



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

CTCSENTINEL

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A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Ten Years On: Inside the Bin Ladin Raid

A CONVERSATION WITH ADMIRAL (RETIRED)
WILLIAM H. McRAVEN AND NICHOLAS RASMUSSEN

FEATURE ARTICLE

The January 6 Boost to Accelerationism

BRIAN HUGHES AND
CYNTHIA MILLER-IDRISS

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FROM THE EDITOR

Ten years ago, the United States launched Operation Neptune Spear, the May 2011 raid on Usama bin Ladin's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, which resulted in the death of al-Qa`ida's founder. In this issue, *CTC Sentinel* speaks with Admiral (Retired) William McRaven and Nicholas Rasmussen to compare vantage points of the operation from a military and policy perspective. A decade after the raid, the operation continues to offer practitioners, policymakers, and researchers valuable lessons for the future. While some of their reflections pertain to counterterrorism policies and practices, others speak to the importance of leadership at times of uncertainty, discipline, interagency collaboration, and most of all, commitment to a shared mission. According to Rasmussen what makes it "such a compelling story at the 10-year mark is that it has such an important operational story to tell, but also ... it's a remarkable window into presidential decision-making under extraordinary conditions of uncertainty and risk." McRaven stresses the mission was about justice for the victims of 9/11 and other al-Qa`ida attacks: "We were honored to have the opportunity to go on the mission, but make no mistake about it, this was about 500,000 plus soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines that took this fight to al-Qa`ida."

In this month's feature article, Brian Hughes and Cynthia Miller-Idriss assess that the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, provided a boost to far-right extremists who seek total political and social collapse, an objective sometimes referred to as "accelerationism." They write that "although many disagreements and personality clashes continue to emerge within and among groups since the storming of the Capitol, there are increasing indications that the typically fractious world of the extreme far-right is becoming more unified toward an objective of overthrowing the country's prevailing political and social order."

Tim Lister examines the jihadi threat landscape in Mozambique in the wake of an attack by Islamic State-aligned militants on the town of Palma in March 2021. He writes: "for four days, they were rampant, killing at least dozens of local people and destroying much of the town's infrastructure, including banks, a police station, and food aid warehouses. The attack reverberated around the world because Palma was home to hundreds of foreign workers, most of them contractors for the Total liquefied natural gas (LNG) project on the nearby Afungi Peninsula." Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming warn that "after reabsorbing a number of splinter groups, and addressing internal tensions," the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) has "intensified its campaign of terrorism in Pakistan and is again growing in strength." Aaron Edwards argues a new approach toward security in Northern Ireland is necessary in the wake of the April 2021 loyalist violence.

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Cover: A model of Usama bin Ladin's compound is pictured at the "Revealed: The Hunt for Bin Laden" exhibition at the National 9/11 Memorial Museum on November 7, 2019, in New York City. (Angela Weiss/AFP via Getty Images)

A View from the CT Foxhole: Admiral (Retired) William H. McRaven, Former Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, and Nicholas Rasmussen, Former National Counterterrorism Center Director, Reflect on the Usama bin Ladin Raid

By Audrey Alexander

Admiral William H. McRaven is a retired U.S. Navy Four-Star admiral and the former Chancellor and Chief Executive Officer of the University of Texas System. During his time in the military, he commanded special operations forces at every level, eventually taking charge of the U.S. Special Operations Command. His career included combat during Desert Storm and both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. He commanded the troops that captured Saddam Hussein and rescued Captain Phillips. McRaven is also credited with developing the plan and leading the Usama bin Ladin mission in 2011.

McRaven is a recognized national authority on U.S. foreign policy and has advised Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and other U.S. leaders on defense issues. He currently serves on the boards of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), the National Football Foundation, the International Crisis Group, The Mission Continues, and ConocoPhillips.

McRaven graduated from The University of Texas at Austin in 1977 with a degree in Journalism, and received his master's degree from the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey in 1991.

McRaven is the author of *The Hero Code: Lessons Learned from Lives Well Lived*, *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare*, and two *New York Times* best-sellers, *Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life and Maybe the World* and *Sea Stories: My Life in Special Operations*.

Nicholas Rasmussen is the inaugural Executive Director of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). A national security professional with more than 27 years in U.S. government service, Rasmussen held senior counterterrorism posts at the White House and in the U.S. Intelligence Community from 2001 to 2017. He concluded his government career as Director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), leading more than 1,000 professionals from across the Intelligence Community, federal government, and federal contractor workforce. Rasmussen served in senior posts across three administrations, including as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Counterterrorism at the National Security Council staff under Presidents Bush and Obama before being appointed Director of NCTC by President Obama and continuing his tenure at the request of President Trump's administration. From 1991-2001, he served in policy positions at the Department of State, focused on the Middle East.

Editor's note: To commemorate the 10th anniversary of Operation Neptune[s] Spear, the May 2011 raid on Usama bin Ladin's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, CTC Sentinel spoke with Admiral William McRaven (U.S. Navy Retired) and Nicholas Rasmussen to compare vantage points of the operation from a military and policy perspective. A decade after the raid, the covert operation by CIA with Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) targeting al-Qa`ida's leader continues to offer practitioners, policymakers, and researchers valuable lessons for the future. While some reflections here pertain to counterterrorism policies and practices, others speak to the importance of leadership at times of uncertainty, discipline, interagency collaboration, and most of all, commitment to a shared mission.

Additionally, as these recollections will highlight, the process and planning of the raid in Abbottabad was relatively paperless due to operational security concerns, which is an important consideration when looking back 10 years later. In our discussion after the interview, Admiral McRaven and Mr. Rasmussen discussed how personal accounts from this period, including their own, may inadvertently blur some details like the precise scope and sequencing of events in the months leading up to the operation. Both Admiral McRaven and Mr. Rasmussen have sought to reconstruct those events to the best of their recollection.

CTC: I'd like to ask you both to talk about where this story begins for you. At the time, then Vice Admiral McRaven served as JSOC (Joint Special Operations Command) Commander, whereas Mr. Rasmussen worked as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Counterterrorism at the National Security Council staff at the White House. We know that the hunt for Usama bin Ladin was ongoing, but what do you see as the turning point in that search? And when did you start exploring more actionable options?

Rasmussen: I remember exactly when I first became aware of the idea of Abbottabad as a 'maybe.' The CIA director came over to brief President Obama on September 10, 2010—so several months before the operation ultimately happened—and basically said that the Agency and the intelligence community had identified a compound of interest in Pakistan. The briefing made it very clear that additional intelligence work remained to be done—and CIA

laid out a set of plans to try to develop that picture—but it was just a very earliest hint that there *might be* a location for a high-value target and potentially bin Ladin.

Now you, Bill, were in the business of high-value target work at JSOC across multiple theaters, and of course, the bin Ladin hunt was never something you were *not* engaged in, in some way. But when did the idea of a potential compound of interest first enter your consciousness and when did you think “we might be on to something” as an intelligence community?

McRaven: For me, it wasn’t until months later. It was December of 2010 when the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Mike Mullen came out to Afghanistan, which he did pretty frequently. He came to our headquarters there at Bagram [Airfield], and after we’d spent an hour or so with the troops, he said, “Hey, Bill, let’s go up to your office. I’ve got a few things I want to chat with you about.” So I went up to my office, and he said, “The CIA thinks they have a lead on bin Ladin, and it’s possible they’ll be calling you here in the next couple of weeks to come back to Langley to talk to them about it.” I was probably a little dismissive, not to the Chairman, but I was thinking, “OK, we’ve had a lot of leads on bin Ladin.” And to your point, Nick, that’s obviously what the Joint Special Operations Command did, along with the Agency, was track down these leads on bin Ladin.

A couple of weeks later, I got a call from I think [General James Edward] “Hoss” Cartwright, the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who said, “You need to come back to CIA headquarters.” I’m not exactly sure of the timeline, but I think it was in late January [2011] when I flew back to Washington, D.C., and I actually went over to meet with Secretary [of Defense Robert] Gates and Admiral Mullen before going over to meet Michael Morell^a at the CIA headquarters. They gave me a little bit of a preamble to what I might see and then said, “Just go over there, listen to what Morell has to say, and then come back and give us your thoughts.” So I headed over to CIA and spent the next hour or so with Morell as he showed me pictures of the compound at the time, a kind of trapezoid-shaped compound. I remember Morell saying, “If you had to take down this compound, how would you do it?” I said, “It’s a compound. It’s what we do every night in Iraq and Afghanistan. It’s a little bigger than what we’re used to, but there’s nothing tactically challenging about it.” So we talked for a little while, and then I debriefed the Chairman and the Secretary, and then headed right back to Afghanistan. So that was my first actual exposure to the compound in Abbottabad.

Rasmussen: For me during that period—January/February [2011]—we knew there was an ongoing effort at CIA and with their intelligence community partners to develop the picture to try to get greater fidelity around the question of a) Is a high value target actually there and b) if there is, is it potentially bin Ladin? And we were told at the White House that CIA had started this conversation with DoD about potential options if this intelligence case matured in that particular way. And yes, much as you say, taking down compounds is what you did, but this would have been an extraordinary operation. And so for you to even begin the process of discussing this with CIA partners, who were you able to bring in from your team? I suspect it wasn’t the normal staffing process around developing options that you would be used to inside



Admiral (Retired) William H. McRaven

of a JSOC setting.

McRaven: As you know, it wasn’t. The president had a “BIGOT” list, [that’s] a term of art concerning the limited number of people that could have access to this information. So after my initial meeting with Morell, I came back to Langley a couple weeks later, and Morell gave me all of the detailed background information about the compound and “the pacer.”^b At the time, it was just me [involved from JSOC], and I had to go into the Situation Room and give the president some sense of what a military operation might look like. I actually went back to the thesis that I wrote at the Naval Postgraduate School,^c and by this point in my career, I had been exposed to about 10,000 special operations missions—either having commanded them, having been on them, or having reviewed the concept of operations. So when I looked at this, as challenging as it was, I kept going back to my post graduate thesis thinking: let’s keep this plan as simple as we can; I don’t want to overcomplicate it. I went through in my own mind a couple of things: can we parachute in, can we come in from the embassy by a truck, what

b Editor’s note: In the period leading up to the raid, intelligence analysts reportedly nicknamed a figure at the compound “the pacer” because of his regular walks within the compound’s courtyard. From an intelligence perspective, that figure, “the pacer,” was also a possible candidate for bin Ladin. Bob Woodward, “Death of Osama bin Laden: Phone call pointed U.S. to compound – and to ‘the pacer,’” *Washington Post*, May 6, 2011.

c Editor’s note: Admiral (Retired) McRaven’s master’s thesis was published as a book in 1996. William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Presidio Press, 1996).

a Editor’s note: Michael Morell was then Deputy Director of the CIA.

were our options? But all of those kind of contradicted what I knew to be the “simplicity”¹ factor in planning a mission like this.

The first time I briefed the president, when he asked me, “McRaven, what’s your plan?” I said, “Sir, our plan is to take a couple of helicopters and fly from Afghanistan into Pakistan, land the force on the compound, we’ll take down the compound, get bin Ladin, and bring him back or he’ll be killed on the spot.” It was that simple. And that was all of the planning I did early on because at the time, I wasn’t allowed to bring anyone else in. But I knew that the basic plan, the basic scheme of maneuver, was sound. We’ve done these thousands of times before; not over these distances and a few other things, but I was confident that what I was telling the president was executable. It wasn’t until later, when I could begin to slowly bring in the SEALs and the air planners, that we really refined it in terms of the routes and the maneuvers on the ground and those sorts of things.

Rasmussen: Just to help readers with a sense of timeline, the meeting you’re describing, where you first briefed President Obama on what military options might look like and what you would recommend from an operational perspective, was on March 14th in 2011. That meeting was the first opportunity where the president was sitting with his full team of national security advisors and hearing the intelligence case, but then also hearing from you about what the potential operational solution was, if the intelligence did, in fact, bear out.

My recollection from that meeting was that you were very, very confident about the operation itself—an assault operation on a compound of that sort—again because you had experienced that and [it] was well within your operators’ capability-set. I remember you were also quite careful about talking about the ‘getting there’ and ‘getting back’ parts of that because, again, this was an area well inside Pakistani territory, not some dramatically remote location far from urban locations. This was right in the heart of, in a sense, [the] establishment security structure of Pakistan, Abbottabad being closely located to many key Pakistani facilities. Do you remember how you framed that to the president, that you needed to do more work before you could really speak to some of the questions related to getting in and out of Pakistan without being detected?

McRaven: I can’t remember exactly when it was, but at one point in time, the president did ask me, “Bill, can you execute this mission?” I said, “Mr. President, I don’t know. Until I can bring the SEALs in and we have an opportunity to rehearse this again and again and again, I can’t tell you whether or not it is doable.” By [late] March, I think I had had an opportunity to bring in a few of the air planners and a few of the SEALs. I didn’t bring the whole body of SEALs in yet, but I had enough planners and, of course, the CIA provided a wealth of intelligence analysts, particularly when it came to the Pakistani Integrated Air Defense.

To your point, Nick, my biggest concern was, how am I going to get the force from Jalalabad, 162 miles into Pakistan to Abbottabad—which as you noted, the compound was near their West Point, about three or four miles from a major infantry battalion, and about a mile from a major police station—but I was really concerned about, would Pakistani radars pick us up, would Pakistani Integrated Air Defenses be a problem? Between the Agency planners, intel analysts, and the helicopter and the aviation planners I brought in, I got more and more confident that we could do it. We needed



Nicholas Rasmussen

to rehearse it with the [right] number of people. As you recall, we were using special helicopters—I can’t go into much more detail than that—but the lift capacity of these helicopters was not the same as the generic Blackhawk, and that constrained us in terms of the number of troops I could get on the ground. Again, the reason I was always concerned about the air component was, can I get the number of SEALs I need to get there without having to refuel and not being picked up by Pakistani Integrated Air? All of that concerned me going forward, but the more we planned it, the more realistic it appeared, before even we had a chance to rehearse it.

Rasmussen: I remember at a certain point during the planning and policy discussions at the White House with the president, the question came up of how you would respond if Pakistani forces reacted and responded to the scene. We were in the middle of a diplomatic mess with Pakistan at the time over an individual who was part of the diplomatic footprint at the embassy in Islamabad who had been arrested by Pakistani security forces.² Things were not good with Pakistan at that particular moment, and you had to plan around contingencies about what would happen if Pakistani security personnel rallied to the scene, surrounded the compound, and you were left with managing that situation. Can you say a little bit about how the president responded to that? Because I think it fundamentally changed the way many of us in the Situation Room looked at the operation after he weighed in on that question.

McRaven: I needed to think tactically and operationally, but you can’t put yourself in this position without recognizing the [geo] political constraints that you might be under. I knew that if we got on target and then all of a sudden the local Pakistani police showed up, if they started to engage us, it was not going to go well for them. If the infantry battalion showed up, we were probably going to have a hell of a good gun fight against them. So that was not going to serve anybody well. My issue all along was if we had bin Ladin, did that then become an ability to negotiate, if in fact we got locked down? It was just one of these: “Well, if we’ve got bin Ladin, if we show bin Ladin, maybe the Pakistanis just say ‘OK, all good.’” That conversation obviously didn’t go on very long. As you well know, the

president very quickly told me, “No, I don’t want to put ourselves in [that] position at all”—which of course I didn’t either—“I want to be in a position to fight our way out.”

Now, I always had a plan to fight our way out. I had a package that was prepared to come in to pull the SEALs out if we needed to. And then the president gave me the latitude that I was looking for, which was, “Fine. Then we’ll fight our way out,” knowing that we had this remarkable force on the ground and that I could bring to bear the power of the U.S. military in terms of fighter, combat air support, AC-130s, you name it. We obviously didn’t want to do that. The Pakistanis are, as you know, an awkward ally at best, but certainly we didn’t want to kill, especially innocent Pakistanis that showed up doing their job. But we were certainly prepared to fight our way out if we got into that, and that goes directly to a great decision made by the president.

Rasmussen: You were an operator, but at the same time, you were a participant in the policy process unfolding at the White House. You were in a sense, jumping in and jumping out—going back and having your role with your operational team to plan and carry that part of the process forward; at the same time, you were a frequent participant in Situation Room meetings where these policy matters were being debated. You had had experience earlier in your career when you were an O-6 [Captain] having served on the National Security Council staff. Talk about how that looked to you given your prior experience as a more junior director at the National Security Council staff.

McRaven: I’m glad you raised that because I look back on that experience, and I’m the junior man in the room as a three-star, and as you well recall, the room [included] the president; vice president; Secretary of State Hillary Clinton; Secretary of Defense Bob Gates; Admiral Mike Mullen, the Chairman [of the Joint Chiefs of Staff]; Jim Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence; Leon Panetta, Director of CIA; John Brennan; Denis McDonough; yourself obviously, then the group got pretty small after that. The thing that was remarkable to me was how the president managed and led his National Security Council staff. I contend he was the smartest man in the room. He asked all the right questions. As you well know, he asked both tactical questions and operational questions and strategic and [geo]political questions. He wanted to understand the details, and I was happy to provide him the details because my sense was, he’s the president of the United States, he needs to understand the risks. The one thing I wanted to make sure I did was to convey the risk to the president because you’re a fool if you don’t explain the risks on something as high profile as this.

But the other thing, and you experienced [it], was everybody sitting around that table ... it’s not that the arguments didn’t get heated, but there was never any rancor. People were just trying to do what was best for the country, best for the nation. And I have to tell you, I was inspired by that. I remember these debates, and of course I’m sitting at the far end of the table where the junior people sat but listening to the members go back and forth and try to look at all the options—the two kind of bombing options; the option that we waived immediately, which was including the Pakistanis; and then of course the raid option—and how well they were able to carry on these conversations in, again, a sometimes heated but collegial fashion, exactly the way I thought the process should work.

“Right up until the very end, this whole operation had an overlay, which was that of significant intelligence uncertainty right up until the time your forces entered into Pakistani airspace. We still didn’t know if bin Ladin was at the compound.”

- Nicholas Rasmussen

Rasmussen: Well, if you were at the junior end of the table, I was in the back bench one row behind, furiously taking notes and trying to think about agendas for the next meeting. From my perspective, what was extraordinary about this set of meetings that unfolded over a 4-, 5-, 6-week period leading up to the operation itself were the conditions under which those meetings took place: absolute attention to secrecy, absolute attention to discretion in terms of how information was shared, no physical written agendas, none of the usual bureaucratic stuff that we were used to as staff officers at the NSC staff. Instead, you had calendars that simply read “meeting,” and the individual went to the meeting with no backup, and then returned back to the organization that they came from with no capacity to back brief their staff about the meeting. It was quite extraordinary that in a town and bureaucracy where paper is everything, this operated almost entirely without paper.

And yet still—I think this is a credit to what you just said about President Obama, and I give a lot of credit to [National Security Advisor] Tom Donilon and [Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism] John Brennan in this regard, too—the attention to detail in making sure there was still rigorous process and debate over all of these questions. We didn’t just, for lack of a better word, half-ass our way through uncertainties; we actually worked through the different sources of uncertainty in a structured way. That, to me, was a remarkable testament to the way in which the president approached his responsibilities as Commander in Chief for something this consequential.

Now, Bill, as you know, right up until the very end, this whole operation had an overlay, which was that of significant intelligence uncertainty right up until the time your forces entered into Pakistani airspace. We still didn’t know if bin Ladin was at the compound. And there was quite a lot of the debate you described in the Situation Room around the question of the intelligence picture and how confident we could be in it. Can you talk a little bit about what your own take on that process was?

McRaven: Interestingly enough, whether bin Ladin was there or not was not going to affect the tactical aspect of the mission. We planned the mission as though he were there, but if he wasn’t, we weren’t going to make any dramatic changes to how we got on target, how we locked down the target, how we swept through the target, all those sorts of things. People often asked me, “Well, were you concerned that you didn’t know bin Ladin was there?” and I said, “No, not really,” because I understood what we had to do and that part of the mission was pretty straightforward in my mind.

The things that we didn’t know, which concerned me most, was

whether or not the building was rigged with explosives and whether bin Ladin would be actually sleeping in a suicide vest. A number of times in Iraq, we had buildings that were completely rigged with explosives. And literally some of the high-value individuals we were going after slept in suicide vests. So part of it was asking, "Well, what if the guys get there on target and they're beginning to sweep their way through the building and the whole building is booby-trapped?" As good as the intelligence was, and of course this will go down as one of the great intelligence operations in the history of the Agency, to your point, we couldn't determine whether or not it was in fact bin Ladin, and lacked clarity on some of the real grainy details that the operators needed to at least put them in their comfort zone: things like, is the building rigged? We didn't think it was, based on the movement of the women and children and other men from the imagery we had, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's not. And of course, was bin Ladin sleeping in a suicide vest? Well, there's no way to determine that. Did he have a bugout route? We just assumed that he would. Would there be some sort of tunnel? He's been there for a long time, certainly going to all the trouble to build this massive compound, so wouldn't he have built a tunnel for he and his wives and his kids to get out? Those were the unknowns that we were operating with. But in terms of thinking about whether it was bin Ladin, that part to me was pretty straightforward: We were going to do the mission pretty much the exact same way whether it was bin Ladin or not.

Rasmussen: The intelligence picture, as you described it, was one that Director Panetta made clear that the Agency was pulling out all stops to get a clearer sense of whether it was, in fact, bin Ladin. But Director Panetta was also very honest in saying we were probably at the limit of what that intelligence was going to produce in the near term. It was one thing if we wanted to sit on this case for another several months and try to learn more over time with various collection activities, but if the president was going to be in a position to make a decision in the near term, meaning over the next few weeks, this was more or less the picture he was going to have. And to your point, that left a considerable amount of uncertainty on the table as the president approached these decisions.

Now, apart from the substance, Bill, what was it like to jump in and out of the Situation Room in the operational world? I know you bumped into people who were in your chain of command in one form or fashion or who wondered, "What's Bill doing in the D.C. area this week? I thought he was at Fort Bragg or deployed forward." How did you manage those interactions?

McRaven: Well, Nick, that did present some problems for me in terms of my bosses, General [David] Petraeus, General [James] Mattis, Admiral [Eric] Olson, none of whom early on knew my movements either way. I felt an awkwardness because certainly I felt it was important that, at a minimum, Admiral Olson know, he was my boss at SOCOM, and of course, General Petraeus who was at the time ISAF Commander in Afghanistan, and General Mattis at CENTCOM.

Having said that, I had a cover for action for lack of a better term. I had been diagnosed in 2010 with chronic lymphocytic leukemia. None of my staff knew what was going on, even my closest aide, Colonel Art Sellers, my executive officer who got me everywhere I needed to go. Early on I told Art, "Just do what I tell you. Don't ask any questions," and Art was kind of one of these unsung heroes who

"Whether bin Ladin was there or not was not going to affect the tactical aspect of the mission. We planned the mission as though he were there, but if he wasn't, we weren't going to make any dramatic changes to how we got on target, how we locked down the target, how we swept through the target."

- William H. McRaven

got things done and, like the great Ranger that he was, followed orders to the T. My staff and my command knew that I have been grappling with the cancer. I felt I never said anything, but I think their assumption was I kept coming back to Washington for treatment because Bethesda Medical Center was there, and I didn't disabuse them of that misconception. Every time I would leave Afghanistan, people didn't want to pry in my personal life, so they didn't ask me why I was going back.

I did bump into several folks while I was in D.C. and had to do the Texas two-step pretty quick. One of them was an old friend of mine, a reporter who I had known since 5th grade, who stopped me as I was going into the White House one day. As another bit of cover for action, the whole issue of Libya was happening. We hadn't seen each other in a long time so she asked about family then the obvious question: "What are you doing here at the White House?" I was like, "Well..." and she goes, "Have something to do with Libya?" I said, "You know, I really can't tell you," and so that all kind of played out better than I hoped. But I remember after I walked into the White House, I thought to myself, "I need a better cover story. This probably won't hold up too long."

Rasmussen: Going back to your staff and command, I remember we all had some version of the compartmenting problem. Even in my own team at the National Security Council staff, I could only have one person brought in to support some of the staff work. That meant I was leaving out 10 or 11 high-caliber individuals, and it just killed me to make some of those choices. President Obama was very clear with his guidance that not a single person was to be brought into this process unless you could speak to the role that person would play, the value they'd add, and why that person was necessary to do it. Didn't matter their rank or station, so you had individuals like the Secretary of Homeland Security and the FBI director who were very late into the process because, again, that very high bar for sharing of the information.

Now as we get further into March and April [2011], Bill, there's a point at which the action shifts to you working with the Agency to rehearse and prepare truly operationally. You know, it's been written before, of course, that mockups had been built where you could potentially rehearse against life-size or to-scale models of a compound. Meanwhile, at the White House, there's a lot of policy work answering questions like what do we do if bin Ladin's captured? What do we do if bin Ladin is killed? And what do we do if we need to dispose of his remains? All of these contingencies

needed to be spun out, and we were doing that work at the White House with an interagency team while you were starting to engage in the real nuts-and-bolts planning process. Can you talk a little bit about that rehearsal process and how that unfolded from your perspective?

McRaven: As you recall, Nick, at one point in time—I guess it was in April—the president asked me, “Can you do the mission?” I said, “I don’t know, Mr. President. I’m going to have to bring the SEALs in now, and I’ve got to rehearse it to find out whether or not what I have presented to you is, in fact, doable.” And he said, “How long will you need?” And I had anticipated that question. I said, “Sir, it will take me about three weeks,” and he said, “OK, you’ve got three weeks.”

The first thing we did was recall the SEAL team, and this was interesting: I’m often asked, why did you pick the SEALs? Why didn’t you pick the Army special operations guys? Was that because you were a SEAL? And of course, I’m quick to point out: are you kidding me? I’m about to report to the president of the United States, you think I’m going to play favorites? I’m going to pick who I think is the best force for the job. In this case, there were two forces: one Army, one Navy. Both of those commanders I had tremendous confidence in, both those units I had tremendous confidence in. However, what happened was the Army unit I was looking at had just deployed to Afghanistan to relieve the Navy unit that I was looking at, and so had I gone with the Army unit, I would have had to have recalled them from Afghanistan, and that would have heightened people’s awareness.

As it turned out, the SEALs had just come back from Afghanistan, so they were on three weeks leave. And so [that] gave me again kind of cover for action. I brought them in and nobody at their SEAL team knew that anything was going on because they just assume these guys were out with their wives or girlfriends and their families taking leave. I brought them into an undisclosed location on the East Coast, and we had told them that we were running this kind of high-level exercise, and it was [a] standard but very sensitive exercise. And boy, you could tell they were not happy campers because I had called them in off leave to do I’m sure what they considered to be this silly ass exercise. Now we’re sitting in this location and I’m looking around at the body language and they’ve got arms crossed, I’m getting the evil eye look: “You called us here to do this dog-and-pony show for a bunch of senior officers on our leave?” And then, of course, the CIA guy comes out, hands them all non-disclosure statements, which was not unusual for these sensitive missions, and then all of a sudden, he begins to talk about the intelligence we have on bin Ladin. And I’m watching around the room, and I can see the guys looking at each other like, “Is this part of the exercise? Are we serious here?” And, of course, the more he talked, they began to realize, “Oh my goodness, this is for real.” And so, I don’t remember how long that brief went but [it was] a couple hours, and then afterward, [with] the CO [Commanding Officer] of the team, the ground force commander, we pulled all the guys together.

To your point, the Agency had built a mockup for us right down the road from this facility we were using. That very day, the guys got at it, and we started rehearsing. That went on for the next three weeks, and then I was able to come back after we did a full dress rehearsal at another undisclosed location with a lot of viewers—Admiral Mullen, Admiral Olson, Mike Vickers—a number of folks

came out to watch the final rehearsal. Once that went off well, then frankly, I was in a position to tell the president, “Yes, sir, we can do this.”

Rasmussen: The other thing, in addition to the president putting out the kind of three-week planning deadline for you, the other reality that was driving this was we were dealing with lunar cycles. You had briefed the president that you wanted to be able to conduct an operation in a period of maximum darkness. And so that gave us a window, and if that window passed, then we’d probably have to wait another several weeks until another window would open. Can you talk about when that started to make things real in terms of a real timeline planning horizon? This is either going to happen or not happen by a certain date.

McRaven: Yeah, there are actually a couple factors. You’re right, the lunar cycle was one of them. We wanted to make sure that we could do it as dark as possible; that’s what we always like. But the other part was the heat. The helicopters coming in, again modified helicopters, do not perform well at altitude and I think Abbottabad was above 4,000 feet. And the temperature was starting to rise. And this was going to be the 1st of May. We realized that if we didn’t get this done soon, probably in the first two weeks of May, it was going to be another four months before the temperature came back down in Pakistan for us to be in a position to conduct this mission. So there was a sense of urgency because if all of a sudden we didn’t do it in May, would we be in a position four months later to do it? What if we had gotten compromised? What if something had leaked? We knew we were up against what I thought was a little bit of a hard deadline with not a lot of flex time, between the lunar cycle and heat.

Rasmussen: Earlier in the conversation, you referenced that on the table in front of the president throughout this period was not only the raid option that you were developing and planning and rehearsing, but also right up until close to the end, there was the idea that a standoff strike of some form might have been the way to go after the compound and all of the difficult issues associated with that—identifying who was on the compound, knowing with certainty if it was bin Ladin, we wouldn’t control access to the site, all of those questions played in this. When you deployed to the region, when you deployed forward to stage for this, you still didn’t have an answer as to whether this was going to happen or not happen. Or did you, in your own mind, know that this was going to proceed?

McRaven: No. In fact, the last meeting I was in was I think one of the last Wednesdays in April, and as you recall, the president had asked the director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Mike Leiter, to red team CIA’s intelligence, kind of review their intel. I recall at that meeting, I think the president started off and he turned to Mike Leiter, and there was kind of this long pause from Leiter and he said, “Well, Mr. President, we reviewed CIA’s intelligence and we think the chance that it’s bin Ladin is anywhere between 60% and 40%.” And when he said 40%, I’m thinking to myself, “Well, this mission’s off.” Who in the world is going to authorize a bunch of SEALs to fly 162 miles into Pakistan to hit a compound that’s near their West Point, three miles from a major infantry battalion, a mile from a police station and oh, by the way,



President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden, along with members of the national security team, receive an update on the mission against Usama bin Ladin in the Situation Room of the White House on May 1, 2011. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

the Pakistanis have nuclear weapons.

So actually, when I left, I thought it was less than 50/50 that we would do the mission. But once again, that affected nothing about my planning process. You go under the assumption that you're going to make sure the boys are all ready to go, but by the time I got to Afghanistan—I think I left on a Wednesday night—no sooner had I arrived than Leon Panetta, the director of CIA, called me on that Friday and said, "Bill, the president's decided to go," and I remember thinking, "Wow. That's a bold decision." Again, it didn't affect any of our planning because we were going to plan it like it was the case, but a pretty bold decision on the part of the president.

Rasmussen: That decision that you referenced just now, Bill, came out of a meeting on that Thursday, April 28th, when the president convened his full set of advisors for one last review of the intelligence, and then the idea of what the potential operational solutions were. You had deployed forward. I recall from that meeting the president methodically working his way around the room, wanting to hear the best advice from each and every individual. And that even included the backbenchers, which I was a little bit taken aback by. The president had made clear in that conversation that he was going to hear everybody, but he wasn't going to make a decision in the moment in that room. Then it was the following morning, as you referenced, Friday, April 29th, when he shared the guidance

through his national security team to Director Panetta and to the Secretary of Defense and the chairman that this was a go.

You're now deployed forward, you now have a go order from the president, but as I recall, timing was left entirely to your discretion in terms of when to execute. You are now, in a sense, in control of the decision-making. The president did not want to micro-manage that from the White House.

McRaven: I think this was really one of the strengths of both the president and Director Panetta. I'd had an opportunity to work for the president for several years at this point in time on a number of operations, and he had always given me the latitude as the military commander to run the military portion—whether it was an airstrike or hostage rescue or whatever. He never inserted himself into that aspect, so I felt completely comfortable and had the full flexibility to make the decisions I needed to make. But what happened was on Saturday, there were two circumstances that caused me to roll it to Sunday. There was fog, a little bit of fog in the valley, and while it wasn't significant, frankly, I was looking for the perfect environmental situation. The heat was also rising and the meteorologist had said, "We think on Sunday the fog will be gone and the heat will have diminished a little bit." And so on Saturday, I rolled the mission 24 hours, but never once did I feel like the president or the White House or even the CIA was trying to give me

directions on how to conduct the military portion of this operation.

Rasmussen: Once it did roll into a Sunday-night-into-Monday operation, I remember we brought the group together to be there on scene at the White House to monitor what was happening with you in the field and be prepared to deal with any fallout in the aftermath. There was quite a lot of planning around the question of diplomatic and other outreach in the aftermath: What do we say to our partners? What do we say publicly? How do we engage with the world if we've either successfully captured or killed Usama bin Ladin or worst case, if it turns out that the intelligence has been bad or there was a bad outcome to the military operation?

As we're gathering in the Situation Room, we've got one of your deputies, Brigadier General [Marshall] "Brad" Webb, and one of his communications colleagues there to keep us plugged in to you. Can you talk about what it was like to be speaking to two audiences as the operation got underway? You're briefing Washington back through Director Panetta at CIA headquarters and into the Situation Room. At the same time, you're single-mindedly focused on commanding an operation that is as delicate and sensitive as any you've ever been involved with. How did you manage both ends of that communication pipeline?

McRaven: It was actually simpler than it sounds because we constructed it to be simple. I told the guys I wanted a decision matrix and decision points along the route. And really, all I needed to do as the commander was make decisions when we hit those points. At the end of the day, once the guys got on the ground, the tactical aspect of this was going to be with the ground force commander. But my decisions were, for example: are we going to launch the mission, yes or no? If we get over the border and were discovered by the Pakistanis, do we keep going, yes or no? If we get a quarter of the way there and we're discovered, do we keep going, yes or no? Halfway, yes or no? Three-quarters, yes or no? We're in the final turn, now what? I wanted to go through in my own mind all the decisions I needed to make ahead of time if things go south, because I don't want to be sitting there in the middle of a crisis [saying], "I don't know. What do I want to do?" I had already made up my mind. If we were compromised crossing the border, we're going to turn around and come back. A quarter of the way, turn around come back. Halfway, turn around and come back. Over halfway, it got a little gray there, but part of that was going to be, "OK, if we were compromised, what's happening on the ground? Do we still have time to get to the target?" But once we got three-quarters of the way there, we were committed. Then, on target. What happens if we lose a helicopter? "OK, I know what we're going to do immediately. I got a backup helicopter. I'm going to move it to the little mountain range; we have a little rally point up there."

With those decisions made in my mind, I just had to give the order when the decision point happened. So, for me, it was a relatively easy operation to manage. Now again, I was in contact with both Leon Panetta and then of course, later on, the White House, but they were following the execution checklist and the code words just like I was. Once the guys launched, I felt very comfortable they would make all the right decisions on the ground, and I knew what decisions I needed to make if things went south on the operation.

Rasmussen: I can tell you from being a part of the team in the

"I had originally planned the mission to go about 30 minutes, and part of this frankly goes back to my naval postgraduate school thesis when I reviewed special operations. As a rule of thumb, once you got past about 30 minutes, the enemy started to get their act together, they started to converge on the good guys, and things began to go south."

- William H. McRaven

Situation Room that day, we were very hands off. This was entirely a decision process that was forward, but that didn't lessen the sense of drama and concern as each of those milestones was met as you worked through the timeline. And, of course, it's well documented that some of those contingency plans that you had put into place had to be called upon because you did, in fact, encounter problems with the aviation support. I guess that's the kind way to put it. In the Situation Room, there was an awareness that things were now straying from the preferred plan. But what I remember, Bill, was the remarkable sense of calm that you projected to those various audiences; no one had any sense of panic or [felt] that we were off script or not able to adapt. I think that speaks to the planning process that you just referred to.

Say just a very quick word about the point at which you were informed that the commander on the ground had assessed that you had, in fact, secured the objective. How did you want to present that information to both Director Panetta and to Washington, wanting to put the appropriate caveats around it, of course?

McRaven: I'd have to go back and check the timeline, but somewhere around 15 minutes into the mission [at the compound], the ground force commander came along and said "For God and Country. Geronimo, Geronimo, Geronimo." And of course, "Geronimo" was the code word for bin Ladin. People have asked, "What was your reaction?" and to me it was just another check in the box. OK, we called "Geronimo," but believe me, in no way, shape, or form did that suddenly relieve my concern in terms of the force on the ground or whether or not it was actually bin Ladin. We had a number of times in the course of Iraq or Afghanistan where we called "jackpot," referring to the fact that we got the individual only to bring him back and find out, "you certainly look like that guy," and it wasn't. So I didn't get overly excited one way or the other. We still had to complete the mission. The guys had to get off target.

I had originally planned the mission to go about 30 minutes, and part of this frankly goes back to my naval postgraduate school thesis when I reviewed special operations. As a rule of thumb, once you got past about 30 minutes, the enemy started to get their act together, they started to converge on the good guys, and things began to go south. So when we had planned it, I'm not sure I had told the guys exactly why I was limiting it to 30 minutes—I remember Bob Gates

asking me one time and I kind of deferred the question—but in my mind, I had a framework for how I wanted this thing to go. Then at about the 20 or 25-minute marker, I get a call from the ground force commander and he says, “Hey sir, we have found a treasure trove of intelligence on the second floor, and we were starting to bundle this up.” I looked at my watch, and I’m thinking, “Oh man, I’m not comfortable with this.” But I said, “OK, grab as much as you can.” Thirty minutes comes, then 35 minutes, 40 minutes, and of course at 40 minutes, I called him back and I said, “Hey, I gotta be honest with you, getting a little nervous here.” He goes, “Sir, there’s just so much stuff here. We’re throwing it into trash bags.” They were just loading this stuff up. Finally, at the 45-minute mark, I said, “OK everybody, get out of there,” and I think at 48 minutes we were off the target. But, of course, that material was, in fact, a treasure trove of intelligence that was eventually returned to the CIA, where CIA and the FBI did a lot of the exploitation on it.

Rasmussen: That’s absolutely right, and that became an important way for the intelligence community to document the state and organizational health of al-Qa`ida. It’s something we had assessed and analyzed for a long time, but this was probably the greatest single input of fresh information to that analytical project that we had had in many, many, many years.

In the Situation Room at the time, there was obviously some sense of relief that “Geronimo” had been declared, but like you noted, that was still a very uncertain outcome. Even more to the point, you still had a very significant bit of work ahead of you to extract from the target, exit Pakistani territory, and reach in a sense safety again back inside Afghanistan. That process still took a couple of hours to execute. Can you talk a little bit about what you were thinking about [regarding those] successive milestones of leaving Pakistani airspace, what that looked like from your perspective?

McRaven: Forty minutes or so into the mission [at the compound], of course, the Pakistanis did start to wake up and realize something was going on in Abbottabad. We’re obviously collecting some intelligence and know they are trying to figure it out, but now they’re beginning to mobilize some ground effort. They’re beginning to look at launching some of their fighters because they know a helicopter had gone down. So things are starting to spin, but once again, I would offer [that] my situational awareness was so good, and oh, by the way, I had what I referred to as the “gorilla package” on the other side of the Afghan border. I was not particularly concerned that the Pakistanis were going to be able to engage our helicopters because I just wasn’t going to let that happen.

What I didn’t want was us to engage the Pakistanis. Again, while I was going to do anything I needed to protect the boys at the end of the day, I was hoping we could avoid conflict with Pakistan because I knew that wouldn’t serve the mission and our relationship with Pakistan well. I also knew we had to refuel, and we picked an isolated location. After the [modified Blackhawk] and the Chinook took off, they had to stop to refuel. I think it took 19 minutes, and it was probably the longest 19 minutes of my life. As I sat there watching them on the screen, I kept turning to the guy running the helicopter part of the mission, going, “Can we just kind of top him off and keep going?” and he’d say, “Sir...” As it turns out, they landed, and sure enough, local Pakistani[s] came by and went, “Hey, what are you guys up to?” “Oh, just got an exercise going on.” “OK, can I watch?” “Sure.” They just kind of stood off to the side

“I think one thing that is sometimes lost is how quickly it could have gone sideways along the way and how the different bad outcomes could have made this a very different story.”

- Nicholas Rasmussen

while the guys refueled and eventually got up and running. But I will tell you that anytime you are refueling in an unknown location at night, as we found with Desert One,^d there is always potential for bad things to happen. So watching it on the screen, that’s probably the more nervous aspect of the mission from my standpoint, just because I wanted to make sure that everybody got back safely. And 19 minutes after they landed, they refueled, got up, and it was another 40 minutes or so until they finally crossed the border into Afghanistan.

Rasmussen: I can remember a palpable sense of relief among the set of people in the Situation Room when you reported to Director Panetta and through him to the White House that you were back on the Afghan side of the border. Again, still a lot to do and figure out, but just knowing that we were past the point of most imminent danger to the operating force was a huge sense of relief.

CTC: With nearly 10 years of distance from the raid in Abbottabad, what do you believe are the most notable takeaways from the operation? Additionally, whether concerning the exploitation of captured materials, how decapitation strategies affect organizations, the role of special operations in counterterrorism, or even just a renewed respect for collaborative teams that make plans like this possible, what insights should we carry into the future?

Rasmussen: As we look back on this event, it’s an incredible story of intelligence, and it will go down in the annals of intelligence history, not only for CIA, but also for our intelligence community writ large. Quite an amazing achievement. And then you obviously can speak to where this sits in the pantheon of operational success stories for your community, but I think one thing that is sometimes lost is how quickly it could have gone sideways along the way and how the different bad outcomes could have made this a very different story. Whether that was faulty intelligence, where [it] could have been proven not to be bin Ladin, conflict with Pakistan, or an operational catastrophe of some sort on the target. When you look back on it now, what are your takeaways in terms of where this fits in that long arc of our counterterrorism efforts since 9/11?

^d Editor’s note: In 1980, a Delta Force operation to rescue American hostages held in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran culminated in failure before the operators reached the embassy. For more, see Mark Bowden, “The Desert One Debacle,” *Atlantic*, May 2006. See also “‘Desert One’: Inside the failed 1980 hostage rescue in Iran,” CBS News, August 16, 2020.

McRaven: Let me talk briefly about the lessons that I took away, and then I'll address that last part of the question. One, we talked about the process in the Situation Room, and what I was incredibly pleased, impressed, and inspired by, frankly, was how the president and his national security team worked the process—as you pointed out, with Tom Donilon running it from the National Security Advisor standpoint—to come to the best decision. There was never any discussion about [U.S. domestic] politics, even though the president had to know that if this went south, he was going to be Jimmy Carter and probably a one-term president. But just the president's demeanor, the thoughtfulness, and the collegiality even in the heat of the moment was, to me, impressive. So I would offer that almost all the credit for this mission really goes to the president, who had to bear the responsibility of everything you just laid out, Nick. If the helicopter had gone down and killed a bunch of SEALs and helo pilots, if we'd have gotten into a shooting match with Pakistan, if the compound had blown up in our face, there were a whole lot of things that could have gone wrong and the one man that bore the responsibility for that was going to be the president of the United States. And so, you have to go back and put that in context as you think about this mission.

When you look back in hindsight you go, "Hey, everything went great, nobody was killed." But make no mistake about it: as we went into this, we had 24 SEALs and a CIA operator and some great helicopter pilots and back-enders who have no idea what that night

is going to mean for them. They could get shot down, they could die going on this mission, yet they all volunteered to do it. That's sometimes lost, I think, in the narrative about the fact that "Nobody even got wounded. How bad of a mission could it have been?" But they didn't know that going into it. The president didn't know the outcome.

Next, I think about Leon Panetta and the way he approached us. As you know, the fact of the matter is the Agency and JSOC have always had this kind of love-hate relationship. We're kind of tied at the hip on so many issues that sometimes that creates friction. Not with Leon Panetta. Director Panetta embraced us early on, made us part of the team, and when you think about his willingness to really make this a military operation rather than a CIA operation because it was what was right for the country—not what was right for CIA, not what was right for JSOC, but what was right for the country—I think that is a remarkable decision and a remarkable mark of the character of the man. And then I would offer the third part here was the great cooperation with all the agencies that were part of it. I talked about CIA because they had the lead, but as you know, Nick, the National Security Agency was there, the National Geospatial[-Intelligence] Agency was there, and the relationship that the operators and the intelligence community had, you could not have put a piece of paper between them when it came to getting this mission done.

And then finally really was the remarkable work of the operators,



Pakistani police guard a gate outside Usama bin Ladin's compound on May 3, 2011, in Abbottabad, Pakistan, the day after bin Ladin was killed there during a U.S. military mission. (Getty Images)

who had been in this fight for a long time. They were all combat veterans, along with their helicopter pilot brethren, and they followed through doing exactly what the nation expects them to do, which is go on target, get the bad guy, and come home safe. Take care of the other men on the target, and then of course, there were also women and children. There's always this kind of belief that the SOF operators are a bunch of steely-eyed killers that don't care about anything but getting the mission done. Of course, that's just not the case. They are brothers and fathers and sons, and they're going to go on target and do what they can to also do what is right by the innocent people that were there. I was really proud of them for making sure that they took care, as best they could, of the women and children on target while still getting the mission accomplished. So there were a lot of takeaways from that mission for me, but those are four of them.

Rasmussen: I think what makes this such a compelling story at the 10-year mark is that it has such an important operational story to tell, but also, as you pointed out, it's a remarkable window into presidential decision-making under extraordinary conditions of uncertainty and risk. As you said, everybody else could have an opinion around the room, but only one individual in the end bore the ultimate risk, beyond the risk borne by the operators—that's always first and paramount in peoples' minds—was the president who had to make the case to himself that the intelligence was compelling enough to support an operation, who had to understand that this could ultimately sink his presidency if this had gone the wrong way. And so for that reason, it's an even more compelling story when you combine the operational, the decision-making, and the collaborative work across all of the different agencies and components involved.

Maybe one last area of questions to ask, Bill, would be around the ultimate impact of the raid. I know one thing we all wrestled with was, what would it mean to remove bin Laden from the battlefield? I don't think anybody thought that it would end our war on terrorism. I don't think anyone argued that al-Qa`ida would be defeated as a global organization because of this one highly significant act. Yet I don't know that we also understood that 10 years later, we'd still be very much engaged around the globe in efforts to deal with al-Qa`ida and al-Qa`ida affiliate groups. How do you look at the ultimate result of the raid now, 10 years later?

McRaven: To me, it really was about bringing bin Laden to justice, as the president said that night in his speech.³ It really wasn't about revenge. It was about justice. But the impact of the mission didn't hit me right away. The next day after the mission, I went back to Washington, D.C., briefed Congress, then went over to the Oval

“We all knew going in that this wasn't fundamentally going to change the fight against al-Qa`ida, but it really was about bringing some sense of closure to those folks who were killed on 9/11 and bringing bin Ladin to justice. I hope the signal it sent to others out there is that if you come after America, we don't care how long it takes, we will find you and we will bring you to justice.”

- William H. McRaven

Office. The president was very gracious, thanking me on behalf of all the guys that had participated in this. Right after that I had to go back to work and keep chasing bad guys for a while. But later that year, after I took command of U.S. Special Operations Command in November, I went up to New York City. I had not been in there in 50 years or something, and the police met me because I was giving a speech to 2,000 of New York's finest. And just their appreciation for the work that the guys have done on the mission, but not just these guys, all the conventional forces, the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, that were part of the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. This was never just about the SEALs. We were honored to have the opportunity to go on the mission, but make no mistake about it, this was about 500,000 plus soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines that took this fight to al-Qa`ida, and at the end of the day, yes, the SEAL pulled the trigger, but let me tell you, there were hundreds of thousands of men and women behind us. And I didn't really appreciate that, and I didn't appreciate how New Yorkers viewed this until I had a chance to get to New York.

So it wasn't so much—as you point out, Nick—were we going to crush al-Qa`ida? We all knew going in that this wasn't fundamentally going to change the fight against al-Qa`ida, but it really was about bringing some sense of closure to those folks who were killed on 9/11 and bringing bin Ladin to justice. I hope the signal it sent to others out there is that if you come after America, we don't care how long it takes, we will find you and we will bring you to justice. That was an incredibly important message to send to the world. **CTC**

Citations

- 1 Editor's note: For more on "simplicity," one of the six principles of special operations emphasized in Admiral McRaven's research, see William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Presidio Press, 1996), pp. 11-14.
- 2 Editor's note: For more context, see Adam Goldman and Kimberly Dozier, "Arrested US official Raymond Allen Davis is actually CIA contractor," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 21, 2011.

- 3 Editor's note: See "Osama Bin Laden Dead," The White House, May 2, 2011.

Uniting for Total Collapse: The January 6 Boost to Accelerationism

By Brian Hughes and Cynthia Miller-Idriss

The crowds that stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, represented an emerging trend in American far-right extremism. Although many disagreements and personality clashes continue to emerge within and among groups since the storming of the Capitol, there are increasing indications that the typically fractious world of the extreme far-right is becoming more unified toward an objective of overthrowing the country's prevailing political and social order. This objective is sometimes referred to as accelerationism. It is capable of uniting a wide spectrum of ideologies; however, it is not an ideology in itself. The coalition of extreme far-right ideologies whose adherents stormed the Capitol is defined by its myriad weak ties, and by the growing importance of unaffiliated actors within it, all united by their shared acceptance of accelerationist tactics.

The extreme far-right has long been characterized by its internal fissures and in-fighting. This fragmentation comes naturally to such a complex assortment of constituent groups—from those with neo-Nazi and white supremacist tendencies to the full range of unlawful militias, those with male supremacist and “incel”^a tendencies, Christian nationalists, conspiracy theorists, and more. Each element nurtures its own peculiar ideologies of anti-democratic and authoritarian values, its specific commitments to hierarchies and stratification of identity, its conspiracy theories, and its fantasies of utopian restoration. These frequently clash, and while similarities and overlaps abound, fragmentation and schism have been the norm rather than the exception. And indeed, prior attempts to unify groups across this disparate spectrum—most notably in the aspirationally named “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017—have failed. To the great advantage of efforts to combat it, the extreme right had remained a fractured and disorganized spectrum—until January 6, 2021.

On that date, the myriad ideologies, extremist cultures, and conspiracy theories converged as both organized militants and spontaneous rioters alike participated in the first mass action of an eclectic but increasingly unified extreme far-right scene.¹ Since January 6, only a relatively small number of arrests have been

made of individuals who are members of groups—as opposed to individuals with no formal affiliation.² This is noteworthy, as it suggests that groups are becoming less important on the extremist fringe than the ideological positions they represent. There were clearly several highly coordinated, hardcore militant groups present at the U.S. Capitol on January 6—including unlawful militias like the Oath Keepers and the extreme far-right, street-fighting gang the Proud Boys.³ And there were also less organized movements present, including individuals affiliated with the QAnon conspiracy cult,⁴ which has no formal structure or leadership yet can claim a far larger membership⁵ than organized unlawful militia groups.⁶ However, the vast majority of those who swarmed the Capitol to stop the formal certification of President Biden's election were not affiliated with any named extremist group.⁷

The events of January 6 reflected a growing trend across extremist milieus more broadly, in which previously fragmented groups and ideologies are coalescing around shared objectives related to the violent overthrow of the United States' existing political and social order. These objectives reflect a growing belief on the extreme far-right that total collapse must precede any social or political project, if they ever hope to reorient society according to their preferred mode of hierarchic organization. As a belief, strategy, and tactic, this approach has come to be known as *accelerationism*. On January 6, the extreme far-right's ability to come together in pursuit of a shared goal—to take the U.S. Capitol by force, interrupt the certification of the electoral college votes confirming Joe Biden as the incoming U.S. president, and arrest and/or execute liberal politicians—revealed how quickly consolidation can happen, driven

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a Scholar John Horgan has defined incels as “an online community of mostly heterosexual men [whose] self-worth is defined by what they would see as physical and sexual inadequacy.” Jordan Culver, “A Canadian teenager has been charged with terrorism inspired by the online ‘incel’ movement. What is an ‘incel?’” *USA Today*, May 21, 2020.

by large-scale disinformation and calls to action from elected officials and group leaders.

The following article will detail key dynamics associated with a coalescing extreme far-right. In order to understand how a movement still prone to in-fighting^b can also be increasingly unified, it is necessary to understand the nature of accelerationism. Accelerationism is a strategic orientation, not an ideology in itself. In fact, insofar as accelerationism addresses ideology, it is through the goal of dismantling prevailing norms of liberal democracy. In this way, accelerationism is uniquely capable of sidestepping the ideological and operational conflicts endemic to the extreme far-right. This operational alliance was seen in action during the events of January 6, when a variety of unaligned individuals as well as formal extreme far-right groups stormed the U.S. Capitol with the intent of overturning the constitutional transfer of presidential power. This article then goes on to describe the role of online communication technology, media, and cultural spaces in fostering a more ecumenical extreme far-right. Online networks are both looser and more extensive than those of earlier eras, creating an extremist milieu that is both decentralized and coordinated, and in which the distance between dedicated extremists and potential recruits is smaller than ever before. Of course, it is impossible to discuss the events of January 6 without an examination of the role played by Donald Trump. This article concludes with an assessment that Trump has been a key element in the evolution of this more united extreme far-right front. However, with Trump having left office and now lacking his platform on social media, the extreme far-right and accelerationist tendencies seem to have evolved past the need for Trump as a galvanizing figure.

Understanding Accelerationism: An Anti-Ideology

It is necessary to distinguish accelerationism from the many extreme far-right tendencies it presently serves to unite. Accelerationism is not an ideology in itself. Rather, it is an ideological *style* and a strategic method, meant to bring about the failure of the ideologies that prevail in any given system or country at this particular moment in time. In the United States, these systems include representative democracy with a strong federal government, putative equality under the law, free markets, internationalism, and a highly technological lifestyle in which commercial entertainment and consumption play important roles. Under accelerationism—as a goal and a tactic—individuals with disparate beliefs are united in the goal of hastening the cataclysmic end of economic, political, and social systems so as to more rapidly bring about what is seen as an inevitable end-times collapse and subsequent rebirth into a utopian afterworld.

Therefore, the question of what happens after systems collapse does not matter in accelerationism per se, even if most extreme-right tendencies do have a ‘utopian’ vision to follow the collapse. Within the anti-government fringe, ideologies such as the Oath Keepers’ paranoid anti-federalism envision a restoration of “self-

government” and “natural rights” in a gauzy re-envisioning of the days of the U.S. founding—implicitly if not explicitly white and male dominated.⁸ For QAnon conspiracy theorists, the utopian future centers on “the Storm,” a preordained day of reckoning for satanic global leaders, in which mass arrests and execution of their political opponents will vindicate them in the public eye.⁹ To the ideologies most associated with the Trumpist base, this entails delivery of authoritarian power via mob violence to existing political figures such as former president Donald Trump.¹⁰ And for still others, it means the beginning of a race war, genocide, and Armageddon itself, followed by a rebirth into a “restored” white civilization.¹¹

These are ‘utopian’ dreams specific to distinct extreme far-right ideologies. But they are not merely statements of political belief or moral value. As functions of ideology, they are “devices designed to bring about a fleeting—yet temporarily necessary—halt to [disagreement] by opting for one conceptual structure rather than another.”¹² That is, they are social and strategic fantasies that aim to organize and direct large groups of people toward a shared goal. This is distinct from accelerationism proper, which has no aim beyond itself. As a strategy and style, accelerationism’s goal is nothing less than to destroy the dominant liberal-democratic order of the United States. It is agnostic as to what follows the “magic moment of ecstatic brotherhood”¹³ of insurrection and coup. It is an *inter-tendency* approach that happens to be compatible with the *intra-tendency* goals of those “militant networks, organized clusters, and inspired believers”¹⁴ who stormed the Capitol. Accelerationism is best understood as an *anti-ideology*, directed toward the destruction of the current ideological order and the political-economic system that expresses and creates that order. But in its anti-ideological thrust, accelerationism makes possible what had once been so difficult: to move the many varieties of extreme far-right tendencies in unison.

Accelerationism in Action at the U.S. Capitol

The events of January 6 represent an inflection point for this loose coalition. The storming of the Capitol reflected the climax of a years-long process of consolidation through new organizational tactics. The extreme far-right has increasingly abandoned “traditional organizing methods,” which it has determined are insecure and vulnerable to surveillance, infiltration, and prosecution.¹⁵ Instead, individuals and groups across the spectrum have relied on informal online networking,¹⁶ linked to calls for individual “lone actor”-style violent action through a torrent of messaging advocating for accelerationist insurrection and violence against the government, political opponents, and minority groups.¹⁷

In this loose network, ideology and tactics are crowd-sourced, and political violence is more typically valorized and rewarded than explicitly plotted. This arrangement has been compared to the style of leaderless resistance advocated by Louis Beam.^{18 c} However, it is also unique to the age of networked digital communication. This new network of far-right extremism exhibits vastly more vectors of connection between its members than the extreme far-right

^b In March 2021, *The New York Times* reported that “some of the most prominent groups that participated [in the U.S. Capitol riot] are fracturing amid a torrent of backbiting and finger-pointing” with rifts emerging within far-right extremist groups such as the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Groyper Army. Neil MacFarquhar, “Far-Right Groups Are Splintering in Wake of the Capitol Riot,” *New York Times*, March 1, 2021 (updated March 3, 2021).

^c “An iconic figure of the radical right, Louis Beam played a key role in shaping the revolutionary racist movement in the United States during the three decades following the Vietnam War as one of [the movement’s] principal theorists and strategists.” “Louis Beam, Extremist Files,” Southern Poverty Law Center.



*Protesters gather in front of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, in Washington, D.C., where a mob later stormed the building.
(Brent Stirton/Getty Images)*

leaderless resistance of the 20th century while simultaneously these connections are far weaker than those that animated the white power movement of the 1980s and 1990s.

The groups, individuals, and tendencies that circulate in accelerationist networks have been able to set aside the acrimony and infighting of the past, thanks to the loyalties that accompany these extensive, but loose, ties. They also share in the growing belief that the overthrow of the existing political and social order is the essential first step of any future agenda seeking to reshape the country. For now, any “Day 2” disagreements over the precise form of their remade America fade into the background of the more immediate desire for mass violence.

A comprehensive survey of all the groups and tendencies comprising this emerging American extremist front has yet to be conducted. However, information gleaned from the January 6 insurrection offers a sample of this population, which may be indicative of its broader make-up. “This is Our House!": A Preliminary Assessment of the Capitol Hill Siege Participants,” published by George Washington University’s Program on Extremism, describes the January 6 cohort according to three distinct categories: “militant networks, organized clusters, and inspired believers.”¹⁹ These were drawn from the so-called Patriot movement, unlawful militia groups, the Oath Keepers, Three

Percenters movement,^d QAnon and assorted conspiracy theorists, street-fighting gangs like the Proud Boys, white nationalist groups like Rise Above Movement^e and “Groyper,”^f neo-confederates, and other more obscure tendencies.²⁰ There is now strong evidence to suggest that participants also included representatives of nihilistic and occultist neo-Nazi tendencies associated with the “Siege”

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- d The Three Percenters are “a wing of the militia movement that arose as part of a resurgence of the militia movement in 2009. The term “Three Percenter” refers to the erroneous belief that only 3% of colonists fought against the British during the Revolutionary War—but achieved liberty for everybody. Three Percenters view themselves as modern day versions of those revolutionaries, fighting against a tyrannical U.S. government rather than the British.” “Three Percenters,” Anti-Defamation League.
 - e “The Rise Above Movement (RAM) is a white supremacist group (originally known as DIY Division) that originated in southern California in 2017, with the goal of fighting against the “destructive cultural influences” of liberals, Jews, Muslims and non-white immigrants. RAM is part of the alt right segment of the white supremacist movement. Operating almost like a street-fighting club, RAM emphasizes physical fitness, boxing and martial arts.” “Rise Above Movement,” Anti-Defamation League.
 - f “Groyperers are a loose network of alt right figures who are vocal supporters of white supremacist and ‘America First’ podcaster Nick Fuentes.” “Groyper Army,” Anti-Defamation League.

subculture.^{21g} These groups often identify themselves by the use of “skull mask” neck gaiters.²²

But perhaps most worrying of all, are those Americans who were not previously affiliated with any of the above groups but are now increasingly drawn into the large tent of the networked extreme far-right. On January 6, it was unaffiliated individuals who appeared to represent the plurality of rioters.²³ To date, the majority of people charged for crimes related to the insurrection have no known ties to extremist groups.²⁴ It is possible that some proportion of these individuals acted out of character and were ‘swept up’ in the crowd, but it should be noted that scholars of the psychology of riots have long rejected the so-called “mad-mob theory” of riots as inadequate.^h The fact that many who stormed the Capitol had a lack of formal affiliation far from rules out casual engagement or personal identification with extremist movements and ideologies. It does, however, indicate that most participants in the insurrection were drawn together by factors beyond formal organization or group affiliation.

The presence of the Trumpist base at events also attended by members of far-right extremist groups is significant for several reasons. First, premeditated terrorist actors can knowingly exploit the right to peacefully protest in order to camouflage their own actions. A mass of legal protestors can provide operational cover in which terrorists can move undetected, transforming “the civilian population into the sea in which the guerilla [can] swim.”²⁵

Second, the presence of the Trumpist base at such events offers a prime recruitment opportunity for extreme elements in the crowd. Outreach such as this can be ideological and social, as seen at the pro-Trump rally in Washington, D.C., on November 14, 2020.²⁶ It can also take the form of “nonaligned” demonstrators becoming swept up in the mania of the riot, as the Capitol riot turned into a “free-for-all, plunder for plundering’s sake.”²⁷ It seems possible, likely even, that some of the Trump base who did not travel to Washington on January 6 have seen media reports of nonaligned

demonstrators who stormed the Capitol and have identified with them based on demographic and cultural markers such as age, ethnicity, geography, attire, slogans, etc. This could in turn lead some to identify with the emerging insurrectionary coalition that seeks to mobilize that base to its own specific ends.

How Online Ecosystems Help Accelerationism

The events of January 6 represent both an apotheosis of the emerging extreme far-right coalition and a galvanizing moment to launch its future. In its role as a galvanizing moment, January 6 has spawned a variety of narratives with potential for cross-movement appeal, catalyzed in part by the ease of their production and circulation in online contexts. As the fringe of the extreme far-right enjoys greater access to unaligned sympathizers (both online and off), one may expect these aspirations toward collapse to circulate between them as freely as any other narrative or ideological position. The authors of this article are presently unaware of any empirical work measuring the frequency of accelerationist messaging or sentiment. However, it is possible (and indeed, until such an empirical study emerges, it is necessary) to assess the present situation symptomatically. To do this, the authors analyze what is known about the accelerationist views of established groups (described above) in light of what is known about the communicative and operational practices of the broader extreme far-right.

Between January 6-13, 2021, a team of researchers in the authors’ lab—the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL)—conducted an exploratory analysis of online content within white supremacist extremist channels on Telegram. The result of the coding indicated that anti-establishment, martyrdom, and accelerationist themes accounted for roughly one-third of narrative and rhetorical content sampled across 23 white supremacist far-right Telegram channels with a range of 1,000-47,000 subscribers each.²⁸ Anti-establishment and accelerationist narratives saw considerable overlap, the former defined as general anti-government and anti-society sentiments and the latter defined as advocacy for violence in bringing about their downfall and/or celebrating January 6 as a turning point in the march toward societal collapse and/or civil war. In other words, anti-establishment sentiments represent the emotional motive for accelerationist tactics and “anti-ideology.” Martyrdom, which celebrated sacrifice for the cause of white supremacy and/or the overthrow of society, also fed a general tone of hoped-for collapse. Less frequently, content discussed how to “red-pill” (that is, radicalize) “normies” (that is, unaffiliated and not-yet radicalized audiences). In all cases, a tipping point was sought. Of course, the search for such a tipping point has historically been common to extremist viewpoints.²⁹ However, in light of anti-societal and pro-accelerationist viewpoints, the implied outcome of these is toward collapse. The exploratory study conducted by PERIL staff suggests that January 6 was viewed by some as just such a tipping point, but further research with a larger sample across a broader range of online extreme far-right spaces is required before any more definitive conclusions can be drawn.

To be sure, these channels present a picture of the furthest vanguard of the extreme far-right. However, these themes do not need to be explicitly connected, either to one another or to a specific ideology, faction, or subculture. Due to the fast-flowing nature of digital communication, and due to the easy juxtaposition of content afforded by the cut, link, copy, paste, and embed features

g “Siege is an anthology of violent pro-Nazi and pro-Charles Manson essays written by American neo-Nazi James Mason in the 1980s and first published as a single volume in 1992. The book has since inspired a generation of neo-Nazis who have formed a violent online subculture called Siege Culture devoted to Mason’s calls for independent terror cells to carry out a race war.” “James Mason’s Siege: Ties to Extremists,” Counter Extremism Project.

h Academic research into the psychology of riots offers a valuable framework with which to view the January 6 insurrection. According to scholars Matthew Radburn and Clifford Stott, “There are three ‘classical’ theoretical explanations of the crowd that endure in the popular imagination. The first, ‘mad mob theory,’ suggests that individuals lose their sense of self, reason and rationality in a crowd and so do things they otherwise might not as an individual. The second is that collective violence is the product of a convergence of ‘bad’ – or criminal – individuals enacting their violent personal predispositions together in the same space. The third is a combination of the first two and is captured in the narrative of Joker: ‘The bad leading the mad.’ ... While these explanations are often well rehearsed in the media, however, they do not account for what actually happens during a ‘riot.’ This lack of explanatory power has meant that contemporary social psychology has long rejected these classical explanations as inadequate and even potentially dangerous – not least because they fail to take account of the factors that actually drive such confrontations. In fact, when people riot, their collective behaviour is never mindless. It may often be criminal, but it is structured and coherent with meaning and conscious intent.” Matthew Radburn and Clifford Stott, “The psychology of riots – and why it’s never just mindless violence,” Conversation, November 15, 2019.

of digital media, these themes and their ideological or subcultural framing are assembled collage-style in the mind of the audience. Narratives and identifications accrue rather than progress in a logical argumentative style, appealing to emotions rather than reason. Together, these themes offer a powerful narrative of heroic purpose and willingness to sacrifice for the sympathetic audiences that encounter them.

Themes like martyrdom and victimhood (which appeared in roughly eight percent of all the aforementioned content analyzed) create powerful emotional investments in this accrual of narrative and identity. These two themes most frequently appeared in content describing the events surrounding the death of Ashli Babbitt. Babbitt was a 35-year-old veteran of the U.S. Air Force who was shot and killed by law enforcement while she attempted to climb through a broken window into the Speaker's Lobby of the U.S. Capitol.³⁰ She has since come to represent heroism and martyrdom among many of the tendencies inspired by the January 6 attack.³¹ One post remarked that Babbitt and others killed on January 6 were “people you can recognize, relate to ... they’re people you can look into the eyes of and say *‘they didn’t deserve this, they died for this.’*”³² This post reflects a larger assumption among the members of this loose, undeclared coalition: most do not view themselves as an elite or select body, but rather as the vanguard of a sleeping majority that will either rise up to assist them in a future civil war or will at least welcome the new order once it has been established. The populist attitude is key in linking the extreme fringes surveyed in the authors’ sample with the much larger group of Americans, including elements within the Trump base whom they target for recruitment and propagandizing. Crucially, however, this view does not reflect the attitude of the more luridly mystical groups and nihilists for whom wholesale destruction is its own moral and metaphysical good.

It is not merely the content of the media bringing together insurrectionist groups across the extreme far-right spectrum. The tools of digital communication themselves promote easy juxtaposition of media and social networks, at the level of both infrastructure and platforms. At its most fundamental, the world wide web is stitched together with hyperlinks: small, simple lines of code that connect any two data points on the web. These lines of code have been simplified and automated such that creating them constitutes a routine part of even the most casual web user’s activity. Yet this simple tool to juxtapose data points also allows the close association of previously siloed subcultures. A link in a yoga Facebook group may take users to a QAnon thread, which may just as easily lead to the kind of conspiratorial conversations in which many of the January 6 insurrectionist groups participated. In the mind of a vulnerable user, the mere presence of these connections implies legitimate affinity between the groups. Without this underlying communication and networking structure, it is difficult to see how such a broad, ecumenical, unified but loose-knit coalition could come to be.

Furthermore, this loose-knit coalition of insurrectionist tendencies would not have become the mobilized force of January 6 were it not for social media, including so-called “alt-tech” and especially the Parler platform (effectively a Twitter clone). In the weeks following the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the far right moved en masse to Parler. Here, far-right users “could share and promote ideas without worrying about the company blocking or flagging their posts for being dangerous or misleading.”³³ Mainstream social media sites had ramped up enforcement of

policies against spreading disinformation and threats of violence in the run-up to the election, and it appears to be the case that the coinciding crackdowns helped to shepherd a mass exodus to alt-tech. In turn, this mass exodus fostered the mixing of various tendencies with grudges pertaining to the election.

This development stands in sharp contrast to prior “deplatforming” waves, which tended to target one particular tendency or narrow topic (e.g., Gamergate,ⁱ the alt-right, etc.). The concurrent banning of QAnon-related content likely contributed to this cross-pollination as well.³⁴ QAnon’s highly adaptable conspiracy narrative and generally cordial attitude toward fellow travelers³⁵ likely fostered connections during this migration, both between Q supporters and other extremist tendencies, and between tendencies via QAnon-spread content. While Parler has since declined in popularity, Telegram appears now to serve as the single-stop, online social space for the extreme far-right; the app’s Apple Store downloads increased by 146 percent the week of January 6, 2021.³⁶

The Trump Factor

The rhetoric and actions of Donald Trump while president were in the authors’ assessment a key factor in the coalescing of the inclusive accelerationist network. The extreme far-right, J.M. Berger noted, does not typically “synchronize.” However, Trump “provided ... a central nexus of the force of gravity that pulls them all into alignment.”³⁷ Several January 6 arrestees have explicitly stated that they undertook their actions on behalf of the then-president.³⁸

During the years in which this loose-knit, accelerationist network was forming, Trump was a charismatic leader around whom each extreme far-right tendency—no matter how bespoke and idiosyncratic—could rally.³⁹ His rhetorical vagaries offered a blank screen on which these tendencies could project their desires.⁴⁰ And his relentless repetition of entirely false conspiracy theories provided moral justification and a sense of heroic purpose to those who stormed the Capitol that day.⁴¹

It remains to be seen whether the former president will still hold the position of influence he once did. It seems unlikely that he could. By failing to support the rioters after they entered the Capitol, and by at least tacitly acquiescing to the election of President Joe Biden, some in this network have come to see him as a traitor or a coward.⁴² On the other hand, with Trump out of office, the inherent contradictions of an anti-government movement with the federal executive as its figurehead is at last resolved. The acceleration can continue as planned.

Conclusion

January 6 represented an apotheosis for this new extreme far-right accelerationist network, just as it has become a moment of reckoning for the mainstream of society. The Capitol insurrection no doubt helped to inspire the Biden administration’s heightened concern over domestic extremism,⁴³ just as it has sparked renewed

i Gamergate “arose in 2014, ostensibly over concerns about ethics in game journalism, and quickly coalesced into a group of self-identified members whose concerns expanded to include the rise of what they labeled ‘PC culture’ and ‘social justice warriors.’ The more vocal of the group typically harass people, more often women and minorities, who question some of the status quo of game content in the video game industry.” Brian Crecente, “Inside the ADL’s Plans to Take on Gamergate, Hate in Gaming,” *Variety*, June 29, 2018.

energy among those conservatives determined to retake control of the Republican Party from Trump loyalists.⁴⁴ But it has also become a source of renewed momentum and energy for the extreme far-right. It is a unifying symbol, an example of a victory that almost was and might still be. It has empowered and emboldened its admirers while offering an opportunity to exercise the common terrorist tactic of studying and learning from failed actions.⁴⁵

It remains unclear whether the coalition that formed on January 6 will ultimately reflect a fleeting, one-time moment in the history of the extreme right or if it will be the first among many examples of unifying events that even temporarily bring together groups and individuals from across a fragmented ideological spectrum. More

cross-national research would be useful to determine whether and how accelerationist networks are communicating across borders, taking inspiration from each other's violent acts, and finding ways to align to bring down their own national systems through violent and insurrectionist action. Finally, the events of January 6 signaled increased engagement from women, who have historically been less engaged in violent action on the extremist fringe, in ways that deserve more attention and study. Ongoing research will likely benefit from an exploratory spirit, since it appears that this "ecumenical" extreme far-right is itself in a mode of discovery and experimentation, as consolidation remains the order of the day and collapse the dream for tomorrow. **CTC**

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The March 2021 Palma Attack and the Evolving Jihadi Terror Threat to Mozambique

By Tim Lister

The jihadi insurgency in northern Mozambique has shown renewed vitality with an ambitious and successful attack on the town of Palma, an economically significant hub that was home to hundreds of foreign workers involved in a nearby gas project being developed by Total. The fighters, known locally as Shabaab, belong to Ahl al-Sunnah wa al Jamma'ah (ASWJ), which is one of two branches of the Islamic State's Central African Province (ISCAP). The attack on Palma in late March 2021 likely involved as few as 200 fighters, but they were able to control the area for four days—an indictment of the Mozambican security forces. As a result of the attack, Total has mothballed its Afungi project, one of the largest energy projects in southern Africa. The attack was the first in almost five months to be claimed by the Islamic State in Mozambique. Debate continues on ASWJ's relationship with the Islamic State, fueled by the United States' decision in March 2021 to designate the group as a foreign terrorist organization, naming it ISIS-Mozambique.

On March 24, 2021, about 200 fighters of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al Jamma'ah (ASWJ)^a attacked the northern Mozambican town of Palma. For four days, they were rampant, killing at least dozens of local people and destroying much of the town's infrastructure, including banks, a police station, and food aid warehouses. The attack reverberated around the world because Palma was home to hundreds of foreign workers, most of them contractors for the Total liquefied natural gas (LNG) project on the nearby Afungi Peninsula. Dozens of foreigners were trapped at a hotel in the town and under fire for at least 36 hours. The attack was another stunning failure for Mozambique's security forces, which

proved unable to hold a town of 70,000 against a couple of hundred young militants.

This article builds on research and reporting for a previous study published by this author in *CTC Sentinel* in October 2020.¹ That piece explored the origins of the insurgency and the factors that enabled it to flourish: a traditional Islamic leadership out of touch with younger Muslims; economic and social deprivation in northern Mozambique amid a wealth of natural resources; and corruption and ineffective governance. The insurgency in Mozambique officially became part of the Islamic State's Central Africa province (ISCAP) in June 2019. In a short video the following month, a group of Mozambicans are shown pledging allegiance to then Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, but there has been no public pledge from any purported ASWJ leader to the central leadership of the Islamic State.²

This article focuses on the attack on Palma after a lull in activity during the rainy season—and what it portends for the insurgents, the security forces, and Mozambique's economic future, which is tightly bound to the exploitation of its LNG potential. It examines the tactics and goals of the attack, the involvement of private military contractors in the response, and the failings of the security forces. The analysis draws from a range of sources, including witnesses to and survivors of the attack, local sources, regional analysts who follow the insurgency, and officials with aid organizations who are based in Mozambique.^b Some have preferred to speak on background.

The article also explores the possible consequences of the United States' designation of ASWJ and its identification of the group as 'ISIS-Mozambique.' It examines the extent to which foreign fighters play a role in ASWJ and cross-fertilization with militancy in southern Tanzania but finds few organizational links with Islamic State 'Central.' It also reviews the current and potential assistance to Mozambique's flagging counterterrorism efforts.

The article is split into six sections. The first examines the attack on Palma. The second looks at the significance of the attack and how it underlines the threat posed by the insurgency and the failings of the Mozambique government to deal with the insurgency. The third section examines the relationship between the Mozambique militants and the Islamic State and ASWJ's foreign fighter recruitment. The fourth section examines the so-far failed regional and international efforts to counter the threat. The fifth section examines the economic fallout. The final section looks at the potential future trajectory of the insurgency.

a This article generally refers to the group as ASWJ. When the group is mentioned in relation to Islamic State claims, this article refers to the group as ISCAP/ASWJ.

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b This article also draws on relevant extracts of a soon-to-be published book on the Islamic State in Africa, which were shared by its authors. Jason Warner with Ryan Cummings, Ryan O'Farrell, and Hénri Nsaibia, *The Islamic State in Africa: Emergence, Evolution, and Future of the Next Jihadist Battlefield* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2021, forthcoming).



Cabo Delgado, Mozambique

The Attack on Palma

The attack on Palma, a town of some 70,000 people swollen by thousands of civilians already displaced by the conflict, began on March 24, 2021. According to witnesses and the Mozambican Defense Ministry, it was a sophisticated operation launched from three directions simultaneously,³ and from inside the town itself by fighters who had previously infiltrated the area.⁴ Analysis of aerial photographs suggests the attack was accompanied by an ambush of trucks heading north from the town.⁵

The attack began hours after the French energy giant Total had announced an agreement with the Mozambique government to restart work on the nearby Afungi Peninsula project,⁶ which had been suspended since January 2021 after a series of insurgent attacks on the perimeter of the complex. However, the preparations for such an assault must have begun before the announcement.

The attack on Palma appears to have had specific targets: the airfield to the north of the town, the army barracks, the town's banks, and a food storage warehouse.⁷ There are indications that the insurgents had intelligence about recent deliveries of food aid to Palma, as well as cash to its banks, which may have influenced the timing of the attack.⁸ Several food supply trucks were attacked and their drivers killed.⁹ Cellular communications were quickly cut, although it is not clear this was done by the insurgents.¹⁰

There were also indiscriminate attacks on civilians, with dozens

and maybe more killed in their homes and on Palma's streets during the initial attack. Residents reported that some of the dead had been beheaded, their bodies left in the streets.¹¹

As the attack unfolded, thousands of local people fled into the bush or mangrove swamps along the coast. The more fortunate reached nearby beaches and were taken off by small boats. "On the beach we had support from small boats who carried us out and we were rescued by cargo ships," one survivor said.¹² Thousands more fled toward the Total compound to seek protection, taking shelter in a village at the edge of the complex.¹³ By some estimates, more than 20,000 people arrived at Total's perimeter.¹⁴

Some 10,000 people arrived in the town of Pemba, mainly by boat, in the days after the attack, while others headed west through the bush to the garrison town of Mueda, which is now the military's northernmost outpost.¹⁵ Several hundred others arrived at the border with Tanzania but were not allowed to enter the country;¹⁶ a full week after the attack, many more were still believed to be in the forests around Palma.¹⁷ Aid agencies believe some 40,000 people were displaced, of whom some 18,000 had arrived in other parts of Cabo Delgado by April 14, 2021.¹⁸

The attackers appear to have included many teenagers, according to witness accounts. A short video later released by the Islamic State's Amaq news agency appears to corroborate the youth of many of the fighters.¹⁹ Some insurgents appear to have worn police

or military uniforms, which confused the small army detachment based in Palma.²⁰ Clashes continued into March 25, 2021; about 20 Mozambique soldiers were reported killed.²¹ However, no reinforcements were dispatched to defend Palma despite there being a capable force guarding the Afungi complex—about 10-15 kilometers away.²²

The attackers took advantage of Palma's isolation. Many routes from the town to other parts of Cabo Delgado were already blocked due to the prevailing insecurity.²³ The arrival of the dry season may also have been a factor, according to Lionel Dyck, who runs the Dyck Advisory Group (DAG), a South African military contractor working in northern Mozambique. "As the rain stops, they call it the fighting season, and this is the start of the fighting season when [the insurgents] can actually come out and attack and do this, and it's been on the cards for a long time," Dyck said.²⁴ Much of Cabo Delgado, which is prone to hurricanes, is impassable in the rainy season.

By the morning of March 25, 2021, the insurgents had surrounded a hotel—the Amarula Lodge—north of Palma, where some 200 foreigners and Mozambicans, including local government employees and the District Administrator, had taken shelter. A few of them were evacuated in DAG helicopters.²⁵

In the ensuing 36 hours, several expatriate workers who lived in the Palma area or were staying at the Amarula were among those killed, including a Briton, a South African, and a Zimbabwean.^c Among them were people at the Lodge who decided to form a convoy in an effort to escape northwards to the Tanzanian border. This convoy was ambushed soon after leaving Palma.²⁶ Mozambican authorities said seven people were killed in this ambush. Other estimates put the number at between 40 and 50.²⁷ The bodies of 12 white men were later exhumed close to the Lodge. A local police commander, Pedro da Silva Negro, showed visiting journalists where the bodies had been discovered but could not provide their identities. He said the insurgents had entered the hotel and abducted the men, and then beheaded them.²⁸

By March 28, 2021, DAG helicopters had airlifted some 120 people from the area and the insurgents had left the town, though were still present for several days in the surrounding forest.²⁹ Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi insisted the following week the insurgents had been "chased out" of Palma,³⁰ but other reports suggest they left at will. As noted by Mozambique analyst Joseph Hanlon: "The insurgents do not initially try to hold towns, but drift away as the military response increases."³¹ As has been evident in previous attacks, such as the seizure of Mocimboa da Praia and those close to the Afungi Peninsula in late December 2020, the insurgents showed tactical awareness in Palma.³² After overcoming the small number of troops in the area, they avoided being trapped by military reinforcements. They were also well enough equipped to hit at least one DAG helicopter that fired on them.³³

In the final analysis, the insurgents were able to remain in Palma for four days. They used explosives to attack and rob two banks, with some reports suggesting they seized about \$1 million because military salaries for the area had recently arrived.³⁴ By March 28,

2021, their objectives had been achieved: seizing cash and food aid, while putting Total and the government on notice that Afungi was not safe. The military did not secure the airstrip to the north of the town until April 3, 2021, when officials also declared the area safe.³⁵ However, sporadic attacks in the area continued over the next week.³⁶

Insurgent Strength and Government Failings

The attack on Palma was highly significant for several reasons. It was the most complex since the insurgents' attack on the port of Mocimboa da Praia in August 2020 and has led to the largest displacement of civilians since then.³⁷ It was the most ambitious attack yet launched in the area adjacent to the Total complex in the Afungi Peninsula to the southeast of the town. It was also the first insurgent attack to target so many foreigners working in Mozambique.

A report for the United Nations Security Council published in February 2021 noted that "In recent attacks, ISCAP operatives seemed to have acquired sophisticated operational capabilities and pursued a strategic intent to seize more locations and expand operations to other districts and provinces."³⁸

The report noted in particular simultaneous attacks in October 2020, including one into southern Tanzania, saying: "Member States observed sophisticated military tactics deployed by ISCAP to cross the Ruvuma River into the southern United Republic of Tanzania, where it attacked Kitaya village in the Mtwara region."³⁹

According to Alexandre Raymakers, senior Africa analyst at Verisk Maplecroft, the group's "ability to hit multiple targets simultaneously in a three-pronged approach and the use of small arms fire combined with mortar fire to overwhelm government forces in just a couple of hours shows enhanced command and control and discipline."⁴⁰

The Palma attack demonstrates that the insurgency in Cabo Delgado continues to have momentum, and that ASWJ's capabilities and tactical skills continue to evolve, while the government's response remains haphazard and inadequate. As Emilia Columbo of the Center for Strategic and International Studies puts it, the security forces' response "was in keeping with what we have seen these past years—weak, reactive, insufficient to keep the insurgency in check."⁴¹

The insurgents were clearly helped by detailed local knowledge, having probably had supporters providing information from inside the town for weeks or even months. Further anecdotal evidence that ASWJ overwhelmingly comprises youth from Cabo Delgado comes from interviews with 23 women who were formerly prisoners of ASWJ.⁴² They said the fighters spoke local languages. They also referred to basic ideological instruction. One woman said: "On the day we arrived, they did a reading of the Koran, brought up the whole issue of injustice in the country, of social abuse, of corruption."⁴³ Some of the women reported that captured civilians are forced to undergo ideological instruction, while boys are given military training. They spoke of the youth of the fighters, referring to children and teenagers carrying out military training and fights with machetes. One described seeing a 14-year-old boy "who had come from his first mission" and was "happy" and "fulfilled" to have murdered and beheaded someone.⁴⁴

Despite high-profile changes to Mozambique's security forces in recent months, their response in Palma was as inadequate as during the assault on Mocimboa in 2020. Raymakers says it is stunning

c South African Adrian Nel, 40, was killed in the convoy that tried to escape Palma. "He didn't deserve to die like that": Mother of victim in Mozambique attack, CNN, March 30, 2021. See also "Mozambique town Palma 'retaken' from militant Islamists," BBC, April 5, 2021.

that the security forces were not better prepared for such an attack and that their capabilities have not improved despite the insurgency being in its fourth year. The military is still training to use combat helicopters, and military fighting vehicles are “completely unable to meet the current security threat,” he believes.⁴⁵

The inadequacy of the military’s response may also have been influenced by internal upheavals in Mozambique’s security establishment. This weakness is rooted in a long-standing rivalry between the police and military commands, with the former historically favored by the ruling FRELIMO party given that some former RENAMO cadres have been integrated into the army.

“The Mozambican army, since its creation in 1994 following the end of the civil war, was never designed to combat this type of insurgency and has for years been in direct rivalry of the elite paramilitary police units,” writes Alex Vines, Africa Director at Chatham House.⁴⁶

President Nyusi only gave the armed forces the lead in Cabo Delgado in January 2021. A new Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, General Eugénio Ussene Mussa, died of an undisclosed illness in February 2021, weeks after being appointed.⁴⁷ Additionally, the military has been reorganized into regional commands. One of those commands has the role of protecting the Afungi Peninsula, where the Total complex is situated, but regional analysts believe this concentrates too many of the better troops in a small area, essentially forfeiting much of the hinterland.⁴⁸

The Palma attack confirms a deteriorating trajectory for the government in Cabo Delgado. In 2020, ACLED recorded some 1,600 fatalities in the province, more than three times the number in 2019. The insurgents still hold a population center—Mocimboa da Praia—after attacking and occupying it in August 2020. In December 2020, the group launched its first attacks adjacent to the Total complex, causing the company to suspend work there. The United Nations estimates the conflict displaced 580,000 civilians in Cabo Delgado in 2020 alone.⁴⁹ About 44,000 of them had taken shelter in Palma before the attack in March.⁵⁰ The total number of IDPs due to the conflict in the north is now thought to be close to 700,000.⁵¹

There is little concrete evidence about how the insurgency sustains itself. Its raids appear partly driven by the need to acquire food supplies and in some instances cash. Civilians have reported that the insurgents have done nothing to preserve or encourage food production in areas where they are dominant, and there are frequent reports of raids carried out solely to seize food supplies.⁵²

There is anecdotal evidence that the insurgency derives some benefits from the long tradition of smuggling along northern Mozambique’s coast. One recent report claimed that ASWJ “benefits from a diverse illicit trade portfolio, which includes the export of timber, gemstones and wildlife products and the large-scale import of narcotics, especially heroin.”⁵³ There is no firm evidence the group *controls* drug or ivory smuggling.⁵⁴

The opportunity to tax such illicit trade may present itself. Dino Mahtani of the International Crisis Group notes: “There are fears that [the insurgents] are already beginning to take a slice of illicit coastal smuggling, including taxing drugs cargoes that transit through waters and land they control ... It stands to reason they might take a cut of the trade, either by transit fees or taxes, or from facilitating transport and landing of cargoes.”⁵⁵

ASWJ and the Islamic State

On March 28, 2021, the Islamic State through its news agency Amaq claimed responsibility for the Palma attack on behalf of ISCAP, its first claim in Mozambique since November 2020. The Islamic State said fighters had killed more than 55 “members of the Mozambican army and the Christians, including nationals of Crusader states.”⁵⁶ The Islamic State claim was accompanied by a short video showing young fighters gathered on a road, but geolocation appears to place them near Mocimboa da Praia rather than Palma.⁵⁷ It also appears likely that the video was from 2020.⁵⁸

The depth of ASWJ’s relationship with the Islamic State remains a contentious subject. In June 2019, the Islamic State released a statement on Telegram describing ASWJ as “soldiers of the caliphate.”⁵⁹ A month later, ISCAP/ASWJ repudged allegiance to al-Baghdadi as part of the “And the Best Outcome is for the Righteous” series.⁶⁰ That was also when the first video emerged of ISCAP fighters in Mozambique pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi.⁶¹

There followed a sequence of claims via the Amaq news agency for attacks in Mozambique.⁶² But little else emerged about the leadership or organization of ISCAP/ASWJ.

In March 2021, the United States designated ASWJ as a terrorist organization, calling it “ISIS-Mozambique,” without sharing specifics on ties between the two groups.⁶³

Tore Hamming of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King’s College, London, believes the growing sophistication of ASWJ operations is an “indication of the benefits it has gained from its inclusion in ISCAP,” arguing that this shows “the Mozambican affiliate is part of an interconnected regional militant network in East, Central and Southeast Africa linked to the Islamic State.”⁶⁴

Hamming says the publication of news and media from Mozambique by the Islamic State’s central media unit, “despite being irregular,” is a further indication of some level of connection between ASWJ and the Islamic State’s Central Media Department.⁶⁵

Similarly, the U.N. report published in February 2021 stated that “some Member States observed that operatives in Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of the Congo had received reinforcement of trainers, tactical strategists and financial support remitted from the ISIL core through ISIL networks and enablers in Somalia and other East African countries, most recently in September 2020.”^{66 d}

The fact that Islamic State ‘central’ releases propaganda—albeit inconsistently—on behalf of ISCAP/ASWJ is evidence of a continuing link between the two. Operational and ideological links are more difficult to gauge, although ISCAP/ASWJ’s use of beheadings and its targeting of Christians are at least indicative.

It is also difficult to assess the relationship between the two parts of ISCAP: ASWJ and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), which operate in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo. A previous *CTC Sentinel* article notes that while ADF-affiliated Ugandans have been arrested in Mozambique and “Islamic State Central designated its Somali branch as a ‘command center’ for both ISCAP affiliates, tangible, material ties between the two groups that could affect either wings’ trajectory are limited and speculative.”⁶⁷ They are, the authors contend, “functionally separate organizations,

d As links between Islamic State Central and ISCAP-DRC have been more visible, much of this assistance may have been provided to operatives in DRC. For more on the links to DRC, see Warner et al., *The Islamic State in Africa* (forthcoming).

largely insulated from the fortunes of each other just as they are both insulated from the fortunes of Islamic State Central.”

The designation and description of ASWJ as “ISIS-Mozambique” by the United States is potentially a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it may focus international attention and assistance on a conflict that has become entrenched. There are already signs this is happening. It is worth recalling that the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria only became an “international” problem with the massacres of the Yazidi population in northern Iraq and the Islamic State onslaught against the Kurdish town of Kobani in northern Syria.

However, some believe the U.S. designations of the ISCAP franchises may be counterproductive. The International Crisis Group argues that such designations “could be used by hardliners to justify calls for addressing the challenge posed by the ADF and ASWJ through military action alone.”⁶⁸ The labeling may distract the international community from the task of persuading the Mozambican government to address the root causes of the insurgency. Emilia Columbo says it “gives the Nyusi government additional cover for its ‘this is a foreign thing imposed upon us’ narrative, which risks distracting from socio-economic programs necessary to address the underlying grievances driving this conflict.”⁶⁹ Unsurprisingly, pro-Islamic State fora welcomed the designation. “If this indicates anything, it is that the soldiers of the Caliphate in Central Africa Province have become a great danger and they fear its developing capabilities,” wrote one user on the forum al-Minbar.⁷⁰

Thus far, the ASWJ’s “foreign fighters” have come from Tanzania, with a handful from Uganda and South Africa.^e The U.N. experts report from February 2021 cited “indicators of recruitment” in both Mozambique and southern Tanzania, “where ISCAP has gained sympathizers and enablers.”⁷¹

A new study based on interviews with more than 20 women who were kidnapped by the group and subsequently escaped tends to support this assessment.⁷² Some of the former female captives refer to a “number of foreigners coming from the East African coast and from Arab countries.”⁷³ While evidence of Arab fighters is difficult to confirm, there is growing evidence of a substantial Tanzanian contingent that shares linguistic and ethnic ties with the coastal Mwani youth of Cabo Delgado.⁷⁴ Aid workers in Mozambique say that many civilians who have escaped attacks by ASWJ have spoken of Tanzanians among its ranks.⁷⁵

This may not be an entirely recent phenomenon. In 2017, Tanzanian authorities launched a crackdown on young militants in the Kibiti region after several police officers were killed.⁷⁶ Some of the survivors, already radicalized, moved into Mozambique. By March 2018, Mozambican state media was broadcasting images of men of “Asian descent”—possibly Tanzanians of Arab descent—who had been purportedly killed in fighting in Mocimboa da Praia.⁷⁷ Between May 2017 and March 2018, the Mozambican authorities claimed to have prosecuted 370 individuals associated with what was then known as al-Shabaab (though it had no link with the Somali group of the same name). Of that total, 52 were Tanzanian.⁷⁸ Over several months in 2018, a total of 104 individuals suspected

of wanting to join Mozambique’s “Al-Shabaab” were arrested by Tanzanian authorities before they could cross the border into Mozambique.⁷⁹

In October 2020, the Islamic State claimed ISCAP/ASWJ’s first incursion into southern Tanzania,⁸⁰ clashing with security forces in Kitaya across the River Romura that forms the border. That attack led to closer collaboration between Tanzania and Mozambique in the face of a common threat, with the extradition of more than 500 alleged fighters to Mozambique.

The United States has also designated a Tanzanian—Abu Yasir Hassan—described by U.S. officials as the group’s leader.⁸¹ It is the first time any government has named the leader of ASWJ, although Mozambican authorities claimed to have identified prominent figures in Shabaab in 2017.⁸² U.S. officials provided no other information about Hassan beyond his approximate age. Tanzanian authorities had no record of an individual by that name, and several analysts said they had never heard of the name.⁸³

Equally little is known about a Somali member of the Islamic State alleged in a September 2020 U.N. Security Council report to have arrived in Mozambique. The report, by the Panel of Experts on Somalia, asserted that after rifts within the Somali Islamic State affiliate, a senior commander, Mohamed Ahmed “Qahiye,” fled to Ethiopia in 2018 and subsequently traveled to Mozambique.⁸⁴ The U.N. report stated that “the arrival of ‘Qahiye,’ a veteran military operator, into the ranks of Islamic State Central Africa Province is a significant acquisition for the group and highlights the linkages between terrorist networks across the African continent.”⁸⁵ However, there is no independent evidence of Qahiye’s presence in Mozambique.

Ultimately, in the author’s analysis, the jury is still out on the extent of organizational and operational connections between the Islamic State and ASWJ. Through ISCAP, ‘Islamic State core’ seeks to co-opt the achievements of the group as a demonstration of its continuing global appeal. Notably, after the Palma attack, the Islamic State’s Sinai Wilayat released images of its fighters watching the video released by the Islamic State on behalf of ISCAP on March 28, 2021.⁸⁶

The Islamic State is looking to Africa to exhibit its vitality and reach. According to a Hudson Institute study, in 2020, “the lion’s share of its photo and video propaganda was devoted to the exploits of provincial franchises in the Lake Chad Basin and the Greater Sahara and, to a slightly lesser extent, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Mozambique.”⁸⁷ But the authors of the study caution that “while its foothold in Nigeria is a well-established reality now, the situation is markedly less clear when it comes to its alleged activities in the DRC and Mozambique.”⁸⁸

Details of the Palma attack, if anything, reinforce the notion that ASWJ is primarily an evolution of the local Shabaab. It is evolving into a more regional phenomenon—one that straddles borders through linguistic, ethnic and socio-economic ties in the face of a one-dimensional response from the governments of Mozambique and Tanzania. Whether it begins to attract fighters from further afield as a result of its success, and becomes ideologically and

e In January 2018, three Ugandans were arrested in Mocimboa da Praia on terrorism charges. Mozambique informed Ugandan authorities of the arrests in May 2018. One was Abdul Faisal—previously the imam of the Usafi Mosque in Kampala. See Warner et al., *The Islamic State in Africa* (forthcoming).

f At the same time, the United States also designated the other component of ISCAP—the Allied Democratic Forces—in the Democratic Republic of Congo. “State Department Terrorist Designations of ISIS Affiliates and Leaders in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique,” U.S. Department of State, March 10, 2021.

operationally more closely bound to the Islamic State, is the outstanding question.

Ineffective Foreign Intervention and Assistance

The attack on Palma has renewed the spotlight on foreign counterterrorism and military assistance to Mozambique. A small detachment of U.S. Special Forces trainers—about a dozen U.S. Army Green Berets—arrived in Mozambique in early 2021, but they have no operational role and are based far from the conflict zone.⁸⁹ The U.S. embassy in Mozambique emphasized that the two-month training program was part of “a multi-faceted and holistic approach to counter and prevent the spread of terrorism and violent extremism. This approach addresses socio-economic development issues as well as the security situation. Civilian protection, human rights, and community engagement are central to US co-operation and foundational to effectively counter Islamic State in Mozambique.”⁹⁰

Even before the Palma attack, there were discussions underway between Portugal and Mozambique on a training mission. On March 29, 2021, in the aftermath of the attack, Portuguese Foreign Minister Augusto Santos Silva said: “We are planning and preparing a team of around 60 Portuguese service members that will support the Mozambican armed forces in the training of Special Forces.” He also anticipated further assistance at the European level.⁹¹

There are also military contractors such as DAG—which provides air cover for ground forces—and Paramount, which has a strictly training role.⁹² However, it appears that the DAG contract with the government was not renewed when it expired early in April 2021, despite the company’s efforts in Palma.⁹³

The Russian contingent, at one point some 160 strong, from the Wagner Group, which was deployed with considerable fanfare in 2019,⁹⁴ was not involved in the response to the Palma attack. Indeed, they have largely withdrawn from Mozambique after an unsuccessful stint in which they failed to make an impact on the conflict and took casualties.⁹⁵

In early April 2021, several heads of state from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) met in the Mozambique capital Maputo to discuss regional assistance.⁸ A communique declared that “such heinous attacks cannot be allowed to continue without a proportionate regional response.” It directed “an immediate technical deployment” to Mozambique, without specifying its purpose.⁹⁶ However, a meaningful SADC role in northern Mozambique seems unlikely for several reasons. The countries represented in Maputo simply cannot afford any foreign adventures and their armed forces are ill-equipped for such a demanding counterterrorism campaign.

Analysts point to the lack of capabilities, such as airlift, and the poor human rights record of the Zimbabwean army, for example. Raymakers doubts that the international community would be willing to finance a regional force that included a Zimbabwean contingent.⁹⁷ And he says South Africa’s public finances, as well as the relative obsolescence of its military, would preclude a meaningful role, even if Maputo was willing to countenance it.

Despite Total’s multi-billion-dollar investment in Mozambique,

there seems little prospect of French land forces becoming involved, given their extensive commitments in the Sahel. However, France has been in contact with the Mozambican authorities since 2020 over the possibility of maritime cooperation, using French facilities in Mayotte in the Indian Ocean. That option may become more relevant if ASWJ continues to take advantage of the Cabo Delgado coast.⁹⁸ An internal E.U. policy paper has suggested an extension of the European Union’s maritime mission off the Horn of Africa (EUNAVOFOR) further south.⁹⁹ The insurgents have a basic maritime capability, frequently commandeering small vessels for coastal raids. In late March 2021, they used motorboats to attack two fishing villages 100 kilometers south of Palma.¹⁰⁰ After the Palma raid, they attacked the coastal village of Pangane from the sea.¹⁰¹ They also appear to have taken possession of a larger freighter off the coast of Palma for several days.¹⁰²

The Mozambican government has historically been averse to foreign involvement in its internal security, but the scale of the problem and the government’s (misleading) recharacterization of ASWJ as directed by outsiders has led to a recalibration of its approach. The government reached out to the European Union for help with military training in September 2020, and in November, President Nyusi said Mozambique was open to any form of support in the struggle against terrorism.¹⁰³ But he has repeatedly set conditions on such support. “Those who arrive from abroad will not replace us, they will support us. It is a sense of sovereignty,” Nyusi said in April 2021.¹⁰⁴

The government has preferred to use military contractors such as the now-departed Wagner Group and DAG. Additionally, South African group Paramount has trained Mozambican pilots to operate Gazelle helicopters and has provided an Mi17 and an Mi24 piloted by Ukrainians.¹⁰⁵

The evidence of the last two years suggests military contractors cannot provide the expertise or resources to make an impact. John T. Godfrey, the State Department’s acting coordinator for counterterrorism, told reporters in March 2021 that the United States is “concerned” by the presence of private contractors, which “complicates rather than helps efforts to address the terror threat there.”¹⁰⁶

Economic Fallout

In the aftermath of the Palma attack, the decision by Total to evacuate its complex and essentially halt all work at Afungi is a bitter blow to the government and calls into question the viability of the project on the current timeline. Total issued a statement saying it had “decided to reduce to a strict minimum level the workforce on the Afungi site.”¹⁰⁷ Later in April, Total declared force majeure and essentially mothballed the entire project “as a result of the severe deterioration of the security situation in Cabo Delgado.”¹⁰⁸ The impact on the local economy, with contractors, hotel workers, translators, and security guards now out of a job, will be significant.

“Total’s decision to resume construction was contingent on Maputo guaranteeing a 25-kilometer security perimeter around the Afungi peninsula, which would include Palma,” Raymakers says.¹⁰⁹ It could be some time before government forces reestablish full control over this area.

Contractors may reassess their commitment. RA International, which lost at least one employee in the attack, said in late March 2021 that it expected further delays in a project to build a large residential camp at Afungi.¹¹⁰

g SADC comprises 16 members, but five—South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, and Tanzania—are involved in the initiative in Mozambique.



Members of an humanitarian organization look on as a helicopter carrying other humanitarian personnel lands at the airport in Pemba, Mozambique, on March 31, 2021. (AFP via Getty Images)

The project that was at the heart of Mozambique's economic transformation is now on hold indefinitely. Industry sources say that Exxon's even larger investment is also in jeopardy, and that Total may shift resources to similar prospects in South Africa.¹¹¹ The sources say that only projects belonging to Italian energy company ENI, which do not rely on onshore infrastructure, seem secure.¹¹²

The development of the LNG industry has at least the potential to improve the economic fortunes of Cabo Delgado and all of Mozambique, if corruption can be tamed and infrastructure developed. But equally, there is the risk that the unequal division of spoils will only feed discontent and the insurgency in Cabo Delgado.

The Future of the Insurgency

The insurgency in Cabo Delgado has evolved substantially since 2017, when it launched its first attack.¹¹³ "It started attacking in the form of small groups of young men, brandishing mainly blunt weapons, and attacking remote security posts. It has evidently now grown into something much more serious," according to Dino Mahtani of the International Crisis Group.¹¹⁴

Columbo says the government of Mozambique is not close to developing, let alone implementing, a comprehensive strategy to neutralize the insurgency. The regional fund for the north created last year "should have been a good start on the 'soft-side' of this counterinsurgency fight, but its activities are stalled. A military solution is not feasible because it won't address those grievances

and to date, has probably made those grievances worse."¹¹⁵

João Feijó, author of the report on the abducted women, concluded that civilians in much of Cabo Delgado are caught between the violence of the insurgents and distrust of the security forces. "This pressure leads them to flee to the south of the province, where they encounter insufficient aid and social injustice, which pushes them back into violent movements - and the cycle continues," he says.¹¹⁶

The effect on hundreds of thousands of civilians of the violence of the last 18 months will be long-lasting. Schools throughout much of Cabo Delgado have been shuttered; 136 did not open for the 2021 academic year.¹¹⁷ A generation of children is being injured to violence, either as perpetrators or victims.

One major question is whether the growing profile and success of ASWJ will attract foreign fighters from beyond Tanzania. "The presence of foreign fighters in ASWJ's ranks is already apparent. Less clear, however, is how foreign fighters might impact ASWJ as an organization and the trajectory of the conflict in Mozambique," Columbo and Austin C. Doctor wrote in a recent report.¹¹⁸

Foreign fighters might bring new skills and experience to the group—in battlefield tactics and bomb-making, for example. Over time, however, foreign fighters can become a liability, "potentially sowing division within the group,"¹¹⁹ and inviting a more international counterterrorism response.

At present, however, the insurgency in Cabo Delgado is more

damaging and threatening to the future of Mozambique than at any time since it began in 2017. It is showing signs of attracting support from beyond Mozambique, and especially from southern Tanzania, and is recruiting hundreds of teenagers who will know nothing but conflict if the insurgency persists. The security forces have failed to turn the tide on an insurgency approaching its fifth anniversary, and the Mozambique government has missed plentiful opportunities to win over the civilian population of Cabo Delgado through economic

development and social programs. Despite its plentiful natural resources, it remains Mozambique's poorest province.

In a majority Christian country, ASWJ does not pose an existential threat to the government. It holds one town in Cabo Delgado and is present in about half its districts. But those districts are adjacent to the multi-billion-dollar energy projects that are the crown jewel in Mozambique's economic future. **CTC**

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The Revival of the Pakistani Taliban

By Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming

A resurgent Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) could soon again pose a major threat to Pakistan, as underlined by a bomb attack on a luxury hotel in Quetta in April 2021 claimed by the group that narrowly missed endangering China's ambassador. Weakened from 2014 onward by infighting, defections, operations against it, and public disgust at its brutal violence directed at civilians, the group under the leadership of Noor Wali Mehsud has finally escaped the shadow of the Islamic State in Khorasan, which was founded in the last decade by disgruntled TTP figures and threatened to eclipse TTP. After reabsorbing a number of splinter groups, and addressing internal tensions, TTP has intensified its campaign of terrorism in Pakistan and is again growing in strength. It has made clear its commitment to a long-haul struggle against the Pakistani state and is attempting to grow and broaden its support base, including by trying to co-opt the grievances of Pashtun and Baluchi ethnic groups and curtailing its violence against civilians. TTP issued new restrictions on targeting in September 2018, which appear to have resulted in a more discriminate approach to violence. Since then, a smaller proportion of TTP's attacks have targeted civilians and civilian fatalities in attacks targeting civilians have constituted a smaller share of overall fatalities inflicted by the group. The overall number of civilians killed per year in TTP attacks targeting civilians has also dropped.

A string of organizational mergers and intensified operational activity since the summer of 2020, including a claimed suicide bombing targeting a luxury hotel in Quetta in April 2021, suggests the Pakistani Taliban or Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) could soon again pose a major threat in Pakistan.¹ TTP's leadership appears at least for now to have consolidated its control of the primary networks that comprise, and form the basis of, the group. In so doing, it appears to have overcome the existential challenge posed by internal fragmentation and the Islamic State in Khorasan, the Islamic State's wing in the region (ISK).^a In 2015, ISK was primarily formed by disgruntled TTP members and leaders dissatisfied with the leadership of their own group and the large number of defections in the years that followed put the TTP's future in peril.

This article draws on open-source materials and interviews to examine the recent resurgence in TTP operations. The first section provides a historical overview of the rise, fall, and revival of the TTP. The second section examines how the group was able to eventually overcome the existential challenge posed by internal fragmentation and the Islamic State and how it has reduced its targeting of civilians to try to win back supporters who had been turned off by its indiscriminate violence. The third section outlines how TTP has reunified its ranks, which has allowed the group to again expand its operations, as documented in the fourth section of the article. The final section makes some observations about the threat outlook.

Rise and Fall and Revival

TTP was established by al-Qa`ida-allied tribal militants in Pakistan who before 9/11 had fought in Afghanistan to support the Taliban regime in Kabul.² The Pakistani tribal militants were opposed to the Pakistani state due to what they deemed to be a change in the Pakistani government policies after 9/11 to support the U.S. war against al-Qa`ida and allied jihadis, including the Afghan Taliban.<sup>3</sup> The Pakistani tribal militants hosted al-Qa`ida and other foreign militants on the Pakistani side of the border after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, which resulted in U.S. pressure for Pakistan to act and an increase in Pakistani military operations targeting the group and allied networks in Pakistan's tribal areas.⁴ These operations further enraged the Pakistani tribal militants. Their anger against the state hit new heights after the July 2007 military operation against a mosque and seminary in the Pakistani capital closely connected to various militant groups, known as the Red Mosque operation.⁵ This incident galvanized many Pashtun tribal militants, including in South Waziristan, Mohmand, Bajaur, and the Swat district to unify their efforts. The result was the establishment of TTP at the end of 2007 as a jihadi entity to fight the Pakistani state.⁶ Anger over the Red Mosque operation led to hundreds of non-tribal and non-

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a In May 2019, the Islamic State split its Khorasan province into three with separate provinces established for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.

Pashtun militants from settled areas of Pakistan joining TTP and attending TTP and al-Qa`ida training camps in Waziristan. Many of these militants had been part of Kashmir-focused jihadi groups loyal to the Pakistani state.⁷ These non-Pashtun TTP cadres were later categorized “Punjabi Taliban” and in the years that followed would play a key role in sophisticated attacks in the country’s capital Islamabad and its Punjab and Sindh provinces.⁸

After its founding in late 2007, TTP not only grew to become the most dangerous terrorist threat inside Pakistan,⁹ taking control of swaths of Pakistan’s tribal areas,¹⁰ but the group also directly threatened the U.S. homeland. According to the U.S. government, TTP “directed and facilitated Faisal Shahzad’s failed attempt to detonate an explosive device in New York City’s Times Square on May 1, 2010.”¹¹

Until around 2014, the group was seen by Pakistani officials as a potent threat.¹² But the cumulative attrition of U.S. drone strikes and Pakistan’s major Zarb-e-Azb military operation launched in June 2014¹³ as well as Pakistani intelligence operations degraded the group’s presence in Pakistan’s northwestern tribal region and its operational network.¹⁴ These setbacks were further aggravated by the internal fracturing and disagreements within the group, addressed below, which threatened the group’s cohesion. As a result, the group was forced to take refuge in areas of eastern Afghanistan bordering Pakistan.¹⁵ Most damaging to the group was the internal turmoil that followed the 2013 death of TTP leader Hakimullah Mehsud.¹⁶ Competing factions contested the leadership of the group, resulting in infighting and in the years that followed defections to the Islamic State.¹⁷

Besides internal conflict, the indiscriminate targeting^c of civilians was a major factor in the decline of TTP.¹⁸ This even led to criticism from al-Qa`ida leadership, including Usama bin Ladin, who issued multiple warnings to the TTP instructing the group to refrain from indiscriminate attacks targeting markets and schools, which risked resulting in Muslim casualties.¹⁹ In particular, the targeting of young school children in the Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar in December 2014 led to a backlash in Pakistan and support for a full-fledged military operation against jihadi groups.²⁰ The government pushback resulted in hundreds of jihadis and their supporters being killed in counterterrorism operations across the country in addition to the hanging of dozens of them in Pakistani jails.²¹ The APS attack also led to TTP being publicly condemned for having carried out the atrocity by the Afghan Taliban,²² AQIS,²³ Jama’at ul-Ahrar (JuA), and the TTP Sajna faction.²⁴ This jihadi criticism increased the group’s internal tensions, which were already severe after the contested appointment of Maulana Fazlullah as new emir the year prior.

The group’s current leader Noor Wali Mehsud, who took over after Fazlullah was killed in a drone strike in Afghanistan in June 2018,²⁵ has worked to rebuild the group, improve internal discipline, increase cohesion, and make the group’s violence less indiscriminate.²⁶ More recently, he has worked to reintegrate jihadi factions that had left the TTP fold. Between July and November 2020, eight jihadi entities pledged alliance to TTP.²⁷ According to a U.N. report published in February 2021, “[t]his increased the strength of TTP and resulted in a sharp increase in attacks in the region,” with one member state reporting that “TTP was responsible for more than 100 cross-border attacks between July and October 2020.” The report stated that “Member State assessments of TTP fighting strength range between 2,500 and 6,000.”²⁸

The TTP’s recent consolidation and expansion comes despite continued pressure from the security forces of Afghanistan and Pakistan. For example, in mid-December 2020, Afghan forces killed Ehsanullah Khattab, a senior member of TTP’s Waziristan shura in Paktika.²⁹ There has also been a string of mysterious assassinations of TTP commanders in Afghanistan over the past two years,³⁰ including one on January 15, 2021, in Afghanistan’s Kunar province that the TTP blamed on Pakistani intelligence.³¹

A key reason the TTP has been able to revive its operations is that

b The TTP and its splinters shifted to the Afghan side of the border, escaping the Pakistani military operations in the North Waziristan and Khyber tribal agencies, starting in June and October 2014, respectively. Both areas had been strongholds for TTP on the Pakistani side of the border. The TTP established hideouts in areas of southeastern and eastern Afghanistan bordering these two tribal agencies. Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud in his book, *Inqilab-e-Mehsud*, provided details about the TTP Waziristan-based groups sheltering in southeastern Afghanistan in the remote areas of Khost, Paktia, and Paktika provinces. In an interview with the authors in March 2021, Pakistani journalist Faizullah Khan, who visited TTP bases in Nangarhar in April 2014 and interviewed its senior leadership in the province, stated that the TTP Swat, Mohmand and Bajaur groups had already established bases in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces’ remote districts before the 2014 military operations in Khyber and Waziristan, which helped them shelter fleeing TTP members from Khyber and North Waziristan. Khan later authored a book about his time spent in TTP bases in Afghanistan, how he and TTP members were arrested by Afghan security forces, and his imprisonment with TTP and al-Qa`ida members in the Nangarhar central prison in Afghanistan. Faizullah Khan, *The Durand Line’s Prisoner* (Karachi: Zak Books, 2016).

c TTP’s attacks have inflicted heavy human and material harm to civilians. This was notwithstanding the fact that TTP stated in its first manifesto and guidelines prepared in October 2010 that attacks should prioritize government, military, security/intelligence agencies and their members, and avoid targeting Muslim brothers and sisters. This manifesto was produced under Hakimullah Mehsud’s instructions and reviewed by al-Qa`ida central leadership, Atiyyatullah al-Libi, and Abu Yahya al-Libi, in December 2010. For details, see “Letter to Hakimullah Mehsud, Leader of the Taliban Movement,” dated December 4, 2010, available at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence website, and Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, *Inqilab-i-Mehsud* [Mehsuds Revolution] (Paktika, Afghanistan: Al-Shahab Publishers, 2017), p. 523. Notwithstanding these first guidelines and other subsequent ‘efforts’ to stem civilian bloodshed, late into the 2010s TTP continued to kill and wound many civilians both in attacks directly targeting them and in attacks on other targets. As outlined later in this article, the group curtailed its violence against civilians only after Noor Wali Mehsud became the TTP emir and published detailed, well-defined attack guidelines for the group members in September 2018. Details of TTP’s previous failed ‘efforts’ to stem civilian bloodshed can be found in Mehsud, *Inqilab-i-Mehsud*.



A screen capture from a video in which some TTP leaders announced their pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State, released January 2015 through Khorasan Media. In the picture are Shahidullah Shahid (middle right) and Hafiz Saeed Khan (middle left).

its regional competitor ISK is suffering. As noted by Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, “[s]ince 2015, a variety of state-led operations against ISK have inflicted substantial manpower and leadership losses upon the group across Afghanistan and Pakistan.”³² In 2020, ISK’s Wilayat Pakistan claimed a total of 13 attacks, resulting in 77 casualties (killed and wounded) according to the Islamic State’s own reporting, down from 22 attacks in 2019, according to data from its Al Naba newsletter.^{33 d} In Afghanistan, ISK has been largely routed from its former strongholds of northern Afghanistan and the country’s eastern provinces of Nangarhar and Kunar.³⁴ While ISK is still capable of launching occasional large-scale and devastating attacks, its general standing has deteriorated, leaving it as a much weaker alternative for the region’s jihadis.³⁵ The story of how TTP escaped from the shadow of the Islamic State is outlined in the next section.

Overcoming the Islamic State Challenge

As essentially a conglomerate of various groups and factions, TTP was from the start a rather fragmented entity. This was especially the case in the aftermath of Hakimullah Mehsud’s death and the election of Mullah Fazlullah to the position of emir in 2013 instead of a candidate from the Mehsud tribe.³⁶

Hence, TTP found itself in a vulnerable position in 2014 when the Islamic State announced its caliphate and prepared its expansion to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Even before the caliphate declaration, there were reports of fighters from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.³⁷ Yet, it was only in October 2014 that Hafiz Saeed Khan, a TTP commander from Orakzai agency who had previously belonged to the Afghan Taliban, decided to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State, thus laying the groundwork for the establishment of the group’s Khorasan Province.³⁸ When the province was officially

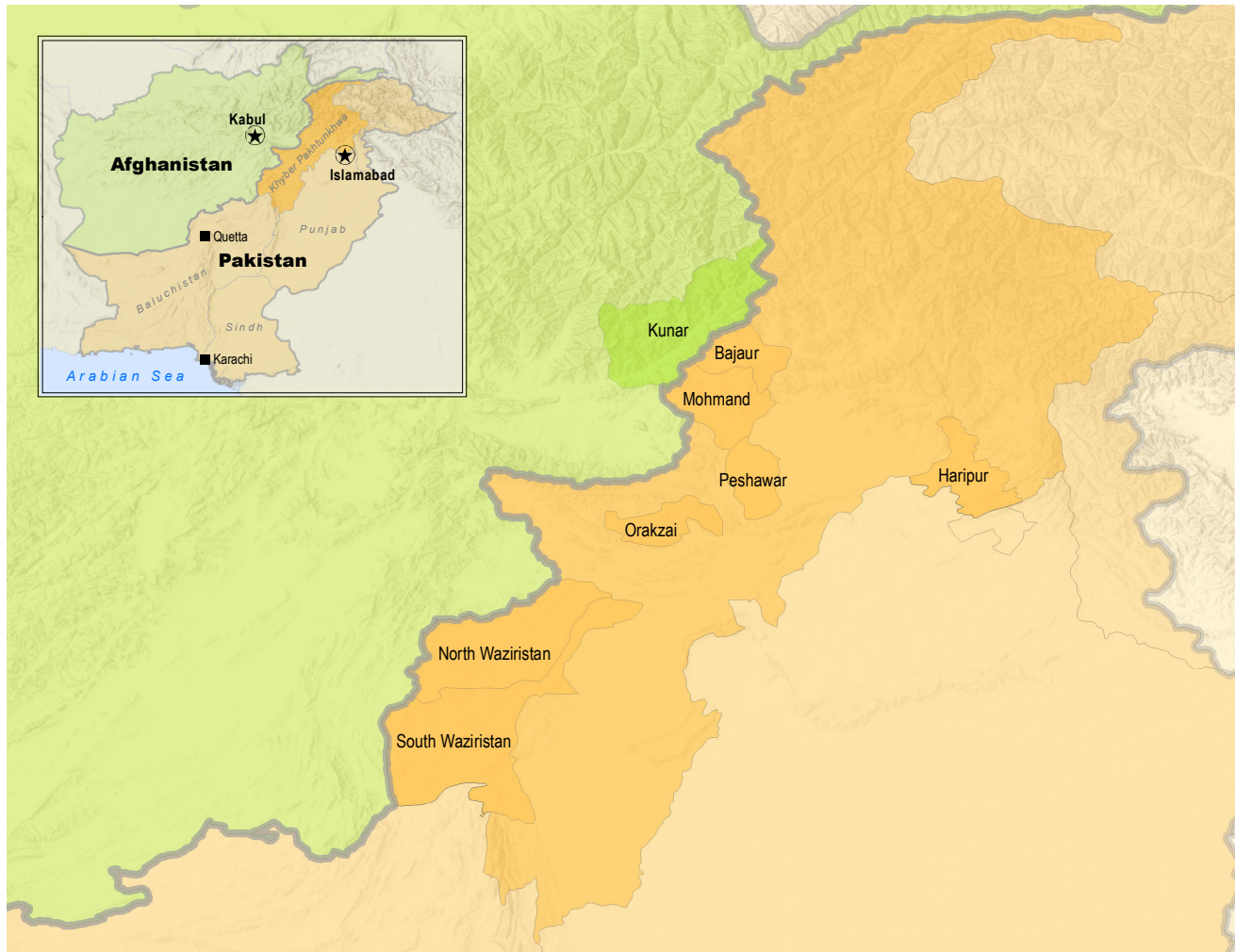
announced in January 2015 as part of the Islamic State’s second wave of global expansion, it was with Saeed Khan as its emir.³⁹ A testament to his standing within TTP before leaving, Saeed Khan had been a serious candidate to become the group’s emir after the death of Hakimullah Mehsud.⁴⁰ Whether the disappointment of not being selected as the TTP leader⁴¹ played a part in his decision remains unknown.^e

Over the next years, several hundred rank-and-file TTP members and a noteworthy collection of senior commanders defected to ISK, exacerbating an already difficult situation for TTP. With regard to senior figures, this included TTP spokesman Shahidullah Shahid, ISK’s future third emir Abdul Rahman Ghaleb, and several district-level commanders and officials such as Mufti Hassan Swati (leader in Peshawar), Hafiz Quran Dolat (leader in Kurram Agency), and Gul Zaman (leader in Khyber Agency).⁴² Senior Afghan Taliban such as Abdul Rauf Khadim, Mansour Dadullah, Saad Emirati, and the prominent ideologue Muslim Dost⁴³ also joined or aligned with ISK.⁴⁴ While some may have joined ISK out of ideological conviction—in this regard, the caliphate declaration was a powerful mobilizing force—others arguably saw it as a personal opportunity to increase their rank and standing, obtain access to resources and be part of the new ‘winning team.’ In an attempt to stop the defections, the Afghan Taliban’s shura council reportedly issued a fatwa making it *haram* to pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi, but the order did not have the desired effect.⁴⁵

Three factors help to explain why TTP became the primary recruitment pool for the Islamic State in the region. First, up until the emergence of ISK, the TTP was always considered ideologically the most radical armed group in the region, with a strong sectarian

d Some caution is required in interpreting this attack claim data because it is possible COVID-19 had an impact on the number of attacks in 2020.

e Pakistani journalist Rifat Ullah Orakzai (who hails from Hafiz Saeed Khan’s home district, Orakzai, and interviewed Khan when he was TTP commander there) told the authors in March 2021 that Khan had been a candidate for succeeding Hakimullah. According to Orakzai, Khan’s failure in becoming a TTP emir was one of the main factors in his defection from TTP into ISK.



The Afghanistan-Pakistan border region (Brandon Mohr)

focus⁴⁶ emerging over time. At the time of the establishment of ISK, it even seemed possible that the bulk of the TTP could retract its loyalty to the less hardline Afghan Taliban and instead join the Islamic State.

Second, TTP's internal fragmentation made it difficult for the group to counter the gravitational pull of the Islamic State. TTP is best understood as a conglomerate of militant factions that regularly compete for internal power. This was certainly the case in 2014-2015 after the death of its powerful emir Hakimullah Mehsud. His successor, Mullah Fazlullah, was not a popular choice. Disparate interests among TTP factions and the general dissatisfaction with the election of Fazlullah left the group vulnerable.⁴⁷ With its emphasis on the caliphate narrative and the potential of upward mobility for TTP members, ISK proved particularly effective at taking advantage of this vulnerability in attracting TTP members that questioned the new TTP leadership or were attracted by the platform offered by ISK, including the fact that like TTP, it was focused on targeting the Pakistani state.

The anti-Pakistan focus of the ISK leadership is the third factor that explains the recruitment of TTP fighters last decade by ISK. The ISK leadership included several former senior TTP commanders like Hafiz Saeed Khan and Shaikh Maqbool Orakzai who were strong advocates of the war against the Pakistani state. In a recent interview with the authors,⁴⁸ a senior TTP leader confirmed

this as a central motivational factor that had made ISK an attractive platform for TTP commanders and rank-and-file who hoped that ISK would strengthen the war against the Pakistani state.

It thus came as no surprise that large numbers of TTP commanders and fighters, especially from the Orakzai and Bajaur agencies, joined ISK, and in many cases were appointed to very senior positions.

But there were also three key factors that prevented TTP from being entirely subsumed into the Islamic State. First, the Afghan Taliban used its strong historical connections with TTP leadership to convince most of them not to join ISK. Over the course of its history, the TTP, and specific nodes of the TTP, have been fairly well operationally integrated with components of the Afghan Taliban, with operational arrangements between the various parties providing the environment and conditions for TTP fighters to operate in territory controlled by the Afghan Taliban.⁴⁹ The emergence of ISK placed TTP in an awkward position as while ISK was attractive to some other elements of TTP, including much of its leadership, TTP decided to maintain their support for the

Afghan Taliban, at least publicly.^f Interestingly, the Afghan Taliban appear to have conducted something of a charm offensive to shore up ties between the groups. Sources close to TTP leadership told an Afghan journalist that the Afghan Taliban sent a delegation to Fazlullah at the beginning of the ISK expansion in Afghanistan's eastern provinces. The Taliban delegation reportedly presented a gift to Fazlullah from Mullah Umar in the form of a turban, which Mullah Umar was said to have used himself.⁵⁰

Second, the Islamic State's demand that new members pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi without any conditions did not sit well with some within TTP. One interesting example to illustrate how this functioned as a restraining mechanism is the TTP-JuA leader, Umar Khalid Khurasani. Khurasani was among the TTP's most radical and anti-Pakistani state commanders and for a period of time appeared to be positioning himself to join ISK along with his entire TTP-affiliated faction, before deciding against it. Indicative of this, he wrote multiple articles in JuA's *Khilafat* magazine, welcoming the Islamic State caliphate and referring to it as a great success.⁵¹ There is also evidence that Khurasani approached the Islamic State Central leadership to discuss the merger of JuA into the Islamic State, but with the condition that the Islamic State establish a Wilayat Hind province under Khurasani's command to include Pakistan, Kashmir, and India.⁵² The Islamic State's leadership rejected his request, arguing that anyone joining the Islamic State should do it unconditionally and that the leadership would only decide on organizational roles afterward.⁵³

The third factor preventing ISK from subsuming TTP was the failure of ISK to convert its strong anti-Pakistani state narrative into action. ISK, after shifting its bases from Pakistan's Khyber agency Tirah valley to Afghanistan's Nangarhar province due to the 2014-launched Pakistani army military offensive, soon started a brutal war against the Afghan Taliban there and later in Kunar province.⁵⁴ This probably made TTP more careful in dealing with ISK in order to avoid jeopardizing its relationship with the Afghan Taliban. The intensification of ISK's war against the Afghan Taliban and its primary focus on Afghanistan as a theater⁵⁵ for jihad in July 2020 led TTP to condemn ISK as a pawn in efforts by regional

states, particularly Pakistani intelligence, to damage the jihadi enterprise in Pakistan.⁵⁶

In the end, the TTP did not join the Islamic State on a group level, but it continued to see members defect and pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi, which left TTP critically weakened. In order to try to re-establish its footing, the group's leadership in September 2018 issued a 13-page manual titled "Operation Manual for Mujahideen of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan."⁵⁷ The document had a dual purpose: to bolster the position of the Noor Wali Mehsud, who was elected leader of TTP in June 2018,⁵⁸ and to establish internal regulations within the group as part of a reform process to distance the group and its members from the Islamic State. In an attempt to draw a contrast with the behavior of the Islamic State and improve the group's standing among the Pakistani population after the backlash against it because of the massacres of civilians, the TTP manual emphasized the necessity of reducing the group's number of enemies and defined what it considered to be a range of legitimate targets.

The new targeting guidelines were significant because TTP has historically had a reputation of indiscriminate targeting similar to the practices of the Islamic State. TTP leaders had previously advised members to minimize the risk of causing harm to civilians during attacks,^g but this rarely translated into a change in operational practices, with the group continuing to carry out large-scale massacres of civilians often through the use of suicide bombers. Since the December 2014 attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar, those attacks in which many civilians have died have included the January 2016 Bacha Khan University attack in Charsadda, the February 2016 targeting of a Shi'a mosque in Peshawar, the December 2017 Agricultural Training Institute attack, and a July 2018 attack targeting an election campaign gathering in Peshawar.⁵⁹

The new targeting guidelines issued under Noor Wali Mehsud's leadership in September 2018 have curtailed the group's violence against civilians. Since then, the overall number of civilians killed per year in TTP attacks targeting civilians has dropped. Furthermore, since the targeting restrictions were issued, a smaller proportion of TTP's attacks have targeted civilians and civilian fatalities in attacks targeting civilians have constituted a smaller share of overall fatalities inflicted by the group. (See Figure 1.)

f Notwithstanding the fact that around mid-2015 TTP issued a religious verdict declaring ISK's claims to be part of a caliphate to be religiously illegitimate, until the summer of 2020, TTP was generally respectful in its rhetoric toward ISK, which it regarded as a fellow jihadi group despite their disagreements. "The Tihrek Taliban Pakistan religious stance on the caliphate announced by Sheikh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, May Allah Protect him," Umar Media, circa mid-2015.

g See footnote C.

	<i>Total Attacks</i> ⁶⁰	<i>Attacks Targeting Civilians</i> ⁶¹	<i>Attacks Targeting Civilians as a Percentage of Total Attacks</i>	<i>Total Fatalities</i>	<i>Civilian Fatalities in Attacks Targeting Civilians</i> ⁶²	<i>Civilian Fatalities in Attacks Targeting Civilians as a Percentage of Total Inflicted Fatalities</i>
2017	87	13	14.9%	303	60	19.8%
Jan. 1 - Aug. 31, 2018 ⁶³	55	21	38.2%	119	34	28.6%
Sep. 1 - Dec. 31, 2018	16	4	25%	20	3	15%
2019	37	4	10.8%	93	6	6.5%
2020 ⁶⁴	149	16	10.7%	218	14	6.4%

Figure 1: TTP attack and targeting trends before and after the September 2018 TTP guidelines
(Sources: GTD, authors' database of TTP attacks)



A picture from the TTP website posted on August 18, 2020, showing four senior commanders pledging to TTP. These include (from left) Umar Khalid Khurasani, emir of JuA; Khushi Muhammad, emir of LeJ Usman Saifullah Kurd group; Commander Muneeb, emir of Ustad Ahmad Farooq group; and Omar Mukaram Khurasani, emir of HuA. The first from the right in the picture is Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud.

According to a dataset maintained by the authors,^h in 2020, TTP claimed 16 attacks that targeted civilians, with 14 deaths. At the time of writing (late April 2021), there has not been a double-digit fatality suicide bombing claimed and carried out by the group since the July 10, 2018, attack on the election campaign gathering in Peshawar that killed 23 people, including a provincial assembly candidate, Haroon Bilour, belonging to the Awami National Party (ANP).⁶⁵

This change of *modus operandi* is explicitly in line with the TTP September 2018 guidelines, which provide a clear list of targets restricted to only the security forces (including the armed forces, intelligence agencies, paramilitary forces and police), government-allied militias, ruling elites, and judiciary, and outlines a stringent procedure for suicide attacks.

Also noteworthy in TTP's rebuilding efforts were a set of stipulations that seem to have been designed to reduce internal tensions. According to the manual, fighters must follow the instructions of their emir both in military and theological affairs. It stipulated how internal reconciliation mechanisms were to be put in place at the local, regional (regulatory shura), and national (supreme shura) levels to manage any incidents of internal conflict. With the aim of protecting the group and its cohesion, it stated that TTP fighters henceforth would be prohibited from having any contact with people or groups that differ in ideology. The new manual also allowed for the return of former members of the group, by stipulating that fighters who had already defected from the group but intended to rejoin were subject to an appeal to TTP's supreme shura. These changes were intended to stem further defections while opening a door for defectors to rejoin the group at a time when the global Islamic State narrative was under severe pressure.

Mergers and Leadership Consolidation

The ascension of Noor Wali Mehsud saw the group again led by a figure from the influential Mehsud tribe, bolstering its position in the border regions with Afghanistan. As Hassan Abbas recently noted in this publication, "the return of a Mehsud as the TTP leader ... persuaded many disgruntled Mehsud tribesmen ... to return to the TTP fold."⁶⁶ Mehsud has worked to restore the fortunes of the group. In November 2017, he published a book of more than 700 pages entitled *Inqilab-e-Mehsud* (Mehsud's Revolution) dealing with TTP's internal problems and the importance of unity. In the book, he appears as a reformer, not only criticizing what he saw as mistakes by the group's previous leadership but also wholeheartedly condemning many of the practices that threatened its survival, particularly the infightings and indiscriminate killings.⁶⁷

Beginning in early July 2020, TTP surprised observers by announcing a string of mergers with influential commanders and rival groups. According to the United Nations, the unification "took place in Afghanistan and was moderated by Al-Qaida."^{68 i} Since then, eight different jihadi groups have joined TTP, signaling a rebuilding and consolidation process that may continue.⁶⁹ These groups include three major TTP splinters, two important Pakistani al-Qa`ida affiliates, a faction of the sectarian group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), and two prominent militant groups from North Waziristan.⁷⁰ The splinter groups rejoining TTP are the Hakimullah Mehsud faction,^j Jama'at ul-Ahrar (JuA), and its sub-splinter Hizb ul-Ahrar (HuA).⁷¹ The al-Qa`ida affiliates are the Amjad Farooqi and Ustad Ahmad Farooq groups.⁷² The LeJ faction in question is known as Usman Saifullah Kurd and is now under the command of Khushi Mohammad, an ex-emir of Harkatul Jihad Islami (HuJI) Sindh province.⁷³

^h The authors' methodology in collecting and verifying TTP attack claims since January 2020 is outlined in the next section.

ⁱ According to another account, the unification talks were facilitated by the Haqqani network with al-Qa`ida members being present during the talks. Franz J. Marty, "Spike in Violence Follows Failed Negotiations Between the Pakistani Taliban and Islamabad," *Diplomat*, April 3, 2021.

^j This group is also known as the Shehryar Mehsud group.

These mergers have strengthened TTP. They have brought TTP breakaway factions back under the command of TTP, which boosts its manpower and may minimize future internal conflict. These factions were co-founders of the TTP and as such played a central role in the group's rise and expansion. The downfall of the TTP started in 2014 when several of the very same groups defected in the aftermath of the election of Mullah Fazlullah.⁷⁴ The decision of the Hakimullah Mehsud faction to rejoin the TTP is of particular importance since this group has been engaged in infighting with its rival Mehsud faction, the Mufti Wali ur-Rehman group, which is now led by the current TTP emir, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud.⁷⁵ Their infighting started after Hakimullah Mehsud's assassination in November 2013 with both factions struggling to lead the Mehsuds within TTP.⁷⁶ Mullah Fazlullah's failure to prevent intra-TTP bloodshed and the ensuing defections of various Mehsud factions shattered other commanders' trust in Fazlullah's leadership and resulted in further splintering.⁷⁷

The mergers have brought rival and independent groups into the fold of the TTP. Both Hakimullah Mehsud and his predecessor, Baitullah Mehsud, were accused of eliminating smaller independent jihadi groups that objected to waging jihad under the TTP leadership in Pakistan.⁷⁸ Hakimullah Mehsud even tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to force Pakistani jihadi groups, including al-Qa`ida loyalists, to pledge allegiance to him, but in response he received strong criticism from al-Qa`ida's central leadership.⁷⁹ The absorption of rival and independent groups under Noor Wali indicate he is succeeding where Baitullah and Hakimullah failed.^k One example is the North Waziristan-based group of Ustad Aleem Khan. Khan was the deputy of Hafiz Gul Bahadar, the leading jihadi in North Waziristan⁸⁰ and the host of al-Qa`ida's leadership in the region. He even sheltered the TTP for a period from 2009 when the group lost its strongholds after the Pakistani military's operations in Mehsud-controlled areas.⁸¹ Khan later split from Bahadar and announced his support for the Pakistani army in 2015.⁸² Khan's merger with TTP therefore represents a major blow to the Pakistani army's efforts to pacify militants and reconcile them to the state. Another example is the LeJ Usman Saifullah Kurd faction that merged into TTP as a group.^l

All of this means that the mergers have again presented TTP an opportunity to be the dominant perpetrator of anti-state jihadi violence in Pakistan similar to the position of the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan. This remains a longstanding objective of the TTP and something its leadership has struggled for since 2010, which Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud reminded TTP commanders about in a November 27, 2020, speech celebrating the last round of mergers.⁸³ Mehsud explained that the jihad in Pakistan would not succeed until all jihadis in Pakistan unite under one flag in fighting against the state, just as the Afghan Taliban has remained united in fighting the United States and its allies over the last two decades.

Section 4: Operational Escalation

The merger process has been followed by a steep increase in attacks carried out by TTP. As already noted, the United Nations stated that the mergers led to a "sharp increase in attacks in the region," with one member state reporting that "TTP was responsible for more than 100 cross-border attacks between July and October 2020."⁸⁴ TTP's higher attack tempo is reflected in its own claims.

The authors have collected a complete database of validly claimed TTP attacks in Pakistan^m from the start to the end of 2020 based on claims of responsibility issued on the group's website and through Telegram detailing the location of each attack, the *modus operandi*, specification of the target, and casualty numbers. To validate the claims, the authors relied on local sources and media reports to confirm that claimed attacks actually took place and were executed by the TTP. Many cross-border attacks are not reported in the media because they usually occur in remote border areas where only security forces are present. In working to verify claims, the authors' examined TTP propaganda video footage for details about the specific attack, such as location, date, and casualties. A noteworthy challenge is the validation of casualty numbers as the TTP reported casualty numbers usually differ from the figures confirmed by the Pakistani security forces to the media. The casualty count figures in the author's database are those provided by TTP. Given jihadi terror groups may see it as in their interests to inflate casualty counts, it is possible TTP may have inflated the casualty counts for certain attacks. In coding for the type of target, the authors made their own determination based on the description of the attack by TTP. For the location of the attack, the authors entered into their database the location provided by TTP in its attack claim. The authors are not aware of any instances of other sources contradicting the TTP's location descriptions.

In total, according to the authors' dataset, the TTP conducted 149 attacks throughout 2020. (See Figure 1.) But while TTP carried out only 48 attacks from January 1 to July 5, 2020, when the merger process began, they executed 101 attacks from July 6 until December 31, 2020. According to TTP's own metrics for 2020, the group inflicted appreciably more fatalities after the beginning of the mergers. (See Figure 2.)ⁿ

k It is possible Noor Wali's success is the result of a more diplomatic approach, but there is insufficient information to make a firm conclusion on this.

l The LeJ group as a whole has been considered a natural ally of the Islamic State in Pakistan due to its sectarian focus. Farhan Zahid, "The Islamic State in Pakistan: Growing the Network," Washington Institute, Policy Analysis, January 30, 2017.

m Before locating to Afghanistan, the TTP occasionally claimed attacks inside Afghanistan, most often jointly with the Afghan Taliban. Since the group lost its sanctuaries in Pakistan six years ago, neither the TTP nor any of its splinter groups have claimed an attack inside Afghanistan.

n On January 3, 2021, the TTP issued an infographic on all of its operations in 2020. Compared to the authors' data based on collection of claims of responsibility, the group claimed a total of 177 attacks (contrasting to the authors' figure of 149 attacks) resulting in 200 fatalities (218 in the authors' data).

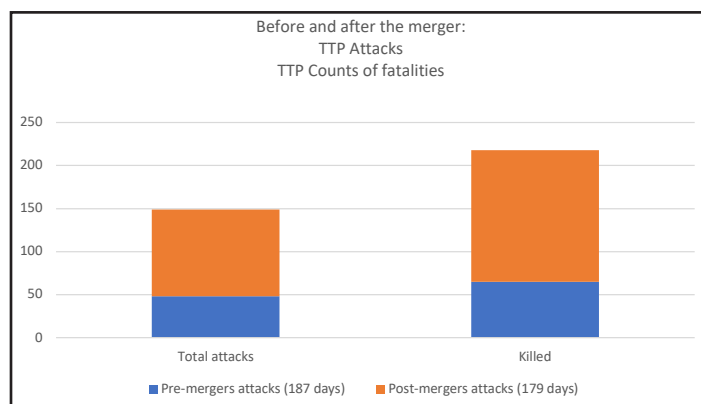


Figure 2: The number of TTP attacks in 2020 before and after the mergers and the number of fatalities as counted by TTP in Pakistan before the July 2020 mergers and after the mergers. While the mergers took place between July and November 2020, for the purpose of comparison, the authors set the merger date as that of the first merger: July 6.

According to the GTD, the TTP conducted 71 attacks in 2018 and 37 attacks in 2019.^o The GTD does not yet list data for 2020. Although the GTD and the authors have small differences in approach in counting attacks,^p the authors' count of 149 attacks during 2020, with the majority of those attacks taking place after the mergers, speaks to an acceleration in attacks. There seems to have been a further uptick in attacks in the first quarter of 2021 with 61 attacks claimed by the TTP between January and March 2021. (See Figure 3.)^q

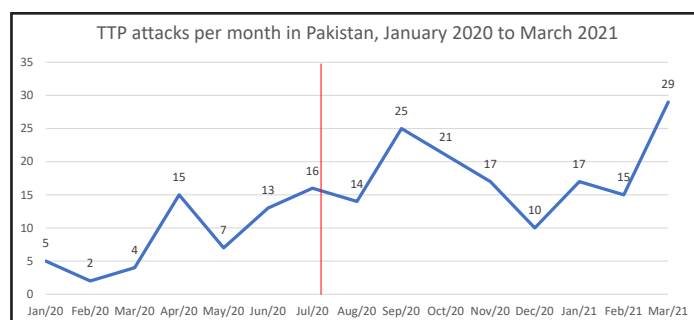


Figure 3: TTP attacks per month in Pakistan from January 1, 2020, to March 31, 2021. Only TTP claims in 2020 were verified by the authors.

A counterargument to explain the increase in attacks in the post-merger period could be that the pre-merger period covers a large part of the winter season, lasting from November until March in which a downtick in attacks could be expected. Yet this argument is not particularly convincing when data from the winter period 2020 is compared to data from the same period in 2021. For example,

TTP carried out 11 attacks in the first three months of 2020 (five attacks in January, two in February, and four in March 2020), while since the beginning of 2021, the group has claimed to have undertaken 61 attacks (17 in January, 15 in February, and 29 attacks in March 2021).

According to the TTP's claims, the main target of the attacks is the Pakistani army, with 73% (110 attacks) of the attacks in 2020 targeting the army. Other targeted actors include the police, civilians, and security forces. According to the TTP claims, attacks against the army resulted in 179 killings to the army, while the group reported 16 attacks against civilians resulting in 14 fatalities. The list of TTP attacks in 2020 recorded in the authors' database includes the claimed killing of a provincial political leader of the ruling party in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KpK) Haripur district.⁸⁵

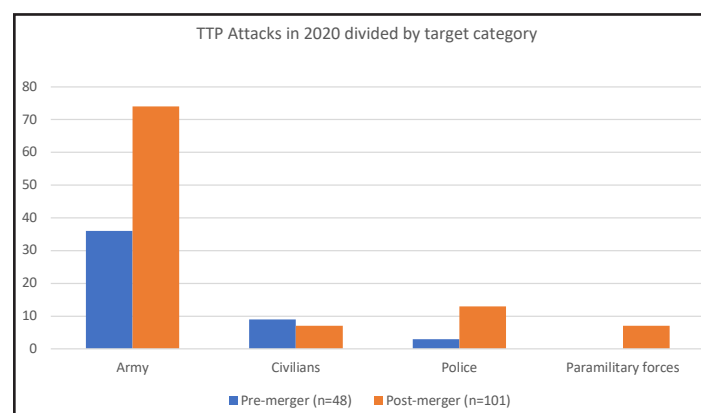


Figure 4: TTP claimed attacks in Pakistan in 2020, divided by target type

Another important dimension of the TTP attacks in 2020 is their locations. (See Figure 5.) The TTP attacks were concentrated mainly in five KpK districts (Lower Dir, Swat, and the three newly established tribal districts: Bajaur, South Waziristan, and North Waziristan)^r where 86% (128 attacks) of all the attacks took place. These areas remain traditional TTP strongholds and share a border with Afghanistan, where the group maintained important safe havens in the past. Almost half of the attacks took place in Bajaur, bordering Afghanistan's Kunar province.

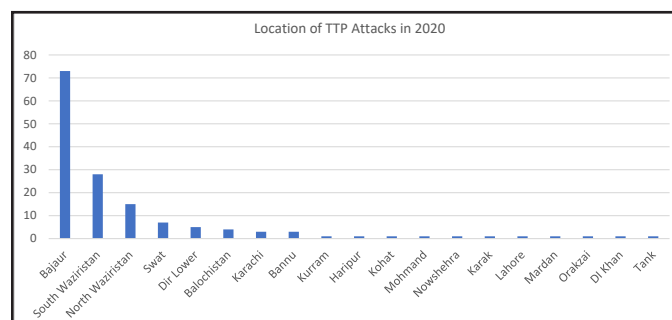


Figure 5: TTP attacks in Pakistan in 2020, by location

Over the last decade, Kunar has been a shelter location for TTP and its former splinters, JuA and HuA.⁸⁶ With North and South Waziristan no longer a safe haven from 2014, Kunar has emerged

^o This tally includes attacks attributed in the GTD database exclusively to the TTP. See endnote 60 for further details.

^p The authors and the GTD take different approaches to data collection. The GTD relies on open-source media reporting while the authors only include attacks claimed by the TTP that they then cross-check against news reports.

^q The authors' tally of TTP attacks in 2021 is based solely on TTP infographics. The authors have not verified TTP's attack claims in 2021.

^r These were previously part of the tribal areas known as Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

as the TTP's command center. The TTP's long presence in Kunar explains why the adjacent district of Bajaur has been particularly vulnerable to attacks from the group. And with the recent absorption back into the TTP of JuA and HuA, which both have a strong presence in the neighboring Mohmand district, it is possible attacks in Mohmand will increase. Both Bajaur and Mohmand border Kunar and the latter borders the KpK Peshawar district, which previously remained the center of TTP's brutal attacks. JuA and HuA, then known as TTP Mohmand chapter, has had strong operational networks in Peshawar and claimed several high-profile attacks there before splintering from TTP in 2014. It is possible, the Bajaur-Mohmand axis will in the future be the epicenter of TTP activity.

Another interesting point to highlight is that in 2020, the TTP for the first time since ISK's emergence in 2014 claimed an attack in the KpK Orakzai tribal district.⁸⁷ Orakzai was one of TTP's original strongholds in the years after its establishment and Hakimullah Mehsud was based there for years.⁸⁸ It was the local leadership of TTP in Orakzai that founded ISKP in late 2014 with almost all of the leading TTP figures from the area joining al-Baghdadi's group.⁸⁹ According to local Afghan sources, the TTP attack claim in Orakzai makes it plausible that segments among ISK's Pakistani fighters are rejoining TTP.⁹⁰

Outlook

Unless counterterrorism operations by security forces or other initiatives to prevent recruitment can reverse its momentum, the TTP may once again establish itself as a major threat in Pakistan. Weakened from 2014 onward by infighting, defections, and operations against it, the group under the leadership of Noor Wali Mehsud appears to have finally seen off the existential challenge posed by ISK. After reabsorbing a number of splinter groups, and addressing internal tensions, the TTP has intensified its campaign of terrorism in Pakistan and is again growing in strength. It has reaffirmed its commitment to a long-haul struggle against the Pakistani state and is attempting to grow and broaden its support base. This has led the TTP to adopt (at least for the time being) a less indiscriminate approach to violence to grow its support. To broaden its support base, it has also attempted to co-opt the grievances of Pashtun and Baluchi ethnic groups. Although most Baloch militants are not motivated by jihadi ideology, the TTP has on multiple occasions endorsed their fight against the state.⁹¹ Similarly, the TTP emir has also openly supported the recent Pashtun rights movement known as Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM).⁹² The TTP's support for the PTM and Baloch insurgents shows a willingness by the group to co-opt issues to try to grow its support base in Pakistan.

The fact that TTP's recent consolidation and expansion comes despite continued pressure from the security forces of Afghanistan and Pakistan underlines the significant counterterrorism challenges ahead.

With the mergers into TTP of the JuA, HuA, al-Qa`ida affiliates, and an LeJ faction, it is possible that the TTP will intensify its

activities in the urban centers of the country, particularly in Punjab and the provincial capitals of Baluchistan and Sindh—Quetta and Karachi, respectively—where these groups have had strong networks in the past. There is a danger therefore that violence could spread from the traditional strongholds of TTP in the country's tribal districts to more populated areas, as it did in the past. A case in point appears to be the group's claimed vehicle-born suicide bombing attack in the parking lot of a luxury hotel in Quetta on April 21, 2021, which it claimed targeted senior security and government officials. The attack killed at least four people and narrowly missed endangering China's ambassador to Pakistan. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, "The Chinese ambassador, Nong Rong, was staying at the hotel, which is in a heavily guarded part of the city. He was due to return there from a dinner meeting outside the hotel when the blast occurred, Pakistani officials said."⁹³

In the wider region, President Biden's decision to withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021, has deep implications for the threat landscape.⁹⁴ How events play out in Afghanistan will have an impact on the TTP. If the Afghan Taliban succeeds in obtaining formal power in Kabul after the U.S. withdrawal, TTP stands to benefit,⁹⁵ and the group could help consolidate the Afghan Taliban position in Afghanistan by sending fighters to Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan. In the short term, it is possible that the Afghan Taliban will distance themselves from the TTP in order to improve their international standing and therefore secure and solidify their return to power. In the longer term, and especially if the Taliban are able to once again entrench themselves in power, mutual assistance is likely between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban.

TTP militants generally represent the segment of Pakistani jihadis who have fought for the rise, expansion, and defense of the Taliban in Afghanistan since the early 1990s and are seen by their Afghan counterparts as legitimate participants in the Afghan conflict. This bond only strengthened after 9/11 when both waged a war against their respective states to punish it for its role in the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, resulting in the collapse of Taliban regime. The majority of TTP leadership and members originate from the Pashtun belt of Pakistan neighboring Afghanistan who share common history, culture, and tribal roots.

With the group launching attacks in Pakistan and with the possibility that it might in the years ahead receive assistance from a government in Kabul controlled by the Taliban, TTP appears to be on the course to reestablishing itself as a serious threat not only to Pakistan but also the security of the region. **CTC**

s One caveat, which has been noted by others, is that the terms of a peace settlement in Afghanistan may result in restrictions on TTP's ability to operate in Afghanistan. Hassan Abbas, "Extremism and Terrorism Trends in Pakistan: Changing Dynamics and New Challenges," *CTC Sentinel* 14:2 (2021); Rustam Shah Mohmand, "Why attacks surge in northwest Pakistan," *Arab News*, September 24, 2020.

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- 4 Ibid.
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A New Approach Is Necessary: The Policy Ramifications of the April 2021 Loyalist Violence in Northern Ireland

By Aaron Edwards

Violence returned to Northern Ireland's streets in early April 2021 as protesters from within the more militant fringe of the Protestant unionist community clashed with police officers in Belfast and other towns and cities across the troubled province. Much of the focus has been on the reaction of loyalists to the Northern Ireland Protocol in the Withdrawal Agreement between the United Kingdom and European Union. Yet, the trigger for these clashes was the announcement that members of the main nationalist party Sinn Féin who breached COVID-19 restrictions to attend a funeral would not be prosecuted. The 'leaderless' violence is a manifestation of deep-rooted socio-economic problems and a rejection by loyalists of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998. It also demonstrates and is reflective of the fragmentation of paramilitary loyalism. Lawmakers and intelligence and security practitioners need a more nuanced understanding of how the security environment has changed since the 1990s if they are to successfully combat the new threat in future.

It all began on Good Friday—April 2, 2021—with bricks, iron bars, and fireworks being thrown by local youths at police officers deployed on the edge of Belfast city center. It soon escalated into a concerted attack that left eight police officers injured.¹ Over the next few nights, sporadic trouble returned to towns and cities across Northern Ireland as fear spread that the violence might threaten the hard-won peace.² A journalist was beaten up, police officers were attacked, and a bus was burnt out before the violence petered out upon the announcement of the death of the Duke of Edinburgh and a period of national mourning. So far, a fresh round of protests in the wake of the Duke's funeral has failed to gather momentum, though tensions nevertheless remain

high.

The upsurge in violence in Northern Ireland in April 2021³ has been blamed on the tensions surrounding the implementation of the United Kingdom's Withdrawal Agreement from the European Union and the Northern Ireland Protocol. Focusing entirely on Brexit, however, misses the deep structural inequalities and the persistence of paramilitary structures that have remained in place since the end of the major terrorist campaigns in the 1990s. A fixation with Brexit also neglects the new dynamics that now inform the security situation, which were glimpsed when loyalists last took to protest action on the streets at the removal of the Union Flag from Belfast city hall in December 2012. The serious civil unrest that unfolded then was confined primarily to unionist working class areas. Recent violence has been more widespread, threatening to draw the nationalist community into sectarian conflict and, thereby, undermine the fragile peace process. Analysis of this volatile situation has been confounded by the tendency of lawmakers in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and elsewhere to underplay the serious challenges that remain in this deeply divided society. There is now an urgency to understand the causes and dynamics of this transformed security environment if solutions are to be found to alleviate the outstanding problems.

The recent rioting in Northern Ireland has highlighted the challenges that remain in stabilizing the security situation in Northern Ireland 23 years after the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement on April 10, 1998. It could be argued that the upsurge in violence has taken the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and Britain's domestic intelligence service, MI5, by surprise. On March 4, 2021, Chief Constable Simon Byrne told members of the Northern Ireland Policing Board that the PSNI did not “see the prospect of a return to protest or violence. We are prudently looking at an assessment of what that means in terms of a policing response or indeed any need to change our posture over the weeks ahead.”⁴ However, by April 1, Byrne's report to the Policing Board acknowledged that the “wider environment in which policing operates has experienced wide-ranging political, economic, social, technical, ethical, legal and environmental changes” and that his officers were operating in “challenging circumstances which increase the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) of the environment.”⁵ While it is superficially attractive to talk up an ‘intelligence failure,’ it may be more appropriate to acknowledge the onset of a general cognitive bias against mounting evidence that suggests the security environment has been transformed since the end of the Troubles in the 1990s.

While the Belfast Agreement has been rightly championed as an effective, political-led conflict management process that hastened the decline of major violence, it has been a process beset by imperfections. Those imperfections, including the failure to dismantle paramilitary structures—voluntary or otherwise—have led to a yawning gap between local law enforcement agencies and

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Loyalists engage in violent unrest on April 2, 2021, in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Around 100 people had gathered when bricks, bottles, and fireworks were thrown at police. (Charles McQuillan/Getty Images)

loyalist working class areas that continue to live under the jackboot of illegal terrorist organizations. The absence of a ‘peace dividend’ in these deprived areas feeds a broader disaffection within the general loyalist and unionist community for the Belfast Agreement.⁶ What has further exacerbated the situation is the presence of ethno-national competition, rather than cooperation, a zero-sum game⁷ that has distinguished local politics since the return of the local power-sharing Executive in 2007 and, following three years in cold storage, again from 2020.^a This disaffection has festered since June 2020 when high-ranking Sinn Féin politicians breached COVID-19 restrictions to attend the funeral of former IRA leader Bobby Storey. Loyalists finally took to the streets after the Director of Public Prosecutions announced that no charges would be made against 24 people who attended the funeral.⁸ Violence initially broke out in inner-city Belfast and spread out to Newtownabbey and Derry/Londonderry before taking on a cypoccat momentum

across Northern Ireland.

Political and community leaders immediately appealed for calm in the face of unrest. However, critics of the British government accused London of not having invested the comparable time and energy of previous administrations.⁹ Indeed, the Chief of Staff to former Prime Minister Tony Blair, Jonathan Powell, publicly called on the government to be more “activist” in responding to the crisis. He also said it was a “mistake to ignore the loyalists” and that more “pragmatism” was required in the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol.¹⁰ Yet, the specter of identity politics is never far from the reality of life for many people, particularly in deprived areas.¹¹ One journalist for the local unionist-leaning daily *Belfast Newsletter* observed how “Boris Johnson has failed to accept his role in destabilising Northern Ireland by dishonestly denying that there would be an Irish Sea border or the checks which have inevitably flowed from the deal he signed. Even now, he refuses to apologise for misleading the public.”¹² On the ground, however, the main paramilitary groups operating under the auspices of the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC) issued a firm denial that they were behind the protest. Nonetheless, they acknowledged the anger in their midst, appealing for calm and for “our people not to get drawn into violent confrontations.”¹³

The remainder of this article explores three key aspects of this resurgent threat to the peace process. First, it examines the history and genealogy of ideas within the more extreme fringe of Ulster

a The Northern Ireland Assembly and power-sharing Executive has been in place in one form or another since they were set up in the aftermath of the 1998 Agreement. However, they have been dogged by years of infighting, much of which is attributable to a lack of trust between the Unionist and Nationalist communities. An internal Provisional IRA feud, in which two men were assassinated in 2015, triggered a crisis accentuated by revelations around political corruption. The Executive collapsed in 2017 and only returned in early 2020.

loyalism. Second, it offers an assessment of how that violence has changed since loyalist paramilitaries called a halt to their armed campaign in 1994 and disarmed in 2009. Finally, it evaluates the response to loyalist violent protest and how the authorities might look to counter the broader threat to the security situation in Northern Ireland and address its root causes going forward.

Militant Loyalism: A Brief History

The origins of militant loyalism stretch back hundreds of years to the formation of the Laggan Army in the 1640s, which began as a militia organized by wealthy Protestant landowners in the ancient Irish province of Ulster.¹⁴ However, in their modern forms these militias only really took on the form of a large-scale paramilitary movement in the late 19th century in a bid to avert the Irish Home Rule policy of the British government. The growth of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) into a mass army in the period 1912-1914 was interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War and the UVF's absorption into the British Army.¹⁵ There was a brief attempt to reorganize the UVF after the war in a bid to protect the new unionist state that emerged from the Government of Ireland Act (1920).¹⁶ The need to ensure protection from attempts to undermine the legitimacy and security of the Unionist state continued to animate hardline elements of the Protestant community for much of the next half century.

In the 1960s, these more extreme unionists—known as “loyalists” for their extreme loyalty to the British Crown, if not always to Her Majesty's Government—believed there were existential challenges to their security coming from a variety of sources. They were suspicious of the modernizing rhetoric of a new liberal unionist government at Stormont from 1963, which they perceived as weak in the face of a perceived IRA threat. They took a dim view of the attempts of the Catholic and Protestant churches to reach out and begin a form of ecumenical dialogue, and they were worried about the irredentist ambitions of the government in the Irish Republic. Although these fears were largely manufactured out of loyalist paranoia, they were seen as real enough for some right-wingers within the Unionist Party to facilitate the creation of an illegal terrorist group.¹⁷ A new militant group known as the UVF—in homage to its paramilitary predecessor—was formed by right-wing elements within the Unionist Party in County Tyrone in 1965.¹⁸ Situated close to the border with the Irish Republic, the frontier Protestants behind the UVF conspiracy ushered the gun back into Irish politics.¹⁹ The group carried out a number of sectarian attacks and murders in 1966 before its leading members were arrested.²⁰

After the outbreak of intercommunal rioting in 1969, the UVF was joined by the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), a large-scale, vigilante-based group that organized across the six counties of Northern Ireland in the early 1970s to defend their areas from the re-emergence of militant Irish republicanism. Much of the early violence emanating from loyalist groups in the 1970s was crude. Civil unrest on the streets went hand in hand with a campaign of targeted assassination of individual members of the nationalist community and their politicians, followed by sectarian bomb attacks on licensed premises that soon gave way to a wave of car bomb attacks in Dublin and Monaghan.²¹ At the same time, the UVF carried out deniable operations across the border, while attempting to organize politically by putting up candidates in local elections. Simultaneously, the UDA channeled their paramilitary muscle in support of the Ulster Workers' Council strike in May 1974,

which was designed to bring down the newly formed power-sharing Executive.²² It succeeded within two weeks.

Apart from presenting a clear and present military and political challenge, loyalist paramilitaries also came to represent a threat within their own communities. They exerted coercive control, carrying out a policing function that should have been performed by state law enforcement agencies.²³ The violence of the early Troubles left the police ineffective in areas where loyalist groups remained strong. Loyalist paramilitaries finally called a halt to their armed campaigns in 1994 in response to the Provisional IRA's cessation.

The UVF and UDA eventually disarmed in 2009, although they refused to disband their structures, claiming in April 2018 that they rejected “criminality.”²⁴ In early December 2020, the BBC obtained a leaked MI5 document that estimated the strength of loyalist paramilitary groups to be in the region of 12,500 members.²⁵ It seems that despite paying lip service to the idea of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of their members, the quarter of a century of promised transition has inadvertently emboldened these violent non-state actors and grafted them even further to the social fabric of unionist working class areas.

Peace researcher and academic Seán Brennan refers to the agency of these loyalist groupings in post-ceasefire Northern Ireland as a form of “paramilitary peacekeeping,” which he defines as a strategy consciously adopted for the purposes of “dominating, disciplining and controlling marginalised and disadvantaged loyalist communities.”²⁶ While holding their own communities captive, some loyalist paramilitaries have used their standing in the eyes of certain local government departments and statutory agencies—and even the police—to enforce their will on their communities, including by carrying out so-called ‘punishment attacks’ and even assassinations.²⁷ Despite their entrenched position in working class areas, loyalist paramilitary groups—most of whom now operate under the umbrella of the LCC—have claimed they are not behind the recent violent protests, a claim substantiated by the PSNI.²⁸ However, another interpretation of events unfolding on the ground might also read into this denial a certain degree of powerlessness to stop the persistence of recent sporadic protests, raising the strong possibility that loyalist paramilitary structures are rusty and, in some cases, even fragmenting.²⁹

A New Way of Violence: Ulster's Answer to Leaderless Resistance

The fragmentation of loyalist paramilitary groups is not a new phenomenon. Throughout the Northern Ireland Troubles, splits were common. The IRA fractured in 1969/1970, which produced the Official and Provisional IRAs. The Officials split again in 1974 when a more radical, Marxist-inspired grouping formed the Irish National Liberation Army. The Provisionals split again in 1986 and 1997, with the splinter groups splitting and reconstituting as a New IRA in 2012.³⁰ On the loyalist side, splits have been rare. From the 1960s and 1970s, the UVF and UDA groups dominated the paramilitary stage. The UVF splintered in 1996 when the organization expelled one of its commanders, Billy Wright, who went on to form the Loyalist Volunteer Force. The UDA split in 2002 when its South East Antrim unit broke away to form its own organization. It is believed that the breakaway group has some 2,000 members.³¹ Although some violent loyalist groups appeared in the late 1990s and early 2000s, they were little more than cover names for elements within the old groups who were carrying out

unsanctioned activity.³² In their manifestations as terrorist groups, militant loyalists have generally remained cohesive.

Recent research has found that militant loyalists were perhaps more autonomous than has been admitted, in large part, perhaps, as a means of managing internal dissent.³³ According to Bruce Hoffman, terrorism is “perhaps best viewed as the archetypal shark in the water. It must constantly move forward to survive and indeed to succeed.”³⁴ That survival means staying one step ahead of the obvious counter-measures put in place by states, but it also requires adapting in order to survive by “adjusting and adapting their tactics, modus operandi, and sometimes even their weapons systems as needed.”³⁵ In Northern Ireland, often regarded as a laboratory for terrorism,³⁶ terrorists have demonstrated considerable innovation akin to their counterparts in other parts of the world. They have learned from past experience in order to improve their capability while attempting to realize their intent.³⁷ Since the 1990s, some loyalists have sought to bypass physical barriers put in place by the security forces in order to channel discontent and disaffection in more ambitious ways. The huge civil unrest centering around the banned Orange Order parades in Portadown during the Drumcree protests of 1995 onwards³⁸ saw some loyalist leaders somewhat amazingly draw on Gandhi’s concept of ‘unarmed resistance.’³⁹

The idea of unarmed resistance practiced by some loyalists, however, had less to do with Gandhi’s teachings and more to do with those advanced by leading doyens of the American extreme far-right and their ideas of ‘leaderless resistance.’ This was a strategic concept that grew in terms of its currency whereby small cells operated in a loose network configuration, rather than in a formal hierarchical organization, and were encouraged to conduct attacks sporadically to evade capture by the federal authorities.⁴⁰ Historically, even freelance terrorists such as Michael Stone, the loyalist who attacked the funeral of three IRA members killed by the SAS in Gibraltar, never truly acted alone.⁴¹ Loyalist lone actor terrorists are, therefore, rare, and so it is likely that some kind of network may evolve from extremism into violent protest action. This has always been a possibility, as indicated in relation to the Drumcree protests of the 1990s and the loyalist flag protests 20 years later in 2012–2013.⁴² In this, there is certainly an opportunity for the British security services to employ tried and tested forms of intelligence attack. As Paul Gill et al. have stated in relation to their research on lone actors, although these plots may “vary significantly in their effectiveness,” with “a common perception that lone-actor plots are virtually undetectable,” one should seek to look beyond the concept of lone actors creating their own ideology, planning and executing their own attacks with no help from others, for at some stage, everybody talks of their violent ambitions. Traditional counterterrorism methods, including signals intelligence, human intelligence, and image intelligence, can play a very valuable role in combating the threat posed by loyalist paramilitary groups.⁴³

Responding to the New Wave of Violence

It is necessary to look at the phenomenon of terrorism and political violence in Northern Ireland through a new prism. The temptation to continue to view loyalist paramilitary structures as exclusively hierarchical organizations with a top-down leadership is questionable in light of the return of recent leaderless violence to the streets. As national security professionals in the United Kingdom sought to adjust their thinking about the challenges posed by Islamist extremism and terrorism, it is now increasingly

important to do the same in relation to Northern Ireland Related Terrorism (NIRT). The unfolding violent protests witnessed on the streets of Belfast and other towns and cities in Northern Ireland suggests a more complex phenomenon is at play than described by some analysts. As this article has made clear, the drivers for the significant shifts in the security environment are many and varied. There has certainly been a degeneration of some loyalist and republican paramilitary groups into organized crime groups.⁴⁴ However, perhaps more worrying, is the increased blurring of the lines between criminality and terrorism in most paramilitary groups.⁴⁵ Since 2018, the PSNI, National Crime Agency, and HM Revenue and Customs have been playing a role in dismantling the new constellation of paramilitary and organized crime gangs.⁴⁶

The October 2021 release of the U.K. Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee report on NIRT was a welcome sign that broader International Counter Terrorism (ICT) lessons are likely to be applied to tackling the local terror threat. In evidence submitted by MI5, one officer told the committee that the security service was participating in a review of the strategic approach to tackling NIRT, “a key part of what we are doing [needs to be] more than just countering the groups and degrading them, it is ... working *** [redaction] to prevent people from joining dissident groups in the first place.”⁴⁷ Although there is a lack of detail on what exactly this will entail, there is scope for the application of lessons from the Prevent strand of CONTEST,^b which looks at disrupting pathways into terrorism and political violence. While such creative thinking is to be welcomed, however, there is still a need to acknowledge the deep ethnic, national, and cultural divisions that characterize Northern Ireland and make it a very different place from inner-city England. Traditionally, the two previous iterations of CONTEST have shied away from dealing with NIRT in any great detail. They have instead sought refuge in the mantra that such matters will be the devolved responsibility of the Northern Ireland Executive. Interestingly, MI5 told the ISC that it “does not view total suppression as realistic: they ‘do not proceed with an assumption that we can continue to drive [NIRT attacks] down to zero.’” It saw the complete reduction of violence as “an undeliverable goal.”⁴⁸ What MI5’s submission to the ISC confirms is that intelligence officers have adopted a pragmatic stance on violence in Northern Ireland. In other words, the population may just have to live with the prospect of future outbreaks of violence.⁴⁹

According to the U.K. government’s March 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, the dissident republican threat “endures and there remains a minority who aim to destabilise the peace process.” Yet, for the first time, a British security review has acknowledged how “Paramilitary and criminal activity by both dissident republican and loyalist groups adds to the wider security challenges we face in Northern Ireland.”⁵⁰

In the absence of a ‘silver bullet’ solution, however, it is perhaps worth considering what kind of options might limit or neutralize violence going forward. One of the viewpoints expressed by MI5 is that it should not only be left up to those government departments with national security portfolios to deal with violence in Northern Ireland. That no one department has a monopoly over tackling

b The four strands of CONTEST—known as the 4 Ps of Prevent, Protect, Pursue, and Prepare—each tackle the terrorist threat from different perspectives. Prevent focuses on stopping people from becoming involved in extremism and terrorism.

the NIRT challenge is obvious. It now appears likely that a whole-of-government approach will be required to tackle the causes and manifestation of violence. How might that then proceed? It may be prudent to take a more realistic critical analysis of the conflict by examining the structural causes, including socio-economic inequality, educational underachievement, lack of skills, and long-term unemployment in deprived areas. Factoring in the causes as well as the manifestation of violence would certainly leave law enforcement and intelligence agencies better placed to work with other government departments, statutory agencies, and community-based NGOs to neutralize disaffection before it becomes the well spring from which violent extremists and

terrorists can draw fuel for their gasoline bombs.

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was a significant achievement because it ended many years of sustained armed conflict. However, as the flare-up of loyalist street violence in April 2021 demonstrated, there is still much work to be done in tackling the resurgence of violent extremism in this troubled part of the world. One of the main ways that lawmakers can meet the challenge is by thinking more imaginatively about how the security situation has changed since the 1990s. Only by understanding both the old and the new dynamics now informing events in Northern Ireland can progress toward a more positive form of peace be made. **CTC**

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