeking a better life anywhere they can hope to find it in a vicious circle that undermines their security and the world's. CTC

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The Death of an Islamic State Global Leader in Africa?

By Austin Doctor and Gina Ligon

Following a U.S. airstrike in Somalia in late May, there were news reports that the Islamic State had appointed Abdulqadir Mumin, the emir of the group's affiliate in Somalia, as its worldwide leader. The outcome of the airstrike is still unclear. While debates around the accuracy of the reports on Mumin's promotion continue, the revelation ushers in a unique set of consequential questions regarding the Islamic State's strategic position and operational priorities. The authors argue that the Islamic State's reported regional shift in leadership would mark an unprecedented but pragmatic move for the organization. This article presents an overview of Mumin's background, assesses the Islamic State's operations during Mumin's supposed tenure, and situates the analysis within the context of the organization's traditional approach to leadership.

Recently, news reports claimed that the U.S. military had targeted the global leader of the Islamic State in an airstrike in late May.[1] It has not been confirmed that he was killed in the operation. For many, the targeting of another Islamic State leader will feel old hat at this point.[2] More interesting is that the reported airstrike occurred in Somalia, marking the first time, presumably, that a top-tier Islamic State leader was found in Africa. Abdulqadir Mumin is already known to the public as the commanding emir of the Islamic State's operations in Somalia.[3] Unnamed U.S. officials claim that he covertly became the "worldwide leader of the terror group" last year.[4 a]

Typically, when an Islamic State leader is killed, academics and analysts reflexively focus on who will be appointed next, what is known about the successor's leadership style, and the expected effect on group operations. However, this case raises a more extensive set of questions and related implications.

If true, the selection of an Islamic State "caliph"[5] who, one, is not of Arab descent, and two, is based in Africa, would represent a notable change in tack for the terrorist organization. Several counterterrorism analysts and scholars have questioned the accuracy of the reporting[6] and speculated that Mumin may have instead been appointed as a ranking operational commander,[7] such as the leader of the General Directorate of Provinces (GDP),[8] rather than the spiritual and political figurehead of the Islamic State network. Indeed, in many ways, this would reflect a functionally more substantive role while also remaining more consistent with the Islamic State's strict traditional criteria for its caliph.[9]

Regardless of the specific title on Mumin's most recent business card, the reported regional shift in leadership would mark an unprecedented but pragmatic move for the organization. Drawing on their backgrounds in the study of the Islamic State,[10] violent extremism in Africa,[11] and militant leadership,[12] the authors survey the Islamic State's operations during Mumin's supposed tenure and analyze this within the broader context of the organization's long-term approach to leadership and current strategic position.

The Islamic State's Historic Approach to Leadership

The Islamic State historically has established an elite leadership cadre,[13] advanced by the religious authority[14] personified by the caliph—the commander of the faithful—and the pragmatic authority[15] manifested by the operational experiences of those in functional roles in various directorates.[16]

The Islamic State's approach to its caliph is distinct but still rooted in its organizational origins, namely its predecessor groups al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) and the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). Both of these organizations strongly emphasized Iraq as a center of gravity. For ISI, this was codified in a January 2007 text, titled *Elam al-Anam bi Milad Dawlet al-Islam* (*Informing the People About the Birth of the State of Islam*).[17 b] Interestingly, and particularly relevant

a The United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team published a report earlier this year that hinted that the Islamic State's center of gravity may have shifted to Africa: "Several Member States assessed that the level of attrition and security challenges makes a shift in the centre of gravity of ISIL (Da'esh) core away from Iraq or the Syrian Arab Republic possible. Africa and Afghanistan were viable locations for a new leader, with the former more likely." See "Thirty-third report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations Security Council, January 29, 2024.

b According to one report, Elam al-Anam "makes the case for Iraq, not by extolling Baghdad's association with Abbasid grandeur, but by highlighting its strategic location at the center of the Arab world. Iraq also has ample resources that could sustain a new state." See Nibras Kazimi, "The Caliphate Attempted: Zarqawi's Ideological Heirs, Their Choice for a Caliph, and the Collapse of Their Self-Styled Islamic State of Iraq," Hudson Institute, July 1, 2008.

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to the skepticism expressed by many regarding Abdulqadir Mumin's supposed appointment, around this same time there were years of debate and related rumors about the personhood and nationality of ISI's actual leadership, with the U.S. military claiming initially that the group's functional emir was not Iraqi Abu Umar al-Baghdadi but Egyptian Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (aka Abu Ayyub al-Masri).[18]

Since its formation in 2013, the Islamic State has named five caliphs: founder Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, Abu al Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurayshi, and supposed current leader Abu Hafs al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, who was named in August 2023. In reviewing historical documents provided by the group as well as examining commonalities of caliphs named in publicly available documents, there are at least six core requisite characteristics for those who assume the pinnacle spiritual leadership role of the caliph in the Islamic State: They must be Muslim, male, free, sound in mind and emotion, educated, and of Qurayshi lineage.[19] Some primary texts reviewed by Aymenn Al-Tamimi have even indicated that a non-Iraqi would not be favored for the role of the caliph.[20]

In contrast to al-Qa`ida—an organization most associated with the leadership of its founder Usama bin Ladin—the Islamic State has had a series of leaders of varying notoriety.[21] While in recent years these individuals have wielded influence from the shadows, foundational leaders to the Islamic State's ascension were portrayed in written, audio, and visual messaging.[22] Given that the Islamic State's creative media agency[23] constructed life narratives of mythical grandeur, both leaders[24] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi continue to have posthumous appeal despite their deaths marking the end of the era of "known caliphs."[25] Organizationally, the group has been united by the ideological credibility of a central leadership figure, and historically, this person has hailed from and lived in the Iraq and Levant region. Moreover, as recent as 2023, a new Islamic State spokesman addressed "soldiers of the abode of the Caliphate in Iraq and al-Sham,"[26] indicating that the geographic region remained central to the core spiritual identity of the group.

As the group has faced intense territorial and leadership loss in Iraq and Syria,[27] however, the potential for leaders in other regions may have developed.

While the Islamic State leverages the position of the caliph to provide historical and ideological credibility for the group, a highly bureaucratized structure[28] called the General Directorate of Provinces (GDP) affords a variety of leadership styles[29] to shape the organization and how it behaves. As recently as June 2023, the U.S. State Department described the GDP function as critical in providing operational guidance and funding around the world for Islamic State activity.[30] Based on reporting from the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team[31] and his own review of primary documents from the group, scholar Tore Hamming described key functions of the GDP as well as the likely leaders who have managed them. Some of the functions revolve around the exchange of military expertise and personnel[32] among the regional affiliate branches, but the most central function of this hub-and-spoke model is the lifting and shifting of munificence between the core Levant offices and the affiliates. During the height of the group's power, it was thought that the funding flowed from the central core to regional offices of varying strategic importance, but Caleb Weiss and colleagues have more recently speculated that instead, it is the distant provinces that now often provide cashflow back to the home base as well as to each other.[33]

The Islamic State's Al-Karrar office, a key node in the Islamic State's present financial infrastructure nested within the GDP, is based in Somalia. Aaron Zelin recently described the "global integration" of the Islamic State's operations, embodied in the GDP.[34] In addition to offering operational guidance to affiliates in eastern and central Africa, Al-Karrar serves as a financial hub and transmitter of funds to a number of provinces in other regions. In the Islamic State's shift toward a regionally pooled financing model, it makes sense that the leader of the Al-Karrar office—being also connected with a prominent regional affiliate—would stand to gain greater power and influence among central leadership.

The Islamic State in the Era of Abdulqadir Mumin

What is known about Abdulqadir Mumin, a leader who not only oversees critical assets in the Islamic State's network, but also may have built an organization sufficiently wealthy to finance Islamic State operations as far away as the Islamic State Khorasan Province?[35]

Mumin was born in Puntland, the semiautonomous region in northern Somalia. He lived in Sweden before moving to the United Kingdom in the 2000s, where he was granted British citizenship.[36] The few images available of him during this period reveal a joyful countenance, showing a bright henna-dyed beard. The authors speculate that his gleaming white teeth may signal potential early and consistent access to dental care. Swedish scholar Magnus Ranstorp discusses Mumin's stint in Gothenburg, likely between 1990 and 2003, as a time of increasing radicalization.[37] Some have suggested the existence of a clip that was broadcast on Swedish national public television in which Mumin cavalierly discussed the genital mutilation of his daughter.[38] After leaving Sweden, Mumin reportedly preached at a mosque in Leicester before moving to South London, where he allegedly crossed paths with Michael Adebolajo (one of the murderers of Fusilier Lee Rigby), Mohamed Emwazi (aka "Jihadi John"), and Moazzam Begg (a former Guantanamo Bay detainee).[39] Some reports suggest he was removed from the Greenwich Islamic Center after speculation that he was part of a large recruiting network influencing British men to travel to Somalia and support local violent Islamist network.[40] He eventually followed suit and left the United Kingdom for Somalia to join al-Shabaab in mid-2010.[41]

Later that year, Mumin gained further notoriety after burning his passport in a mosque in Mogadishu, where he was also instructed to find more recruits on behalf of al-Shabaab.[42] Mumin became a deputy in the group and, according to scholar Christopher Anzalone, was one of the al-Shabaab officials tasked with negotiating with local clan elders in and around Mogadishu in 2011 to 2012.[43] It was during this period that al-Shabaab formally declared allegiance to al-Qa`ida. Following the surrender of a ranking commander, Mohamed Said Atom, to the Somali government in 2014, Mumin took on a more senior role in the group. And in 2015, he became one of the most notable defections from al-Shabaab to the Islamic State when he pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[44] A small number of his followers joined the Islamic State along with him,[45] forming what would become Wilayat al-Sumal (Mumin's *bay`a* was not formally recognized by Islamic State leadership until December 2017).[46] The group established its base in the Golis Mountains of the Puntland semi-autonomous region in northern Somalia.[47] In 2023, the U.S. Treasury reported that Mumin had become the leader of the Al-Karrar office.[48] Under him, his former deputy Abdirahman

This picture, taken on September 1, 2016, shows a computer screen displaying an image of Abdulqadir Mumin. (Simon Maina/AFP via Getty Images)

Fahiye Isse Mohamud was promoted to lead Islamic State-Somalia's operations as *wali* (governor).

During Mumin's tenure, Islamic State-Somalia has experienced up and downs, being pressed hard by both U.S. counterterrorism operations and an al-Shabaab campaign against the group.[49] Nonetheless, Islamic State-Somalia has established itself as a niche but prominent member of the Islamic State network.[50] Unlike the group's operational units in Syria and Iraq or the Islamic State West Africa Province, all of which can boast a larger number of combatants and are more active on the battlefield, Islamic State-Somalia maintains a relatively small cadre of fighters. It has staked its reputation less around high-impact attacks or control of large swaths of territory.[51] Instead, as host for the Al-Karrar office, Islamic State-Somalia's gravitas and influence comes through its role as a key node of financial facilitation and operational support to Islamic State affiliates and cells active in central Africa, South Africa, Mozambique, as well as Islamic State elements far outside of the region.[52] In the past few months, the group has shown its willingness and occasional ability to repel al-Shabaab forces, though this is still limited to the mountainous areas of Puntland comprising its core base of operations.[53]

Notably, Mumin developed Islamic State-Somalia into one of the most financially solvent of the Islamic State's provinces in the post-caliphate era.[54] In 2023, the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) reported, "In the first half of 2022, ISIS-Somalia generated nearly $2 million by collecting extortion payments from local businesses, related imports, livestock, and agriculture. In 2021, ISIS-Somalia generated an estimated $2.5 million in revenue. ISIS-Somalia is one of the most significant ISIS affiliates in Africa, generating revenue for ISIS to disburse to branches and networks across the continent."[55] In 2024, the U.S. Treasury assessed Islamic State-Somalia to likely be the Islamic State network's "primary revenue generator," having earned as estimated $6 million dollars through extortion and taxes since 2022.[56] Of course, these numbers pale in comparison to the massive budgets enjoyed by the Islamic State at the height of its territorial campaign; a RAND Corporation report estimates that the group had annual revenues of $1.89 billion in 2014.[57] In additional context, al-Shabaab is estimated to bring in annual revenues of $100 million,[58] dwarfing its local Islamic State counterpart. Still, present reports indicate that Islamic State-Somalia likely operates at a budget surplus—likely enabled by its historically light operational profile—and, through the Al-Karrar office, is instrumental in moving financial support to Islamic State elements around the region and the globe.

Mumin most likely took his promotion as an Islamic State 'global leader' sometime last year. His experience recruiting foreign fighters—particularly those from the West—and his established financial leadership would have been viewed as desirable competencies. The Islamic State's global operational profile took a somewhat discernible character in the past six to 12 months,

which may indicate the priorities or unique efficacies that Mumin brought to the table. First, and most notably, during this period the Islamic State demonstrated an increased willingness and ability to pursue external operations, particularly through its affiliate in Afghanistan, Islamic State Khorasan Province.[59] These include a set of deadly operations in Iran[60] and Russia.[61] Intelligence leaders in the United States warn of a growing risk of similar "coordinated attacks"[62] on the U.S. homeland. Second, and relatedly, the Islamic State has continued its emphasis on foreign fighter mobilization[63] and inspiring homegrown violent extremist[64] attacks in Western Europe, Israel, and North America. Lastly, in 2024, the Islamic State has invested heavily in Africa with a notable show of renewed strength[65] in northern Mozambique, recruitment pushes in North Africa,[66] and a stubborn entrenchment in Somalia.[67] These initiatives align well with what the authors believe to be true of Mumin's background and experience.

The Organizational Opportunity, Impetus, and Risk of a Leadership Pivot to Africa

If recent reports are correct, what did the Islamic State stand to gain from giving high command to a leader in Africa, in general, and to Mumin, specifically? What were the expected risks that weighed in the decision? Answers to these questions are more than academic; they provide valuable insight into the Islamic State's strategic priorities and perceptions around its global operational capabilities.

The expected benefits of a regional shift in leadership are an operational commander leading from a seemingly more permissive environment who is also more geographically proximate to the Islamic State's established and still growing global epicenter of activity.[68] One can speculate that the Islamic State likely sought some relief from the heavy operational pressure it faces in Iraq and Syria.[69] Due to a steady tempo of high-value targeting operations, the group is on its fourth caliph in less than three years. On the ground, the region remains a hotly contested battlespace and political arena, with several state and non-state armed forces operating in the area, most of which are actively hostile to an estimated 2,500 local Islamic State combatants.[70]

The Horn of Africa may have offered welcome insulation from instability in the Levant and greater freedom of movement. Of course, as demonstrated in the January 2023 Bilal al-Sudani raid[71] and the airstrike in late May, Puntland—the northern region of Somalia in which Islamic State-Somalia primarily operates—is clearly within reach of U.S. forces and their partners.[c] As such, the relative utility to the Islamic State of a geographic shift in this regard may be only marginal.

Perhaps more importantly, placement in Somalia co-locates the leader with a key facilitation node in the Islamic State network and puts the leader squarely in the region where the group is conducting the most operations, all while retaining connective tissue to the Middle East through Yemen as a transit point for fighters and materiel. To be sure, violence associated with the regional affiliates of the Islamic State has remained somewhat flat over the last year, and the group's lethality actually decreased in some areas.[72] Still, in the global context, violent operations by African branches and cells comprised 60 percent of all claimed Islamic State operations worldwide last year—the largest proportion in the Africa region to date and the sort of portfolio of violence one might expect under the direction of an African emir.[73] As senior analysts from the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center recently assessed, "[Islamic State] networks in Africa have the potential to fund and help lead ISIS' global enterprise."[74]

If the benefits of maintaining a top-tier Islamic State leader in Africa are largely operational, the risks for the group are mostly symbolic and reputational, though no less consequential. First, the appointment of a non-Qurayshi as caliph would undermine the group's carefully laid ideological foundations[75] and eschatological vision.[76] Mumin has not publicly claimed to be a direct male descendant of the Prophet Mohammad or have Qurayshi lineage.[77] This restriction does not apply, however, to heads of Islamic State directorates, such as the GDP. This is where Mumin's role, his latest formal title, matters most. A blatant inconsistency in this regard would likely provide ample fodder for the group's competitors and adversaries to launch effective counter-messaging campaigns aimed at undermining the Islamic State's legitimacy and inciting defections from its corps of followers and supporters. Moving the caliph or other top leadership from Iraq and Syria may also feed into global perceptions around the Islamic State's failure to survive in Iraq and Syria and the reputational blows it has suffered as a result of its extensive territorial retreat over the past five years.

For the Islamic State, the risks and benefits involved lie not only in regional and organizational dynamics, but also in the appointed leader. Mumin's background and resumé of experience may reveal the knowledge, skills, and abilities that the Islamic State value at this stage in the organization's lifecycle and hint at the personal qualities and 'professional' competencies that were expected to characterize Mumin's tenure.

First, Mumin may have come from money—or at least was comfortable with it. Given his life history in Sweden and the United Kingdom, as well as markers evident in his appearance, it may be that Mumin not only was skilled at managing finances in his province and beyond, but he also may have been capable of leading a capital campaign needed to fund a large-scale, international attack. This profile of leadership parallels that of another jihadi leader—Usama bin Ladin—who saw that funding his war was most central to winning it.[78]

Second, while he may not have had the Qurayshi[79] lineage requisite for divine ideological leadership, he clearly would have displayed the spiritual expertise to justify any acts of violence via his interpretation of Islamic law.[80] In short, Mumin's experience as an ideologue in a variety of extremists' circles likely points to an affluence with leveraging obscure texts and Hadith interpretations that would be difficult to refute or counter. This level of expertise likely made Mumin's analysis and direction unassailable, particularly by followers with less doctrinal training.

Finally, his familiarity with Western culture likely made him more dangerous than most on at least two fronts: foreign fighter recruitment and attack planning. Mumin had a long record of

c As the authors have written with Tricia Bacon elsewhere, Bilal al-Sudani was a key operative and facilitator for the Islamic State. Like Mumin, the Sudanese national was originally a member of al-Shabaab, where he facilitated the travel of foreign recruits and financed foreign fighter activity in the country. He was designated as a terrorist by the U.S. Treasury Department under E.O. 13224 in 2012 and defected to the Islamic State in 2015. Al-Sudani was killed in a U.S. raid conducted by U.S. military forces in January 2023. See Tricia Bacon and Austin C. Doctor, "The Death of Bilal al-Sudani and Its Impact on Islamic State Operations," Program on Extremism at George Washington University, March 2023.

success in recruiting foreign fighters to Africa, including violent extremists from the Middle East, Europe, and the United States.[81] This seems to have proven useful. Recent reports indicate that Islamic State-Somalia has experienced an "influx of fighters and operatives" from Yemen.[82] Aaron Zelin reported that in late 2023, four Moroccans were arrested with members of Islamic State-Somalia in Cal Miskaat and, in early 2024, ranking members of Islamic State-Somalia—a Moroccan and a Syrian—were arrested in central Puntland.[83] Other foreign fighters have attempted to join the Islamic State's front in the Sahel.[84]

Perhaps his most important leadership characteristic had not yet been enacted, however. Given his life events in Sweden and the United Kingdom, it is likely that Mumin would have gained tremendous domain expertise with symbolic people, processes, and property in those and similar countries. In addition, his comfort and familiarity with the media may have made him particularly savvy at timing highly visible and powerful attacks in the West. While there has been an uptick in thwarted plots on such targets,[85] none have publicly been attributed to Mumin's leadership, at least so far.

Conclusions

The geographic shift in Islamic State leadership represented by Abdulqadir Mumin's reported promotion is probably best understood as a pragmatic recognition of the network's operational global epicenter, rather than as a signal that the group has reimagined its long-term political and ideological centers of gravity. The Islamic State retains deep roots in Iraq and the greater Levant. And its forces in that region, numbering still in the thousands, remain focused on resurgence.[86]

The May airstrike in Somalia and related reporting about Mumin's promotion requires close and sustained attention. Any extensive conclusions will be highly dependent, first and foremost, on whether or not Mumin was actually killed in the operation and, second, on the specifics of his most recent role in the Islamic State. In the meantime, intelligence collection as well as counter-threat efforts should focus on what seem to be the pillars of the Islamic State's operational priorities during Mumin's tenure to date, such as an increase in foreign fighter flows to Africa, greater resourcing to African affiliates, and a growing appetite for external operations. The selection of a top tier leader in Africa is notable—for the reasons discussed here—but the rest of the Islamic State's extensive leadership apparatus almost certainly remains concentrated in the Middle East. In this sense, much is business as usual. CTC

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The Financial Future of the Islamic State

By Jessica Davis

The fall of the Islamic State's caliphate in Iraq and Syria significantly impacted the group's ability to fundraise through territorial control. Despite this loss, the group retained substantial financial reserves, estimated between $10 million to $30 million, some of which were stored outside its immediate area of operations. These funds have enabled the Islamic State to sustain and expand its global network of provinces and sub-groups, primarily in Africa and Asia, through the General Directorate of Provinces and by providing start-up and sustenance funds to its various sub-groups. This article provides an in-depth analysis of the Islamic State's financial strategies post-caliphate, illustrated through case studies of various Islamic State provinces and sub-groups and their financing mechanisms. The Islamic State's evolving global strategy and financial strength is a challenge for international efforts to combat the group's persistent and adaptive financial network. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for global security.

The fall of the Islamic State's caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2019 marked a profound loss of territory for the group. Prior to this, the Islamic State was a wealthy terrorist group that relied on a variety of methods to raise funds, many of which were based on territorial control. As a result, the Islamic State's loss of territory was a blow to its fundraising capabilities. Still, the group did not lose all of its wealth: It managed to store a significant amount of money outside its immediate area of operations,[1] with estimates ranging from $10 million to $30 million.[2] These funds have allowed the group to create, sustain, and augment provinces and sub-groups around the world, concentrated mainly in Africa and Asia, in a globally integrated network.[3] The Islamic State has focused on establishing and managing a global presence through its General Directorate of Provinces (GDP).[4] Part of this focus has been on developing financial networks and self-sufficient funding strategies, which has created resilience and redundancy in the broader Islamic State brand that is difficult to combat, particularly in the face of competing global security priorities. The 2024 threat environment, which has seen a steady stream of arrests and disruptions of Islamic State activities, illustrates how this network has maintained the group's resilience and, in some cases, grown stronger since the fall of the caliphate five years ago.

This article's analysis draws on case studies of the various Islamic State provinces and groups and their known financing mechanisms and methods. Academic and open-source research is augmented by information from the United Nations Security Council's monitoring team and interviews with regional experts conducted by the author. By combining this disparate research, a new picture of the Islamic State's global strategy and financial strength comes into focus, and it points to a grim future for efforts to combat the group's international presence.

Islamic State Finance

In its heyday, the Islamic State was able to raise significant amounts of money (perhaps as much as $1 million per day) from the territory that it controlled in Iraq and Syria.[5] The group did this by extracting and selling oil, taxing and extorting the population under its area of control through kidnapping for ransom, the theft and sale of antiquities, and many other methods, all to supplement the cost of its ongoing war and to implement its political project.[6]

Not all the money raised in Iraq and Syria was profit; running the caliphate cost the group serious money. The Islamic State provided some security and other state and governance functions in the territory it controlled and had to pay individuals to provide these services.[7] In practice, while the group ran a surplus and diverted some of those funds out of Iraq and Syria, the costs of running the caliphate likely consumed most of the revenues generated. Despite this, the group generated a surplus of funds and stored much of those financial reserves in cash. However, upon dissolution of the caliphate, the group likely lost access to much of its surplus funds, although resources outside Syria and Iraq remain accessible.[8] For instance, financial networks and resources in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Sudan[9] remain largely intact, despite U.S. sanctions and Turkey's arrests of Islamic State operatives.[10]

Indeed, the Islamic State was able to siphon some money out of Iraq and Syria and establish a fund for its longer-term objectives, including the establishment and funding of the GDP and other Islamic State groups. From 2014 onward, the Islamic State invested funds in legitimate commercial businesses such as real estate and automobile dealerships.[11] The bulk of the group's residual and liquid assets are reported to have been transferred to Turkey, some in cash but a portion in gold.[12] The group probably also moved funds to different locations internationally through one of its finance

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networks, such as the Al-Rawi network.[13]

Today, the remnants of Islamic State Central operating in Iraq and Syria are estimated to have access to between $10 million and $20 million in liquid assets, including cash.[14] While this is significantly less than what the group previously held, it is plenty of money for the low-level insurgency/periodic terrorist attacks that the group perpetrates in its current areas of operations. These funds are also likely sufficient to occasionally provide influxes of cash to its provinces and sub-groups that provide start-up and short-term funding to help maintain its global brand. This brand combines provinces, sub-groups, networks, and identity-based support networks,[a] all connected by a financial network.

Islamic State Provincial Finance Strategies

Key to the Islamic State's ongoing global relevance are its provinces and sub-groups, which operate primarily in Africa and Asia. In 2014, the group established the GDP to ensure its core leadership's ability to maintain command and control over the new entities pledging allegiance to the Islamic State.[15] Over the next nine years, the Islamic State established relationships with groups in many countries, ranging from loose connections to formal recognition of provinces. Over time, these connections have waxed and waned. Still, a presence remains in Libya, Algeria, Egypt, West Africa, Somalia, Mozambique, South Africa, Nigeria, the Sahara, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Yemen, Pakistan, the Caucasus, Afghanistan, and Southeast Asia.[16] In many of these cases, the Islamic State welcomed into its fold groups that existed before the rise of the Islamic State's global brand. And in some of these cases, these groups had existing sources of funds and established financing methods.

Islamic State provinces and sub-groups employ a common finance strategy dictated by the economic and financial terrain in which they operate; the precise nature of the finance strategy also tends to reflect the size and strength of sub-groups. Islamic State provinces and sub-groups seeking to control territory implement a taxation system like what the group deployed in Iraq and Syria. This is by design: The Islamic State has even deployed financial advisors to professionalize some of the fundraising activities in its provinces and sub-groups, such as Mozambique,[17] Nigeria,[18] and Somalia.[19]

The deployment of advice and funding was part of the Islamic State's strategy from the first instance. For example, in 2014, the Islamic State established a group in Yemen with leadership, direction, and financing from Islamic State Central.[20] This was a direct effort by Islamic State Central to implement economic and financial lessons learned in Iraq and Syria. These lessons are also being implemented to make the provinces more sustainable in the long term, prioritizing independent revenue streams and reducing the provinces' burden on the broader movement.[21]

This finance strategy generates significant money. For instance, Islamic State-Somalia is estimated to raise at least $6 million annually.[22] While nowhere near the sums raised by the Islamic State in its heyday, Islamic State-Somalia is a much smaller organization, and these funds are likely ample to support its ongoing activities, as well as the Al-Karrar office, the GDP's presence in Somalia. The DRC-based Islamic State affiliate ADF was provided with some funding through Islamic State networks in Somalia and East Africa;[23] now, the group relies on taxing and extorting local businesses, as well as theft and kidnapping for ransom.[24] Other groups, such as Islamic State-Mozambique (known as Ansar al-Sunna or, confusingly, al-Shabaab), have also adopted these models.[25] Islamic State-Mozambique relies on taxation of business activities (small stores and sole-proprietor transportation providers) to generate revenues and, in some cases, uses these business activities to provide cover for its members.[26] Some provinces, such as Islamic State-West Africa Province (ISWAP)[27] and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP),[28] as well as smaller cells, such as the one operating in South Africa, employ kidnapping for ransom and robberies to raise funds.[29] This is critical for the Islamic State's broader longevity: Having its local sub-groups and provinces be largely self-sufficient and developing diversified fundraising schemes makes the broader movement more resilient to counterterrorism pressures.

By 2017, the Islamic State had established more provinces/franchise groups in Libya, Egypt (Sinai), and Southeast Asia.[30] While much depleted in terms of overall importance in the group's finance network, Islamic State-Libya continues to be resilient, exploiting the local political crisis and economic decline in the south while maintaining cooperation with tribal elements involved in smuggling and illicit trade, which attract new fighters. The group finances itself from arms smuggling in southern Libya, taxes on illicit trade routes, and kidnapping for ransom, in addition to small and medium-sized enterprises in Sahel towns run by its sympathizers (from which funds are likely diverted in the form of donations), especially in western Libya.[31]

Islamic State affiliates in Southeast Asia also generate revenue locally but with less success than other provinces and sub-groups, with some exploiting the charitable sector to raise funds for terrorist activities in Indonesia.[32] The Islamic State in the Philippines raises funds and uses the formal financial sector to transfer state-backed currencies. However, it has increasingly used cryptocurrencies to move money internationally.[33] As of 2023, the United Nations assessed that Islamic State-SEAP (Southeast Asia province) relied heavily on Islamic State Central funds for attacks and propaganda activities.[34]

Centralized fund transfers from Islamic State Central have been instrumental in providing some provinces and groups with start-up funds and, in other cases, funds to sustain their activities during economic drought. This has been important, particularly in areas where the group has experienced between-group conflict or has struggled to establish non-taxation-based revenue streams, a prerequisite for which is territorial control or, at the very least, significant influence. For instance, Islamic State-Libya received millions (the precise figure is unknown) in start-up funds from Islamic State Central in 2014, and while this funding dwindled between 2016 and 2019, regular transfers resumed in the early 2020s.[35] Over the last 10 years, Islamic State Central has also transferred millions of dollars to various provinces and groups, particularly ISWAP and ISKP, the group's strongest outlets today. While details released by the U.N. monitoring team and other open sources about Islamic State financial transfers is unlikely to be exhaustive (and specific information on the amount of money sent to Islamic State-Libya is not available), this information provides a snapshot of the level of funding that Islamic State Central has sent

a Identity-based support networks are individuals and small groups who identify with the cause. One of the tangible ways they express this support is by providing small amounts of money directly to terrorist groups or to individuals planning terrorist activity.

to the provinces and sub-groups, illustrated in Figure 1.[36]

East and Central African provinces of the Islamic State also received transfers from Islamic State Central in 2017 (amounts unknown), which allowed the groups to expand their operations.[37] Islamic State Central Africa Province or ISCAP (the province composed, at the time, of the ADF and Islamic State-Mozambique) is believed to have used some of these additional funds for attacks, purchase of supplies, and recruitment.[38] While Islamic State Central financing has been critical in increasing and sustaining some groups' operations and capabilities, local funding streams sustain the groups and provinces. Domestic financing capability is critical for many of these groups, as reflected by the fact that this strategy is replicated throughout Islamic State provinces and groups and the importance that Islamic State Central places on this strategy by deploying financial advisors.

Islamic State Finance Networks

Beyond the formal provinces and sub-groups, Islamic State finance networks, both regional and international, operate independently and play a crucial role in the broader financial facilitation network. These networks are essential for sustaining the movement's operations and vary in their connections to Islamic State Central; some are tightly integrated with the brand, provinces, or sub-groups, while others are opportunistic nodes driven by profit. Key networks include the Al-Rawi network, the South Africa network, and the brand's presence in Turkey and Sudan. Other identity-based support networks have also emerged in diverse locations, such as the Maldives, further highlighting the complexity and reach of the Islamic State's financial infrastructure. These networks enable the group to maintain financial resilience and operational continuity.

The Al-Rawi network operates in Iraq, Turkey, Belgium, Kenya, Russia, and China and was used by the Islamic State to transfer funds.[39] The network uses proxies and cash smuggling to obfuscate the source of Islamic State money and has also converted funds into gold.[40] The network is primarily a family business. The leader of the network, Mushtaq Al-Rawi, was responsible for resurrecting a prominent money laundering network that was active during Saddam Hussein's regime.[41] The network uses cutouts (proxies), layering, and cash smuggling to obfuscate the source of Islamic State money.[42] Individuals in the network have accepted Islamic State cash (hundreds of thousands of dollars in regular transactions totaling millions of dollars), converted those funds into gold, and then sold the gold and reverted the proceeds to cash for the Islamic State (a somewhat familiar money-laundering scheme).[43] Much of this network likely remains in place despite U.S. designations, arrests, and deaths of key members.[44]

The South Africa node of the Islamic State's network in East and South Africa has provided funds to various groups and actors. For instance, the DRC's ADF network was directly involved in money transfers from South Africa.[45] Further, in 2022, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned seven Islamic State financial facilitators in South Africa for providing support and funds to the Islamic State in Mozambique,[46] and South Africa-domiciled banks were used to transfer funds from the GDP (likely the Al-Karrar office in Somalia, or Al-Furqan in Nigeria) to the Islamic State in Central Africa (ADF and Islamic State-Mozambique).[47] While these networks might have been disrupted through a combination of U.S. designations and South African law enforcement action,[48] the long-term effects of these counterterrorism efforts have yet to be demonstrated,

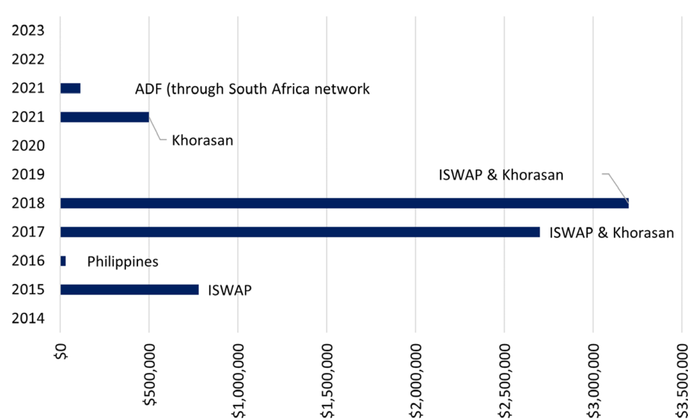

Figure 1: Annual Islamic State Central transfers to provinces, in U.S. dollars (Source: U.N. Monitoring Team Reports and open-source reporting)

with both Islamic State-Mozambique and the ADF demonstrating significant operational tempos in 2024 that do not suggest a lack of funds.

Other areas of Islamic State operations also contribute to the network. For instance, an Islamic State member, Abu Bakr Al-Iraqi, a businessman, had registered a variety of businesses using false identities in Sudan and Turkey. According to information published by the United Nations, "he operates several money exchange businesses and a travel/tourism agency in Türkiye and holds substantial investments in the Sudan."[49] This appears to be more of a facilitation network than an active operational group, at least currently.[50]

In other cases, Islamic State supporters might raise funds individually for the group; these are unlikely to be heavily coordinated fundraising campaigns and are instead identity-based support networks and individuals seeking to contribute to the cause. For instance, the June 2024 arrest of an individual in Germany for, in part, transferring nearly US$1,700 in cryptocurrency to an address associated with ISKP[51] illustrates this support. These parts of the network are informal groups of individuals who (sometimes) band together to contribute to financing an organization or operation to feel connected to a cause and to feel they are providing it with support.[52] While these nodes in the network are often small, they can be impactful, particularly when they mobilize to finance a terrorist attack directly or when the central group uses them to move money for operational purposes.[53] Another more pronounced example of this type of activity is the finance network that has arisen in Tajikistan and among Tajik Islamic State supporters,[54] funds from which might have been used for the Moscow Crocus Hall terrorist attack.[55] Because of the dispersed nature of this network, most people sending funds are unknown to law enforcement and security services, which makes stopping the movement of money in advance of attacks or incidents challenging.

The Al-Karrar Office

The networks that facilitate the movement of funds between various groups are well-developed, and they appear to be coordinated in large part by the Al-Karrar office located in Somalia. Recent reporting on the Al-Karrar office illustrates this point: The office created links between different Islamic State provinces across Africa, including the DRC and Mozambique, and throughout the

Middle East, using a network of businesses allegedly run by the Ali Saleban clan in Somalia.[56] Al-Karrar has also been central in exporting the Islamic State's extortion and taxation business model, including to Mozambique.[57]

Interestingly, the flow of funds between Islamic State Central and the provinces is not one-way. Some groups also share a portion of their profits back to the Al-Karrar office, either as payment for the advice they have received or as part of an ongoing and concerted effort to fund the office.[58] In an article for this publication last year, Tore Hamming found that funds flow partly from the provinces to the center.[59] Hamming further found that "50 percent of funds was required to be allocated for smaller provinces associated with a specific larger province, 25 percent for the general administration of larger provinces, and 25 percent to the Islamic State's *Bayt al-Mal* [central bank]."[60] Even smaller groups, such as Islamic State-Libya, have supported other groups. In 2015, one individual from Islamic State-Libya is believed to have transferred money, weapons, and ammunition to Islamic State-Sinai and potentially to ISWAP as well.[61] This division of funds might help explain the spread of Islamic State-affiliated jihadi groups across Africa and explain what some wealthier groups are doing with their financial surpluses. The redistribution of assets across the network indicates a finance cycle in which advisors and funds are deployed to help establish or formalize a province's fundraising structures (specifically taxation). Then, some funds are remitted as payment to the Al-Karrar office and Islamic State Central. This cycle enables Al-Karrar to provide ongoing support to the provinces, establish new ones, and sustain the Islamic State in Syria.

The role of Islamic State-Somalia in funding the Al-Karrar office is likely an important one. Islamic State-Somalia has a relatively small presence in the country and a relatively limited operational tempo. As such, the group likely has limited expenditures in Somalia, meaning it could provide surplus funds to other groups through the Al-Karrar office. If this is the case, the Al-Karrar office likely has access to much, if not most, of the funds raised by Islamic State-Somalia, currently estimated to be around $6 million per year.[62] These funds could create more resiliency in the network and provide funds for other groups to become established or to increase their operational tempo.

According to U.N. reports, some member states reported that the financial strength and importance of the Al-Karrar office is overestimated and that the Al-Furqan office raises more funds than Al-Karrar.[63] While this latter point is likely valid, it appears that Al-Karrar plays a more central role in facilitating the movement of funds through the network, even though Al-Furqan in Nigeria might have more money at its disposal. This likely has to do with Somalia's financial network. Over time, Somalia has developed an impressive network of mobile money operators and *hawala*[b] that can move money quickly and cheaply worldwide.[64]

While Al-Karrar and the Islamic State finance network are important, they do not sustain Islamic State sub-groups. Instead, money received from the network is better thought of as start-up or seed funding meant to help groups get established or overcome temporary financial difficulties. The Al-Karrar office's primary influence in the longer term is through the deployment of advisors and the establishment of the Islamic State finance strategy in the provinces and sub-groups. The office likely also functions as a logistics and financial hub for the network, a critical role for the brand but not necessarily essential for revenue generation.

The Islamic State's Growing Adoption of Cryptocurrency

Globally, terrorist groups have increasingly used cryptocurrency in recent years to move funds internationally, and the Islamic State is no exception.[65] However, this is not to say that they have abandoned traditional methods of moving funds, quite the opposite. Islamic State Central primarily relies on *hawala* and cash couriers. However, it has also used trade-based methods of moving funds across borders, particularly in Nigeria and Mozambique.[66]

Central Asian jihadis exemplify the diversification of fund movement sources well. They solicit donations from identity-based support networks and receive funds through online payment systems and cryptocurrencies, as well as through more traditional mechanisms such as QIWI Wallet, Western Union, Ria, and online bank transfers.[67] The East and South Africa network, controlled by the Al-Karrar office, primarily uses cash and *hawala* to move funds.[68] The network also uses money service businesses, banks, mobile money, and some cryptocurrency transactions to move funds globally.[69] This diversification of methods demonstrates that the Islamic State is mechanism agnostic: The group and its supporters will use whatever fund transfer mechanism is fastest, cheapest, and least likely to be detected and disrupted.

Islamic State provinces and sub-groups are not the only ones using cryptocurrency; identity-based support networks also use it. In the Maldives, supporters have raised and sent money through cryptocurrency to wallets associated with the media units of ISKP and Islamic State-Pakistan.[70] These funds were raised through a network of approximately 20 people and included corporate fronts.[71] Other Islamic State supporters have also been sanctioned for providing Islamic State leadership and supporters with cybersecurity training and enabling the group's use of cryptocurrency and obfuscation methods meant to hide the source and destination of the funds.[72] For terrorists operating in small countries or outside of areas where the Islamic State has a significant presence, cryptocurrency might hold even more appeal than other methods of moving money since they can avoid interacting with compliance staff or having their transactions caught up in geographic targeting and monitoring.[73]

Some Islamic State provinces and sub-groups are more prone to using cryptocurrency than others. ISKP is one such example. The group has used Tether to receive funds,[74] and recent attacks and arrests suggest a broad use of cryptocurrency by the group and its supporters.[75] Some of these funds are believed to transit through virtual asset exchanges in Turkey,[76] where ISKP can convert cryptocurrency into cash and other monetary instruments with relative ease and impunity.

Not all Islamic State theaters have adopted cryptocurrency use. For instance, Islamic State groups operating in Nigeria, Mozambique, and the DRC have minimal, if any, adoption of

b *Hawala* is a system used to move money domestically and internationally and is particularly popular in non-Western countries and in countries with underdeveloped formal banking sectors. The *hawala* system pre-dates modern banking and eschews current bookkeeping practices. *Hawala* transactions involve the movement of money between two (or more) locations without the physical transfer of funds, except for the settlement of accounts between *hawaladars*, or *hawala* operators. *Hawala* is often described as trust-based systems; in practice, these are businesses with established and verified relationships, often based on extended family networks.

cryptocurrency. There are some reports that ISWAP has made payments using virtual assets through Tether,[77] but such reporting is limited. For Nigeria, this is counterintuitive, as the country is ranked second in the world for cryptocurrency adoption.[78] Because of this, one would expect to see more use of cryptocurrency by ISWAP. However, since ISWAP is regionally concentrated and much of its revenue generation is done in cash (through taxation and extortion), it stands to reason that it has little use for cryptocurrency. It also suggests that the GDP office there, Al-Furqan, is not responsible for or integrated with the broader financial facilitation network. However, the possibility also exists that law enforcement and security services have failed to identify cryptocurrency transactions associated with the Islamic State originating in or going to ISWAP/Al-Furqan. While possible, this scenario is less likely given the extensive analytic capabilities that have been deployed to analyze blockchain transactions and identify terrorist-associated wallets.

The case of Afghanistan and ISKP is also intriguing. While Afghanistan is not high on the index of crypto adoption, *hawaladars* in the country have been relatively quick to adopt cryptocurrency as a service, and proximity to India and Pakistan, both very high crypto-adopting countries, likely further facilitates this adoption. *Hawaladars* set up wallets to receive transfers of funds through cryptocurrency and essentially act as informal cryptocurrency exchanges and cash-out services.[79]

Cryptocurrency is used by Islamic State terrorists in regions where local conditions permit and where other pressures necessitate alternative measures. Local groups are more inclined to use cryptocurrency for international transfers if there is already an established cryptocurrency market in their operating country, a developed cryptocurrency sector in the destination country, and a compelling reason to avoid conventional financial systems. This adaptation and adoption of financial technology is well beyond the proof-of-concept stage and has entered a mature period where the Islamic State increasingly uses stable and less expensive (in terms of transaction fees) cryptocurrencies (such as U.S. dollar-pegged Tether) and some privacy coins,[80] demonstrating enhanced financial tradecraft.

Countering the Networked Islamic State Problem

The future of the Islamic State's financial infrastructure is networked, resilient, and adaptive. The network has achieved this by focusing local groups on finance and governance and combining new and old methods of moving funds. The network also has redundancies: Revenue-sharing between groups and provinces allows the redistribution of funds to weaker groups or those that have suffered disruption, either because of between-group competition in their areas of operations or because of state or international CTF (countering the financing of terrorism) activities. As a result, countering the financing of the network will be an international coordination challenge, exacerbated by the great power division in some of the institutions for combating terrorism like the U.N. Security Council (and associated monitoring teams), and the expulsion of Russia from the Financial Action Task Force.

There are currently insufficient kinetic counterterrorism efforts being applied to disrupt the territorial control of Islamic State sub-groups. Without a sustained and effective kinetic counterterrorism approach, the group's revenue-generating taxation and extortion activities will remain operational. Further, cash storage sites used by these groups will continue to amass funds, helping to sustain groups (and the broader network) over the long term. The current lack of investigative capacity to disrupt terrorist financing activities (through investigations and arrests) of terrorist financiers also remains a challenge for CTF and means that many Islamic State financiers and financial facilitators can operate with impunity. This is true for both the areas where Islamic State sub-groups operate directly, but also for their support areas outside direct conflict zones.

In many places where the Islamic State operates, regulations to prevent terrorist financing in the financial sector are lacking, as is cryptocurrency regulation. This has led to a lack of monitoring and reporting, which is vital for detecting and disrupting terrorist networks. This lack of financial surveillance means that significant gaps exist in the understanding of Islamic State networks. It also means that key facilitators and financial leaders operate freely, and many retain access to the global financial system, allowing them to move money for both organizational purposes, as well as terrorist attacks and other operational activity.[81]

Unfortunately, the prospect for success in countering the Islamic State's finance network is poor. Many states where the group operates are struggling to maintain basic order and the rule of law and are primarily focused on preventing terrorist attacks. (Many states fail to understand fully the connection between finance and attacks and fail to resource and prioritize financial investigations. But terrorists with less money are less deadly.) Further, states are stretched thin, combating a growing number of security threats. The international strength of the Islamic State (and its network) is further bolstered by its ability to maintain safe havens and evade financial controls and by global connectivity.[82] Because of the lack of international counterterrorism pressure against the Islamic State, the Islamic State will likely maintain its financial strength. The only question that remains is whether the Islamic State will use this strength to focus on governance and state-building in the long term or turn its attention to external attacks. Without serious counterterrorism pressure against the Islamic State's finance network and sub-groups, the choice will be its own to make. CTC

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The History and Future of the Nordic Resistance Movement

By Peter Smith

In June 2024, a man in Finland with a long history of ideological and racist violence allegedly stabbed a 12-year-old immigrant child and attempted to stab another. The suspect was previously described as a key member of the Finnish branch of Scandinavia's largest National Socialist organization, the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM). Meanwhile, less than 24 hours later, the United States designated NRM as a terrorist entity, the second country to do so after the group was banned by Finland's Supreme Court in 2020. NRM has developed a reputation for its public demonstrations, its striking propaganda, and the violence perpetrated by some of its members. Initially sprouting from the remnants of a decentralized Swedish far-right network, NRM has grown into a pan-Nordic organization with a rigid hierarchy and has expanded with chapters throughout Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and Finland. Authoritarian in its political aspirations and seeking to supplant the democracies of the nations in which they operate, NRM members have been convicted of stabbings, killings, bomb plots, among other violent activities. The U.S. designation has been reportedly quick to impact NRM's online presence, with several of NRM's websites offline at the time of publication. Most of its current public messaging flows from an official Telegram account. While the designation is a disruption to NRM's ability to operate, it is unlikely to dismantle the network that makes up its far-right membership. This article examines the evolution of the group from its early days to its current iteration.

On June 14, 2024, the U.S. Department of State designated the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist.[1] NRM is estimated to be the largest white nationalist organization in Sweden and has chapters extending out across Scandinavia including Norway, Denmark, and Iceland. The Finnish chapter was banned by the country's supreme court in 2020, upholding the ruling of a lower court.[2] The U.S. designation also named three of NRM's leaders. This included a man who has contributed to the organization's activities and growth for the past 20 years, its current leader Tor Fredrik Vejdeland. Listed alongside him was Pär Öberg, a member of NRM's governing body, the national council, and head of its parliamentary branch, as well as Leif Robert Eklund, another member of the national council and a prominent NRM organizer within Sweden.[3] In its release, the State Department stated:

> *NRM's violent activity is based on its openly racist, anti-immigrant, antisemitic, anti-LGBTQI+ platform. The group's members and leaders have carried out violent attacks against political opponents, protestors, journalists, and other perceived adversaries. NRM members have also taken steps to collect and prepare weapons and explosive materials, including on behalf of the group and in furtherance of its goals. In addition, NRM has organized training in violent tactics, including hand-to-hand combat and knife fighting.*[4]

While NRM is primarily a political organization focused on staging protests and producing propaganda, its members train in martial arts, weapons use, and other activities seen as preparatory for, in its view, the coming clash of the races. To that end, NRM members and associates have been arrested and convicted in a slew of targeted violence and vandalism cases, terrorist plots including bombings, and dozens of criminal weapons charges. Members and leadership alike have been arrested during clashes with counter-protesters and police,[5] and the organization's antisemitism pervades its ideology, leading it to blame Jewish people for everything from demographic change to economic troubles to the Russian-Ukraine war. Avowed National Socialists, its members seek to create an ethnostate that not only excludes non-European descendant minorities but also non-Nordic Europeans as well.

NRM's History and Ideology

NRM began as a very different organization than what it would become. Initially a decentralized network of Swedish neo-Nazis in the 1990s, dubbed Vitt Ariskt Motstand (VAM—White Aryan Resistance), it was set up to mirror the American network founded by Robert Jay Mathews, The Order.[6] Initially intended to be a nameless and silent brotherhood of white supremacists, VAM was never meant to function as a homogeneous group with centralized leadership, but rather as a collection of aligned white nationalist gangs, groups, and individuals from Sweden's National Socialist and racist skinhead youth subcultures. The network's ideology and culture were codified in the pages of the magazine Storm, which served as a mouthpiece for the movement. Initially titling the community the "Storm network," the publication billed itself as an "organ for White Aryan Resistance." The pages of Storm delivered rhetoric, news, and culture that was embraced by its readers as the voice of the movement during its publishing run from 1991 to 1993. When affiliates of the network were found to be responsible for a series of assaults and robberies, the media gave VAM its name after

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lifting White Aryan Resistance from the text of a demonstration poster. VAM distinguished itself as a departure from the racist skinhead culture, creating a unique brand that borrowed its decentralized organizational model from American neo-Nazi movements, while adding a unique Swedish nationalist flavor. Adopting the German Wolfsangel as its symbol, VAM members had no formal uniform but typically draped themselves in black U.S. military clothing.[7] A flourishing Swedish and international far-right music scene, promoted in the pages of Storm magazine, cemented the sound of the subculture.[8]

The early 1990s also saw a small group of influential figures began to emerge from the scene, including Klas Lund, then in his early 20s, who would play a pivotal role in the creation of the organization that would become the Nordic Resistance Movement. It was his association with VAM and his history of violence that brought media attention to the group. VAM transformed radically during this time, even having contact offices, moving away from its initial *raison d'être* as a clandestine brotherhood to what Expo Magazine called a "radical youth movement with its own dress code and symbols."[9]

After being released from prison for beating a man to death in the late 1980s, Lund contributed to and served as editor for National Socialist magazines, including Storm.[10] In the spring of 1991, police arrested seven men for robbing a military weapons depot in Väsby, Sweden, among them Lund. Released shortly after the warehouse robbery, he was picked up again after he and another man pulled off a bank heist in Vemdalen. While he served six years in a Swedish prison, outside its walls, Lund's status among the national neo-Nazi movement grew. Staging a failed escape attempt, his supporters called in bomb threats demanding his release. Nevertheless, in 1993, VAM announced it was disbanding, and Storm's printers released a final issue.[11]

Lund emerged from prison in 1997 to find VAM had survived via splinter groups that operated with varying degrees of success.[12] Lund quickly joined Nationell Ungdom (NU, National Youth), a neo-Nazi organization based in Stockholm. Feeling there needed to be a more focused and formal approach to National Socialist organizing, he and some of the remnants of VAM formed the Swedish Resistance Movement (SRM) in 1997 and would eventually absorb NU into its membership in 2006.[13] Both SRM and NU began offering paramilitary training to their members, preparing for a coming white revolution.[14] Despite losing favor with other groups within the Swedish far-right at various points during the 2000s, Lund remained in charge of SRM until his departure in 2015 to found another Swedish far-right organization, Nordisk Styrke (Nordic Strength), where he remains active.

With its new leader, Simon Lindberg, SRM reorganized in 2015 officially under the banner of Nordiska Motståndsrörelsen (Nordic Resistance Movement).[15] Discarding its sole focus on Sweden, the new model aimed at creating a political movement that crossed nearby borders to unite white people of Scandinavian descent together. Virulently anti-immigration of any kind, anti-LGBTQ+, and antisemitic, the organization focused on advocacy and preparation, warning that war against their race had already begun and supporters needed to prepare for the swiftly coming clash between white Nordic people and immigrant populations invading the country as part of a global Jewish plot.[16]

Slowly expanding to Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland, the Swedish chapter remains the largest branch of the organization to date. Recent estimates put NRM's membership around 150 to 300 active members, with NRM Sweden protests mobilizing crowds of 600 to 700 people in 2018.[17] Public protests remain the organization's primary focus, drawing media attention from mainstream news sources as well as generating images and footage for a suite of podcasts, articles, videos, and other types of propaganda in multiple languages pushed out through its public social media channels. Besides demonstrations, NRM members continue to train in combat sports, knife fighting, and paramilitary tactics. The organization's official stance is that there is still value in engaging in political action, with an aim to recruit and indoctrinate as many potential members as possible, but there will be a time for an armed struggle and members should prepare accordingly. A handbook released by NRM maintained that the organization "can only be victorious through physical struggle" and that "in the future, our weapons will be decisive on the battlefield."[18] It adds though that "at present," members should continue to act within the confines of the law.

Often refusing to distance themselves from members suspected of committing violent acts, including three men associated with the organization who carried out a series of targeted bombings in late 2016 and early 2017,[19] NRM is still willing to engage in the democratic political process. The group managed to have a member elected as a write-in candidate to a municipal government council in Sweden in 2014[20] and registered NRM as a political party in Sweden in 2015.[21] A comparison of the group's rhetoric and messaging both pre- and post-entry into the democratic process found that little had been done to temper its overall message of Nordic racial superiority and its goals remained to establish an authoritarian state.[22] Leaflets distributed by NRM in 2018 named and pictured four Jewish people with connections to international finance. Calling the men "parasites" who "rule" the lives of the Swedish people, it asked the reader to "take back power from the globalists."[23]

Connections to the International Far-Right

NRM dedicates considerable resources to its networking with other far-right organizations and networks in Europe and North America. This is partly due to NRM's English-language media, including the Nordic Frontier podcast, and striking imagery captured during the numerous rallies and public events the organization holds to garner attention. Members of NRM traveled to the United Kingdom for a speaking event organized by Patriotic Alternative in October 2022, a far-right organization founded by long-time British white nationalist Mark Collett.[24] Nordic Frontier host Andreas Johansson (Andreas Holmvall) presented at the Lancashire, United Kingdom, event on behalf of the organization.[25] Likewise, Johansson has had members of the far-right from Australia, Canada, Hungary, South Africa, the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere as guests on his podcast.[26]

Alternatively, members of foreign far-right organizations have traveled to meet and network with NRM. Members of the American white nationalist organization Patriot Front met with members of NRM while visiting Sweden.[27] The meeting took place during a trip by Patriot Front members across Europe to meet various other far-right organizations.

NRM's more direct connections to the international far-right encompass a complicated landscape, as unlike some other prominent white nationalist organizations, NRM specifically

Members of the Nordic Resistance Movement march during a celebration of Finnish independence in Helsinki, Finland, on December 6, 2017. (Markku Ulander/AFP via Getty Images)

endorses Russia's war against Ukraine, viewing the conflict as a product of NATO's alleged expansionist aims, a product of Jewish influence on global politics. The connections to Russia extend beyond propaganda support for the war: NRM has hosted the leadership of the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) in Sweden,[28] a conglomerate of nationalist, imperial, and far-right groups that offer members military training at a facility in St. Petersburg. Two of the three men charged with the bombings of refugee centers and leftist bookstores in Sweden near the end of the 2010s received training from RIM.[29] Reported to have learned to build explosives through RIM's "Partisan" course, the men were former members of NRM.[30] RIM was designated a terrorist group by the United States in 2020.[31]

RIM and NRM connections go back to at least 2012 when RIM's founder and leader, Stanislav Anatolyevich Vorobyev, awarded two NRM writers for their "objective and correct description" of the politics of Russia in Swedish media.[32] Vorobyev also spoke in Sweden during a 2015 summit organized by NRM.[33] Though the exact amount has been an issue of some contention, Vorobyev claimed to have donated money to NRM and thanked the organization during a speech for its part in the war against Ukraine's "Jewish oligarchs."[34] NRM also was present during the "International Conservative Forum," a far-right conference in St. Petersburg that was organized by the Russian Rodina (Motherland) party.[35] This trip included a visit to a RIM facility in the same city.[36] Since the announcement of NRM's designation, it now also shares a place with RIM as the only two white nationalist organizations on the State Department's terror registry.

An NRM member, Ronny Bårdsen, also lived with Yan Igorevich Petrovskiy in Norway until his arrest by Norwegian authorities in 2016.[37] Petrovskiy is a senior member of the Russian paramilitary organization Rusich.[38] A Soviet national at birth, Petrovskiy grew up in Norway. He was eventually deported from the country after Oslo ruled that he was a national security threat. He was also designated by the U.S. Treasury in 2022 for his role in aiding the Russian war in Ukraine.[39]

While one of its core beliefs is that the Nordic race in particular is superior to all others, NRM does hold rallies in support of its ideological allies in other countries. Approximately 80 members of the Swedish Resistance Movement (the predecessor of NRM) marched through the streets of Stockholm in support of the Greek neo-Nazi group Golden Dawn in September 2013 after 20 of the latter group's members had been arrested for belonging to a criminal organization.[40] More recently, in April 2023, NRM held protests in support of the American white nationalist and founder of the white-only Active Club network Robert Rundo.[41] Rundo had been arrested in Romania on an outstanding warrant for rioting charges in California. Pictures posted to NRM's official Telegram channel show at least five men demonstrating outside the Romanian embassy in Stockholm, Sweden.[42]

NRM was dubbed a "supported group" by the "skull mask network," an accelerationist and neo-fascist community of individuals that grew out of the Iron March web forum, which was active from 2011 to 2017,[43] and includes groups like the Atomwaffen Division, National Action, and Antipodean Resistance.[44] At least one NRM member was a moderator on Iron March and an early supporter of the Atomwaffen Division.[45]

Attacks and Violence

NRM members and former members have been at the center of violent assaults, robberies, and killings since the organization's outset. While the group rhetorically embraces the idea of coming violence, most terrorist activity, such as bombings and attack plots, are often not linked back directly to the group, but rather the actions of individual members or associates. NRM embraces principles of aggressive self-defense, often praising its members after clashes for protecting themselves if not outright distorting events where NRM members have been the instigators. Violence against political enemies has been common since even before NRM's official founding, as two men—both connected to National Youth—killed trade unionist Björn Söderberg in 1999 after he tipped off a newspaper that a fellow union official was active in the far-right.[46] A third man faced weapons charges related to the killing.[47]

NRM-Finland members' propensity toward violence resulted in the group being banned by the Finnish government in 2017, a decision that was upheld by the country's supreme court in 2020.[48] Many of NRM-Finland's former members remain active in far-right political advocacy, including a man alleged to be behind the June 2024 stabbing of a 12-year-old immigrant and the attempted stabbing of another youth of the same age.[49] Sebastian Lämsä is currently awaiting trial but has admitted to the attack while denying that race played a factor.[50] Reportedly a "key member" of NRM before it was banned,[51] the 33-year-old Lämsä was also arrested in 2021 after authorities seized explosives that he allegedly ordered through the mail.[52]

Two NRM activists from Denmark, including the leader of a regional 'nest'—the name for local chapters—vandalized 84 graves in a Jewish cemetery in 2019.[53] Far from a random act, the incident coincided with the anniversary of the 1938 "Night of Broken Glass" (Kristallnacht) by German Nazi paramilitaries. It was revealed in court that the perpetrators planned and prepared for the targeting beforehand.[54]

In a separate incident in 2019, Oslo police fired multiple bullets into a moving vehicle after a man who had distributed NRM propaganda[55] stole an ambulance at gunpoint and led authorities on a 15-minute chase through the city's streets.[56] After attempting to ram a police car and striking several pedestrians with the vehicle, the man crashed the ambulance and was arrested. Police found a large quantity of drugs, a shotgun, and an Uzi submachine gun in the vehicle.[57]

The year prior, Swedish authorities uncovered a plot to kill two journalists after searching the computer of an NRM member.[58] Their investigation revealed that the man had files containing the addresses and other personal information of both targets. Searches also uncovered a firearm and silencer in the man's possession.[59]

In July 2017, three NRM members were also found to be behind a series of bombings against a center for asylum seekers and a left-wing bookstore. While no one was killed, a worker at the center was severely injured.[60] A third unexploded device was found outside a migrant encampment.[61] Two of these men were the individuals mentioned earlier who had traveled to St. Petersburg to receive training from RIM.[62]

The act that ultimately led to NRM's banning in Finland stemmed from an incident at a 2016 NRM demonstration at Helsinki's Central Railway Station. When a Finnish man, Jimi Karttunen, objected and confronted the demonstrators, an NRM member knocked him to the ground, injuring his head on the concrete. Though he was subsequently discharged from the hospital, Karttunen died six days later from a brain hemorrhage. During the trial, the victim's history of drug use[63] was used to partially explain his death, and NRM member Jesse Torniainen would serve two years for aggravated assault rather than manslaughter.[64]

In 2013, Sebastian Lämsä—the same man who allegedly stabbed a child in a Finnish shopping center in 2024—and two others attempted to rush a Jyväskylä, Finland, event for the release of a book on the far-right. Though they failed to make it through the door, Lämsä stabbed a security guard before fleeing with the others.[65] That same year in Sweden, NRM members planned and carried out an attack against a 200-person demonstration protesting the rising far-right in their neighborhood.[66]

Impacts of the Designation

The designation of the Nordic Resistance Movement by the U.S. government could have potentially serious consequences for the group. As mentioned, several of NRM's websites are offline as of early August. While Finland is the only other country to date to take steps to ban the organization, Swedish authorities described NRM in 2018 as the "largest threat to Sweden's internal security."[67] A terrorist designation from yet another fellow NATO country could create momentum for further national and international action against the group and its membership. NRM's leadership has remained defiant, publishing an article on June 15 claiming that "all attempts to stop us will fail" and blaming "Jewish activist and Foreign Minister Anthony [sic] Blinken" for the decision.[68]

A transnational organization in practice, NRM has not expressed an interest in expanding chapters outside of the Nordic block. Barring significant changes to this organizational policy, the most significant impact undoubtedly will be on the financial support NRM receives from abroad. The U.S. designation specifically prevents Americans from doing business with or financially supporting NRM, but it already has had an impact on the group's leadership in Sweden. Tor Fredrik Vejdeland and Pär Öberg, both named in the U.S. designation, claimed on NRM's website and Telegram channel to have had their bank accounts frozen as a result of the terror listing.

The exact figures on financial support from abroad to NRM are not known, but the group was previously accepting monetary donations.[a] NRM was an early adopter of cryptocurrency as a means to fundraise, and while this could be a means to circumvent the

a While figures on the amount of funding NRM receives from abroad are not publicly available, and much of the group, including leadership, relies heavily on social funding to survive, NRM did receive a total of USD $92,000 in cryptocurrency donations over nine years, eventually selling these holdings for $200,000, according to Chainalysis. "OFAC Sanctions Individuals Linked to the Nordic Resistance Movement, which Accepted Crypto Donations to Fund Terrorist Activities," Chainalysis, June 14, 2024.

restrictions imposed by the U.S. terrorist designation, the Denmark branch in particular removed the links to its crypto wallets from its website shortly after the State Department made its announcement. On July 1, 2024, a post to NRM's English-language website asked for cash donations to be mailed in "well-concealed envelopes" to a Swedish post office box. Donors who wished to give large amounts were told to contact the organization directly and arrange to deliver the money in person.

Several of the group's websites are no longer accessible at the time of publication. In response, NRM used its official Telegram channel to blame the "forces" that seized its bank accounts and were "working on racially replacing us in our homelands."[69] While a serious blow to its propaganda efforts and ability to fund its operations, it remains unlikely that the terrorist designation will eradicate the political or ideological aspirations of the group or its membership entirely. Even if national bans within the Nordic block were effectively to end NRM as an organization and political entity, the Finland ban has shown that members will remain networked and active within the nation's far-right, though at a diminished capacity. CTC

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