



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

CTCSENTINEL

OBJECTIVE · RELEVANT · RIGOROUS | NOVEMBER 2019 · VOLUME 12, ISSUE 10



FEATURE ARTICLE

Next in Line to Lead al-Qa`ida

A profile of Abu Muhammad al-Masri

ALI SOUFAN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

General (Ret) Joseph Votel

FORMER COMMANDER,
U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND

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Cover: Abu Muhammad al-Masri (U.S.

Department of State, Rewards for Justice Program)

FROM THE EDITOR

This past summer, the United Nations Monitoring Team charged with tracking the global terrorist threat assessed that “the immediate global threat posed by Al-Qaida remains unclear, with [Ayman] al-Zawahiri reported to be in poor health and doubts as to how the group will manage the succession.” In our feature article, Ali Soufan profiles the veteran Egyptian jihadi operative Abu Muhammad al-Masri and outlines why he appears to be next in line to lead al-Qa`ida. Soufan writes: “Abu Muhammad has long played a critical role in al-Qa`ida, both as an operational commander and as a member of the governing shura council. Yet despite his importance to the organization, Abu Muhammad remains a shadowy figure. Little is known about his early life or his current activities. Unlike most al-Qa`ida Central figures, he is based not in northern Pakistan but in Iran, where he was previously imprisoned and now resides under a murky arrangement by which he is apparently allowed a great deal of freedom while still being barred from leaving the country.”

Our interview is with General (Ret) Joseph Votel who retired as the Commander of U.S. Central Command earlier this year after leading a 79-member coalition that successfully liberated Iraq and Syria from the Islamic State caliphate. He is now the Class of 1987 Senior Fellow at the Combating Terrorism Center.

Michael Horton examines how Somaliland combats al-Shabaab. He writes that “the government has, with limited means, denied al-Shabaab the operational space it requires through the implementation of a virtuous circle that builds on local buy-in and uses HUMINT as a force multiplier.” He notes, however, that the terrorist group is increasingly active along Somaliland’s border with Puntland “where this virtuous circle is under increasing strain.”

There has been significant concern about the potential national security threat posed by the significant numbers of Islamist extremists convicted of terrorism-related crimes in Western countries who are due to complete their sentences in the coming years. Using nearly 30 years of data, Christopher Wright finds that “while not zero, the recidivism rate of those involved in jihadi terror plots targeting the United States is much lower than that of common criminals.”

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

Next in Line to Lead al-Qa`ida: A Profile of Abu Muhammad al-Masri

By Ali Soufan

Now is an opportune time to revisit the question of succession to the leadership of al-Qa`ida, for a number of reasons: the organization's current emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is 68 years old and reported to have a potentially serious heart complaint; bin Ladin's heir apparent, his son Hamza, is reported by the United States to have been killed in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region; and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of al-Qa`ida's principal rival, the Islamic State, is also dead. An analysis of al-Qa`ida's history and current decision-making structure points to one man in particular: the longtime jihadi commander known as Abu Muhammad al-Masri. Abu Muhammad has long played a critical role in al-Qa`ida, both as an operational commander and as a member of the governing shura council. Yet despite his importance to the organization, Abu Muhammad remains a shadowy figure. Little is known about his early life or his current activities. Unlike most al-Qa`ida Central figures, he is based not in northern Pakistan but in Iran, where he was previously imprisoned and now resides under a murky arrangement by which he is apparently allowed a great deal of freedom while still being barred from leaving the country.

The fall of 1998 marked a high point in Abu Muhammad al-Masri's career. He had just returned to Afghanistan from East Africa, where he had masterminded al-Qa`ida's deadliest attack on the United States yet—the twin truck bombings of U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.¹ He had positioned himself as one of Usama bin Ladin's key confidants, to be consulted on the planning of all major attacks. And he had risen to the leadership of al-Qa`ida's network of training camps.

Around this time, reports came to Abu Muhammad that a certain recruit, a Palestinian-Jordanian named Abu Moutassem, was behaving strangely.² Despite claiming a history in the jihad stretching back over a decade, he struggled to control his rifle. He had a suspiciously large amount of cash, as well as a valid visa for Afghanistan in his passport—a formality with which most self-respecting jihadis would not bother. And he was overheard talking on the phone

apparently speaking in code.³ Abu Jandal, bin Ladin's bodyguard, had a concise take on the matter: "If that chap is a jihadi," he said to al-Qa`ida's military chief, Abdel Hadi al-Iraqi, "you can cut my arms off!"

Abu Muhammad had Abu Moutassem arrested and proceeded to interrogate him personally. It was not long before Abu Moutassem confessed that he was working for Jordanian intelligence. "I'm ready to tell you everything," the terrified spy told Abu Muhammad, "so long as you guarantee me a fair trial."

Evidently Abu Muhammad calculated that the prospect of a fair hearing was worth the potentially valuable intelligence Abu Moutassem might provide. Instead of shooting the man on the spot as many other jihadis might have done, he bundled the Jordanian into a car and drove him to Logar, south of Kabul, to meet face-to-face with bin Ladin. Saif al-`Adl, the hot-headed Egyptian former paratrooper then serving as al-Qa`ida's security chief, was less eager to show mercy to the unmasked spy. Al-`Adl quickly pulled together a lynch mob of fellow jihadis and followed Abu Muhammad's vehicle.

When they arrived at Logar, Abu Muhammad confronted al-`Adl—and his crew, demanding to know why they had come and reminding them of an ugly previous incident in which some of the same men had beaten another alleged spy to death. Al-Qa`ida was not the government of Afghanistan; the Taliban was. Indeed, bin Ladin had recently sworn allegiance in secret to Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban leader. As Abu Muhammad said, "Al-Qa`ida does not want to be accused of taking the law into its own hands by interrogating suspects or, even worse, killing them without referring the matter to the Taliban first."

In response, al-`Adl and his gang did something unusual—they backed down. The spy was handed over to the Taliban, pumped for intelligence, and eventually freed.

This incident showcases the high regard in which Abu Muhammad al-Masri has been held within al-Qa`ida. The episode also provides a window into Abu Muhammad's personality. For unlike many jihadis, who are motivated by feeling and passion, Abu Muhammad's actions seem to be governed by logic and calculation.

This article aims to synthesize what is known about Abu Muhammad al-Masri, draw some conclusions as to his current and future role, and assess what some of the implications may be for global jihad.

First in Line

Understanding Abu Muhammad is important because as the United Nations Sanctions Coordinator recently noted, he and Saif al-`Adl are "next in line" to take over the al-Qa`ida leadership from a potentially ailing Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁴ In fact, as this article will make clear, of all living jihadis, Abu Muhammad al-Masri has the strongest claim to succeed Ayman al-Zawahiri as emir of al-Qa`ida. In early 2001, al-Qa`ida and Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) merged after a long courtship. Usama bin Ladin named EIJ's leader, Ayman

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al-Zawahiri, as his deputy and successor, much to the chagrin of some in al-Qa`ida who saw the Egyptian as an interloper.⁵ Beneath al-Zawahiri in the hierarchy stood the group's military chief, Mohammed Atef (also known as Abu Hafis al-Masri and not to be confused with lead 9/11 hijacker Mohammed Atta). Underneath Atef was a trio of fellow Egyptians: Saif al-`Adl and Abu Muhammad al-Masri, both of whom had been with al-Qa`ida since its inception, and Abu al-Khair al-Masri, who came with al-Zawahiri from EIJ.

After the 9/11 attacks, Atef became the only senior al-Qa`ida leader to stay behind in Kandahar. (He was practically bedridden, thanks to a herniated spinal disc.⁶) He was killed in a U.S. airstrike on his home in November 2001.⁷ In the number-three slot, this left the trio of senior Egyptians—Abu al-Khair, Saif al-`Adl, and Abu Muhammad—roughly equal in rank. A few years later, in correspondence recovered from bin Ladin's Abbottabad compound, the al-Qa`ida founder explicitly put Abu al-Khair and Abu Muhammad, in that order, ahead of al-`Adl (albeit possibly as a means of venting his displeasure at an article attributed to al-`Adl that urged the creation of an Islamic State in Iraq, something the al-Qa`ida leader saw as premature).⁸

At some point between the death of Usama bin Ladin in May 2011 and that of the Yemeni operative Nasir al-Wuhayshi in June 2015, members of al-Qa`ida's governing shura council signed documents apparently intended to formalize bin Ladin's intentions with regard to the succession.⁹ They agreed that in the event of al-Zawahiri's death or incapacitation, leadership would pass first to Abu al-Khair, then to Abu Muhammad, then to Saif al-`Adl.¹⁰ This line of succession, of course, was established before al-Qa`ida began publicly grooming Hamza bin Ladin as a future leader, but this would likely not have affected Abu Muhammad's place in the queue. His generation would have been given a chance to lead before the torch passed to jihadis of Hamza's age. Regardless, Hamza's death, apparently confirmed in September 2019, removes any potential ambiguity.¹¹ And in any event, signed promises carry great weight among jihadis.

In late 2015 or early 2016, Abu al-Khair, having been named as "general deputy" to al-Zawahiri, was sent to Syria to serve as al-Zawahiri's personal representative to al-Qa`ida-aligned jihadi groups fighting in that conflict. Abu al-Khair was killed in Idlib province in February 2017 when a missile from a U.S. drone struck his car.¹² According to what is known about al-Qa`ida's succession, that leaves Abu Muhammad al-Masri first in line to inherit the leadership.

The death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the so-called "caliph" of the Islamic State, further raises the stakes for the next emir of al-Qa`ida. The Islamic State began life as an al-Qa`ida franchise, and only split from the parent organization in 2014. Since then, scholars and analysts have speculated on whether and how the two groups might merge once more. Ayman al-Zawahiri is unlikely to be capable of leading such a reconciliation, given the perception of him as an interloper who spent most of his career with a different organization, Egyptian Islamic Jihad. But Abu Muhammad, as will be outlined, has been with al-Qa`ida from the very beginning and would therefore face no such impediment. Moreover, al-Baghdadi's death bequeaths the Islamic State its own succession challenge: with so many of its senior leaders dead or captured, the group has resorted to promoting virtual unknowns. Its new leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Quraishi, had no name recognition among global jihadis when the group announced he had become 'caliph' and has

not yet been seen nor heard from.^{13a} Moreover, much of the animosity between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida has built up around a war of words between al-Zawahiri and al-Baghdadi personally; with both of them gone, reconciliation could become markedly easier. Abu Muhammad, should he succeed al-Zawahiri relatively soon, will therefore potentially enjoy an unprecedented opportunity to bring former Islamic State members into the al-Qa`ida fold.

Generation Jihad

Abu Muhammad was born Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah in June 1963 in Gharbia, a governorate of Lower Egypt in the central Nile Delta.¹⁴ As a young man, he played soccer professionally for a club in the Egyptian premier league.¹⁵ Given his age, he was also part of a generation of Egyptian Sunnis vulnerable to radicalization. He would have been 15 years old when Iran became a Shi'a theocracy and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat signed a peace deal with Menachem Begin's Israel; 16 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan; and 18 when Sadat was assassinated by a cell of EIJ, the organization Ayman al-Zawahiri would later lead.

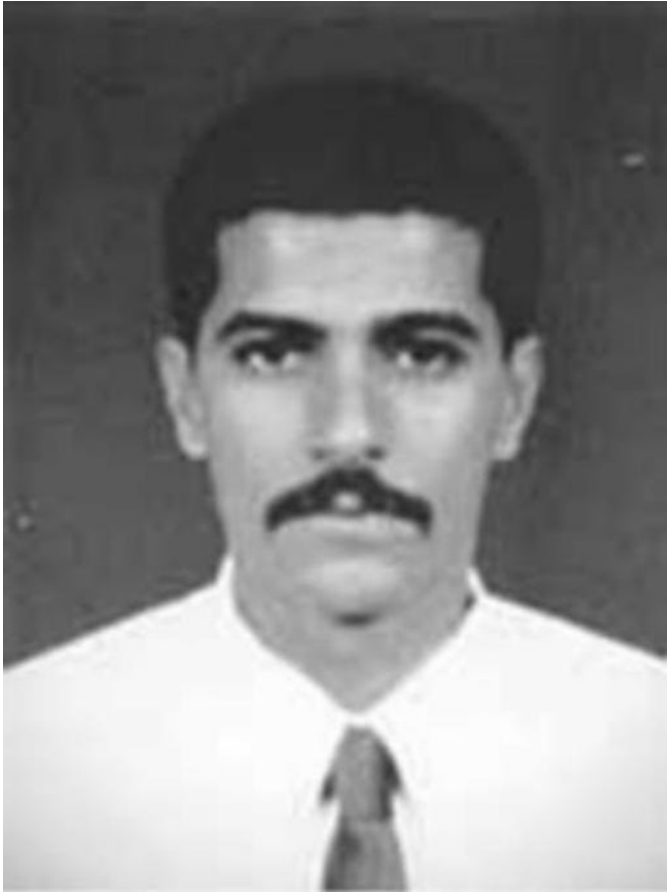
For disaffected Arab youths of Abu Muhammad's generation, Afghanistan's decade-long struggle against Soviet occupation, from 1979 to 1989, acted as a lightning rod. Usama bin Ladin bankrolled hundreds of foreign fighters—known as "Arab Afghans"—using his share of the bin Ladin family's vast fortune. Abu Muhammad was among the many who came into bin Ladin's orbit in this way.

By the early summer of 1988, the war-weary Soviet Union had begun to withdraw from Afghanistan, but several Arab governments—foremost among them Abu Muhammad's native Egypt—blocked the return of their nationals who had fought in the conflict. It was out of this subculture of stranded foreign fighters that, in or around August 1988, bin Ladin founded a new, explicitly international, emphatically religious organization called al-Qa`ida al-Askariya—the Military Base.¹⁶ Membership in the new group was to be limited to militants whose presence in Afghanistan was of "open duration"—in other words, indefinite.¹⁷ In effect, given the Egyptian government's crackdown on returning foreign fighters, that requirement meant that a disproportionate number of founding members would be Egyptian. From the earliest days of al-Qa`ida, bin Ladin singled out the Egyptians for particular praise, saying, "Their standing with us in the darkest of circumstances cannot be ignored."¹⁸ As will be seen, this preponderance of a single nationality was to create tensions further down the line, but for now, al-Qa`ida was grateful for the manpower.

Abu Muhammad was with the organization from the very start. During the opening stages of the 2001 ground invasion of Afghanistan, a team of U.S. investigators—this author among them—recovered a treasure trove of documents from the rubble of various al-Qa`ida facilities and safe houses. Among the finds was a list of 170 "charter members" of al-Qa`ida. On that list, Abu Muhammad al-Masri is listed seventh, one position up from fellow Egyptian and future shura council member Saif al-`Adl.¹⁹ In the annals of jihadism, this fact alone would accord Abu Muhammad a semi-mystical significance—even apart from the rise to greater prominence that lay in his future.

Afghanistan, however, was quickly becoming less than ideal as

a It is possible that al-Hashimi changed his name upon taking charge and may, in fact, be a better-known figure than he appears.



Abu Muhammad al-Masri (FBI)

a base for al-Qa`ida. Following the end of the Soviet occupation, the local armed factions that had hitherto fought the Soviet Union began battling each other for control of the country. Al-Qa`ida had little to gain from being drawn into such an internecine conflict. Besides, as luck would have it, the organization already enjoyed a standing offer of safe harbor from the new Islamist government of Sudan. Over the winter of 1991-1992, therefore, bin Ladin moved his organization's base of operations from Afghanistan to the Sudanese capital, Khartoum.²⁰

Shortly thereafter, a prominent Sudanese cleric paid a visit to bin Ladin at an al-Qa`ida guesthouse in al-Riyadh, one of the city's wealthier neighborhoods. The cleric brought with him an unlikely guest—a man named Sheikh Nomani, known as a high-ranking representative of the Iranian government.²¹ It might seem strange for a Sunni terrorist to sip tea with an emissary of the world's foremost Shi`a power, but it should be remembered that bin Ladin was always significantly less strident in his criticism of Shi`a Muslims than most in the jihadi movement—in part, perhaps, because his mother hailed from a closely related sect, the Syrian Alawites.²²

Besides, Iran had in the past aided Sunni militant groups like Hamas and EIJ, and bin Ladin had an idea for how al-Qa`ida and Iran might make common cause against the West.²³ Iran's most powerful terrorist proxy, Hezbollah, had grown notorious for truck bombings like the 1983 attack on the U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Beirut, in which 241 American personnel had died. Bin Ladin wanted his operatives trained to use similar techniques.²⁴

Evidently, the Iranian regime did see a potential use for al-Qa`ida, for following the meeting, a number of members traveled to

the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon to receive explosives training from Hezbollah.²⁵ There is no evidence that Abu Muhammad was among those who received training, but in the years that followed, he would put the new techniques to devastating use.^b

Black Hawk Down

In 1991, the government of Somalia fell, and the country quickly descended into anarchy, precipitating a humanitarian crisis. In response, the United Nations Security Council authorized a military intervention to shield civilians taking refuge in the south of the country. The operation was led by the United States, which began deploying in December 1992. Almost immediately, bin Ladin issued a fatwa calling for the expulsion of foreign forces from the country—anticipating by three years his 1996 “Declaration of Jihad against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites”—and al-Qa`ida set about establishing a cell in neighboring Kenya to coordinate assistance to local Somali warlords determined to oppose the international presence.²⁶

Abu Muhammad was among a group of al-Qa`ida military trainers sent to the Somali capital, Mogadishu, to assist fighters loyal to the warlord Mohammed Farah Aideed.²⁷ Among other things, they instructed Somali militants in the use of rocket launchers to bring down helicopters—something the Afghan mujahideen and some of their “Arab Afghan” allies had famously learned to do with American Stinger missiles against Soviet Hind gunships. This time, however, the targets were American, and the rockets were old Soviet models.

On October 3, 1993, militants trained by Abu Muhammad and his colleagues shot down two Black Hawk helicopters over Mogadishu; in fact, one of the RPGs was fired by a Tunisian al-Qa`ida trainer, Zachariah al-Tunisi (later killed in a coalition airstrike on al-Qa`ida's military headquarters in the opening days of the Afghanistan campaign in 2001).²⁸ The Mogadishu attacks marked the start of the notorious “Black Hawk Down” incident in which 18 U.S. servicemembers died, several of their bodies being dragged through the streets as cameras rolled.²⁹ This grisly episode precipitated an immediate U.S. withdrawal from Somalia and helped to solidify bin Ladin's view, later expressed to then-ABC News correspondent John Miller (now Deputy Commissioner for Intelligence and Counterterrorism at the New York Police Department) that “the American soldier was just a paper tiger. He was unable to endure the strikes that were dealt to his army, so he fled.”³⁰

Al-Qa`ida, too, soon pulled out of Somalia, much to the annoyance of some in the movement who had hoped that the group would go on to establish a power base there.³¹ Nor did the organization stay in Khartoum; in 1996, the Sudanese government bowed to international pressure and expelled al-Qa`ida from its territory.³²

But its attacks in East Africa were not over, and nor was Abu Muhammad's role in them.

The Northern Group

On May 18, 1996, bin Ladin boarded a plane chartered by the Sudanese government and flew from Khartoum to Jalalabad, Afghan-

^b It should be noted that the partnership between Hezbollah and al-Qa`ida would prove short-lived, largely because al-Qa`ida's rank-and-file (though apparently not their commanders) balked at the idea of working with Shi`a Muslims. See Ali Soufan, *Anatomy of Terror* (New York: Norton, 2017), p. 58.

istan, in order to take up residence at his old mountain base of Tora Bora.³³ The Taliban had not yet overrun the area—al-Qa`ida was hosted, for the time being, by other independent warlords—and would not do so until September. It was by no means clear how the relationship between al-Qa`ida and Afghanistan's new de facto government would play out. Al-Qa`ida had been shunned by one Islamist regime; the Taliban might do the same. Despite claiming that its goal was to “liberate” Saudi Arabia, the organization was now even more dominated by Egyptians than ever, creating a severe legitimacy problem in the eyes of would-be sympathizers.³⁴ In short, these were precarious times for al-Qa`ida.

Around this critical moment, there arrived at al-Qa`ida's Jihad Wal training camp a group of 40 experienced jihadis, 38 of them from the Arabian Peninsula. Collectively, they were known as the Northern Group, because they had originally planned to go north to fight in Tajikistan.³⁵ Bin Ladin had his eye on a number of them as potential key operatives. But there was a problem. Al-Qa`ida's brand of jihad was global, and it used terrorist methods, whereas these men (many of them battle-hardened from the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s or from fighting in the Balkans in the early 1990s) had come to fight in a war—to “fight the enemy face to face,” as one of their number told this author years later—not to plot bombings against foreign civilians.³⁶ Twenty-three of the 40 returned home right away, but bin Ladin spent three days convincing the remaining 17 to join. At the end of the three days, all 17 fighters joined al-Qa`ida, and they included some who would later prove pivotal: Salim Hamdan, bin Ladin's driver and confidant; Abu Jandal, bin Ladin's future bodyguard who would become a protégé of Abu Muhammad al-Masri; Mohammed al-Owhali, one of the bombers in the East Africa embassy plot; Abdul Rahim al-Nashiri, mastermind of the attack on the USS Cole; and Walid bin Attash (better known as Khallad), a key planner of the Cole bombing and later the 9/11 attacks.³⁷

During this critical three-day conversation, bin Ladin selected three close advisers to be at his side—one of whom was Abu Muhammad al-Masri.³⁸ This was becoming typical of Abu Muhammad, who was increasingly included at the highest levels at all the key moments.

The Embassy Bombings

Shortly after the carnage of Black Hawk Down, al-Qa`ida's cell in Kenya began gathering intelligence on possible targets in that country. Having reviewed the cell's surveillance files, bin Ladin and the al-Qa`ida military brass decided to attack the U.S. embassy in Nairobi, Kenya.³⁹ There were several reasons to choose it: the embassy building was prominent and lightly defended; the ambassador, Aurelia Brazeal, was a woman (a fact which bin Ladin saw as likely to attract heightened attention if she were to die in the attack); and the building housed U.S. personnel working on American policy toward Sudan, which was hostile to the Islamist government there, still at this time al-Qa`ida's host.⁴⁰ In mimicry of an old Hezbollah tactic of striking multiple locations at once, al-Qa`ida's leadership subsequently added another target to the plot—the U.S. embassy in Dar es Salaam, the capital of neighboring Tanzania. To begin with, the leader of the East African cells was al-Qa`ida's military chief and number two in the organization, a commander named Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri; but al-Banshiri drowned in the M/V Bukoba ferry disaster in Tanzania on May 21, 1996—three days after al-Qa`ida's move back to Afghanistan.

Right away, al-Banshiri was replaced as head of the East African cells by a rising star in the movement—Abu Muhammad al-Masri, known among the operatives in Kenya and Tanzania by the *nom de guerre* of Saleh.⁴¹ Soon, Abu Muhammad was supervising the building of two truck bombs, each weighing almost a metric ton.⁴² He was reportedly pleased to be attacking in Kenya, partly because, for reasons that are not entirely clear, he did not like the country or its people.⁴³

At one point, one of the plotters, a Saudi named Mohamed al-Owhali who had come to al-Qa`ida in 1996 as part of the Northern Group, asked him what must have seemed an obvious question: if their enemy was the United States, why not attack there?

“There are targets inside the U.S. we could hit,” Abu Muhammad responded. “But things aren't ready yet ... We have to have many attacks outside the United States and this will weaken the U.S. and make way for our ability to strike within the United States.”⁴⁴

In the spring of 1998, al-Qa`ida's military committee, of which Abu Muhammad was a leading member, gave the go-ahead for the East Africa attacks. Abu Muhammad ordered all non-essential personnel out of Kenya and Tanzania and instructed all others to be ready to leave at short notice. Shortly before the planned date of the attacks, Abu Muhammad left Afghanistan to supervise final preparations on the ground in Nairobi.⁴⁵

As the attacks approached, the normally cool Abu Muhammad seems to have grown increasingly paranoid. One plotter, a Palestinian named Mohammed Odeh, dragged his feet getting his travel documents ready. By August 1, less than a week before the planned bombings, Odeh still did not have his passport in order. For this offense, Abu Muhammad yelled at Odeh in public and in front of a senior member of the Kenya cell.⁴⁶

Three days later, on August 4, Abu Muhammad and others were in his room at Nairobi's Hilltop Hotel discussing an article about wanted terrorists that somebody had told them had been published in an Egyptian magazine. The conversation turned to whether the magazine would have printed pictures of the wanted men, and this seemed to spook Abu Muhammad. He began to look agitated and to repeat prayers intended to alleviate anxiety.⁴⁷ Around the same time, Abu Muhammad saw a television news report that made him think the embassy plots had been exposed.⁴⁸ Apparently fearing imminent arrest, on the evening of August 5, Abu Muhammad evacuated the Hilltop Hotel and stayed away all night.⁴⁹ The following day, he left Nairobi bound for Karachi, Pakistan, on Kenya Airways flight 310.⁵⁰ Abu Muhammad had chosen the next morning, August 7, as the time for the attacks on the basis that “real” Muslims should be at the mosque for Friday prayers.⁵¹ Around 10:30 AM, the two truck bombs exploded nearly simultaneously in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, killing more than 200 people and dealing massive damage to the two embassy buildings.

In some ways, however, the attacks did not go according to plan. Odeh, the cell member who failed to get his passport in order, was arrested upon arrival in Pakistan, having traveled from Nairobi on a fraudulent Yemeni document apparently forged in haste.⁵² Perhaps Abu Muhammad cannot be blamed for that particular mishap, but the execution of the attacks, too, was botched. The idea was to force the guards at the embassy compounds to open the gates, then drive the trucks as close to the buildings as possible; in fact, Abu Muhammad's ideal scenario would have involved bringing the buildings down entirely, the way Hezbollah had done on several occasions.⁵³ In the event, the guards simply refused to open the gates, leaving

the trucks to explode on the public streets outside, with their cargo beds (and therefore the majority of the explosive force) facing away from the embassy buildings. One result was that many more locals died than had been intended, along with far fewer Americans; of the 224 combined dead, only 12—just over five percent—were American.⁵⁴

For these mistakes, Odeh—Abu Muhammad’s underling on the plot—would later explicitly blame Abu Muhammad’s poor planning.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the embassy bombings did galvanize al-Qa`ida’s efforts against the United States, particularly because the American response—cruise missiles launched at a largely evacuated camp near Khost—proved so muted relative to the destruction the bombings had inflicted.⁵⁶ Within a few months of the East Africa bombings, bin Ladin had greenlit the “planes operation,” the plot that would become the 9/11 attacks.⁵⁷

Abu Muhammad’s Apotheosis

Despite their flawed (from al-Qa`ida’s perspective) execution, the embassy bombings also bolstered Abu Muhammad’s burgeoning career as a terrorist commander. By the end of 2000, he had been appointed as one of the nine members of al-Qa`ida’s shura council, the organization’s governing body (the 10th member being bin Ladin himself).⁵⁸ He was prominent on the council’s military committee, meaning he was consulted on all planned attacks, including the deadly bombing of the destroyer USS Cole in October 2000 and the “planes operation” itself.⁵⁹ He commanded all al-Qa`ida forces in Kabul, the Afghan capital.⁶⁰ And he was placed in charge of the organization’s vital network of training camps, replacing a Tunisian, Abu Ata`a al-Tunisi, killed in a battle against the Northern Alliance.⁶¹ Salim Hamdan, bin Ladin’s one-time driver, told this author during an interrogation that as head of the camps, Abu Muhammad proved particularly adept at identifying would-be operatives and recommending them for specialized training in techniques like explosives and urban warfare.⁶²

The old tensions between the Egyptians and the rest persisted. Egyptians made up the bulk of the organization, including all but two members of the governing shura council (the exceptions being bin Ladin himself and Abu Hafsa al-Mauratani, then the group’s chief cleric, who has since left al-Qa`ida⁶³). Even intramural soccer matches were usually Egyptians versus everybody else.⁶⁴ Arabs from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf particularly resented this arrangement; in their countries, Egyptians typically did menial jobs, not senior management.

Saif al-`Adl’s approach to these complaints, characteristically, was uncompromising; in essence, he told the Saudis to get over it. Bin Ladin had said that in order to be fully trusted in the organization, members should make Hijra—move their families and homes to Afghanistan the way the Prophet Mohammed had moved from Mecca to Medina. The way al-`Adl saw it, these Saudis did jihad only for “vacation,” returning to their comfortable lives whenever the mood struck them, whereas Egyptians, barred from returning home, were in Afghanistan permanently. So, what did they expect?⁶⁵

Abu Muhammad, equally true to form, chose a more nuanced tack, recognizing the value of fighters from the Gulf. One focal point of the tensions was the guesthouse in Kabul, a key part of al-Qa`ida’s recruitment pipeline and an institution of which Abu Muhammad, as commander in Kabul, was now in charge. To show that Peninsular Arabs could indeed advance in the organization if they stayed around, Abu Muhammad chose a Yemeni born in Saudi

Arabia, Abu Jandal, to serve as emir of the guesthouse.⁶⁶

Abu Muhammad soon became a mentor to Abu Jandal, 10 years his junior. Later, in interrogations with this author and in his 2010 memoirs, Jandal painted a complex portrait of Abu Muhammad’s personality around this time. He was “extremely religious,” Jandal said, and must have studied Islamic theology, for he could quote the Qur’an and Hadith (sayings and deeds of the Prophet Mohammed) at will.⁶⁷ Despite his carelessness about killing passersby in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, Abu Muhammad was, Jandal said, “against targeting civilians” and “the one who seemed most touched” by civilian deaths among al-Qa`ida’s senior leadership.⁶⁸ Recall that it was also during this same period that Abu Muhammad found the Jordanian spy in Kabul and prevented Saif al-`Adl from lynching him.⁶⁹

The Flight to Iran

Like every other member of the shura council who did not come with al-Zawahiri from ELJ, Abu Muhammad counseled bin Ladin against the “planes operation.”⁷⁰ “It was like all of al-Qaeda’s history,” said Mustafa Hamid, a revered “Arab Afghan” who was close to the al-Qa`ida leadership. “They disagreed but they would not go against Abu Abdullah [i.e., bin Ladin].”⁷¹ So the 9/11 attacks went ahead, and as the old guard had predicted, the United States quickly retaliated by invading Afghanistan. Kabul, Abu Muhammad’s old command, fell almost without a fight, all but a handful of its Taliban and al-Qa`ida defenders having fled.

In Kandahar, things were different. Saif al-`Adl was placed in command not just of al-Qa`ida’s fighters but of all “Arab Afghan” forces.⁷² In preparation for the battle, al-`Adl sent a truck convoy west, carrying the wives and children of high-ranking al-Qa`ida members to the relative safety of a country that would reliably not assist the Americans, Iran.⁷³ Kandahar fell under heavy bombardment from U.S. warplanes. Afterward, al-`Adl and a group of other surviving commanders fled eastward to a safe house in Bermel, close to the Pakistani border, where Abu Muhammad had also taken refuge.⁷⁴ There, they discussed their next moves. Traditionally, the Taliban and the Arab Afghans had found shelter in the lightly governed north of Pakistan, but following the horror of 9/11, the Musharraf regime had thrown in its lot with the United States (albeit Musharraf himself continued to castigate the United States in public). This supposed “betrayal” of the Taliban and al-Qa`ida preoccupied bin Ladin during the U.S. invasion, and he furiously ranted to his underlings about it.⁷⁵

For the commanders huddled in their safe house in Bermel, the choice was stark: keep fighting and risk death in Afghanistan or flee across the border and risk capture in Pakistan. Saif al-`Adl chose the latter, but Abu Muhammad chose the former.⁷⁶ Nor did he simply stay on the battlefield locally; he also carried on plotting attacks against the United States. When this author interrogated Abu Zubaydah, a veteran of the Battle of Kandahar, in 2002, Zubaydah identified Abu Muhammad as a commander whom bin Ladin “has working on plots.” Specifically, Abu Muhammad was hatching a plan to attack a U.S. military base—an attack that was thwarted because of information extracted from Abu Zubaydah during the non-coercive phase of his interrogation.⁷⁷

In the face of overwhelming U.S. power, however, even Abu Muhammad had to admit defeat and take steps toward self-preservation. Like many al-Qa`ida members, Abu Muhammad and his family sought refuge in Iran. Admittedly, al-Qa`ida’s Sunni extremists were not happy to be hiding out in the belly of a Shi`a theocracy.

One, a veteran of the East Africa plot who was arrested around the same time as Abu Muhammad, called Iran a “rejectionist Persian country” populated by “people whose mannerisms resemble those of the Jews and the hypocrites” where true Islam seems “out of place.”⁷⁸ But with the U.S.-led crackdown in full effect across the region, they had little choice.

For some months, Abu Muhammad and his family lived in a safe house operated by sympathetic Sunnis in the city of Shiraz in the south of the country.⁷⁹ While there, he adopted the slightly unconvincing alias Daoud Shirazi—“David from Shiraz”—although presumably any local would have been able to tell right away that the Egyptian was not from anywhere near Shiraz.⁸⁰

The Iranian authorities were aware of al-Qa`ida’s presence in the city and kept them under covert surveillance. Eventually, however, the militants discovered that they were being watched and Iranian security was forced to make arrests to avoid losing track of them altogether.⁸¹ (To add to the urgency, around the same time a U.S. agency recorded Saif al-`Adl on a phone call attempting to coordinate the purchase of an alleged nuclear weapon, prompting a rare instance of the United States sharing intelligence with Iran.⁸²) On April 23, 2003, Abu Muhammad was arrested, together with Saif al-`Adl, Abu al-Khair al-Masri, and a host of other al-Qa`ida figures.⁸³

Iran swiftly moved to deport the foot-soldiers it captured in these raids, but it retained custody of the more senior figures, including Abu Muhammad.⁸⁴ It divided them by seniority into three tiers, to be kept separately; naturally, Abu Muhammad and al-`Adl were in the top tier. For the first 20 months, the high-value prisoners were kept in the cells of an intelligence building in Tehran, but they were never interrogated—perhaps evidence that Iran wanted to detain them not for intelligence but as bargaining chips in an effort to control the potential threat from al-Qa`ida.⁸⁵

Around the beginning of 2005, Abu Muhammad was reunited with his family at a detention facility on a base in Tehran apparently used for training Hezbollah militants.⁸⁶ They were allowed to communicate with each other, but not with the outside world, although back channels seem to have existed by which various manifestos, memoirs, and other messages could be smuggled out for publication.⁸⁷

Tellingly, in correspondence between bin Ladin and senior al-Qa`ida members based in northern Pakistan, those detained in Iran were referred to as “al-Zayyat and his partners” or “the al-Zayyat brothers”—al-Zayyat being an alias of Abu Muhammad (typically used to distinguish him from another “Abu Muhammad,” Ayman al-Zawahiri).⁸⁸ This nomenclature would seem to indicate that al-Qa`ida Central took for granted that Abu Muhammad was the leader of the group, ahead of other detainees like Saif al-`Adl and Abu al-Khair.

Behind bars and barbed-wire fences, life assumed a slower pace, and one day became practically indistinguishable from the next—a familiar experience for those detained anywhere, but a far cry from the frenetic pace of frontline jihad. Every few years, the detainees would be moved to a different facility, always on a base in Tehran or its suburbs.⁸⁹ Over time, they were allowed more contact with the outside, albeit strictly supervised by Iranian officials. Their living conditions also gradually improved until, around seven years after their initial arrest, they were moved to freshly refurbished houses lining something resembling a suburban cul-de-sac, complete with dedicated yards, a small mosque, and a playground for the

children.⁹⁰

This relative tranquility did not please some of the jihadis, who by nature craved the excitement of an active warzone.⁹¹ On March 5, 2010, the detainees rioted and had to be pacified by masked security forces who stormed the compound.⁹² The senior leaders, presumably including Abu Muhammad, were rounded up, jailed for a time, and tortured.⁹³

Around the fall of 2011, Abu Muhammad and the other detainees were offered their freedom if they would return to their home countries. It is not clear why the Iranian authorities made this offer. Partly, no doubt, they were interested in ridding themselves of some troublesome prisoners. Perhaps with a pro-Tehran regime in place in Baghdad, the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq nearing completion, and Assad’s rule not yet seriously threatened in Syria, they felt that al-Qa`ida was not as relevant in the region as it once was.

In any event, some senior detainees took the deal, but the three senior Egyptians—Abu Muhammad, Saif al-`Adl, and Abu al-Khair—all refused.⁹⁴ As usual for Abu Muhammad, there was presumably a strong logic behind this decision: the Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak might have been toppled, but the country’s security services would still be on the lookout for any returning al-Qa`ida members, and their retribution would likely be swift and terrible. For Abu Muhammad, the better option was to remain in custody in Iran where he could be with his family and enjoy a certain measure of freedom to communicate with jihadis outside.

Alongside the commanders and ideologues, a number of family members of Usama bin Ladin were detained in Iran, including one of the al-Qa`ida leader’s favorite sons, Hamza, who was kept in the same compound as Abu Muhammad.⁹⁵ Hamza’s mother, Khairia Sabar, herself an educated woman who had lectured on child psychology at universities in Saudi Arabia, recognized the importance of good schooling and evidently worried that her son was not receiving it. So she arranged for Hamza to be homeschooled by a handful of the senior men in the compound. In an audio message recorded years later, following his own release, Hamza praises his mentors in captivity—“my sheikhs through whose hands I was educated”—a short list that includes Abu Muhammad.⁹⁶ Between them, these men educated Hamza in Qur’anic study, the sharia, and the Hadith.⁹⁷

But Abu Muhammad became more than a mentor. Around 2005, Hamza married Abu Muhammad’s daughter Miriam in a ceremony at the compound where they were detained together. Footage of the event was seized from the Abbottabad compound in 2011 and released by the CIA in early 2018.^c

The marriage of Hamza bin Ladin was not the only dynastic connection Abu Muhammad forged in captivity. At some point, another of his daughters married a son of Abu al-Khair, the commander who was first in line to succeed al-Zawahiri as emir until his death in a drone strike in Syria in 2017.⁹⁸ These blood ties would be significant in any context, but in an organization as wedded to tradition as al-Qa`ida, they are doubly so.

Abu Muhammad’s “Release”

Around 2007, al-Qa`ida opened a back-channel with the Iranian

c Footage of the wedding can be viewed at Huda al-Saleh, “New footage shows Hamza bin Laden at his wedding in Iran,” *Al Arabiya English*, January 19, 2018. See also “Bin Laden files: CIA releases video of son Hamza’s wedding,” *BBC News*, November 2, 2017.

authorities through a series of go-betweens. The purpose was to negotiate the status of the detainees, still referred to internally as “al-Zayyat [i.e., Abu Muhammad] and his brothers.”⁹⁹ Within the organization, there was disagreement on how to handle the talks. The leadership in northern Pakistan wanted to “fight fire with fire ... to increase the pressure against the oppressors for the sake of al-Zayyat and his brothers,” by threatening attacks against Iranian targets.¹⁰⁰ But bin Ladin, characteristically, counseled caution, warning his underlings to “be patient” and “not start anything.” This is not surprising given that many of the detainees were bin Ladin’s own family members.

Negotiations continued for a number of years.¹⁰¹ In early 2011, a few weeks before bin Ladin’s death, Khairia Sabar, her son Hamza, and a number of other bin Ladin family members were released in exchange for an Iranian diplomat kidnapped in Pakistan.¹⁰² Abu Muhammad and most of the other leaders remained in custody. (Saif al-`Adl was briefly released, but later returned to Iran for reasons that are not clear, perhaps because his wife and children stayed behind.¹⁰³)

In July 2013, al-Qa`ida once again bolstered its position by kidnapping another Iranian diplomat, Nour Ahmad Nikbakht, in Yemen, home of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).¹⁰⁴ In 2015, another prisoner swap was agreed, and in September of that year, five al-Qa`ida leaders were released.¹⁰⁵ Three of them, Abu al-Khair, Sari Shihab, and Khalid al-Aruri, made their way to Syria. Abu al-Khair and Sari Shihab were killed there in 2017 and 2019, respectively, while al-Aruri is still active, as will be outlined later.¹⁰⁶

Saif al-`Adl and Abu Muhammad remained in Iran.¹⁰⁷ In a letter posted to a jihadi social media channel in 2017, al-Aruri addressed their status. After the prisoner exchange, he says, they “got out of prison. So the two are not detained as is understood and implied from this word, but they are prohibited from travelling until God can grant them an exit, for they move about and live their ordinary life except for permission to travel. [They are not] in prison or incommunicado or deprived of will or the like.”¹⁰⁸

This account begs the question: How involved are Saif and Abu Muhammad in the day-to-day running of al-Qa`ida? In March 2013, Sulayman Abu Ghayth, an al-Qa`ida operative imprisoned with them in Iran and now serving a life sentence in the United States,¹⁰⁹ told the FBI that the two Egyptians are “beaten men ... primarily concerned with the day-to-day activities / welfare of their families in Iran ... they have no larger intentions ... to continue the jihad if / when they are released.”¹¹⁰ This assessment may have represented an attempt to direct attention away from these two revered figures. At any rate, whatever their precise status within Iran, Saif and Abu Muhammad have not just “continue[d] the jihad;” they have positioned themselves as its elder statesmen.

Evidence of this came in relation to a dispute between al-Qa`ida and its Syrian affiliate. In July 2016, the al-Nusra Front proposed a rebranding exercise to dissociate itself from al-Qa`ida Central, in the hopes of attracting support from secular and international elements opposed to the Assad regime.¹¹¹ According to the letter uploaded by Khalid al-Aruri (the same one mentioned earlier), al-Aruri and Abu al-Khair, al-Zawahiri’s senior representatives in the Levant, tentatively authorized the rebranding but submitted it for approval “on the same night” to Saif al-`Adl and Abu Muhammad.¹¹² The two Egyptians rejected the rebranding and transmitted it onward to al-Zawahiri for a final decision.¹¹³ Abu al-Khair and Khalid al-Aruri then called a halt while al-Zawahiri considered the

matter. (He, too, would eventually reject the rebranding, on the basis that it would not fool anybody and would just confuse potential recruits.¹¹⁴)

Of this turn of events, several aspects are interesting.

Firstly, the rebranding plan was reportedly submitted to Saif al-`Adl and Abu Muhammad “on the same night” it was decided upon, suggesting that al-Qa`ida commanders in Syria have been and likely continue to be in direct phone or online communication with their colleagues in Iran.

Secondly, opposition from al-`Adl and Abu Muhammad was enough to prompt al-Aruri and Abu al-Khair to suspend their approval of the project. This indicates the standing that al-`Adl and Abu Muhammad likely still enjoy within the organization as managers and decision-makers.

Thirdly, al-`Adl and Abu Muhammad were able to transmit the plan (together, presumably, with an indication of their opposition to it) to al-Zawahiri, a detail that shows they are in contact with the overall emir, possibly through a courier network similar to the one bin Ladin was using in the months before his death.

Fourthly, al-Aruri’s letter claims that al-`Adl and Abu Muhammad are the decision-makers not only for Syria but worldwide: “And the leadership reads, hears and tracks all the fields, not just the field of al-Sham [the Levant].”¹¹⁵ Evidence of their part in decisions outside Syria is currently lacking, but given their influence within al-Qa`ida throughout its existence, al-Aruri’s assessment could well be correct.

Finally, while it might be supposed that the Egyptians’ presence in Iran would complicate their ability to make decisions for al-Qa`ida as a whole, that does not seem to have been the case, at least on this occasion. This suggests that Abu Muhammad, if and when he should succeed, would not face significant obstacles in running the organization from Iran (provided, it may safely be presumed, that he does not move to attack Iranian interests directly). That is not to say that the government of Iran would necessarily be content to allow the leader of al-Qa`ida—as opposed to its number two—to operate from Iranian soil. Such an arrangement might, indeed, also cause suspicion among jihadis and within the al-Qa`ida membership itself. Moreover, Iran has previously attempted to exert influence over al-Qa`ida’s actions by holding family members of both bin Ladin and other senior commanders based elsewhere. The more likely outcome, should Abu Muhammad succeed to the leadership, is that he would depart from Iran and be forced to leave family members behind as collateral.

In June 2018, the United Nations team responsible for monitoring sanctions seemed to confirm the essentials of this account in a report to the Security Council based on member state intelligence:

*Al-Qaida leaders in the Islamic Republic of Iran have grown more prominent, working with Aiman al-Zawahiri and projecting his authority more effectively than he could previously. They have influenced events in the Syrian Arab Republic, countering the authority of Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani [leader of the al-Nusra Front] and causing formations, breakaways and mergers of various Al-Qaida-aligned groups in Idlib ... Member States report that Aiman al-Zawahiri, partly through the agency of senior Al-Qaida leadership figures based in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Abu Muhammad Al-Masri and Sayf Al-Adl (QDi.001), has been able to exert influence on the situation in north-western Syrian Arab Republic.*¹¹⁶

Less than a month after the Security Council made this report public, the U.S. State Department doubled the bounty for information on Saif al-`Adl and Abu Muhammad from \$5 million to \$10 million.¹¹⁷ The State Department did not offer an explanation for this decision, but one may safely conclude that the U.S. government still considers Abu Muhammad a dangerous leader within al-Qa`ida.

And such an assessment would seem to be correct. Abu Muhammad al-Masri is experienced, highly regarded, well connected, able to make and transmit decisions for the organization as a whole, and—given his location—immune from the drone strikes that have ended the careers of many other senior commanders. Moreover, as a close associate of bin Ladin since the founding of al-Qa`ida, he is better placed than al-Zawahiri could ever be to reunite al-Qa`ida with its wayward progeny, the Islamic State.

Conclusion

One of the many younger al-Qa`ida members mentored by Abu Muhammad was Abu Jandal, whom Abu Muhammad recommended for the post of emir of the guesthouse in Kabul, one of the principal pipelines to membership in the organization. During his 2001 interrogation by this author, Jandal recounted a conversation with his mentor in which Abu Jandal said he wanted to leave al-Qa`ida for a quieter life back home in Yemen. Abu Muhammad told him, “If you think by leaving Afghanistan [the Americans] will leave you alone, you are wrong. This is a war. Either we will win or die. There is no place for turning back.”¹¹⁸

“Look at me now,” Abu Jandal later told the author. “I left al-Qa`ida, but I’m in prison. Abu Muhammad was right.”¹¹⁹

In its June 2018 report, cited earlier, the U.N. sanctions monitoring team summed up the long-term threat from al-Qa`ida as follows:

Al-Qaida’s leadership demonstrates strategic patience and its

*regional affiliates exercise good tactical judgment, embedding themselves in local issues and becoming players. While there is as yet little evidence of a re-emerging direct global threat from Al-Qaida, improved leadership and enhanced communication will probably increase the threat over time, as will any rise in the tendency, already visible in some regions, of ISIL supporters to join Al-Qaida.*¹²⁰

With his long history in the jihadi movement, Abu Muhammad al-Masri could rightly be seen as the embodiment of this kind of “strategic patience”—a quality that has seen al-Qa`ida cheat death several times over the 30 years of its existence.

Ayman al-Zawahiri, for his part, has never been popular among the al-Qa`ida rank-and-file, primarily because, as leader of EIJ until 2001, he is seen as an interloper even to this day. Having been with bin Ladin since before al-Qa`ida was even founded, Abu Muhammad al-Masri cannot be accused of similar carpet-bagging. He is well connected within the organization through ties of loyalty and family, and as a commander he has shown himself to be both tough and shrewd. Moreover, as the mastermind of the East Africa attacks and a prominent terrorist planner during the peak of al-Qa`ida’s war against the United States, it would not be surprising to see him turn the organization’s focus back toward attacking the West. Finally, as has been noted, the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi may represent the best opportunity yet to restore al-Qa`ida’s primacy among jihadis—and potentially to bring disappointed former Islamic State members back under the al-Qa`ida umbrella.

Throughout its existence, whenever al-Qa`ida has evolved, Abu Muhammad al-Masri has been at the forefront of the change. With al-Zawahiri reported to have a potentially serious heart complaint,¹²¹ the group may be on the verge of only the second transfer of leadership in its history. Barring some unforeseen mishap, there can be little doubt that Abu Muhammad will be at the center of the next evolution. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: General (Ret) Joseph Votel, Former Commander, U.S. Central Command

By Brian Dodwell, Paul Cruickshank, and Kristina Hummel

General Joseph L. Votel is a retired U.S. Army Four-Star officer and most recently the Commander of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM)—responsible for U.S. and coalition military operations in the Middle East, Levant, and Central and South Asia. During his 39 years in the military, Votel commanded special operations and conventional military forces at every level. His career included combat in Panama, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Notably, he led a 79-member coalition that successfully liberated Iraq and Syria from the Islamic State caliphate. He preceded his assignment at CENTCOM with service as the Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC).

Votel is the Class of 1987 Senior Fellow at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. He is also a Distinguished Fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C., and the Belfer Center at the John F. Kennedy School of Government in Cambridge, MA and a member of the Council of Foreign Relations. Votel is a member of the Board of Directors for Service to School, a non-profit organization that helps military veterans transition and win admission to the Nation's best graduate and undergraduate schools. In January 2020, Votel will become the President and CEO of Business Executives for National Security (BENS). He is a 1980 graduate of the United States Military Academy and earned master's degrees from the U.S. Army Command and Staff College and the Army War College.

CTC: We wanted to start off with Syria and Iraq and to ask you to reflect on the lessons learned that you have from a military perspective on the territorial defeat of the Islamic State. What were the advantages and drawbacks of a strategy that relied heavily on Iraqi forces and SDF forces on the ground?

Votel: I think one of the things we did really well, in both Iraq and Syria, was applying the 'by, with, and through' approach.^a I think we were able to strike the balance between the enabling activities that we needed to do for them—whether it was intelligence support, whether it was a certain amount of equipping, whether it was training, whether it was advising—I think we were able to do that without overdoing it. There'd have perhaps been great interest in the past in trying to get in and muck around with the Kurdish organizations or even the Iraqi forces and try to change them. We didn't

get too far into that. We took them as they were. And we tried to leverage them and enable them from that point. And I think that helped us move quicker frankly. But there's some inherent challenges in that. They weren't as efficient as they needed to be. On the Iraqi side, you had these different pillars of security, you had Ministry of Defense, you had Ministry of Interior, you had the federal police, you had Popular Mobilization Forces. We didn't try to do something more with that. We worked with what he had. So I think that was a first key to success in this. The downside is there's some inefficiencies that come along with that.

The second piece is we tried to focus on building really strong and trustful relationships with the key leaders. One example in Iraq was Abdul Amir [Yarallah], the Army three-star [general] who became their joint force commander. We focused on making sure that he was successful, and we had really strong relationships with him at all levels—including my level and then all the way down well into the organization. Same thing across the border with [General] Mazloum [Kobani Abdi], the Syrian Democratic Force leader. I made sure we had really good relationships, trusting relationships with him. And we were very clear with both of those partners about what we would do and what we would not do. And particularly with the Kurdish part of the SDF, I made sure he understood what our redlines were, things that we weren't going to do. We were never going to go to Afrin. We were never going to do anything that would connect the cantons. If we ever saw something that looked like YPG or SDF attacks against the Turks, this would immediately be a deal breaker for us. We made these kinds of things really, really clear to him through our normal, routine interaction. And I think that developed a fairly trustful relationship in terms of them knowing what they were getting with us. Mazloum I know talked to a variety of other people; he talked to everybody. But he kept coming back to us, despite every opportunity we gave him by policy decision or things we said in the news or anything else, to walk away. He continued to come back to us because I think he viewed us as the preferred partner.

The last thing I would just say with regard to this was that in the orchestration of the campaign, we recognized there was a real urgency in the 2015-2016 timeframe to "get going, get to Mosul, come on, let's get on with this." We recognized there was a Kasserine moment^b in the early days when the Iraqis faltered and ran away, and they had to be built back up. And so we had to take a

a 'By, with, and through' is a key term and concept that was born out of the special operations community but whose use has been expanded to describe a broader approach to military operations that relies on partners to pursue U.S. interests. See Joseph L. Votel and Eero R. Keravuori, "The By-With-Through Operational Approach," *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2nd Quarter 2018).

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General (Ret) Joseph L. Votel

more incremental approach to this and build confidence and build capacity and kind of set the scene for the campaign that followed. And we had to do better integration of our campaign plan with the humanitarian side and the government side. And I think we became proficient with that.

Same thing in Syria. We had a very incremental, clear way in which we were going to try to get down the Middle Euphrates Valley, and I think that worked for us. It was predictable. They understood where we were going. We knew where we were going. We were able to communicate it fairly effectively.

CTC: You were able to build these partnerships, and they proved, at the end of the day, effective in removing the Islamic State from territory both in Syria and Iraq. However, if you look at places like Raqqa, given the coalition's need to rely on air power and work through non-U.S. forces on the ground, there was clearly a significant civilian toll, especially because the Islamic State was present in population centers and using human shields.¹ Now that lessons are being drawn from this conflict, what needs to be the debate about whether more or fewer U.S. troops should have been used on the ground?

Votel: I think part of the challenge in places like this was that we didn't have a lot of people on the ground who could go in and make evaluations afterward and confirm facts and do the investigation on things like that. I take that point, but it was where we were policy-wise. So I think in the future, a lesson learned out of this is that we have to plan for that aspect of it. It should not have been a surprise to anybody that there was going to be a lot of damage in the urban areas and that there were going to be civilian casualties. This was the nature of the fight. To accomplish the mission assigned, this is what was going to have to happen. And so, we certainly have to

communicate that, but we also have to highlight the risk associated with that and that there may be some things we can do better.

It was very instructive to me in the closing months of the fight in Syria, especially as we got deeper into the Middle Euphrates Valley, which was very clearly Arab territory. We were using Kurdish forces along with our Arab militias, and we actually saw local tribal elders interacting in the campaign. At first, we thought it was really frustrating, but then we began to understand it provided a mechanism for us to try to control the violence and try to minimize the opportunities for civilian casualties. So several times in Raqqa and that last fight in the Middle Euphrates Valley, when for months we said, "we're at 98 percent," this was the reason why. It was because we kept starting and stopping because of the interaction of the tribal elders, the Arab tribal elders, trying to get people out, and trying to actually negotiate with ISIS. The tribal elders said to us, "We're going to do it. We know you Americans don't want to do it, we're going to negotiate with them because we want them out of there, we want something left of our villages, we don't want to kill a bunch of people on this thing," and we supported that because that was what our partners were doing.

There's a certain amount of flak that comes along when you are told "our partners are talking to ISIS right now." I was like, "What? What are you doing?" Well, this is what had to be done. So you have to accept it. This is part of the 'by, with, and through' operational approach. When you rely on partners to do things, they're going to do it in a partner way. We're not going to like everything they do. It won't be exactly the way we'd do it, but that was the trade-off. And frankly, even as horrendous as that fight was, I think we probably saved lives allowing them to operate that way.

CTC: Many believe that far too little is being done by the international community when it comes to fostering reconciliation in Syria and Iraq. As you think it through, what are the key steps that need to be taken to better foster that political reconciliation in a place that's so difficult?

Votel: I think the key steps are there has to be a recognition that there's going to have to be some compromise and there has to be an understanding of the facts on the ground. We can say that we don't want to deal with the Assad regime because of the horrendous things they've perpetrated on their own people, but the fact is the Assad regime is in place here. To move forward we have to, I think, figure out some ways to accommodate the facts on the ground that might be very bitter pills to swallow. The same thing applies to Afghanistan. We're going to have to talk to the Taliban. If we want to achieve the President's objective in Afghanistan of reconciliation and using that as a platform to reduce our own presence and focus on our enduring interests there, there's going to have to be some compromise here. Not everybody's going to be happy with this. And so when we come in with very hard policy lines on these kinds of things, it's going to take time, or we're going to miss opportunities. And it's going to make it harder for us to achieve what we need to do down the line. We were basically in northeastern Syria to hold the ground, keep it stable while we worked through whatever comes next politically. This was slow in developing. With the President's recent decision to pull back from the border, we are essentially trying to do the same thing but with less terrain, forces, and importantly less strategic influence and a more complex partnership relationship.

CTC: What do you think are the main lessons learned about what makes a good partner and how to transform partnerships that exist initially in principle into ones that result in real tangible effects on the ground?

Votel: Let me just start with the coalition. It was really important to have an effective way of communicating and interacting with our coalition partners so that they really felt integrated into the things that we were doing. And so, one of the things we put in place—my predecessor did and then we continued to refine it—was to make sure that we had forums and activities planned on a regular basis that brought the international military leaders together to make sure everybody was aligned with the campaign plan. That became very, very important. We essentially brought together what I refer to as the “framework nations” on a fairly regular basis, about every quarter. And we’d bring them to Tampa [location of U.S. Central Command Headquarters], or we’d go somewhere else. And these are the 12, 13 nations that were providing the majority of the military capability on the ground and in the air, and it was most important to align them. So we had to have a mechanism to talk among ourselves. So my first point is how important the communication aspect was to our effectiveness.

And then I think what allowed us to develop an effective relationship with the Iraqis and with the Syrian Democratic Forces was really this idea of trust-building with them at multiple levels. Again, making sure that we were talking clearly with them so that it was very clear to them the things we would do, and would *not* do. That was very, very important in this. This meant being first with the news—good and bad. For example, it was critical for me on December 19th last year after the President made his announcement [signaling that U.S. troops would withdraw from Syria]² that the first person after talking to the Chairman [of the Joints Chief of Staff] that I went to was General Mazloum. So he heard this from *me*. And while I believe they were disappointed, I think the fact that we were able to very quickly explain to him what we knew, what we didn’t know, and then where we were going to go with this helped us move forward in a better way than might have been the case if we hadn’t had a very robust, trustful relationship. So all the work to build that up paid off on that afternoon when we really had a crisis and we were really putting the partnership to a test.

This strong relationship was also helpful when in December 2018 Turkey threatened an incursion into Syria.³ We made it very clear to the Kurds that this was a NATO ally and we aren’t going to take military action against Turkey, and that allowed us to help them work through this and get back into the fight against ISIS. We stopped the campaign two or three times because of what was happening on the Turkish border. Yet we were able to get the SDF back in the fight. It took time, but it was about having a good, solid relationship and convincing them “it’s better for you to stay with us and continue to finish the campaign, and that will put you in a position where there will be an advantage for you long term.”

CTC: This issue of Turkey and northern Syria is a very thorny issue for U.S. policymakers for all the reasons you’ve described. What needs to guide U.S. policymakers moving forward managing this problem set?

Votel: I think, first of all, the interests of all the parties need to be well understood, and our position ought to be that we are going to

try to devise a solution that does the very best job of addressing everybody’s interests in this. Note everybody is going to be 100-percent satisfied with this. But if we can’t achieve everyone’s interests, if we can achieve some compromises in this, and this is kind of in the approach: it’s this idea of a security mechanism—not necessarily a safe zone, I think that’s an inaccurate term for what we’re trying to do here; unfortunately, that’s out there and people use it; it’s not really the approach when you look at what safe zones do—but there is a way to put in place certain communication, security, surveillance, other things that allow us to basically address the interests of all the parties.

Turkey’s got interests. They don’t want to be attacked. They want to be secure along the border. Got it. That’s very valid. The peoples of northeast Syria want to be safe, want to be safe from attack, they want to have an opportunity to recover and be in their communities and not move back into camps. That’s a legitimate concern. We have an interest in preventing ISIS from resurging and keeping the area stable. I think all of those can be accommodated, but it isn’t going to be by just collapsing to somebody’s, to one party’s desire for a 30-kilometer-deep zone in this area. That’s only going to address one of the parties’ interests. Our view needs to be, our approach, our strategic approach is balancing these interests. And that’s what we’re doing here. So it’s unacceptable to continue to talk about this because you know that that doesn’t fit into the overall framework here.

As we now know, our decision in October to pull back from the border made a Turkish incursion inevitable. What I learned out [of] this was the importance of clear and direct communication. It is important to not only be direct but also to make clear what is acceptable and not acceptable. In my view, we should have used our moral authority as the leader of the coalition to compel Turkey to stay engaged in the security mechanism process that was underway. If we did not think this was going to work, we owed it to our partners on the ground, the SDF, to make different arrangements.

CTC: In the September 2019 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, Acting Director of National Intelligence Joseph Maguire warned the Islamic State “had all the recipes” for a resurgence and noted that “tens of thousands” of fighters “remain unaccounted for in Syria and Iraq.”⁴ Given all that we’ve seen and know about the evolution of the Islamic State, how can this resurgence be prevented? Or is it an inevitability?

Votel: I think it’s an inevitability that there is always going to be an element of resurgence out there. I think what we were trying to do is work with our partners—whether the Syrian Democratic Forces or the Iraqi forces—to make sure that they could keep that threat controlled and bounded within a framework that is manageable and sustainable from their standpoint. This became more difficult with our decision to pull back in Syria, but as we have seen, we retain access and opportunities to prosecute operations against ISIS—the raid to get Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is a good example.

I think it’s unreasonable to think we can completely eliminate all of this in the near term. Maybe over time you can begin to address that, but I think we have to recognize there is going to be a certain amount of instability, there is going to be a certain amount of ISIS that is left behind. And we have to plan for it, resource that, and make sure that our partners are ready to handle it. That should be the object of our security activities right now from a U.S. stand-

point, a coalition standpoint.

I don't know what form ISIS will take next. They've gone to ground. You've got still very radicalized populations in terms of women and children in these camps. We don't have a good disposition for them. We still don't have a good disposition for the 2,500-plus foreign fighters that are being controlled by the SDF. So I don't know what direction this takes. Maybe ISIS' next iteration is them being more patient and allowing for the situation to return to the way that it was, to become more polarized so they can take advantage of that opportunity again. Maybe they've learned their lesson: "We can't govern. We can't control terrain. But we can certainly make life very, very difficult, and to try to achieve our objectives through a different tactical, operational approach."

CTC: It took years to track down Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. How big a priority was finding him, and what difficulties did the United States face in trying to do so over the years? What impact do you assess his death will have on the Islamic State's ability to sustain its operations and inspire terrorism around the world?

Votel: Tracking down al-Baghdadi was an important milestone. Leadership in these organizations matters, and while he had been under great pressure as a result of the campaign, his death was an important psychological blow for his fighters and it sent a strong message to his victims. We have learned over time that these organizations are very resilient, and they plan for leadership losses. So I do expect we will see emergent leadership try to take over and continue the ISIS mission. This is why we take a long-term view as we keep pressure on these groups.

CTC: One way the Islamic State has sought to sustain its global reach is by continuing to spread its ideology through its media and propaganda apparatus. How would you assess the United States' performance in the war of ideas? And where can the United States improve preparedness to better counter the messaging of its adversaries in the future?

Votel: I think we had difficulty in the beginning getting our arms around publicly available information and trying to understand that and then interact in that space to have an impact on ISIS. I think we became more effective with it over time. We drove them off Twitter. We drove them off certain forums like that. We made it much more difficult for them when we were able to actually begin effectively integrating cyber activities into our normal military operations. We also became much more effective when we shut down sources for people to get information out; we were kinetically striking them, putting pressure on those areas. That became a much more effective approach overtime.

So I think we've improved our abilities in this regard, but the challenge is that many of the underlying issues that gave rise to this organization still remain—disenfranchised populations, corrupt governance, the divide between haves and have-nots, the economic disparity that is playing out. When you look at why fighters came to ISIS, it was because they gave them an identity, they gave them a job that they were paid for, and it gave them a family. These are basic things that everybody aspires to, and ISIS fulfilled that. I think somehow our efforts have got to nullify that effect as we go forward so they can't use that, and I'm not sure we're effectively doing that.

CTC: Shifting the discussion to Afghanistan, the United States has been there for 18 years now. The talks between the United States and the Taliban broke down in September. What are some of the lessons learned about what can be achieved in Afghanistan by military means? The Taliban seem to believe that time is on their side. Is it? Can the United States prove that wrong?

Votel: I don't know that we can prove it wrong. I mean, I think to some extent, that's true. Obviously, we've had a variety of different strategic approaches here that we've attempted to apply. And we've tried to do it, many times, within a time constraint. And I think that has limited us. My personal belief is that the latest strategy that was announced, whether you agree with this approach or not, was very clear and it gave us something to rally around.

The rationale behind the most recent South Asia strategy was, "Ok, the end state here is trying to bring the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan together to some level of reconciliation. And if we can do that, then that gives us a chance to withdraw some of our forces, making sure that we can protect our enduring interests, making sure it doesn't become a terrorist safe haven or platform, and to do all that in a much more sustainable, long-term way." Ok, so some people would agree with that. Some people wouldn't agree with that. But nonetheless, that's what the President decided our strategy was going to be, and that's what we had to get behind.

So, to me, I think that was an approach that we could make some progress on. And my belief was Ambassador Khalilzad was doing his best to do that. We tried to align our military activities to support him as much as we could—whether it was my interaction with the Pakistanis or whether it was with specific things that General Miller [the Commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan] was being asked to do on the ground to create leverage points that were useful to Ambassador Khalilzad. Again, like most of the things we've been talking about, this is not going to be perfect. We're not going to satisfy the government of Afghanistan to begin with. But there needed to be, in my view, more interaction with President Ghani to reassure him that, "Hey, here's what we've gotta do. We've gotta create some kind of platform over here. We've gotta create some kind of enclave of trust, of agreement with the Taliban so we can bring them over to you here." We were ineffective in doing that. That's not something the military can do, frankly. That requires our diplomatic and political leadership to help us with that.

My view here is that the President's strategy was very, very clear. We identified a strong envoy in the form of Khalilzad. I think we tried our very best to get the military aligned with what he was doing. I sometimes wonder if the rest of the government got aligned behind that as well. And I do think if we could have done that and held the line, we could have perhaps been more successful in getting him to a point where we could have an opportunity for reconciliation.

CTC: During that dialogue, in March 2019, a Taliban spokesman said that "a core issue for the American side is that the soil of Afghanistan should not be used against the Americans and against its allies."⁵ The following month, U.N. Monitoring Team Coordinator Edmund Fitton-Brown noted that there were at least "grounds for hope" because "the Taliban has shown an iron self-discipline in recent years in not allowing a threat to be projected outside the borders of Afghanistan by their own members or by groups who are operating in areas they con-



Then Chief of Staff of the Army and now Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley (left) is pictured with General Joseph Votel during the latter's retirement ceremony on March 28, 2019. (Lisa Ferdinando/U.S. Department of Defense)

trol.”⁶ The problem, of course, is al-Qa`ida has re-pledged loyalty to the Taliban.⁷ And you’ve got Sirajuddin Haqqani, who’s a deputy leader of the Taliban but has close ties to al-Qa`ida.⁸ In working toward this political settlement, if that’s where the end destination needs to be, how difficult is it going to be to ensure that Afghanistan does not again become the launching pad for international terrorism?

Votel: I think that that’s an enduring interest for us, and so I think as part of the discussions, we have to address that. And while I get it that we haven’t in recent years had more of that kind of international attack plotting come from this area, I certainly would not suggest that we outsource our national security interests to the Taliban or the government of Afghanistan after some of the experiences that we’ve had.

And so I think if we can get an agreement, that this is in our interest and that can be leveraged, then I think we can begin to look at what residual capability we need to leave on the ground or in the region to protect our interests. This could be U.S.-only strike forces, ISR, or partnering capabilities with Afghan Special Operations Forces using a ‘by, with, through’ approach. Perhaps this posture changes overtime as you gain confidence or the threat is decreased or the situation changes. This residual capability can only operate with a reconciliation in place between the government and the Taliban. We have an enduring interest to ensure this country and this region cannot be used as a platform to attack our homeland, our citizens or those of our friends and allies.

CTC: Turning now to Iran, pro-Tehran so-called Special Groups have expanded their personnel in Iraq.⁹ The Houthis have claimed, though not always convincingly, they carried out drone strikes in UAE and Saudi Arabia.¹⁰ Hezbollah has stockpiled weapons and played a key role in buttressing the Assad regime in the Syrian war. What level of threat do you believe Iranian proxy groups pose to U.S. interests in the region?

Votel: The threat that they pose is they could perpetrate attacks against Americans or American interests in any of the areas where we happen to be co-located. I think that’s the big concern. I think as we looked at other things that were happening in the Gulf, it became clear to me we needed to look at the threat through the lens of everything that Iran can bring to bear against us. And the fact that they have these proxy surrogates/groups that are aligned to them is a serious challenge. These proxy groups can cause casualties. They can kill troops. But I don’t consider them to be an existential threat.

CTC: The September attacks at Abqaiq and Khurais oil fields with drones and cruise missiles were claimed by the Houthis. Western governments have pointed the finger more toward Iran, although the picture remains murky on where these strikes were launched from based on publicly available information.¹¹ How dangerous an escalation do you see this attack?

Votel: I think it is pretty dangerous, and I think there’s two ways that I look at it. One is first through the maturation of the technologies.

We've been watching this for a while, with both these drones and with missiles and other things that can actually penetrate defense systems and get in and hit these vulnerable targets. We've watched the Houthis with Iranian support kind of move from quad-copters to bigger, medium-sized UAVs to now larger sizes that can penetrate much further and put infrastructure at risk. And then, of course, there is the development of missile technology that we watched over a long period of time.

I don't know how this attack was actually perpetrated, but Iran certainly has used their access and their partners and their know-how to provide them with better weaponry including surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missiles. And so I think about it from the concern of just a maturation of these systems and how quick they are learning on this drone side. When you look at our long learning curve here, theirs is much sharper. They're taking advantage of what we have learned on this.

And then the second thing is, whether Iran were directly or indirectly involved in this, I think they're doing it for the same purpose and that is they're trying to figure out what our redlines are. They're trying to push up against this so that we can get to a point where we are talking with them.

I think one of the challenges we have here, and this is an anathema to some people, is our inability to communicate with Iran about anything we're doing in the region. This is a hinderance to us right now. We really don't know what they're thinking. We don't know how they assess the things we're doing, and vice versa, and really what we're after. And so, we have to be clear in terms of what our strategy is. We say we don't want to go to war, but sometimes

our rhetoric is much different than that. We have to achieve some kind of alignment with that. And we have to figure out a way that we are talking to them and have a way of communicating with them. I am deeply influenced by our ability to talk with Russia in Syria. I believe this was a factor in our success. It kept us safe; it kept them safe. It gave a professional military-to-military mechanism for us to communicate with them. This was extraordinarily important. And it just reinforced the notion that you've got to find a way to communicate to people, and it helps reduce the opportunities for miscalculation. When you don't have a way to talk to people and something is happening out there, people are going to react with what they have. And that's usually going to be a weapon or something else. So it would be great if our maritime commander could talk to their maritime commander. You're not trying to synchronize things. You're not trying to be friends with them, but a professional military-to-military communication link would be very helpful.

CTC: Last year, *CTC Sentinel* published a major profile of the long-serving head of Iran's Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, the driving force behind much of the Iranian strategy.¹² What's your assessment of him as an adversary?

Votel: You have to respect all your enemies. When you stop respecting your enemies is the time that you become extraordinarily vulnerable. So we have to respect what their capabilities are, what they're attempting to do, and their ability to execute it. He has demonstrated he's a dangerous person, and he is able to orchestrate things. So we have to respect that, understand that, and plan



GEN(R) Joseph Votel delivers a lecture to the sophomore class of cadets at the U.S. Military Academy in October 2019. (Bryan Ilyankoff/U.S. Military Academy)

for that type of staff. His role is different than any other military commander that anybody in a Western nation would have because he has both this military capability but he also has this kind of quasi-diplomatic, political, policy, strategy kind of role that he plays, and the access that he has, I think, gives him the opportunity to have an outsized role and to connect these policy decisions to the action arms that can carry them out, so I think he's an extraordinarily dangerous person. I think there's very little chance that he will change. So, the sooner he can be removed from that aspect, the more our chances may get better for some kind of peace. Because it is this very revolutionary leadership that I think continues to perpetuate the conflict between our countries.

CTC: To bring this discussion back around to Iraq, the role of Iran there has been a major challenge, and has fluctuated over time, but seems to be at a significant inflection point. What should guide U.S. policy in Iraq moving forward?

Votel: I think the biggest opportunity is continuing to demonstrate our value to Iraq, in terms of being good partners to help them keep moving in the right direction. If we can maintain it, then I think it's worth the investment to stay linked with them. I think they're a lynchpin country. They sit at an important location geographically, and they're at a pretty key nexus with us. So I think we have to continue to stay engaged with them and continue to be seen as value-added by them. It's very instructive to me that, you know, the one entity that we did stay with after 2011 was their counterterrorism service (CTS). Just with two ODAs,^c that's it, two ODAs. Ultimately, the Iraqi security forces were essentially rebuilt around the CTS. They became the core of all this. They never lost their level of professionalism, their capabilities, their apoliticalness, and their focus on state security as the Iraqi Army drifted away because we broke our relationships off. So I think the opportunity for us is to continue to be seen as value-added. So that's the greatest opportunity. I think the Iraqi Army can really be something the nation can rally around. I think it's good to try to provide that for them. We should support them.

CTC: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has drawn attention to a suicide bomb attack on May 31 in Kabul, which injured four American servicemen and which the U.S. government believes was instigated by Iran.¹³ What concerns, if any, do you have about what they are trying to do in Afghanistan? How does that impact what the United States is trying to do?

Votel: I think Iran has concerns for their own security with respect to Afghanistan. They certainly have along their eastern border, the western border of Afghanistan, so they have influence in that area and interest in making sure the western part of Afghanistan remains stable. You can't deny that. I think it's in everyone's interest to have a stable Afghanistan here, so this is an opportunity for convergence if we can get to a point where we can begin to discuss those kinds of things.

Frankly, I never really thought of Iran as necessarily a security

risk in Afghanistan. I viewed them much more as a political risk, influence risk against some of the things that we were doing. That being said, their ability to influence Afghan units or their perhaps support to Taliban or other organizations as they try to stabilize the situation, I think, are the things we should be concerned about. But in terms of them directly doing something, that was not really our concern. I think it was more the influence that they were able to achieve as they pursued their own interests.

CTC: There's been a lot of discussion of late on a shift toward a focus on near-peer competition and potentially a resulting shift away from counterterrorism. What's your perspective on balancing across what is probably a logical refocusing, to a certain extent, but also mitigating against the risk of complacency in the terrorism fight and ensuring that the United States is able to consolidate the gains made in the fight over the last couple decades against the terrorism threat?

Votel: First and foremost, I am on the record as supporting the National Defense Strategy and making sure that we maintain our competitive advantage against great powers out there, states that could have an existential impact on the United States. I don't think that anyone can argue with that. I think that's pretty clear, and I support that. That said, I think there are going to be other threats out there and there are going to be interests that we have, and so I was very supportive of the integrated campaign plan approach that the Department of Defense, the Joint Staff was pursuing with the combatant commands, that began to look at the threats we had and looked at the intersection between all the different areas where that played out. I recognize that in CENTCOM, we had certain responsibilities with Russian influence or maybe some Chinese activities in that particular region, and that's the way we ought to look at it. So I think the first piece is continuing to follow through with the integrated planning effort that has been undertaken by the Joint Staff. It is a really important aspect.

Secondly, this ultimately gets down to resources. We have to figure out what the sustainable level of resources are that the CENTCOM commander in that region can count on to address the threats and the interests that exist in that particular area. And that will probably be less than he wants it to be, so then I think that moves us into a third area and that is this idea of what are we going to ask our partners to do and how are we going to help them do that. And so it's given that we're going to focus on other areas and given that resources are going to flow to these areas and we're going to have less than we need to address our threats and interests in areas like CENTCOM. So then what are we going to do more with our partners to help offset that? So we have to look at our security cooperation plan. We have to look at our FMF and FMS [Foreign Military Financing and Foreign Military Sales] programs and make sure that they are geared to the objectives that we want to truly achieve in this area. And that's going to be heavily focused on making them more resilient, more capable—not just having stuff but having stuff and actually being able to use it for their own collective defense. I think we have to have some hard discussions about that. And so, linking that whole system to the overall strategy is really important in those three areas: planning, resourcing to a sustainable level, and then making sure that we are developing our partners who help mitigate those situations where we have to take some risks.

c In the U.S. Army, "Special Forces are organized into small, versatile teams, called Operational Detachment Alphas (ODA)." "Special Forces Team Members," U.S. Army.

CTC: Over the past couple decades, there's been considerable and significant amount of change across how the United States conducts Special Operations and counterterrorism activity. In the various roles and various commands you've had, you've had an integral role in shaping a lot of those changes. When you look back over that time period, what stands out to you as the most interesting aspects of how U.S. Special Operations Forces and CT capabilities have evolved?

Votel: I think the most interesting and the most satisfying thing is the integration between Special Operations Forces and our conventional forces. I think we've reached an apex of this in Iraq and Syria, and I think it was very, very evident in our performance on the ground and just in the relationships that you saw there. Our ability to move people from the Special Operations community back out to the conventional forces and draw on that experience, and then bring them back to the Special Operations community, and much more integrated command and control arrangements that we've had in place that actually put the Special Operations formations under the command of conventional JTF commanders, I think, represents a level of trust and integration that we haven't enjoyed before and that we've always strived to realize and know that we could achieve, but it took a lot to do it. I think that's the thing I'm most satisfied with. And as we look towards things like great power competition, I think that experience is now rightfully driving this discussion of "ok, well, what is the role of Special Operations in great power competition?"

And so you see much more intellectual discussion about these and much more work on the ground and debate about what that is. And I think you see organizations like SOCOM and JSOC and others who have played this key role in the CT fight now looking at "what do we do to be relevant, to be value-added to this coming challenge?" I think that's really healthy for the force.

CTC: So to build on that a bit, some have suggested that the heavy emphasis placed on the SOF role in the CT fight and perhaps the heavy cost paid by that community and the level of effort they had put into it potentially took away from the SOF community's ability to address the near-peer threat. It sounds like you're saying that their role in that fight set them up to learn lessons and to build upon that experience to actually make it a better force to fight in the near-peer world.

Votel: Through relationships, through experience, through systems that we put in place, we're a much smarter force. Conventional force commanders are much—I'm not sure if comfortable is the right word, but it's the right sentiment here—are much more confident in an ability to integrate Special Operations activities and formations into the broader campaign, perhaps much more than we were. And vice versa. The SOF community is much more comfortable with the sentiment and much more comfortable with doing that, and so I think that gives us a really good basis to begin to move forward. I do think, though, perhaps there ought to be more discussion on who really is involved in the CT fight. When I look at a place like Syria, we definitely had SOF organizations on the ground who were advising and who were working with our partners. But as I look back a little bit deeper from that pointy end of the stick there, we had logistics formations from the Army and the Air Force running air fields, we had Marine artillery that was in there, we had Army aviation that was in there supporting that, we had Army HIMARS

[High Mobility Artillery Rocket System] that were in there providing precision fires, so there's an awful lot of the CT fight that is being done by our conventional forces.

So I sometimes think we overemphasize that the CT fight is really about just SOF skills when, frankly, the SOF community has always been extraordinarily dependent upon conventional force enablers and capabilities and backstopping to be successful with this. Or put another way, this isn't just about these snake eaters over here, this is about bringing everything to bear to get after the problem.

CTC: What are your thoughts on the national security dimensions of technology and innovation? One example has been the use of drones by a terrorist organization, but more broadly, what are your thoughts on how the United States competes in that space?

Votel: I think this is an area to really focus on. I think we have to have, one, a strategy for where we're going technology-wise. I think we have an advantage but we also have a disadvantage because the Chinese are very centralized in terms of how they're approaching their technology development and cutting-edge capabilities. It all comes out of a centralized government approach. We have a much more bottom-up approach. I think there's some really great advantages for that, but there's also I think a much bigger integration challenge. Connecting those people that are in development with the people that are using it I think is really important for us. The learning curve is moving so quickly right now.

CTC: You've spoken to cadets here at West Point about what it takes to be a good leader. And the things you laid out were: trust your instincts, use your position for good, take care of yourself and your family, and be a happy leader. It was striking that what you laid out could really be applied to leadership in any organization, at work, in politics, even in your own home, in your own family. Why did you see those particular qualities as important?

Votel: I think because my observation about leadership over time is that the basics really matter. If you look at business literature, there's tons and tons of books about different techniques and everything else. But in my view, it really does come down to pretty basic things about being a good person and drawing on your own experience to understand what's right and what's wrong and then modeling that for people. Just being a decent human being and taking care of yourself. The thing that I was always concerned about were tired leaders, people that just work themselves into a lather and as a result, their organizations as well. You could just see that permeate through an organization. So taking care of yourself and maintaining some of the balance in your life was really important.

It's really heartbreaking to see a man or woman get to the end of their career and they've been very successful, but the price they paid was they lost their family. When I was at a battalion commander course at Ft. Leavenworth, we had a senior officer, a three-star [general], get up and talk about that. I was like "Oh my god." It was emotional for him, the price that he had paid in trying to balance that.

People really have an option. They don't have to come to the military. They can go do other things. But wouldn't it be great if they came in, had this great experience, did a tour, then went back out to business or to be school teachers, and they'd always say, "yeah, I was in the Army, I had this great experience, I had these officers,

these NCOs, they took really good care of me, and it was really a sense of team work,” and they became coaches and other things out in their communities and made them better. I agree with you. I don’t just use that for military audiences. I use it for virtually every audience that I have an opportunity to talk to. It’s about the basics.

CTC: You’re now a senior fellow at the Combating Terrorism Center. What is your perspective on the value of academic and scholarly research in the counterterrorism space? Also, what is the value of, where appropriate, declassifying captured enemy material and getting it to scholars in the open source domain?

Votel: I think you’re on to something right here. I always viewed visits to the CTC and other academic institutions that I went to, as a way to help me do my thinking. So, you know, whether it was engaging a guy like Graham Allison at the Belfer Center or Dick Shultz at Tufts or your predecessor in the organization here at CTC, these were always opportunities to come up and have a conversation with people and do your thinking without the burden of having to make a decision about something. And in the busy military, in the busy Department of Defense, our senior leaders are often a mile wide and an inch deep, and there needs to be a mechanism in your rhythm that allows you to do thinking. And that’s what the academic engagement, to me, does. Routine visits here annually, maybe even a little bit more, to here, places like Tufts, Belfer Center, other places we have out there, I think is really invaluable in helping you think through problems and look at things from a different perspective. Use it as a bit of a sounding board. So that was very valuable to me. And I think it is valuable to my colleagues.

To your other point about releasing information to the organi-

zations, again, I see the value of that. This organization [the CTC] does remarkable work with a little bit of information. I’m always amazed when you come up and go, “hey, we’ve got these couple documents right here, but we were able to learn this out of it.” Your recent report on children in ISIS territory [based on a captured Islamic State spreadsheet] and the implications of your findings regarding how children transition from being dependents to being fighters at a certain age, that was fascinating to me. I would not have even thought about that. So, I think, again, this adds another dimension to the way we look at the data here. I think it’s extraordinarily important ... absolutely essential.

CTC: Any final takeaways for our readers?

Votel: The only one I would add is that when it comes to national security, I think it’s really important to figure out how we balance policy and process. I’ve come to the observation that if you have policy without process, that’s foolish and dangerous, and if you have process without policy, that’s meaningless. There has to be a balance between this. And we really have to look at how we align people with the things we’re doing, all the way up and all the way down, left and right. And that has to happen through this policy and process framework. I think that sometimes works against us, and we’ve seen, I think, the extremes of that over the last several years, where we had a lot of process and at the end of that, the good thing is that everybody’s aligned. But the bad part of that is it takes a lot of time and we miss opportunities. At the other end of this, we take advantage of opportunities but we’ve got people rolling on their own and not everybody is completely aligned. So, what we have to do is figure out a way to balance that. I think that’s a really important aspect of keeping people aligned. **CTC**

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How Somaliland Combats al-Shabaab

By Michael Horton

Al-Shabaab has struggled and largely failed to establish itself in the independent but unrecognized Republic of Somaliland. There, the government has, with limited means, denied al-Shabaab the operational space it requires through the implementation of a virtuous circle that builds on local buy-in and uses HUMINT as a force multiplier. However, despite its successes in its war against al-Shabaab, Somaliland faces a formidable foe that is increasingly active along its border with Puntland where this virtuous circle is under increasing strain. The efficacy of Somaliland's security forces in these border areas is limited.^a

Analysts and officials have made frequent predictions about the decline and demise of al-Shabaab over the years.¹ However, the al-Qa'ida-allied terrorist group has not only survived but continues to thrive in much of Somalia. On September 30, 2019, al-Shabaab launched attacks on two high-profile targets. It attacked a military base that hosts U.S. Special Forces soldiers at Balegdole in Lower Shabelle (southern Somalia), and then its operatives also targeted an Italian armored convoy carrying military advisers in Mogadishu. Both attacks failed. Al-Shabaab did not succeed in penetrating the outer defenses of the military base nor did they injure or kill any of the military advisers.² However, both attacks demonstrate al-Shabaab's ability to target extremely well-guarded sites and individuals.

Since 2006, when al-Shabaab began to coalesce as an organization, billions of dollars have been spent by the United States and the international community to fight the group.³ The expenditure of vast sums of money and the eventual deployment of 22,000 soldiers by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), however, have failed to defeat the organization.⁴

^a Much of the information that this article is based on was collected during the author's September 2019 visit to Somaliland. There, the author met with a broad spectrum of government officials, members of opposition parties, journalists, and analysts. To guard against issues of bias and "self-evaluation," where possible, the author has cross-checked information with independent analysts, officials from other governments and security services, and published sources.

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The key to al-Shabaab's resiliency and its resurgence is two-fold. First, the failure of the Somali Federal Government to police and govern its territory consistently and effectively provides al-Shabaab with a high degree of operational freedom.⁵ Second, al-Shabaab's ever-increasing organizational competence allows it to out-govern the government and other armed factions in many parts of Somalia. This competence extends well beyond its war-fighting capabilities. While important, these are not as critical as the group's ability to operate what is in effect a shadow government that is often more effective, efficient, and predictable than the Somali Federal Government.⁶ It is the presence of this often efficient shadow government, far more than its armed operations or ideology that arguably allows al-Shabaab to maintain its influence across much of Somalia.

Notably, al-Shabaab has failed to establish an enduring foothold in the unrecognized Republic of Somaliland. There, the government of Somaliland exerts consistent control over most of the territory that it claims. Al-Shabaab has not launched a large-scale attack in Somaliland since 2008 when it struck the presidential palace, the Ethiopian consulate, and UNDP offices in Hargeisa, Somaliland's capital.⁷ The reasons for al-Shabaab's failure, at least so far, to establish a foothold in Somaliland are due in large part to the Somaliland government's ability to disrupt al-Shabaab's attempts to insert itself and its operatives into communities where it could then establish its shadow government.^b This ability is predicated on the Somaliland government's fostering of a virtuous circle. This virtuous circle begins with effective, locally derived governance that supports broad community buy-in.⁸ This then provides the critical human intelligence (HUMINT) that allows the government to combat militancy. This capacity to combat militancy contributes to the security and governance that yields the broad support that

^b It is worth noting that a number of prominent members of al-Shabaab were members of the Somaliland-based Isaaq clan. This includes al-Shabaab's former emir, Ahmed Abdi Godane, who died in September 2014, and Ibrahim al-Afghani. During his tenure as leader, Godane's tendency to favor members of his clan became a contentious issue within the broader al-Shabaab organization. Following Godane's death, this preference was reversed to the point where members of the Isaaq clan were often regarded with suspicion. That said, al-Shabaab continues to recruit men from Somaliland. Berouk Mesfin, "The death of its leader has shaken al-Shabaab, but will not completely weaken the Somali-based group," Institute for Security Studies, October 8, 2014; Roland Marchal, "Harakat al-Shabaab al Mujaheddin in Somalia," Sciences Po, March 2011.

Authorities in Somaliland claim to have disrupted at least three significant attacks by al-Shabaab in the last five years. Author interviews, Somaliland intelligence and police officials, September 2019. However, while al-Shabaab is active—at least at a low level in parts of Somaliland—it may be the case that operations in Somaliland are a low priority for the organization. But this may, in turn, be the result of the efforts of Somaliland's security services. In other words, the challenging operation environment in Somaliland may mean that it is a low priority for al-Shabaab.



Somaliland (Brandon Mohr)

allows the circle to perpetuate itself.

In Somalia, on the other hand, it is uneven, unpredictable, and often corrupt governance that gives al-Shabaab the space it requires to operate so effectively.⁹ Al-Shabaab, much like the Taliban in Afghanistan, mixes brutality with efficiency and predictability to secure the support—often through fear and terror—required to survive and thrive in many parts of Somalia. The government of Somaliland understands this, and despite severe limitations on its national budget, it has largely managed to thwart al-Shabaab's efforts to expand its influence in the territory that it controls. However, Somaliland faces a growing list of challenges that include stalled governmental reforms, refugee and migrant inflows from Yemen and Ethiopia, climate change, and worryingly high youth unemployment. It is in Somaliland's relatively undeveloped and less well-governed border areas where its efforts to counter al-Shabaab are most in danger of being compromised and overwhelmed.

Battling Militancy with Governance

Somaliland, which declared its independence from Somalia in 1991, has spent nearly three decades building its capacity to govern. The former British protectorate was briefly independent in 1960 before it joined with what was Italian Somalia. Almost immediately after its union with Somalia, friction arose between Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, and Mogadishu over the centralization of power and other issues. These tensions only increased with the rise of Siad Barre, Somalia's president turned dictator. The Somali National Movement (SNM) was formed in 1981 with the goal of overthrowing Barre. The SNM was most active in northern Somalia

where Barre launched a brutal war that resulted in the deaths of an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 civilians.¹⁰

After Barre was overthrown in 1991, the SNM was instrumental in Somaliland's decision to declare its independence. Many of the leaders of the SNM went on to play important roles in what was to become the government of Somaliland. The formation of the government of Somaliland was fraught in its early years as officials grappled with clan and inter-clan rivalries, the disarmament of militias, and the creation and formation of the structures of governance. However, by 2003, Somaliland had transitioned to a multi-party democracy that has subsequently held parliamentary elections and has elected three presidents.¹¹

Somaliland has adopted a kind of hybrid government that is very much of its own making. Clan elders continue to play formal and informal roles in governance and are represented in Somaliland's upper house of parliament, the Guurti. It is this hybrid form of government and the fact that Somaliland has had to contend with little outside interference that have most contributed to its relative stability.¹² However, Somaliland, just like Somalia, has battled and continues to combat the pernicious threat of al-Shabaab and, more generally, militancy.

Between 2003 and 2004, jihadis murdered four foreign aid workers in Somaliland—an Italian nurse (2003), two British teachers (October 2003), and a Kenyan aid worker (March 2004).¹³ The attacks prompted the government of Somaliland, with some assistance from the United Nations and United Kingdom, to create the Special Protection Unit (SPU), a police force tasked with protecting foreign organizations in its territory and those who work for

them. At the same time, Somaliland began to build up its intelligence-gathering capabilities in response to the increased threats from militant groups.¹⁴

On October 29, 2008, suicide bombers launched coordinated attacks on three targets in Hargeisa and one in the neighboring semi-autonomous Puntland State of Somalia. In Hargeisa, the presidential palace, Ethiopian consulate, and UNDP offices were all bombed, leaving 25 dead.¹⁵ While al-Shabaab never claimed credit for the attacks, U.S. authorities and officials in Somaliland blamed the group and al-Qa`ida for the attacks.¹⁶

For officials in Somaliland, the attacks were a wake-up call. It was after these attacks that the government began to focus more of its limited resources on local governance, counterterrorism, and community-driven intelligence initiatives.¹⁷ Officials within the executive branch and the ministries of interior and defense recognized that they had been lulled into a false sense of security by the relative stability that Somaliland had enjoyed since 1997. Efforts to strengthen local and district governance and to build ties between these communities and the police and military were redoubled following the 2008 bombings.¹⁸

The link between effective, predictable, and reliable governance—especially at the local level—and counterterrorism efforts was recognized at the most senior levels of government. To that end, the government of President Dahir Riyale Kahin focused on formalizing and funding—to the extent possible at the time—government structures from the community level up to the district level. Each substantive village in Somaliland has a community leader who may also be a clan elder. The community leader, in turn, answers to authorities at the district level who are accountable to regional officials. The structure for local governance has existed since 2002, though much of it was informal and inadequately funded.¹⁹

At the same time that these structures were being formalized after 2008, efforts were underway to build up Somaliland's capacity for gathering and acting on intelligence. Local buy-in and participation were fundamental to this effort and were encouraged through more responsive governance. Even community leaders can gain access to officials at the national level if they feel they have not received an adequate response from district- and regional-level authorities.²⁰ While this closeness is at times problematic since it subverts the chain of command, it does facilitate swift responses and the rapid collection and dissemination of human intelligence.

Somaliland's Force Multiplier: HUMINT

Accurate, rapid, and actionable HUMINT is Somaliland's force multiplier in its war against al-Shabaab and other militant groups. Somaliland has no air force, no helicopters, and no drones, and its police and military struggle with minimal budgets that are not likely to increase.^c Somaliland already spends an estimated 35 percent of its national budget on its security services, police, and military.²¹ Somaliland's army is small with an estimated total force of under 8,000 soldiers.²² The Somaliland police field a nationwide force of under 6,000 men and women.²³ Housed within the police force are the Special Police Unit (SPU), which guards foreign organizations and those who work for them, and the Rapid Response Units

(RRU), which are dedicated counterterrorism forces. The Somaliland Police and the SPU have and continue to receive aid and training from the United Kingdom.²⁴ The Somaliland military and coast guard also receive some aid and training from the United Kingdom and the European Union.²⁵

In 1992, in response to the civil war in Somalia, the United Nations imposed an open-ended arms embargo on the country that is still in place. Since the United Nations considers Somaliland to be a part of Somalia, it cannot import weapons or materiel that might be used for kinetic operations. This means that Somaliland's army and police forces suffer from acute shortages of critical equipment. Communications equipment is in particularly short supply.^d Recruits to Somaliland's police and army are required to supply their own personal weapon or purchase one before enlisting.^e This is partly due to budget constraints and the embargo and partly a means of removing small arms from general circulation.²⁶ Despite these shortages and budget constraints, Somaliland's police and army have proved themselves to be effective at combating al-Shabaab.

One of the keys to their success are the formal and informal intelligence gathering capabilities of Somaliland's National Intelligence Service (NIS) and the army's and police's own intelligence officers.^f Informal intelligence gathering networks are extant throughout Somaliland where they are nested within local communities. Formal networks led by officers from the NIS, army, and police exist alongside and in conjunction with the informal networks that act as early detection systems or tripwires.²⁷

Somaliland employed a similar approach with its anti-piracy efforts during the period of 2007-2010, when the threat from pirate gangs was at its most pronounced. Somaliland's coast guard set up observation posts along its 528 miles of coastline. However, given the distances and its limited resources, the coast guard could only actively monitor limited portions of the coastline. To overcome this, the coast guard, in conjunction with local police, trained and deputized coastal residents as shoreline monitors. These citizen monitors were given cellphones if they did not have them and numbers to phone to report suspicious activity.²⁸ The low-cost program, which continues to operate, proved effective. To date, there have been no recorded acts of piracy originating from Somaliland's coast. However, much like its counterterrorism efforts, Somaliland's under-resourced coast guard faces growing challenges. The coast guard is largely unable to patrol the coastal areas near Puntland. Consequently, both al-Shabaab and ISS use small vessels to move men and materiel into Somaliland from small ports in Puntland.

c Somaliland's national budget is 233 million USD. See <https://www.somaliland.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Somaliland-2019-Budget-Breif-ISIR.pdf>

d Somaliland's police and army are largely reliant on communication by cell phone due to the lack of military grade communications equipment. This poses particular problems in border areas where al-Shabaab often forces network providers to shut down cell phone masts or destroys them ahead of operations. The Somaliland Coast Guard has, with the help of local businesses, developed its own communications system. Author interview, Ethiopia-based analyst, September 2019; author interview, Somaliland Coast Guard official, September 2019.

e The need for a recruit to provide his or her own weapon in order to join the police forces or army at times hampers the recruitment of the best new soldiers and officers. Author interview, Somaliland Ministry of Interior official, September 2019.

f The Somaliland National Intelligence Service is also sometimes referred to as the Somaliland National Intelligence Agency or the Somaliland Intelligence Agency.

Somaliland's broader intelligence effort was largely modeled on its anti-piracy program.²⁹ Citizen monitors and field officers report suspicious persons and activity to designated officials or community leaders.³⁰ When a possible or confirmed threat is detected and reported, the authorities decide whether to set up surveillance or to bring the suspected individual or individuals in for questioning.^g If the threat detected warrants it, authorities dispatch either the police or an RRU to apprehend suspects. By and large, the response by authorities is swift and measured.³¹ The level of trust between many citizens, their community leaders, and the police is such that it is not unheard of for relatives to inform authorities on a family member that they fear may be subject to recruitment by al-Shabaab.³²

It is this quick, generally reliable, and targeted response that helps secure citizen participation. Somaliland's efforts to combat al-Shabaab hinge on citizen participation and the HUMINT this provides.³³ If trust is lost or if authorities fail to respond in measured and accurate ways, then the virtuous circle breaks down and al-Shabaab gains a point of entry, whether that be with an individual or an entire community.

Outmaneuvering al-Shabaab

It is these points of entry that al-Shabaab is expert at detecting. While al-Shabaab has not successfully launched a large-scale attack in Somaliland since 2008, the organization has operatives and informants in both urban and rural Somaliland.³⁴ Since 2008, Somaliland's intelligence service, working with the police and army, has prevented at least three attacks al-Shabaab was attempting to orchestrate. The attacks were disrupted due to the human intelligence that was collected by formal and informal networks.³⁵

This is no easy feat given that al-Shabaab's own intelligence and security apparatus, the Amniyat, is highly capable.³⁶ In Somalia, the Amniyat has agents and informers in most, if not all, of Somalia's various ministries and security services.³⁷ Al-Shabaab devotes considerable resources to the Amniyat and its operatives and officers are drawn from the most capable and best educated recruits.³⁸ Over the last five years, al-Shabaab has worked to further professionalize, formalize, and expand the Amniyat.³⁹ Within the Amniyat there are compartmentalized units that are tasked with internal security and with identifying individuals and communities that might be vulnerable to being recruited by al-Shabaab.⁴⁰ Amniyat operatives also identify areas and communities where clan and inter-clan rivalries can be exploited and leveraged by al-Shabaab.⁴¹ Just like the government of Somaliland, al-Shabaab recognizes that HUMINT and the deep socio-cultural understandings that should inform it, are fundamental to its success.

As part of its efforts to out-manuever and combat al-Shabaab, the government of Somaliland looks to identify areas where clan conflict is likely. To do this it uses many of the same networks that it relies on to detect suspicious activity and persons. Authorities within the government and the NIS recognize that clan and inter-clan conflict are readily exploited by al-Shabaab in both Somalia and Puntland.⁴² Therefore, detecting and mitigating conflict in Somaliland

and is a core part of the Somaliland government's counterterrorism efforts. To this end, the government tailors local governance and policing to particular areas. In some areas where it is deemed beneficial and necessary, the government makes use of less formal and more traditional forms of governance.⁴³ A failure to respect clan and inter-clan politics as well as traditional seats of power can be just as problematic as an absence of governance.

Balancing effective and active state governance with respect for traditional authority is difficult. The struggle to find this balance was best captured by the author and British officer Gerald Hanley who served in Somaliland and Somalia during World War II. When Hanley asked a Somali man what he wanted most, the man responded, "to be well governed but to be left alone."⁴⁴ For Somaliland, finding this balance means employing its hybrid form of government, which combines traditional power structures and authority with representative democracy. This hybrid government is a key part of Somaliland's battle against al-Shabaab. It helps Somaliland diffuse and mitigate conflict while keeping the government close to the people it governs.

Facing Down al-Shabaab and the Islamic State in Somalia (ISS) in its Borderlands

The government of Somaliland exerts control over most of its territory. The Borama-Hargeisa-Berbera-Burao area, which includes Somaliland's largest cities, is relatively safe and secure.⁴⁵ However, Somaliland's border with Puntland and the eastern reaches of its territory are vulnerable to infiltration by al-Shabaab and, to a lesser degree, the Islamic State in Somalia (ISS). It is here that Somaliland's police, army, and intelligence service are being most severely tested.⁴⁶

Al-Shabaab and ISS, which are also battling one another, have identified these borderlands as the soft underbelly of Somaliland.⁴⁷ It is in these border areas and the Cal Madaw Mountains, which form part of Somaliland's border with Puntland, that communities are most vulnerable to infiltration by al-Shabaab and ISS.

While much of Somaliland has enjoyed economic growth, the states of Sanang and Sool, which abut the border with Puntland, remain largely undeveloped. In addition to limited investment, the border between Somaliland and Puntland is contested by Puntland.⁴⁸ The government of Somaliland bases its border on the one demarcated by British authorities when Somaliland was a British protectorate.⁴⁹

The border runs through lands claimed by the Warsengeli and Dhulbahante sub-clans as well as the Majerteen sub-clan. The Warsengeli and Dhulbahante sub-clans, which are spread across the Somaliland regions of Sool and Sanaag, do have members and clan elders in the government of Somaliland. However, grievances and claims of underrepresentation in the government of Somaliland by these sub-clans have helped fuel tensions in both Sool and Sanaag.⁵⁰

This combination of uneven governance, clan tensions, and a lack of economic development all make the communities in these borderlands ideal targets for al-Shabaab and ISS. This is particularly the case in the Cal Madaw mountain range. The mountains are largely inaccessible by road and they offer year-round springs and ample grazing. The mountains also allow militants easy access to isolated beaches along the Gulf of Aden. Many of these beaches offer excellent landing sites for small boats and skiffs.⁵¹ Al-Shabaab and ISS both maintain strongholds in Puntland where they fre-

g There are recurring conspiracy theories about how the government of Somaliland has paid off al-Shabaab in order to protect Somaliland from the group. There has never been any evidence presented of such a deal, and given that Somaliland has been and continues to be targeted by al-Shabaab and continues to lose members of its security services to its war with al-Shabaab, such theories are unfounded.

quently use small craft to move men and materiel up and down the coast of Puntland and into Somaliland.^{52 h}

In parts of the Cal Madaw mountain range and Garof Hills, the police and army are engaged in a bitter battle with al-Shabaab, and, to a lesser degree, with ISS.⁵³ The government of Somaliland is trying to implement its virtuous circle in the mountains and in the border areas, but it is struggling with a lack of resources and two determined foes. While al-Shabaab is the most active group in both the mountains and along the border, ISS has also set up small semi-permanent camps in the mountains.⁵⁴ Both groups know that Somaliland's police and army do not have the required resources to police the mountains.

Consequently, both groups have established themselves in the parts of the mountains that border Puntland. Here, they move back and forth between Somaliland and Puntland largely at will. Both groups are also trying to build ties with local communities in these areas.⁵⁵ Due to its deeper pockets, numerical superiority, and far better developed organizational structure, al-Shabaab poses the greater threat. In parts of the Cal Madaw that abut the border with Puntland, al-Shabaab has covertly and overtly funded madrassas, the rehabilitation of water catchments, and has also bought live-stock for those who lost their herds due to recent droughts.⁵⁶

It is in the borderlands that Somaliland's virtuous circle is under strain. Here, HUMINT is especially critical given the inaccessibility of much of the area. Yet, in these borderlands, Somaliland is struggling to compete with al-Shabaab with respect to governance and the delivery of basic services, both of which are vital to securing the kind of broad community buy-in that leads to the provision of timely and actionable HUMINT. Somaliland's lack of air assets and a limited number of off-road vehicles means that police and army units are often unable to quickly follow up on the intelligence they do receive.⁵⁷ This in turn dissuades many who might contribute to the government's efforts to combat al-Shabaab since there is no guarantee that there will be a response. If Somaliland fails to implement the virtuous circle that has served it well in other parts of the country, al-Shabaab and even ISS may be able to take full advantage of the vulnerabilities that exist in Somaliland's border areas. This, in turn, might well allow them to move north.

h Somaliland has seen a significant increase in arms and people smuggling in the last two years, largely due to the ongoing war in Yemen. Somaliland's Coast Guard and police forces intercept and seize small arms shipments that originate from Yemen on a monthly basis. Author interview, Somaliland Coast Guard official, September 2019.

Outlook

The case of Somaliland demonstrates what can be done when a government works closely with its citizens to combat militancy. The case of Somaliland also shows the critical importance of HUMINT. Somaliland has steadily built up its capacity to govern despite the limitations imposed on it by its non-recognized status. However, as is evidenced in the borderlands, the government is butting up against some of these limitations. It is there that Somaliland's capacity to govern is less well-developed. Consequently, al-Shabaab, and, to a lesser degree, ISS are concentrating their efforts on these areas. It is unlikely that al-Shabaab or ISS will be able to move from these areas to other parts of Somaliland over the near or medium term. The government of Somaliland enjoys significant public support, support that will not be easily eroded or co-opted.⁵⁸

However, Somaliland's stability and security should not be taken for granted. As is evidenced by al-Shabaab's recent attacks on hardened targets in Somalia, the militant group is highly capable, and it is steadily enhancing these capabilities. This is especially the case with respect to its intelligence and infiltration capabilities.⁵⁹ In Somalia, al-Shabaab benefits from and readily exploits uneven and frequently corrupt governance. Al-Shabaab's ability to out-govern the federal government in many parts of Somalia, far more than its military capabilities, is what gives al-Shabaab the advantages that it enjoys.⁶⁰

Somaliland faces numerous challenges going forward. Its unrecognized status puts great pressure on its national budget since it cannot receive international loans, and many international investors remain wary due to the legal limbo of non-recognition. Somaliland is also grappling with climate change and a youth bulge. Youth unemployment in Somaliland exceeds 70 percent.⁶¹ Somaliland must also contend with the fallout from the war in neighboring Yemen. It is now home to more than 25,000 Yemeni refugees, in addition to an estimated 100,000 Ethiopian migrants and refugees.⁶² The war in Yemen has also led to a dramatic increase in weapons trafficking as small and medium arms make their way out of Yemen to the Horn and other parts of East Africa where prices are much higher than in Yemen.⁶³

So far, al-Shabaab has had little success with gaining support or establishing itself in Somaliland's territory. However, without well-targeted and appropriate international assistance, the virtuous circle that Somaliland relies upon to fight militancy could be compromised. What is certain is that al-Shabaab will seize on the opportunities that any instability—even if localized—might provide. **CTC**

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An Examination of Jihadi Recidivism Rates in the United States

By Christopher Wright

The recidivism rate for ordinary criminals is extremely high, and since over 200 convicted terrorists have been released in the United States and many more will be in the near future, a natural fear has been that they pose a high risk of recidivism. Using nearly 30 years of data, this article shows that while not zero, the recidivism rate of those involved in jihadi terror plots targeting the United States is much lower than that of common criminals. Unlike most criminals, prison may deter jihadis from future involvement in violent extremism.

Will those convicted of jihadi-related terror offenses pose a danger once they are released from prison?^a This article explores that question by looking at conflicting findings from research examining what to expect from terrorists who have served their sentences. Next, it presents quantitative data on those involved with jihadi plots in the United States over the past three decades. Given the small numbers of jihadi re-offenders with a link to terrorist plotting in the United States, the article then gives a qualitative description of each. Lastly, it discusses possible lessons that may be gleaned from the documented cases of jihadi plot recidivism in the United States.

Why Study Jihadi Recidivism Rates?

In the United States alone, there have been over 500 prosecutions of those with ties to international terrorism post 9/11.¹ Although the rate of terrorism-related arrests and prosecutions in the United States has slowed since they peaked in 2015-2016, 191 have been

a Islamist terror-related prosecutions in the United States represent a broad range of offenses from attempted mass murder to lying to a federal agent. The most common terrorism-related offense in the United States has been “conspiracy to provide material support” to foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs)—that is, an organization designated by the U.S. State Department for which any aiding or abetting is considered illegal. However, even such conspiracy prosecutions include a wide range of illegal actions ranging from giving small sums of money to someone believed to be a member of a terrorist organization (often an informant) to those who attempted to travel overseas to join the Islamic State.

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charged in plots related to the Islamic State since 2014 alone.² Well over 200 convicted terrorists in the United States have already completed their sentences and been released.³ Over 50 who are currently incarcerated in the United States on terrorism charges are scheduled to be released in the next five years.⁴ Years of studies show criminals in the United States re-offend at rates between 25 and 83 percent.⁵ Similar high recidivism rates (45-55 percent) have been reported in the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, and the Netherlands.⁵

There has long been concern about jihadi recidivism. A 2012 report by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security stated that 27 percent of prisoners released from the Guantanamo Bay detention center had returned to the fight.⁶ The terrorism analyst Dennis Pluchinsky noted that “there is an apparent tendency for global jihadis to become recidivists”⁷ and that “the propensity for reform is less likely for global jihadis than secular terrorists.”⁸ Most recently, researchers Mary Beth Altier, Emma Leonard Boyle, and John Horgan studied the autobiographies of individuals involved in terrorist activities that were affiliated with known perpetrator groups and came to the conclusion that “terrorist reengagement and recidivism rates are relatively high”⁹ and are even, “slightly higher than criminal recidivism rates.”¹⁰

If convicted jihadis are indeed more dangerous than secular terrorists and recidivism rates among them approach those of common criminals, then there is a significant problem looming on the horizon. The potential problem may be even worse in Europe where foreign fighters who joined the Islamic State have returned in large numbers, many to countries where criminal sentences of all types tend to be much shorter than in the United States.¹¹ Even if convicted, many will be back on the streets within a few short years.

Yet, there are some reasons to hope that those convicted of terrorism-related offenses might be less prone to repeat offense than more common criminals. For instance, two studies on those involved in militant groups on both sides of “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland found recidivism rates to be much lower than the general criminal population. While 11 percent of those convicted were later re-arrested, only 3-3.6 percent (depending on the study) of these were convicted of paramilitary-related crimes.¹² This does not necessarily mean that a very high proportion of these former convicts are “reformed” in the sense that they have given up their underlying ideological commitment to violent manifestations of ei-

b These variations are partially explained by how one defines recidivism. For instance, 25 percent of federal inmates are re-incarcerated within eight years of their release. See “Recidivism Among Federal Offenders: A Comprehensive Overview,” United States Sentencing Commission, March 2016. Whereas 83 percent of state prisoners are re-arrested within nine years of their release. See “2018 Update on Prisoner Recidivism: a 9-Year Follow-up Period (2005 – 2014),” U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, May 2018.

ther the Republican or Unionist cause,^c only that they are no longer engaged in the terrorism-related illegal behaviors that led to their initial criminal convictions. As John Horgan finds, disengagement is more common and often just as important as deradicalization.¹³

Whether or not convicted jihadis represent an increased risk of danger should be open to empirical observation, yet few studies have actually tested the premise. To date, only two studies have looked at terrorist recidivism in the United States.¹⁴

Most recently, a report from the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) looked into disengagement from ideological extremism.¹⁵ The eye-catching headline in the report's description reads "New data shows risk of recidivism is high among extremists." At first glance, the numbers in the report are alarming. Of the 300 extremists examined in the START sample, 49 percent re-offended after their first known instance of ideologically motivated crime.¹⁶ If taken to mean that nearly half of convicted terrorists will return to terrorism, this would be a true cause for concern.

But a closer look shows that this is not what the numbers imply. First, the report does not have recidivism as its primary research question. Its main concern is with why some leave extremism and the barriers to exit they encounter. Second, the report looked at "re-offending," which is conceived as a much broader category than recidivism. In other words, the report is not necessarily talking about a convicted terrorist completing his sentence, being released, and then returning to terrorism-related crimes. Lastly, according to the primary author of the report, very few jihadis were included in the sample of 300 and the vast majority of those "re-offending" were right-wing extremists.¹⁷ In other words, this report should not be taken to mean that a high danger exists from convicted Islamist extremists.

The most thorough study so far on terror-related recidivism in the United States is from Omi Hodwitz's Terrorism Recidivism Study (TRS), which examined 561 individuals convicted of terrorism-related offenses in the United States after 9/11.¹⁸ The underlying data is not at this time publicly available, leaving several unanswered questions.¹⁹ For instance, the author does not make it clear if it includes all terror offenses, even those prosecuted as non-ideological due to the prevalence of plea bargaining in the United States. The study also excludes arrests that did not proceed to conviction, which increases the probability that unprosecuted cooperating witnesses who later were involved in terrorist plots would not be seen as recidivists. Moreover, by focusing exclusively on post-prison release convictions, the study may have overlooked individuals who had prior terror-related convictions, were involved in later plots, but who were never prosecuted for a variety of reasons.

Even with these caveats, the study is important as the first to systematically examine terrorist recidivism rates in the United States. Of 297 ideologically motivated extremists released from prison, only nine were charged with crimes post-conviction, yielding a recidivism rate of 1.6 percent. This figure is far below that of non-ideologically motivated crimes, however measured. A closer

c In the context of Northern Ireland, "Republicans" are those who generally support secession from the United Kingdom and a unified and independent Ireland on the whole island, while "Unionists" are those who support the continuation of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom.

look indicates an even lower number may be more accurate. Five of the nine were charged while still in prison, mostly of crimes unrelated to terrorism. Only four individuals were charged with crimes post-release, *none* of them for terrorism-related offenses.

To reemphasize, the TRS study found no individuals in the United States who were convicted of terrorism, released from prison, and then were later convicted of a terrorism-related crime.

Measuring Recidivism Among Those Linked to Jihadi Attack Plots in the United States

So, are would-be jihadis in the United States committed life-long ideologues who are likely to return to their former ways upon release? Or are convicted jihadis much more likely to become deradicalized or disengaged during or after incarceration than once feared?

Some answers can be found by looking at the most dangerous category of jihadi offenders: those individuals linked to jihadi terror plotting.

This study examines recidivism rates among jihadi plotters by using data collected in the author's ongoing "Jihadi Plots in the United States" (JPUS) dataset.^d The JPUS dataset attempts to capture all known plots by would-be jihadis against specific targets in the United States in which at least one of the plotters was physically located within the United States.²⁰ The dataset includes all known plots that were executed, which were executed but failed, or which were in the planning stages but disrupted before being fully executed.²¹ It is, therefore, more inclusive than other datasets, which focus solely on successfully executed plots.^e It excludes plots with connections to the United States but in which the targets were overseas.^f

Within the dataset, the author sought to identify what he terms "jihadi plotter recidivists." For the purpose of this study, the author defines jihadi plotter recidivists as either:

Individuals who were previously convicted of a crime in a case related to a jihadi terror plot involving a specific plan to commit an act of violence on U.S. soil who were then subsequently convicted or are awaiting trial in relation to *any* jihadi terror activity or who died in the commission of a jihadi attack.

Individuals who were previously convicted of a crime in a case related to *any* jihadi terror activity who were then subsequently convicted or are awaiting trial in a case related to a jihadi terror plot involving a specific plan to commit an act of violence on U.S. soil or died in the commission of an attack.^g

In other words, the author counts as a jihadi plotter recidivist as those individuals in the United States who re-engage in criminal jihadi activity after a conviction related to a jihadi terror plot or who become criminally implicated in relation to a terror plot after

d Since the dataset only looks at those who overtly adhere to the salafi jihadi ideology, it excludes right-wing and other ideological strains of terrorism and is therefore of more limited scope in predicting broader terrorist behaviors.

e For instance, the START Global Terrorism Database only includes executed plots.

f For instance, an American citizen who joined the Islamic State in Syria and was later captured and sent home to the United States for prosecution would be excluded.

g In some cases, a judgment call had to be made whether or not the inclusion criteria had been met. Details of some of these cases are discussed later.

previously being convicted in relation to jihadi activity. It excludes individuals who took part in jihadi activity not linked to specific attack plotting against targets in the United States.

A former terrorist re-incarcerated for simple parole violations, such as drug or alcohol abuse, is therefore not counted as a jihadi plot recidivist. The JPUS dataset includes all known jihadi plots in the United States from January 1990 through the end of May 2019. Most studies begin post 9/11, and there is a good case to be made that this is the appropriate starting point when studying terrorism in the United States since there was a fundamental change in intelligence and law enforcement orientation after the event. However, terrorism is not a new phenomenon, and a similar overhaul of terrorism-related laws also occurred after the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing.^h The longer time frame allows for some comparisons of those convicted prior to and after 9/11.

Neither is jihadi terrorism in the United States an exclusively post-9/11 phenomenon. The first recorded event in the JPUS dataset is El Sayyid Nosair's 1990 assassination of Rabbi Meir Kahane in New York City, but the phenomenon of jihadi terror in the United States goes back to at least 1983 and probably much earlier.ⁱ The further one goes back, the more difficult it becomes to identify plots as jihadism was not widely recognized as a distinct strand of terrorism and has often been entangled with nationalist struggles. The dataset does capture major jihadi plots in the United States prior to 9/11. For instance, two major plots in 1993. That is the year the World Trade Center was first bombed, killing six and injuring over 1,000, and in which the planned follow-up attacks by an overlapping cell against New York City landmarks were thwarted. The New York City landmark plotters received sentences ranging from 25 years to life in a plot that never was executed.²² Three of the plotters have served their sentences and two more are scheduled for release this year.

Findings

From the JPUS dataset, 189 total individuals were identified as being involved in jihadi plots against targets in the United States between January 1990 and the end of May 2019. Of these, 17 were convicted prior to 9/11. Only 31 individuals involved in these plots have been identified as being released from prison, three of those were involved in pre-9/11 plots.^j

Only four of the 31 (13 percent) released plotters have been identified as having *any* criminal involvement in any post-incarceration crime. While much lower than traditional criminal recidivism rates, which range between 25-83 percent, this is much higher than the Terrorism Recidivism Study.

However, one of these, Burson Augustin, was involved in a clear-

ly non-ideological crime.^k A second, Abdelghani Meskini, was accused of terror involvement after his initial release, but a closer look at the facts suggests his is not a case of jihadi plot recidivism. Both of these cases will be discussed in further detail below.

In fact, only two individuals—Elton Simpson and Ali Muhammad Brown—can be categorized as being jihadi plot recidivists, yielding a 6.5 percent recidivism rate in the United States for those linked to jihadi attack plots. This figure is far below recidivism estimates for common criminals, however measured. This data, although just looking at those involved in jihadi terror plotting in the United States, suggests that convicted jihadis are less likely to return to terrorism-related crimes than some have feared. Unlike the TRS sample, which captured no ideological crimes committed post-incarceration, this data shows that at least a small number of jihadis remain committed enough to the cause that they attempt to commit acts of terror after their release.

The numbers are small enough that a deeper look at each individual may be illustrative of potential future trends.

The first of the two cases of jihadi plot recidivism presented in this data is Elton Simpson.¹ In Simpson's case, a judgment call had to be made whether or not to include him as a jihadi plot recidivist because the charge on which he was originally convicted was not technically jihadi related. In the author's judgment, the totality of the evidence presented below and of his later actions was enough to include him as a jihadi plot recidivist.

Simpson's social media presence and his real-world connection with Hassan Abujihaad in his hometown of Phoenix, Arizona, had put Simpson on the FBI's radar as early as 2006.²³ In 2009, Abujihaad, born Paul Hall, was convicted of disclosing classified information that he had acquired during his time in the U.S. Navy to an online publication that supported the Taliban.²⁴ In 2010, Simpson was arrested and charged with lying to the FBI about his intentions of traveling abroad to join al-Shabaab.²⁵ However, the judge in the bench trial did not believe the prosecution had presented a strong enough case that Simpson's lies were directly tied to a foreign terrorist group,²⁶ a charge that would carry a prison sentence. In 2011, he was convicted of a lesser charge of lying to the FBI and was given the minimum sentence, three years of federal probation.²⁷

Five years later, Simpson's online activities landed him back on the FBI's radar, and he was once again placed under surveillance. On May 3, 2015, Simpson and his co-conspirator opened fire at an anti-Islam event in Garland, Texas.^m Both of the attackers were killed, and one security guard was injured. The undercover FBI agent who had been in communication with the pair arrived too late.²⁸ The Islamic State later claimed responsibility for the attack

h The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, which banned support for designated foreign terrorist organizations, was passed in the wake of the Oklahoma City attack.

i The reference is to the 1983 attack against the Hotel Rajneesh in Portland, Oregon, by Jama'at al-Fuqara' member Stephen Paster. See Elizabeth Shogren, "Fuqra: A Name For Muslim Terrorism," *Seattle Times*, July 6, 1993.

j These low numbers are partially the result of convicts with long sentences dying in prison before their release. However, it should be noted that six more jihadis either have been or are scheduled to be released in 2019. Another four are scheduled for release in 2020, so that by the end of next year, the number will have jumped by nearly one-third in only two years. JPUS Dataset (maintained by the author).

k After his release, Burson Augustin was convicted of low-level drug dealing. See "Former Member Of Liberty City Seven Charged In Federal Court For Drug Distribution," U.S. Department of Justice, August 15, 2013.

l Simpson's is also the only case from the JPUS dataset of someone who initially wanted to travel overseas to fight, was prevented from doing so, and then was involved in a plot against the homeland. See C.J. Wright, "Sometimes They Come Back: Responding to American Foreign Fighter Returnee and Other Elusive Threats," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (April 2018).

m It is because of Simpson's involvement in the Garland attack that he was initially placed in the JPUS dataset as a plotter. Only upon closer review of the details of his life and previous encounters with law enforcement does it become clear that he was a repeat offender of jihadi-related crimes.

as, moments before executing their plan, the pair pledged allegiance to the group on Twitter.²⁹

In hindsight, it seems that Simpson's commitment to violent jihad was both deep and long lasting. His earlier encounter with law enforcement and the justice system did not deter him from later involvement in a terrorist plot.

The second case is that of Ali Muhammad Brown and also involved a judgment call. Although the state charges for which he was initially convicted were not directly related to a jihadi crime, the evidence presented below as well as Brown's later actions were enough in the author's judgment to include him as a jihadi plot recidivist.

Brown was part of a group of men involved in a string of criminal activities based around the Seattle barbershop of Ruben Shumpert.³¹ In 2002, the FBI began to investigate the group after they received tips that jihadi videos were being shown to customers. Over a dozen men associated with the barbershop, including Brown, were arrested in 2004 by police and charged with various crimes, including bank fraud, for which Brown was convicted.³⁰

Shumpert was the main focus of the investigation, but federal prosecutors believed they lacked the evidence necessary to charge the suspected ringleader and the others with terrorism-related crimes. Released on bail awaiting a state trial, Shumpert fled to Somalia and is believed to have died there fighting for al-Shabaab.³¹

In 2006, an FBI agent involved in the initial investigation claimed that "although this investigation did not lead to terrorism charges ... it nipped this one in the bud before it could become more dangerous."³² The agent could not have known that in 2014, one of the men arrested would kill four people across two states.

Two of Brown's victims seemed to have been chosen at random, but two more were killed outside a Seattle gay nightclub in what appears to be a symbolic act.³³ Brown claimed that the murders were justified as retaliation for the killings of Muslims abroad. He also claimed the killings were in furtherance of the "re-creation of the caliphate, so that Muslims could have peace."³⁴ However, unlike Elton Simpson, Brown never publicly pledged allegiance to any specific terrorist group nor has any group claimed him as one of their own.

He received life sentences in both Washington and New Jersey and in the latter case was prosecuted under a little used state-terrorism charge. His is the only case of jihadi recidivism in which someone, other than the perpetrator, was killed.

The former head of the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force in Seattle believed that Brown would be better classified as a 'serial killer' as Brown's primary motivation may have been the kind of blood lust more typical of the category.³⁵ But as academics Emily Corner and Paul Gill have persuasively argued, there need not be a conflict between mental illness and terrorism.³⁶ One can be both mentally ill and a terrorist. That is to say, terrorists need not be solely motivated by ideological commitment. Given Brown's own self-identification as a jihadi, it is not necessary to look further than his own admission to include him as one.

In both the cases of Simpson and Brown, the details outlined above make clear their link to "jihadi terror plot involving a specific plan to commit an act of violence on U.S. soil" came in their later

rather than their original offense. It is noteworthy that in the author's dataset, there is not a single individual in the United States who was jailed in a case related to jihadi plotting, was released, and then became involved in jihadi attack plotting again.

It is useful to explain why Meskini and Augustin were not categorized by the author as jihadi plot recidivists.

Abdelghani Meskini was a con-man involved only tangentially in the 1999 al-Qa`ida-linked LAX Millennium bomb plot.³⁷ Meskini had known criminal ties prior to his terror-related conviction. As a cooperating witness against Ahmed Ressay, the ringleader of the al-Qa`ida-linked cell tasked with carrying out the plot, Meskini pled guilty to material support and document fraud. His part in the plot was in delivering forged documents and ill-gotten money once Ressay had crossed the border into the United States from Canada.³⁸ In return for his cooperation, Meskini was given a light sentence and released in 2005.

In 2010, he was accused of violating the terms of his parole by allegedly buying an AK-47 in Georgia. Whether or not this is a case of jihadi recidivism hinges on both if and why he bought the rifle. Analyst Todd Bensman believes Meskini's re-conviction is evidence of jihadi recidivism and of a looming problem on the horizon.³⁹ As evidence, he cites testimony that Meskini had conducted internet research on Anwar al-Awlaki and the November 2009 Fort Hood attack.⁴⁰ Prosecutors allege that Meskini became disillusioned after he lost his job and "was ready to snap."⁴¹

Prosecutors in the second case against Meskini also allege that after his release, "he became a willing participant in drug dealing, prostitution and bank fraud."⁴² In other words, he returned to his previous criminal life. The two witnesses against Meskini were a prostitute and a drug dealer, both of whom testified in return for immunity or lighter sentences. The AK-47 at the heart of the accusation that Meskini was on a path toward violent jihad was never found. The judge in the bench trial rejected four of the more serious allegations against Meskini. He was convicted of lying to the FBI and to his parole officer. The lies revolved around his involvement in the drug and prostitution trade at the crime-infested apartment complex he managed and about the handgun he owned, which he claimed was for self-defense.⁴³ He is therefore not classified as a jihadi plot recidivist.

The second excluded individual is Burson Augustin of the 2006 "Liberty City Seven" plot. Augustin served his time, was released, and then was convicted for distribution of cocaine in 2013.⁴⁴ Because his later offense did not involve any link to jihadism, he is not categorized by the author as a jihadi plot recidivist.

Of all plots against targets in the United States in the author's dataset, the Liberty City Seven case had the weakest ties to jihadism. The seven reportedly considered themselves followers of the Moorish Science Temple, a religious movement "blending together elements of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam."⁴⁵ The Florida cell, who met in a rented warehouse in the Miami neighborhood of Liberty City, had a membership that was largely drawn from the down and out and those previously involved in crime. The accused group claimed it had pledged allegiance to Usama bin Ladin as part of a scam to get money from al-Qa`ida.⁴⁶ It took three trials (including two mistrials) to acquit two of the accused and convict the five others, most of whom were given light sentences.⁴⁷

Prior to joining the group, Augustin had been a low-level hustler and drug dealer. After prison, he returned to that life.⁴⁸

n Shumpert's case also shows another limitation to the data presented here as those who traveled abroad are not included in the dataset, and yet he clearly showed he was committed to jihadism after his initial arrest.

Conclusion

This article only looks at the most dangerous category of jihadi re-offenders (those linked at one point to attack plotting) rather than all jihadi re-offenders and therefore can only make tentative conclusions about the larger prison population of convicted jihadis. But if the low recidivism rates in this data are representative of jihadi recidivism as a whole, then jihadi offenders in the United States tend to come out of prison deradicalized or disengaged. While the recidivism rate for those linked to jihadi plots is not zero, it is far below that of common criminals.

Something has changed these would-be jihadis in prison, and this change cannot be attributed to any specific nationally coordinated CVE or deradicalization program. The fact is that the United States has no such program in place, so any change of heart or will to commit further crimes must be the result of something else. It suggests that time spent in prison alone may dampen enthusiasm for jihadi re-offending. This runs counter to years of data showing that prison tends to increase criminality over time.⁴⁹

It is worth pointing out that Elton Simpson, the clearest example of a jihadi plot recidivist in the United States over the past 30 years,

did not go to prison. His earlier conviction resulted in probation only. He never made it to prison for the second offense because he was killed in the process of carrying out an act of terrorism.

The most important question left unanswered here is the extent to which the findings represent general trends? This article looks only at the most dangerous category of jihadi offenders in a single country.

Could there be a kind of American exceptionalism when it comes to jihadis? Perhaps other countries will face a larger problem from the dual threat of dangerous religiously based terrorism and high recidivism rates? One possible explanation outlined here is that prison itself may have a deradicalizing effect among some jihadi plotters in the United States. An alternative explanation could be that lower-than-expected recidivism rates might be caused by longer prison sentences in the United States,⁵⁰ depressing enthusiasm among released inmates for jihadi re-offending because they are older and wearier. Another might be that there is a deterrent effect because they do not want to spend another long period in prison. Further research into jihadi recidivism in different parts of the world is clearly necessary before the issue can be put to rest. **CTC**

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