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The Insider Threat

Far-right extremism in the German military and police

Florian Flade

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Idriss Mounir Lallali

Deputy Director, African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism

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"A series of extreme far-right cases among members of Germany's military and police highlight the threat of the enemy within: radicalized extremists within security services, with access to weapons, training, and confidential information," Florian Flade writes in this month's feature article. According to Flade, "The specter of armed underground cells being trained by former or current members of the security services has been a wake-up call for authorities. New measures have already been implemented within Germany's domestic and military intelligence agencies to more effectively root out enemies of the state wearing uniforms. Nevertheless, the threat will most likely persist in the coming years." He adds that "with the United States and other countries also grappling with this problem set, it is vital to share lessons learned and best practices at the international level."

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Cover: German soldiers photographed on October 27, 2020. (Patrick Pleul/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)

The Insider Threat: Far-Right Extremism in the German Military and Police

By Florian Flade

A series of extreme far-right cases among members of Germany's military and police highlight the threat of the enemy within: radicalized extremists within security services, with access to weapons, training, and confidential information. Such individuals, and especially those who are part of groups and networks, pose a new challenge to Germany's intelligence community, which is still struggling to assess the true dimension of the threat. From police chat groups where racist, nationalist, and anti-Semitic content is being shared to a Nazi sympathizer within the special forces allegedly storing weapons and explosives to a police employee allegedly looking to help far-right terrorists plunge the country into civil war, it is clear the threat is significant. The specter of armed underground cells being trained by former or current members of the security services has been a wake-up call for authorities. New measures have already been implemented within Germany's domestic and military intelligence agencies to more effectively root out enemies of the state wearing uniforms. Nevertheless, the threat will most likely persist in the coming years. The detection and monitoring of potential terrorists among fellow servicemen and police officers is a difficult task for security services, and rooting out bad actors can be even harder—especially in times when new recruits are desperately needed. With the United States and other countries also grappling with this problem set, it is vital to share lessons learned and best practices at the international level.

On February 3, 2017, Franco Hans A.,[a] a German national from Offenbach in the West German state of Hesse, entered a restroom for the disabled at Vienna-Schwechat airport and began trying to break open a maintenance shaft on one of the walls. Shortly after, a police team moved in and arrested him on terrorism charges. They had been expecting that someone would show up and pick up the gun, which had been stored in the restroom, but had no idea who it would be. A week earlier, a cleaning person had discovered the handgun hidden in a shaft in the restroom and notified the police.[1] The shaft was then outfitted with an electronic alarm system.[2]

Soon after they arrested Franco A., Austrian police found out he was a German national and an officer of the Bundeswehr (German armed forces).[b] His phone and a USB stick were confiscated and his fingerprints were taken, then Franco A. was released and sent back to Germany. Austrian investigators of the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung (BVT) then informed the German Federal Police (Bundeskriminalamt, BKA) and Germany's domestic intelligence agency, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, BfV), and the Federal Office for Military Counterintelligence Service (Bundesamt für den Militärischen Abschirmdienst, BAMAD) about the arrest.[3]

After Franco A.'s arrest in Vienna, German police started an investigation into him but did not immediately arrest him. He was identified by German authorities as a soldier in the German military stationed with the Bundeswehr's Jägerbatallion 291 at a joint French-German military base in Illkirch, Bas-Rhin department in northeastern France. In the past, he had been flagged for possible far-right extremist views because of a master's thesis he wrote at the Special Military School of Saint-Cyr in December 2013. His thesis was rejected because of anti-Semitic and racist content. An appraiser wrote that: "In terms of type and content, the text is demonstrably not an academic qualification paper, but a radical nationalist, racist appeal, which the author tries to support in a pseudo-scientific way with some effort." Franco A. was not dismissed from military service, however. Instead, he was given the chance to write a new master's thesis.[4]

The German police investigation into Franco A. soon led to a surprise: The suspect's fingerprints matched those of a Syrian refugee registered in Germany. As it turned out, Franco A. had posed as a refugee fleeing from civil war in Syria in 2016 and had applied for asylum in Germany. He had been interviewed by the staff of the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees

a In Germany, because of privacy laws, criminal suspects and those charged with crimes are generally only identified by their first name and the first initial of their last name.

b "The Bundeswehr has more than 260,000 personnel, including women and men in uniform as well as civilian staff." Bundeswehr website, May 2021.

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German Special Forces Command (KSK) soldiers train with G36 assault rifles on the unit's base in Calw, Germany, on January 23, 2017. (Franziska Kraufmann/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)

(Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, BAMF) and had falsely claimed his name was "David Benjamin" and that he hailed from a Christian Syrian family of French descent from a small village of Tel al-Hassel near Aleppo. He also stated that he had attended a French school in Syria and was not fluent in Arabic.[5] The "false Syrian" was then granted "subsidiary protection," and German authorities even assigned him refugee accommodation in Bavaria. Franco A. regularly showed up at this accommodation while he reported ill for service at the military base in France where he was stationed.[6]

The German General Federal Prosecutor opened a case against Franco A., accusing him of planning a terrorist attack—possibly an assassination of a German politician. The prosecutor accused Franco A. of planning to use his fake identity as a Syrian refugee "to direct suspicion of asylum seekers registered in Germany after the attack."[7] According to a spokeswoman for the Federal Prosecutor's Office, the planned false-flag attack "was intended to be interpreted by the population as a radical Islamist terrorist attack by a recognised refugee … [and] would have attracted particular attention and contributed to the sense of threat."[8]

On April 27, 2017, the Federal Criminal Police (BKA) moved in and arrested Franco A. and soon afterward two additional suspects, another Bundeswehr soldier, and a university student.[c] Ammunition, grenades, and weapon parts were found during the raids.[9]

Franco A. denied any terrorist activities and claimed he had been in Vienna to attend the "Ball of the Officers" there in January 2017. According to his account, after the event he went on a boozing tour through the city and stopped to urinate outside.[10] In his telling, it was in the bushes that he then found the gun later recovered in the airport restroom, a handgun made by Manufacture d'Armes des Pyrenees Francaise, Modell 17, Calibre 7.65mm Browning.[11] This weapon used to be the pistol of choice for the German Wehrmacht soldiers in occupied France during World War II.[12] According to Franco A., he had picked the gun up, put it in his jacket, and forgotten about it. In his rendition of events, the next day when he entered the airport, he panicked about the weapon that he was carrying and decided to store it in a hidden place to pick it up at a later point. He denied any assassination plans, but BKA investigators recovered some suspicious handwritten notes, allegedly listing names of potential targets[13] as well as mobile phone video footage showing a garage in Berlin[14] used by the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, a German NGO named after one of the first

c Terrorism charges against the two additional suspects were subsequently dropped.

victims of far-right violence after the reunification in Germany in 1990.[15]

The trial against Franco A. is scheduled to start at the High Court of Frankfurt am Main in May 2021.[16] Germany's General Federal Prosecutor charges him with preparing a severe state act of violence endangering the state ("Vorbereitung einer schweren, staatsgefährdenden Gewalttat" - § 89a Strafgesetzbuch), violation of the gun laws, theft, and fraud.[17]

The case of Franco A. led to a series of terrorism-related investigations against current and former members of Germany's military and law enforcement agencies. Several networks and cells were uncovered that had apparently prepared for doomsday "Day X" scenarios of civil war, had been storing weapons and ammunition, and had collected information on political enemies and potential targets.[18]

As the investigations progressed, Germany's intelligence agencies became aware of extreme far-right ideology among the staff of agencies tasked to protect the state, the government, and the constitution—posing a new threat as such individuals have "access to weapons, are trained to use them and know how to avoid detection," as one German security official described it.[19]

The emerging threat of far-right extremists in the ranks of police and military has been a wake-up call for authorities and policy makers. Several high-ranking officials, including the head of the German military counterintelligence agency BAMAD, have resigned or were dismissed in recent years over allegations of not acting decisively enough to face the challenge. Germany's Parliamentary Oversight Panel (PKGr), the oversight committee for the intelligence services, has conducted an inquiry into extreme far-right activities in the German military. After two years, the members of the committee presented a report in December 2020, stating that "in the Bundeswehr and in several other security services on federal and state level (police and intelligence agencies) – despite a security screening – there are a number of public servants with an extreme far-right and violence-oriented mindset."[20]

This article examines several clusters of far-right extremist influence that have been discovered within the German military and police, before outlining how German authorities have responded and their latest diagnosis of the threat. Finally, the article assesses the evolving challenge posed by the far-right extremist insider threat. In so doing, it examines how adequate the response has been, the lessons learned in Germany that may be applicable to other countries grappling with similar problems, and the threat outlook.

Case Studies

The "Nordkreuz" Group

Shortly after the arrest of Franco A. in Germany in April 2017, a former Bundeswehr soldier named Horst S. gave BKA investigators new insights into a loose network of former policemen, former military service members, and civilians spread across Germany that was connected through various WhatsApp, Telegram, and other messaging groups. In these chat groups, there were allegedly discussions about preparation for an upcoming civil war and about "Day X" when all state authority would collapse and self-defense would become essential.[21]

Horst S. was a former officer in the German air force and was still active in the military reserve. German security services, specifically the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), had first become aware of him after he had purchased literature in an extreme far-right online shop that was monitored by the BfV.[22] This led to the reservist being questioned by the BfV as well as BAMAD (military counterintelligence) because he was about to serve as part of the German Bundeswehr mission tasked with safeguarding the G20 summit in Hamburg. During the interview, Horst S. denied that he was a far-right extremist and made an offer to the intelligence officers: He said he could provide additional information on Franco A., who had been arrested a few months earlier.[23]

Horst S. was then questioned in July 2017 by the BKA investigators leading the Franco A. case. He talked at length about various chat groups he had been part of in which, according to his account, there had been discussions about preparations for civil war. He claimed there had been information collected on left-wing politicians, including private addresses and photos. Horst S. spoke about alleged weapon storages and told the investigators that Franco A. had been a member of at least one of these chat groups. These groups had names like "Nord," "Süd," and "Vier gewinnt."[24]

Further investigation by the BKA led to a Telegram group named "Nordkreuz," consisting at times of more than 30 members who were mostly living in the state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in the northeast of Germany. Several of the "Nordkreuz" members were current or former policemen and soldiers, and some were in the military reserve force.[25] The men of "Nordkreuz" are regarded as "preppers" by investigators,[26] meaning they belong to a survivalism subculture. Adherents to this subculture proactively prepare for emergencies, natural disasters, and social, political, or economic disorder by stockpiling supplies, such as water, canned food, batteries, candles, and gas. They also gain survival knowledge and acquire emergency medical and self-defense training.[27]

The German General Federal Prosecutor opened a case against the "Nordkreuz" group on terrorism charges, suspecting members of the group had planned to kidnap and kill politicians.[28] In August 2017, the BKA raided the apartments of six suspects in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and confiscated large quantities of weapons and more than 23,000 rounds of ammunition, most of which had been legally obtained.[29]

The leading figure and founder of the "Nordkreuz" group was Marko G., a former Bundeswehr paratrooper who had joined the state criminal police (Landeskriminalamt, LKA) in 1999, was a member of the police special forces/SWAT team (Spezialeinsatzkommando, SEK), and had served as a police sniper and shooting instructor. In December 2019, he would be sentenced to 21 months on probation for violation of German gun laws after an Uzi submachine gun and around 55,000 rounds of ammunition were found in his home during further investigation.[30]

A part of the ammunition originated from police stockpiles from various German states, including around 1,900 cartridges that were traced back to special forces police in North-Rhine Westphalia and more than 100 cartridges from police in Saxony. Until today, it remains unclear how Marko G. obtained the ammunition; he would not give any details on its origin in court.[31] Investigators believe the ammunition, including the rounds originating from police stockpiles, might have been sourced from a private shooting range in Güstrow, in Meckleburg-Western Pomerania, whose operator had links to the "Nordkreuz Group." Numerous police and military special forces units from all parts of Germany had trained at that shooting range.[32] Seventeen members of a police special forces unit

from Saxony are under investigation because the members allegedly had left large amounts of ammunition behind as a gift to the range's operator. Prosecutors suspect the bullets were used as a form of payment to the shooting range owner for unauthorized tactical shooting training.[33]

The Uniter Network

Horst S. told the BKA investigators not only about Marko G. and the other members of "Nordkreuz," but also mentioned a network of chat groups spread across the country—some of which, according to Horst S., were administered by a mysterious figure with a military background known as "Hannibal."[34]

The BKA was able to identify the person behind that nickname.[35] It was André S., a sergeant in the German military's elite special forces Kommando Spezialkräfte (KSK).[d] André S. appeared to be operating several chat groups and organizing in-person meetings. He had not only administered a network of chat groups of like-minded people discussing doomsday scenarios, possible military tactics, and war games, but was also the founder and head of a much broader network, an organization called Uniter, which describes its name as coming "from the Latin for: united in one."[36]

Uniter was founded by André S. in the city of Halle in 2012.[37] Later, a new entity with the same name was registered as a non-profit association in Stuttgart, and since February 2020, Uniter has been registered in Switzerland.[38] The current number of Uniter members is not publicly known. In the past, the organization has claimed to have around 2,000 members, but this has been disputed by Germany's security services who (as of early 2021) estimate it to be a few hundred.[39]

Uniter describes itself as starting off as "a network of active and former members of special forces from federal and state level and police," which evolved into a "network for people outside of these specialized professions." The organization's mission statement reads: "Uniter connects people of the same values and virtues regardless of their heritage, their culture or their faith. In a worldwide community security and stability should be promoted on the basis of freedom, democracy, the rule of law and human rights."[40]

Uniter claims it has assisted former special forces members to find new jobs and connect with other veterans.[41] Uniter has also sold merchandise, T-shirts, badges, and pins with its logo on it. One of these badges was found during the investigation of Franco A., the German soldier posing as a Syrian refugee.[42] Uniter claims Franco A. has never been a member.[43] It has been reported that Uniter members have offered military training to police and army in the Philippines and have also looked for opportunities to work in Libya.[44]

The Uniter network has offered various forms of security training, including self-defense courses and military-style combat training, to civilian clients. In October 2020, a court in southern Germany issued penalty orders[e] against André S. and five former members of his network over a civilian combat training session in the southern German town of Mosbach in the summer of 2018.[45]

Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution has been treating Uniter as a so-called "Verdachtsfall" since June 2020,[46] meaning the domestic intelligence agency is looking into the organization as a possible threat to German democracy because of its suspected far-right extremist aspirations. Uniter denies any extremist activities or connections, and its founding figure André S. left the Bundeswehr in late 2019.[47]

The KSK Special Forces

Germany's KSK military special forces, established in 1996 and headquartered in Calw in Baden-Wuerttemberg, have come under scrutiny because of far-right extremist occurrences in recent years, which as described above included the activities of KSK instructor André S. (aka Hannibal). On April 27, 2017, a farewell party was organized for Pascal D., then commander of the 2nd company of the KSK. At the event, which allegedly resembled a Roman emperor theme party, much alcohol was consumed, and there was archery shooting and a competition involving tossing a severed pig-head. A prostitute who was flown in was presented as an award to the winner. The woman later described the party—later dubbed "Schweinskopfparty"—in detail to journalists and the Bundeswehr, saying she witnessed soldiers listening to neo-Nazi rock music and making the "Hitler salute."[48]

Germany's military counterintelligence agency, BAMAD, has investigated several dozen KSK special forces soldiers for suspected extreme right-wing tendencies. Five soldiers were dismissed from military service, and another 16 have been redeployed to other sectors or have left the Bundeswehr. Currently, around 20 members of the KSK are still under investigation.[49]

In April 2020, police raided the property of 45-year-old KSK Sergeant Major Philipp S. in the eastern state of Saxony.[50] BAMAD had received a tip-off about the elite soldier a few weeks earlier. A cache of weapons, ammunition, and explosives were found hidden in boxes in his house and buried in the garden, including an AK-47 assault rifle; the origin of the material still remains unknown.[51] Police also found Nazi literature, postcards with swastikas, and a songbook of the SS. In March 2021, Philipp S. was sentenced to two years on probation for violation of the Military Weapons Control Act.[52]

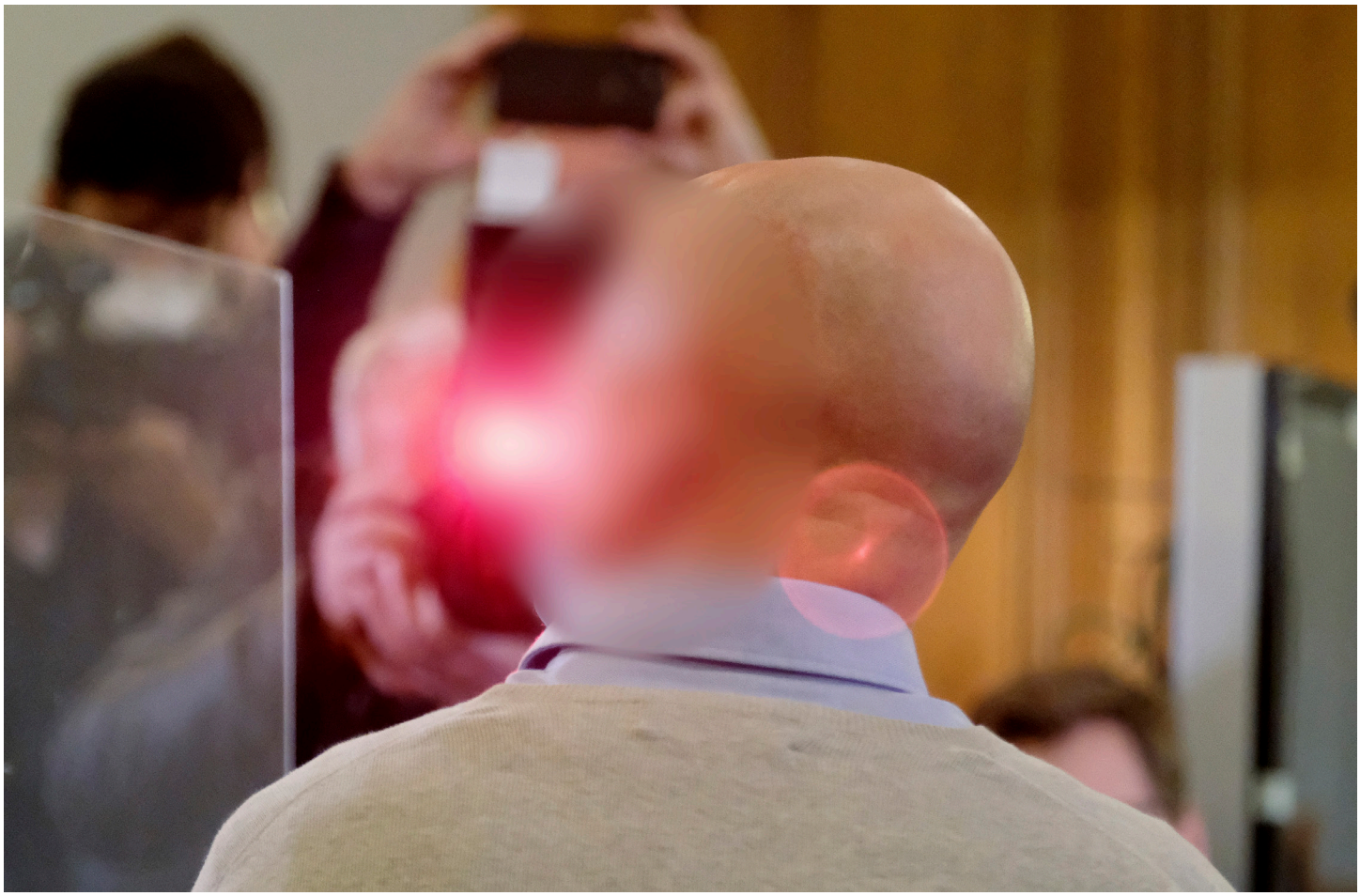
The Case of "NSU 2.0"

On August 2, 2018, at 3:41 PM, Seda Basay-Yildiz, a German lawyer of Turkish descent from Frankfurt who represented relatives of one of the 10 victims killed by the neo-Nazi terrorist group "Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund (NSU),"[f] received an anonymous fax containing racist insults and death threats against

d "The Special Operations Forces Command, or, for short, SOFCOM (in German 'KSK', for 'Kommando Spezialkräfte'), encompasses the German Army's special operations forces (SOF) and has unique capabilities at its disposal within the Bundeswehr. Spanning the entire gamut of tasks that fall within the Bundeswehr's remit, these capabilities give the Federal Republic of Germany added options in its courses of action." "Special Operations Forces," Bundeswehr website.

e In Germany, penalty orders are punishments imposed by judges in cases in which a trial is determined not to be necessary. Recipients of such an order must file an appeal within a certain time period to take the matter to trial. For more, see "What is a Penalty Order?" Rudolph Rechtsanwalte website.

f The German neo-Nazi terrorist group "NSU" killed 10 people (nine murder victims had an immigrant background, one was a policewoman) between 2000 and 2017. "The NSU is also said to be responsible for the nail bomb attack that left 22 people injured in a Turkish neighborhood in Cologne in June 2004." See Marc Saha, "NSU: What you need to know about Germany's neo-Nazi terror group," Deutsche Welle, August 5, 2020.



Defendant Philipp S., a former Bundeswehr soldier of the Special Forces Command (KSK), sits in a room of the regional court in Leipzig, Saxony, Germany, on January 22, 2021. (Sebastian Willnow/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)

her, signed "NSU 2.0."[53] It was the beginning of a series of threats. Dozens of anonymous e-mails, faxes, and text messages were sent to Basay-Yildiz and more than 25 leftist politicians, activists, comedians, and journalists in the following years: many recipients were female and many of migrant heritage. Many were signed "NSU 2.0 Der Führer" or "SS-Obersturmbannführer."[54]

The "NSU 2.0" barrage of threats stood out from other similar incidents of extreme far-right threats previously sent to lawyers, politicians, and activists[55] because some of the messages contained personal details of the victims, such as the private addresses, names, and birth dates of family members and sometimes private phone numbers or other non-public information. This could have been obtained by accessing official records, perhaps even police computer systems.[56]

As the police in the west German state of Hesse began to investigate the case of threats made against Basay-Yildiz, they came across a suspicious search in the state's police system. Someone had accessed the non-public records of Basay-Yildiz via a computer in a police station in Frankfurt only about two hours before she had received the threatening "NSU 2.0" fax.[57] Further investigation led to a group of six police officers working at the Frankfurt police station where the data was accessed. All were members of a WhatsApp group named "Itiotentreff," in which they had shared more than 40 anti-Semitic and racist images and memes from October 2015 to early 2017. One of the pictures showed Adolf Hitler on a rainbow with text that read "Good night, you Jews." Another image shows Hitler standing next to a chimney and the message: "The bigger the Jew, the warmer the shack."[58]

Investigators established that on the police computer on which Basay-Yildiz's data had been accessed, a policewoman was logged into her account at that time. She told investigators she had not been present and anyone else at the police station could have accessed the system using her password. All of the police officers involved were dismissed from duty for the racist content of their chat messages, but investigators were not successful in establishing that anyone at the police station was involved in the threats. In fact, as will be outlined later, authorities now believe no one at the police station had a witting role in the threats.[59]

A police officer with alleged links to far-right extremists who worked at the Frankfurt police station and was also a member of the WhatApp chat group was investigated early on as a prime suspect. The police officer was monitored, his house was searched, computer and mobile phones confiscated, but no evidence has emerged that he is behind "NSU 2.0."[60]

An investigative unit within Hesse Criminal Police named "AG 211" was set up with around 60 investigators working on the case. By March 2021, they had counted more than 100 threats directed at left-wing politicians, journalists, comedians, and justice and police officials coming from "NSU 2.0," a vast majority not containing personal data of the recipients. The investigation has focused on

the possibility of an extreme far-right network within the Hesse police, but years of investigation have not led to any charges against any suspects, resulting in harsh criticism against the police for not doing enough by the victims of the "NSU 2.0" threats.[61]

In July 2020, the Hesse state police chief was forced into early retirement after crucial information about a different suspicious search in a police database—regarding data later possibly used in a "NSU 2.0" threat message—was not reported to the Hesse Ministry of Interior.[62] Later that month, police raided the house of a retired police officer and his wife in Bavaria (a state that borders the southeast of Hesse) after threatening e-mails were sent to politicians in which a pseudonym appeared that the retired police officer had used in previous online postings.[63] Investigators now believe the former policeman was a copycat of "NSU 2.0."[64]

The author of the genuine "NSU 2.0" threats used a unique anonymous e-mail account of the Russian provider Yandex. Investigators have asked Russian authorities for help, without much success.[65] Investigators in Hesse have become aware of additional searches in police databases in Berlin, Hamburg, and cities in Hesse that they suspect are linked to the "NSU 2.0" threats and that are still under investigation.[66]

On May 3, 2021, a suspect in the "NSU 2.0" case was arrested in Berlin. The 53-year-old German national Alexander M., who is not a former or active member of the police, had been identified by the Hesse police investigators after postings on a far-right online website were found bearing similar use of words as in the "NSU 2.0" e-mails. The suspect had been sentenced several times in the past and was also known for making fake calls to German authorities posing as an official or public servant to obtain information from government databases. During the house search, a weapon was found. The hypothesis of investigators is that Alexander M. posed as a public servant and called police stations across Germany, including the one in Frankfurt under scrutiny, as part of an effort to piece together information on Basay-Yildiz and others who received "NSU 2.0" threats. No charges have been filed, and the investigation is ongoing. But authorities now believe that no one at the Frankfurt police station wittingly had a role in the threats. After the arrest, the Hesse Interior Minister stated that "from what we know today no Hesse police officer was responsible for the NSU 2.0 threat message series."[67]

In recent years, extreme far-right tendencies within German police have surfaced in several German states—in many cases involving chat groups.[68] In North-Rhine Westphalia, a police chat group named "Alphateam" was discovered in 2020 consisting of 31 members, all of whom were police officers working at a police station in the city of Mülheim. They are suspected of sharing racist and anti-Semitic content. More than 250 mobile phones, computers, and hard drives were confiscated during the follow-up investigation. The criminal inquiry is still pending in some cases.[69]

"Gruppe S."

In February 2020, 12 terrorist suspects, including an administrative officer of the police, were arrested and houses were searched in various cities across Germany. The investigation focused on a suspected extreme far-right group named "Gruppe S.," allegedly led by 54-year-old Werner S., a German national from Bavaria with no military or police background, living from social care (welfare benefits), and calling himself "Teutonico."[70] He is charged with recruiting the other group members in 2019 mostly via social media to form a cell planning terrorist attacks on Muslims, migrants, and politicians, with the aim of sparking civil war. The trial against the alleged group members began in April 2021 in Stuttgart.[71]

The alleged group founder, Werner S., had planned to acquire a Kalashnikov-type assault rifle, an Uzi submachine gun, 2,000 rounds of ammunition, and hand grenades, according to investigation files seen by reporters of *Stuttgarter Nachrichten* and ZDF. The group already had obtained 27 unlicensed weapons, mostly pistols, it is alleged. "If the accused had been able to carry out their planned acts of terror, we would have had a totally brutal and massive killing machine running here," said Ralf Michelfelder, chief criminal investigator for the state of Baden-Württemberg, ahead of the trial.[72]

The plot allegedly has a police nexus. Thorsten W. from Hamm is accused of offering material support to the group. At that time, he worked for the police in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia and allegedly offered €5,000 ($6,000; £4,300) to buy weapons for the attacks.[73]

The Response

With example after example emerging of the far-right extremism problem within Germany's military and police, German authorities have taken steps to counter the threat. The case of Philipp S. prompted the Federal Ministry of Defense to start a large-scale internal investigation into the grievances at KSK, extreme far-right incidents and missing weapons, explosives, and ammunition.[74] Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer promised further investigation of possible extremist networks and ordered a task force to reform the elite unit. She said there was no place for anyone in the armed forces who acted "in a radical way."[75] As a first step, the 2nd company of KSK, which was deemed to be the most problematic unit with the highest number of suspected extremists, was disbanded in July 2020.[76] In total, 60 measures to reform the KSK were announced, including changes in education and training.[77]

There was also the adoption of a more focused approach by the military counterintelligence agency BAMAD. Furthermore, in September 2020, the director of BAMAD was dismissed.[78] The new director, Martina Rosenberg, is the first woman to lead one of the federal intelligence agencies.[79] She recently presented her plans for a reform of the BAMAD to confront the threat of far-right extremism among soldiers more efficiently, demanding more staff and proposing the OSINT, HUMINT, and information analysis elements of the agency work closer together. Rosenberg made clear that BAMAD needed to be able to input its own data into the Nachrichtendienstliche Informationssystem (NADIS), the database for extremists operated by the domestic intelligence agency BfV. At the time she presented her plans, BAMAD was allowed to access NADIS for reading purposes but was not allowed to add data from its own cases.[80]

In recent years, BAMAD has changed the methods of security screening (in German, "Sicherheitsüberprüfung") for soldiers and recruits. A new law allows BAMAD to do an early background check on people applying for the military. This means their data is cross-checked with databases of known extremists before they enter military service. In the past, such screenings were only allowed after a person had already joined the military.[81] As part of the widened security screening, BAMAD is now also allowed to conduct online research on certain individuals, checking their social

media accounts for extremist content and/or racist or anti-Semitic statements.[82]

In 2018, BAMAD began using a new system to characterize investigations, utilizing four different categories:[83]

- Yellow: person is under investigation by BAMAD for potential extremist ideology
- Green: suspicion against the person under investigation is not confirmed
- Orange: suspected lack of loyalty to the constitution, further investigation is necessary to rule out extremism
- Red: person is a confirmed extremist

In December 2020, the "Koordinierungsstelle für Extremismusverdachtsfälle" in the German Ministry of Defense released its annual report on extremism in the German military, providing for the first time a detailed overview of the suspected cases of far-right extremists within the military. The statistics of the active-duty personnel showed that most extreme far-right suspects were 34 years old or younger, 50 percent served in the Army, 14 percent in the Joint Support Service, nine percent in the Air Force, and seven percent in the Navy. The majority of suspected far-right extremist soldiers were stationed at military bases in Bavaria, Lower-Saxony, and Baden-Wuerttemberg in West-Germany, but when compared to the numbers employed by the Bundeswehr payroll across the different German states, the highest proportion were from Saxony.[g]

Reservists—which in Germany means civilians regularly undergoing military training—pose a very unique challenge to Germany's security services due to their hybrid status. BAMAD is authorized only to investigate active-duty military personnel for extremism, espionage, and terrorist activities. The domestic intelligence agency BfV, on the other side, is charged with monitoring extremists and terrorists among civilians. As noted above, during the investigation into the "Nordkreuz" group, several reservists had appeared on the radar of the security services as potential terror suspects. To coordinate efforts and meet the challenge of effectively monitoring these individuals in their civilian life as well as during their military trainings and service, the BAMAD and the BfV formed a joint working group in 2017 called "AG Reservisten."[84] Officials from both intelligence agencies now regularly meet to discuss individual cases; since its establishment, the working group has met more than 20 times and discussed 1,250 cases. In 2020, the "AG Reservisten" identified 313 suspected extremists or "people with a lack of loyalty to the constitution" among reservists.[85] There is now a security background check undertaken by the BAMAD and the BfV for every reservist by default.[86]

German authorities' concern over the infiltration of far-right ideas extends to all parts of the public sector. When Germany's Minister of Interior Horst Seehofer announced in December 2019 a new plan for a more effective fight against extreme right-wing violence, one of the measures was to establish of a new "Central Office" (Zentralstelle) at the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, BfV) focusing on far-right extremists among public service staff.[87]

g Only three percent of all Bundeswehr staff are living in/originate from Saxony, but seven percent of all the suspected far-right extremist cases in the Bundeswehr investigated by the BAMAD are people from Saxony. "Koordinierungsstelle für Extremismusverdachtsfälle BMVg, Jahresbericht," Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, December 31, 2020.

How Authorities View the Threat

Amidst the growing concern over the infiltration of extreme far-right ideology into the German military and police, the BfV was given the task of composing a report about extremist incidents across Germany's public service that contravened the country's constitution. It took several months to complete the report as there was a lack of data[88] on suspected far-right extremists in public service in the federal states.

The 95-page report by the BfV titled "Rechtsextremisten in Sicherheitsbehörden" was released in October 2020. It focused on cases of extreme far-right suspects among national and state law-enforcement agencies, German military, and intelligence services (whose combined workforce consists of over 535,000 employees[89]). For the first time, a nationwide overview (federal and state level) of the threat was presented.[90] The BfV counted the cases "on the basis of which, in the period from January 1, 2017 to March 31, 2020, legal measures or proceedings were initiated on suspicion of right-wing extremist attitudes or behavior."

The results:

- There were proceedings launched against 377 individuals in relation to the workforce of police, intelligence, and customs agencies
- The military counterintelligence agency (BAMAD) reported 1,064 suspected individuals (uniformed and civilian employees) working for the German armed forces, 550 of which were being actively pursued.

Combining the cases in all the different German military, security, police, and federal and state-level intelligence agencies:

- the worst-affected state according to the report is Hesse with 59 suspected individuals, followed by Berlin (53), North Rhine-Westphalia (45), Bavaria (31), and Saxony (28).
- Only 34 of all cases were regarded as "confirmed cases" of far-right extremists, 22 of those concerning police agencies, 11 cases in the German military, and one confirmed case at the Customs agency. (Each "case" referred to in the BfV report refers to one individual under investigation.)
- The majority of confirmed cases led to criminal proceedings or disciplinary measures, including individuals whose employment has been terminated. About 20 percent of the criminal cases had been discontinued.

There was no evidence of structural far-right extremism in the country's security forces and only "a small number of confirmed cases," German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer told reporters when he presented the BfV review in Berlin. "However, every proven case is a disgrace," he added. "Every proven case is one case too much which tarnishes all members of the security agencies."[91]

In September 2020, Seehofer had rejected calls for a study into racism in the German police after authorities across the country had started to investigate numerous suspicious police chat groups. "There won't be a study that deals exclusively with the police and the accusation of structural racism in the police," Seehofer told the *Bild am Sonntag* newspaper. "That wouldn't even begin to do justice to the problem. What is needed is a significantly wider approach for the whole of society, and that's what we're working on."[92] Subsequently, however, Seehofer agreed to a wider study exploring the everyday working life of police officers and their motivation for going into the force.[93] The three-year study is named "MEGAVO,"[94] which stands for "Motivation, Attitude and Violence in the Everyday Life of Police Officers" and will be conducted by

DHPol, the German Police University (Deutsche Hochschule der Polizei).

In November 2018, Germany's Parliamentary Oversight Panel (PKGr), a committee providing oversight of intelligence agencies, decided to investigate the threat of far-right extremists in the military by launching an inquiry. For two years, the members of the PKGr have read through thousands of pages of files of BAMAD, BfV, and Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND). In December 2020, the PKGr presented their findings to the public in a non-confidential report, highlighting:

> *BfV and BAMAD recognized a worrying real and digital networking. There are personal overlaps between previously rather isolated networks of people and people from certain political parties or parts of parties at federal and state level and right-wing extremist movements. BfV and BAMAD currently have no evidence of a "shadow army" planning a violent overthrow. Nonetheless, you see right-wing extremist organized structures (networks) with links to the Bundeswehr and other security authorities. Therefore, there is a need for continuous further analysis and close observation by the authorities.*[95]

The report also criticized BAMAD for acting hesitantly and proposed several changes to its work:

> *In the course of the investigation it became clear that BAMAD had not adequately fulfilled its tasks in the fight against right-wing extremism and in counter-espionage in the Bundeswehr. BAMAD is part of the security architecture of the Federal Republic of Germany and must also perform this task in practice … The information flows and the cooperation between BAMAD in combating extremism and countering espionage with the federal and state security authorities must be significantly strengthened … The staffing and the organizational set-up of the operational evaluation and procurement work in the defense against far-right extremism and counter-espionage as well as in the forensic-technical tasks of the BAMAD must be optimized and technically upgraded.*[96]

In June 2020, PKGr started a follow-up inquiry into the subject of missing weapons and ammunition from the German military and federal police. This review is ongoing.[97]

The Evolving Challenge

From the curious case of Franco A. to the disbandment of a whole KSK special forces company, the threat of radicalized individuals and networks within Germany's military and law enforcement is now high on the agenda of the security services in Germany. The problem was underestimated for a long time and has not been dealt with in an adequate manner, as various investigations and scandals have proven. Most cases had been treated as isolated, singular incidents. Virtual networks had not been fully investigated in the past, likely leaving some potentially dangerous behaviors and individuals undetected.

The potential threat posed by weapons and ammunition stolen from military or police stockpiles has not received enough attention from the security service until recently. Thousands of rounds of ammunition, assault rifles, handguns, grenades, and explosives are currently unaccounted for.[98] As noted above, some of the ammunition obtained by the "Nordkreuz" group originated from police stockpiles. Further investigation could possibly reveal extensive extreme far-right networks within and across military, police, and security agencies.

After the parliamentary review, a number of measures have been taken by Germany's intelligence agencies. Many of these changes will most likely improve the detection and monitoring of potential terrorists in public service. The much greater challenge still lies ahead. In the coming years, a high number of civil servants in Germany will retire, which means that almost all public sectors, including the security services, are in desperate need of new recruits to fill their ranks.

The police and the military in Germany have been regarded for a long time as the "mirror of society," meaning all parts of society should be represented. But this is not the case in reality. In Germany, police recruits from immigrant communities are still underrepresented.[99]

An independent police commissioner who is representative and oversees police staff in the various state police agencies as well as at the federal level could be another effective step to act against misbehavior of individuals or even structural problems regarding racism and extreme ideologies. This could be implemented in addition to a more robust and extensive whistleblower system protecting those who report wrongdoing and extremist activities within law enforcement departments.

With regard to the Bundeswehr, some have suggested reintroducing general conscription to combat far-right extremism.[100] Compulsory military service was introduced in Germany after World War II, under the idea of 'citizens in uniform.' In 2011, general conscription was scrapped when the government decided to professionalize its troops. Today, the Bundeswehr only consists of career soldiers and long-term contract troopers.

In July 2020, the German parliament's military commissioner, Eva Högl, a Social Democrat, suggested reintroducing conscription. It had been a "big mistake" to get rid of mandatory military service, Högl argued. According to her, extreme far-right tendencies among German soldiers stemmed from that decision to scrap conscription.[101]

While it seems unlikely the country will return to mandatory military service, there needs to be a clear understanding conveyed to new recruits that extremism will not be tolerated in any shape or form. Members of the police and military not only have to follow laws strictly, but have to represent the country's constitution in their daily work. They represent the state and the monopoly on violence, so the understanding is that they need to be even more loyal to the constitution than a regular citizen. Strengthened internal leadership (in German, "Innere Führung") is required to ensure this as well as including value-based elements in all training and education.

Germany is far from alone in confronting far-right extremism among active and former members of the military and police. Recent reports, for example, highlighted some of the challenges

pertaining to active personnel faced by France[h] and Belgium.[i] It is a problem set also present on the other side of the Atlantic. According to an April 2021 report by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point and the Program on Extremism at George Washington University:

> *43 of 357 individuals (12%) charged in federal court for their role in the Capitol Hill siege had some form of military experience. Of these 43 individuals, the vast majority (93%) were veterans and not currently serving in an Active Duty, reservist, or Guard status.*[102]

According to new data reported in April 2021 by the Center of Strategic and International Studies:

> *U.S. active-duty military personnel and reservists have participated in a growing number of domestic terrorist plots and attacks … The percentage of all domestic terrorist incidents linked to active-duty and reserve personnel rose in 2020 to 6.4 percent, up from 1.5 percent in 2019 and none in 2018. Similarly, a growing number of current and former law enforcement officers have been involved in domestic terrorism in recent years.*[103]

In April 2021, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin established a countering extremism working group to tackle the issue in the U.S. military and ordered U.S. military services to "work closer together and learn best practices from each other to ensure extremists do not get into the ranks."[104] Best practices also need to be shared at the international level. The United States, Germany, and other countries need to share lessons learned about how to best counter the threat posed by the insidious spread of extremist ideas into the very organizations entrusted with protecting the public. CTC

h "An investigation by [the French news outlet] Mediapart revealing the existence of neo-Nazi sympathisers among French military personnel has prompted the armed forces minister and France's chief of defence staff to promise a crackdown on extremists within the ranks. The investigation … identified 50 members of the French armed forces, many of who brazenly posted photos and videos on social media illustrating their admiration of Nazi ideology." Sébastien Bourdon, Justine Brabant, and Matthieu Suc, "Revealed: the neo-Nazis within the ranks of France's armed forces," Mediapart, March 25, 2021.

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Idriss Mounir Lallali, Deputy Director, African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT)

By Jason Warner

Idriss Mounir Lallali is the Deputy Director and Acting (Interim) Director of the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) and was part of the multidisciplinary team designated by the African Union to launch the Centre. Among his primary responsibilities are leading the design and development of the Centre's Counter-Terrorism Early Warning System and managing a team of analysts who conduct policy analysis, studies, synthesis, and audits on terrorism in Africa. He previously provided assistance to consultants appointed by the A.U. to the African Anti-Terrorist Model Law, managed the Focal Point Community Database, and led the Monitoring Process of ratification of the African and Universal Counterterrorism Instruments. Mr. Lallali currently also leads a team of experts who evaluate the counterterrorism capacity of African Union member states.

CTC: Can you to tell us a little bit about ACSRT and your position there? What does ACSRT do, and how does it fit into the broader African Union Peace and Security Architecture?

Lallali: I'm the Acting Director of the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism, which has its headquarters in Algiers, Algeria. I've been working at ACSRT[a] for over 17 years. I was head of Analysis Unit—Alert and Prevention Unit—for 10 years, and I think I still have that analyst mindset in the back of my mind, even if more recently I've been in managerial positions.

ACSRT was established on October 13, 2004, out of necessity, I would say, as a result of the emergence of the threat on the African continent. The A.U. [African Union] had as early as 1999 developed its counterterrorism framework, translated into the 1999 Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism, commonly known as the Algiers Convention since it was adopted in Algiers.[1] This was followed by the 2002 Plan of Action for the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism,[2] followed by the 2004 Protocol to the 1999 Convention[3] that came to address some of the inherent weaknesses of the Convention and their impact on its implementation.[b] These were the first major documents and decisions regarding terrorism that were compiled into legal instruments by the A.U. member states. Member states adopted them, ratified them, and they now guide our work.

Already in 2002, we could read between the lines that there was a need for the A.U. to take the lead and create a coordinating structure when it comes to preventing and combating terrorism. And when you look at the Plan of Action of 2002, you will realize that this was indeed a foundation upon which ACSRT was laid.

ACSRT's main missions are collecting and centralizing information related to terrorism in Africa, analyzing trends to inform A.U. and member state decisions and actions, building the prevention and combating of terrorism capacity of A.U. member states, and assisting member states in implementing their international counterterrorism obligations—namely, the relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions, international standards and norms, and so on.

How do we do that? ACSRT has three fundamental units. The first unit is the Alert and Prevention Unit. The second is the Database and Documentation Unit. The third is the Training and Equipment Unit. The first and second units form what we call the Continental Early Warning System [CEWS] on CT. This works to provide continuous threat assessment and analysis on terrorism and violent extremism in Africa. It also works to assess the capacity and readiness of member states and to identify CT gaps and technical/operational capacity needs.

CTC: So the Continental Terrorism Early Warning System (CTEWS) is based at ACSRT.

Lallali: Yes, ACSRT is the technical arm of the A.U. on CT-related matters, including CT capacity-building and policy orientation. The Centre is basically the one-stop shop for anything that deals with CT and violent extremism on the African continent. In this regard and in implementation of our mandate of, inter alia, enhancing information sharing and dissemination between the Centre and the A.U., but also between and with A.U. member states and regions, we established what we commonly call the ACSRT-CT Early Warning System (CTEWS), which is operational 24/7 and is in continued and permanent liaison and contact with National and Regional Focal Points. These are the interlocutors that have been officially designated by their member states and regions to liaise with ACSRT. They are the point of entry and exit of all information exchange between ACSRT and the African Union member states and regions. When I say regions, I have to also indicate that the idea of a region has developed from Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to also now encompass Regional Mechanisms (RMs).[c] As the threat evolved on the continent, the creation of new security mechanisms and initiatives has required us to go beyond the RECs

a Editor's note: ACSRT is also known by its French acronym CAERT (Centre Africain d'Etudes et de Recherche sur le Terrorisme).

b Editor's note: Idriss Mounir Lallali added that "in this respect, it was noted that the Convention did not provide for an implementation mechanism and adequate measures for the suppression of terrorist financing. The provisions on human rights protection were also deemed to be insufficient, and the risks of terrorists acquiring weapons of mass destruction were not adequately addressed."

c Editor's note: Regional mechanisms are ad hoc intergovernmental organizations that the African Union has set up to help coordinate security among member states within regions that do not have organizations that would represent them otherwise.

and to look at the RMs as part of our Focal Point community.

The Focal Point corresponds to a particular institution or lead agency working on counterterrorism, and within which you will have a desk officer or a contact person that will allow us not only to request terrorism or CT-related information but also to disseminate information and early warning products emanating from us to the relevant stakeholders at the level of our member states and regions. As you can imagine, with the development of the threat, we realized that even the concept of Focal Points and its roles and responsibilities (as stipulated in the Code of Conducting Regulating the Relationship between the Focal Point and the ACSRT), had to evolve to integrate the many criminal activities that were linked to terrorism that needed to be embedded in that structure. In that respect, we started promoting and encouraging member states to establish national CT fusion centers, bringing under one roof all actors that have a role to play in CT, including financial intelligence units, which until now in many of our member states were not considered part of the national intelligence community. As a matter of fact, in collaboration with the U.N. Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) and the U.N. Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), we are assisting several countries in developing their national fusion centers, including Mozambique, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Uganda, and Botswana. Many other countries have since expressed the wish to get assistance in developing their fusion centers, including regions such as SADC,[d] who we are assisting in establishing their regional CT center.

Indeed, from a regional perceptive, in Africa we have two fusion centers which are already operational: L'Unité de Liaison de Fusion (UFL) – Sahel, which is based near the ACSRT office in Algiers, and the East Africa Fusion and Liaison Unit (EA-FLU), which is based in Kampala, Uganda. Both have clearly demonstrated the importance of such structures in enhancing regional CT cooperation and coordination.

CTC: Groups aligned with al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State are present in many parts of Africa. What is your assessment of the evolving threat they pose?

Lallali: When I look at al-Qa`ida and I look at the Islamic State, they are two faces of the same coin. They have the same objectives. But they don't agree on how to implement their agendas: one is looking towards the long term—this is the al-Qa`ida folks and their veterans—while the other, namely the Islamic State, is much more focused on the short term, in tune with the fast-paced and tech-savvy Generation Z; they are as fast as the internet connection. They want to get things done quickly, whereas al-Qa`ida is still working at the Commodore 64 pace. It's a generational clash.

Since their objectives are the same, sometimes I question whether they are really in competition or whether there is a division of labor between the two groups. I always push our analysts to think that way. Maybe while al-Qa`ida is really looking at how to achieve those goals in the long term, the agreement with Daesh, or the so-called Islamic State, is "keep the international community occupied while we're doing our own longer-term business." Al-Qa`ida has a more sustainable approach compared to Daesh, which seems to be all over the place, trying to be everywhere geographically and, by that, diverting the attention on to its actions and not on AQ.

I think al-Qa`ida's survival over 20 years or 30 years now demonstrates a very high degree of resilience, long term-thinking, and a long-term strategy that has yet to be well demonstrated by Daesh or any of the Daesh affiliates.

When it comes to threats, in the Sahel, you have mainly al-Qa`ida in the form of JNIM [Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin] and the Islamic State in Greater Sahara. It is important to highlight that JNIM is a conglomerate of the main al-Qa`ida affiliates operating in the region, and who are very active in the other countries of the Sahel.

It is also important to note that the threat posed by the Islamic State in Greater Sahara tends to be exaggerated; however, it should not be underestimated. Although the group did not conduct as many terrorist operations in 2020 compared to JNIM, it demonstrated its ability to launch deadly attacks, in particular in Niger; the best examples are the March 2021 terror attack of the villages of Intazayene, Bakorat, and Wistane, in Niger near the border with Mali that left over 137 villagers dead[4] and the December 2019 attack in Inates, in the Tillabéri region of Niger, where a large group of fighters belonging to the ISGS attacked a military post using guns, bombs, and mortars, killing over 71 soldiers.[5] The Inates attack was one of the worst attacks in the history of Niger and also among the first in which ISGS used drones to video the attack. It seems that ISGS tends to focus more on attacks that capture media attention than low-key attacks, in an effort to perpetuate the ISIS slogan *baqiya wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding).

Al-Qa`ida is quite persistent through JNIM. Even the leadership itself has gone through some changes whereby it went through different morphing phases, adapting to the local context and conditions. It went through a "Mauritanization" phase and more recently a "Sahelian" phase where even the al-Qa`ida representatives within the Sahel are much more local than they are regional.[6]

We also have the Islamic State in Western Africa (ISWAP) and Boko Haram.[e] The clash between the leaders of the two groups could be a strategy like the one that I presented to you earlier where they are in fact cooperating. On the one hand, Boko Haram under Abubakr Shekau, is focusing on Nigeria, but there are many reports that his fighters are still crossing borders here and there, notably in Cameroon. And on the other hand, ISWAP is much more regionally focused. Another important feature of the difference between Boko Haram and ISWAP is that while the former tends to focus more of its attacks against civilian populations and occasionally attacks military personnel, ISWAP primarily targets military personnel and their bases. There are some indications that terrorist elements will move from one group to another, making it difficult for analysts to understand the dynamics within the groups and estimate the

d Editor's note: The Southern African Development Community (SADC) is a regional economic community consisting of 16 member states stretching southwards from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania.

e Editor's note: Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad (colloquially known as "Boko Haram") leader Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015 to form the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP). By the following year, Shekau had been expelled from ISWAP. His faction is again referred to as Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad. Jason Warner, Ryan O'Farrell, Heni Nsaibia, and Ryan Cummings, "Outlasting the Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State Threat," *CTC Sentinel* 13:11 (2020).

number of terrorists in each group. This creates a lot of confusion from that point of view.

In terms of prestige, ISWAP is now being superseded by Islamic State in Central Africa, in particular Al Sunnah wa Jama'ah (ASWJ) in Mozambique.

CTC: ISWAP is composed of two wings. ISWAP-Core is made up of Boko Haram fighters who pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015 and is based in the Lake Chad basin. The other wing, ISWAP-Greater Sahara (or ISWAP-GS), used to be called the Islamic State in Greater Sahara and has been active in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso.[7] To what extent are you seeing evidence that the two wings of ISWAP are cooperating?

Lallali: The relationship has always existed. Let's go back to the roots. ISGS has its roots in AQIM and before that, the GSPC.[f] Let's not forget that al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb had trained in the past Boko Haram individuals, in particular in the manufacturing of IEDs, sharing information, tactics, expertise, and personnel among these groups, which in itself may explain how Boko Haram has been able to quickly develop its bomb-making expertise and tactics. So, individuals within Boko Haram have always had links with AQIM. If you set aside the titles of the groups, you're still dealing with the same individuals, and so the links are still going to be there. There is this camaraderie and fraternity, whether we like it or not, that exists between these people, which is built on trust that pushes them to continue to cooperate regardless of the differences that may arise at some point or another. Those that came from al-Qa`ida to support Boko Haram in certain operations are the same ones that created ISWAP-Greater Sahara, so that link will definitely be there.

Strategically, from a marketing point of view, I would suspect that Daesh, the mother organization, is the one that pushed for this merger between the two organizations, but there is not as of yet any empirical evidence to demonstrate a formal cooperation between ISWAP-Core and ISWAP-GS, except for the few occasions where ISWAP-GS claimed responsibility for attacks carried out by ISWAP-Core. However, this desire for a merger may be driven by a number of factors. First, because the Islamic State needed to offset the operational capacity losses that ISGS had shown on the ground since they were not conducting as many terrorist activities as they did in the past. So, it was somehow a way to offset that by reinforcing its ranks by merging it with ISWAP-Core or giving the impression that now they have a much wider geographic area controlled under the Daesh banner in West Africa. Strategic considerations from the point of view of terrorist groups have to be taken into consideration when analyzing the merger.

Second, from my point of view ISWAP-Core and ISWAP-Greater Sahara had to create a united front against the expansion of JNIM. They had to give the impression that there is a consortium now also being founded by Daesh affiliates in Western Africa, since—let's not forget—JNIM is just a consortium, too.

f Editor's note: GSPC, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, was an offshoot of GIA (the Armed Islamic Group). Several years after aligning itself with al-Qa`ida, it rebranded itself al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007. For more, see Lianne Kennedy Boudali, *The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qaida's Global Jihad* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007) and Jonathan Schanzer, "Algeria's GSPC and America's 'War on Terror,'" Washington Institute, October 2, 2002.

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When it comes to the conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida affiliates in Africa, a key question is: are we seeing a conflict between individuals, or is it a dictated/directed conflict between the global groups themselves? They were working together. They're coming out of the same womb basically, which is al-Qa`ida's womb. Remember, the leader of ISWAP-Greater Sahara, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, was a lieutenant to al-Qa`ida's "MBM"—Mokhtar Belmokhtar—let's not forget that. He was always at his side.

If you look at the region closely, you realize that al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State clash in certain geographic areas, but they are at the same time cooperating elsewhere. The Liptako-Gourma region [the border region of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger] for instance is the best example. While they are seemingly clashing in northern Mali, they are cooperating in the tri-state border area, where they exchange HUMINT skills, personnel, and even conduct joint operations. One has to take a magnifying glass and really look deeper into this evolving relationship and really question, is it individuals who are still hostile to one another because of an historic grudge they hold against each other, or is it really the two groups fighting each other? It's difficult to say.

CTC: On the other side of Africa, the Islamic State has a two-winged Central African Province (ISCAP), with one wing—ADF/ISCAP-DRC—active in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the other—ASWJ/ISCAP-Mozambique—active in Mozambique. What is your assessment of the threat posed by the DRC wing?

Lallali: The DRC wing has reportedly grown out of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF)[g] and has become a significant force. Initially, honestly speaking, we thought, "what would the ADF want to do with ISIS, and why would ISIS want to migrate to the region?" However, there were some well-known individuals linked to ISGS that were spotted in the region. One specifically was involved in kidnap-for-ransom in the Sahel. What was puzzling and intriguing is, why is this individual in the region of Central/East Africa—countries bordering DRC? And for me, that was the first indication that something was going to happen between the ADF and the Islamic State, but also that the situation was about to get bad in this part of the continent.

Around the same period, we had reports of some Arab figures in the ranks of ADF, in addition to ISIS funding to ADF, as revealed by the arrest of the ISIS "financial facilitator" Waleed Ahmed Zein for allegedly transferring funds to ADF. So this was also another indicator that Daesh was starting to think about either migrating or opening a new front in Central Africa.

And due to the already volatile situation in eastern DRC, particularly in the Ituri and North Kivu provinces, ISCAP is exploiting the situation to advance their attacks. Indeed, for most of 2020 and for the first half of 2021, terrorist and violent extremist attacks in the DRC have surpassed all other regions of the continent including the Sahel that was hitherto considered as the epicenter.

But then again, in terms of manpower for the DRC wing of ISCAP to recruit foreign fighters, I would assume that it's quite difficult for FTFs coming from Syria and Iraq to reach DRC; in addition, it will also be seriously challenging for them to acclimate and operate in the jungles of DRC. The environment is completely different to that they are accustomed to.

CTC: I'd like to talk more about the situation in Mozambique as regards ASWJ/ISCAP-Mozambique. Can you speak to how the African Union and ACSRT are thinking about the threat it poses?

Lallali: With regard to ISCAP's other wing in Mozambique, what was interesting was this emergence of small groups of militants in northern Mozambique that became a group to reckon with. Having experienced the development of the terror threat in northern Mali, we at ACSRT were telling our Mozambican colleagues to 'watch out,' as something was brewing, which if not tackled now would become a serious problem to manage. But as was the case with Mali, I don't think they grasped the gravity of the situation and did not necessarily take seriously the threat as they were supposed to. The indicators were there; all that needed to be done was to look.

In addition, we had clear indication of linkages between the ISCAP in DRC and Mozambican elements. Our DRC colleagues shared with us information and intelligence of the arrest of suspected terrorists of Mozambican origin in the DRC with technical skills and indicating that some of these Mozambican operatives were getting access to training, weapons, explosives, you name it. However, we did not receive indications that these Mozambican operatives returned to Mozambique, but since this coincided with the emergence of Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamaa (ASWJ), at the time we could only assume that these trained individuals would soon be taking their new expertise back home with them to help ISCAP-Mozambique. This was later demonstrated by the type of attacks this group was able to conduct in the northern province of Cabo Delgado. This was similar to how Boko Haram was trained by AQIM, where Boko Haram saw their operational capacity increase dramatically, from using machetes to conducting sophisticated attacks using AK-47s, RPGs, and all types of IEDs.[8] So this also was an indicator that there is an acquired skill, there is training that's being conducted, and there is technical support that is being provided to the Mozambican terror group by ISCAP in the DRC. I don't think that either the Southern African Development Community (SADC) or Mozambique itself appreciated the seriousness of the threat.

At the level of the A.U. and ACSRT, we have been monitoring, since at least 2017, and continue to monitor and follow the situation in Mozambique and the two regions—namely East and Southern Africa—very closely and with great concern. We are worried that if the threat is not contained, it will certainly expand beyond Mozambique to neighboring countries, namely Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. Tanzania, which borders Mozambique, is already impacted, as demonstrated by the recent terror activity.

The recent March 2021 attack in Palma, Mozambique,[9] redoubled our concerns, as it was a demonstration of a well-developed and executed sophisticated attack. It also showed a high degree of intelligence gathering and military planning. This could not have been possible without some skilled individuals. We are therefore concerned about the flow of fighters from outside the region. As a result, we're working in coordination with SADC to assist Mozambique and its neighboring countries, while at the same time running a number of consultations with our partners on how best to assist Mozambique and the region to avoid a spillover. As a matter of priority, for instance, we are in collaboration with the UNOCT [United Nations Office of Counterterrorism] and the U.N.'s Counterterrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), working on assisting Mozambique in developing its national fusion center, at least so that all the security agencies can start sharing information and intelligence. If you look at how the threat evolved and certain incidents that happened, it is a clear indication of the need for greater coordination between the different law enforcement and security agencies on the ground, as little coordination can only result in poor or ill-prepared reaction. It's unacceptable that such a strong country as Mozambique, with strong defense forces, is subjected to such an aggression by a group that can not only mount such attacks but occupy space for a period of time.

When we look at ASWJ/ISCAP-Mozambique, let's not forget they have occupied a port, Mocimboa da Praia, for quite some time.[10] And we're trying to avoid also the risk associated with the increasing tendency of involving private military contractors [PMC] for

g Editor's note: One of "ISCAP's two wings is the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an Islamist rebel group that originated in Uganda in the early 1990s. Following a failed rebellion in western Uganda in 1995, its members were forced to flee to eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where they embedded themselves within local conflict dynamics as violence spiraled into two regional wars and enduring instability. A 2014 military offensive by the Congolese military severely degraded the group and forced its longtime leader, Jamil Mukulu, to flee to Tanzania, where he was later arrested and extradited back to Uganda. His successor, Musa Baluku, rebuilt much of the group's strength in eastern DRC and embarked on a campaign of retaliatory massacres that killed almost 3,000 Congolese civilians between October 2014 and October 2019, while pivoting the ADF's rhetoric and identity away from its focus on Uganda and toward that of the broader transnational jihadi movement." Warner, O'Farrell, Nsaibia, and Cummings.

obvious reasons. First, as the A.U., we look at this question from the point of view of the 1977 Convention Against Mercenaries. Second, we are concerned about the human rights violations and the absence of accountability of these PMC companies vis-à-vis any mistakes or bad handling they would make. Third, the evolving PMC presence I personally think is quite risky because it discredits the perception of citizens of their government's capacity to protect them, since you are, basically, requiring a private company or a foreign power to come and handle the situation, which is quite counterproductive and could feed into the cycle of militant recruitment. It also gives the impression that the terrorist groups are much stronger than government, since the government has to seek external help to overcome a small group of thugs with AK-47s, for instance. So the involvement of PMCs and any foreign military power, as far as I am concerned, is quite sensitive, and it has many more downsides than upsides.

CTC: Are there any issues that you see governments, analysts, and observers from outside the region misinterpreting about the violent extremist landscape on the African continent?

Lallali: There are many indeed, which unfortunately may if not presented accurately misinform and influence wrongly decisions. The first, I would say, is this growing attempt to link intercommunal violence to terrorism and this tendency of considering intercommunal fighting as part of CT. While there is a very high degree of probability that terrorist groups will try to exploit such conflicts to their advantage, the two are not linked. Intercommunal violence/conflicts are rooted in history—shepherds and herdsmen fighting over land and access to water. As we struggle to come to terms with global warming, such conflicts will certainly be on the increase. In this regard, we have to invest our energy in finding solutions to such violence before it escalates to ensure that they are not exploited by Daesh or al-Qa`ida. Again, terrorists will always exploit conflicts or any grievances the community might be experiencing or expressing.

The second issue is radicalization. Many countries in Africa are investing heavily in training imams, religious scholars, and so on, and I think many countries on the continent, including Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and the Sudan, are ready to share their expertise in terms of deradicalizing of former fighters, terrorist fighters, and so on. Having said that, the issue of radicalization in prisons, for instance, is not yet as big of a threat in Africa as it is in the West, since, in Africa, individuals are mainly joining terrorist groups for other reasons than ideology. Radicalization comes usually after the enrollment into the group. Efforts should be focused more to prevent our populations from becoming captivated by the recruitment efforts of the terrorist groups.

The third issue that I think gets overblown is the worry about foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) coming from Syria and Iraq to the continent. Although there were numerous reports about the presence of thousands of these on the continent, we haven't seen this in serious form yet. What is, however, worth noting is that from an African perspective, FTFs are not a new phenomenon on the continent. A great number of terrorist groups in Africa had within them foreign elements or were supported and/or financed by individuals or entities from abroad, if we consider the U.N. definition of FTF.

I also think we need to be careful with keywords like "radicalization" and "violent extremism," countering/combating/preventing violent extremism, etc. This is creating more confusion among member states. They don't know anymore what their obligations and what their priorities are. Do we apply the same resolutions and international instruments on violent extremism that we apply on terrorism? What should the national/regional CT strategy include? What mechanisms are required to be established, what should be included in the law?

Getting clarity on the use of these terms will be a serious challenge that we have to collectively deal with, because a lack of understanding of these terms could be the barrier to effective and efficient CT management, collaboration, and cooperation. Take the example of intelligence sharing, for instance. We have a number of U.N. Security Council resolutions, include the landmark 1373 (2001) resolution, that sets obligations on member states to share terrorism-related information. In the absence of clarity of terms such as violent extremism, the resolution might not apply if groups are simply labeled "violent extremists."

CTC: We've covered a lot of ground. Are there any points you would like to make in closing?

Lallali: Last year, I was fortunate enough to do three important briefings—namely to NATO, the Daesh Coalition, and the European Union Special Representative for the Sahel—related to the question, "How can the U.S./international community assist?" I found myself coming back again and again to the same issues when trying to answer this question. The first is that our partners need to listen more to African countries' needs, not try to impose on them their own approach or own assistance that they think they need. You have to engage the countries, to tell you exactly what their weaknesses are and what their specific need is. They are better positioned to tell you and express that clearly. There is a need to listen more to countries, to view the threat from their point of view and local context, and try to assist within the framework of their national counterterrorism plan of action. That would be quite useful.

Second, there is a need to avoid creating new initiatives or security arrangements instead of improving existing ones. It's not because an initiative doesn't work that we have to create new ones. We have to understand why these haven't worked and how they can be assisted to fulfill the intended mission, because a lot of money and a lot of man-hours have been invested in them, and in addition, a lot of lessons learned can be drawn from them—even if there are failures. One then has to assess and evaluate what went wrong and how one can improve the existing initiatives.

Third, we need improved command and control. In terms of CT arrangements, in particular military arrangements, if we take the example of the Sahel countries and what's happening in the Sahel, we have G5-Sahel, there is the French led-Operation Barkhane, the U.N., and now there is the deployment of the European Special Operation Forces Task Force Takuba.[11] However, there is no unified command and control. A lot of resources are wasted but not much development is felt on the ground. We still are seeing a geographic expansion of the terror threat. It is quite clear that all this military intervention did not really contain or eliminate the threat. On the contrary, the threat has even spread beyond the G5-Sahel countries, requiring us to look at this beyond the G5-Sahel countries and to start looking at it from the broader perspective of the West Africa region.

Fourth, I think there is also space for dialogue and negotiation with certain groups. Why is dialogue important? Because you want to weed out the local terrorist from the foreign elements; you want to also give an opportunity to those terrorists that were forcibly recruited into the ranks to surrender. Because negotiations could be beneficial, it is counterproductive when you have some partners coming out and saying, "there will be no negotiation." This disregards the sovereignty of states. Our partners have to understand that African states are independent and sovereign. Their decisions that concern their national stability, security, national unity, and territorial integrity have to be respected. Our member states are in better positions to know exactly what works best for them. Our partners should 'try us out' more and listen to us more. I think that would avoid many of the missteps and problems. Having said that, I have to express our appreciation to all our partners that continue supporting our continental organization and member states, including the U.S., and hope that this support continues, as overcoming terrorism and violent extremism will only be achieved if we collectively work together in the fight against all forms of the threat. Continued cooperation and more comprehensive approaches that address the underlying drivers of terrorism and violent extremism are necessary to prevent the spread of terrorist activity in Africa.

For its part, the African Union Commission, through its relevant specialized entities, spearheaded by the ACSRT, will continue to work with member states, partners, and the international community in order to galvanize support, provide direction, facilitate assistance, and enhance cooperation—all of which are conditions for success against the scourges of terrorism and violent extremism. Ensuring a secure and stable environment free from violent conflict and threats to peace and development is a key objective of the African Union. Winning the challenge posed to peace and security is therefore a question of survival for the continent. Overcoming terrorism will only be achieved if we collectively work together in the fight against all forms and manifestations of the threat. CTC

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The Threat Is the Network: The Multi-Node Structure of Neo-Fascist Accelerationism

By Alex Newhouse

Since 2015, the Atomwaffen Division has received the bulk of academic and media attention in coverage of the neo-fascist accelerationist movement. Atomwaffen's criminal history, hyper-violent propaganda, and involvement with neo-Nazi ideologue James Mason gave it a particularly notorious reputation. As a result, many researchers and reporters have referred to Atomwaffen as a keystone group that has generated many affiliates and splinter groups throughout the world. However, evidence from Atomwaffen's development and collapse reveals that it was not the apex of a hierarchy of groups, but rather one node in a larger network of violent accelerationists. This network is built on membership fluidity, frequent communications, and a shared goal of social destruction. This framework is vital to understanding how and why action against individual groups is not sufficient, and why the threat from Atomwaffen has not faded in spite of its reported "collapse." The lesson to be drawn from the history of the Atomwaffen Division is that the current threat of neo-fascist accelerationism exists more in the evolution of the network as a whole, rather than in any one individual group.

On July 25, 2020, a blog post appeared on an extreme far-right website that announced the formation of the "National Socialist Order" (NSO), a new terrorist group situated within the broader neo-Nazi accelerationist milieu.[1][a] The NSO declared that it would "build an Aryan, National Socialist world by any means necessary", and it would be led by some of the remaining membership of the Atomwaffen Division, a now-defunct U.S.-based group that had gained notoriety for a string of high-profile murders during the 2010s.[2]

The formation of the NSO out of the remnants of Atomwaffen represents one example of a much larger trend within neo-Nazi accelerationism around the world: the continual collapse, reshuffling, and reemergence of groups over time. A close look at the legacy of Atomwaffen shows that significant fluidity of membership, themes in branding, and shared goals tie its successor groups more closely together than may otherwise be apparent. However, it also reveals that Atomwaffen did not serve as an umbrella group for those that came after it; rather, it is but one node in a much larger global network of accelerationist activity.[3]

The accelerationist movement encompasses much more than just neo-Nazi and neo-fascist activists, but neo-fascist groups represent its most violent, dangerous, and extreme core: The vast majority of the groups presented in this article have been alleged to have either plotted or participated in violent activity.[4] Although these groups generally never expand beyond a few dozen members, their demonstrated commitment to violence for the sake of sparking more violence indicates that investigating the network's survival and operational strategies is increasingly important.

To advance understanding of how the network has developed, this article will first explore the history of the Atomwaffen Division. Then it will examine the expansive transnational network cultivated by its members and allies, before finally looking at the current state of the network's activities following disruption efforts by law enforcement agencies. Along the way, it presents a novel way for conceptualizing the threat posed by neo-Nazi accelerationist communities.

The Rise and Fall of Atomwaffen

Emergence and Rise

The Atomwaffen Division was strongly networked with other groups, individuals, and movements from the moment it was founded. It emerged from the Iron March website,[b] an internet forum that was active from 2011 to 2017.[5] Iron March was founded by a man named Alisher Mukhitdinov, who went by the alias Alexander Slavros online. While little is known about the personal life of Mukhitdinov, researchers believe that he is an Uzbek immigrant to Russia.[6] He is possibly well-connected to various figures in extreme far-right politics and activism himself, and he claimed in a direct message on Iron March that notorious Russian

a "Accelerationism is an ideologically agnostic doctrine of violent and non-violent actions taken to exploit contradictions intrinsic to a political system to 'accelerate' its destruction through the friction caused by its features." Jade Parker, "Accelerationism in America: Threat Perceptions," Global Network on Extremism & Technology, February 4, 2020.

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b Iron March was taken down from the internet in 2017, but anonymous anti-fascists obtained the website's entire database and published it online in 2019. Researchers are now able to access the raw data, which is hosted on archival sites, or they can use activist-run searchable sites. In this article, Iron March data is cited with the author, type of message (either forum post or direct message), and date of post. These citations do not include web links to avoid amplification.

Andrew Dymock arrives at the Old Bailey, London, where he is appearing on terrorism charges, on January 3, 2020. (Aaron Chown/PA Wire URN:49327516/Press Association via AP Images)

ideologue Aleksandr Dugin had once recruited him for the Global Revolutionary Alliance.[7]

While running Iron March, Mukhitdinov played an active role in facilitating discussions, connections, and organization of the website's members. According to analysis of the Iron March database, he sent nearly 700 direct messages and authored 7,600 forum posts.[8] He also frequently assisted in the creation and distribution of propaganda and celebrated the organization of in-person groups, such as Atomwaffen and National Action.[9]

The result of Mukhitdinov's efforts and the highly engaged Iron March user base was that the website gave rise to numerous different named groups, many of which went on to commit violence. For example, Matthew Heimbach, a prominent figure in ethnonationalist and accelerationist circles, recruited for the Traditionalist Workers Party in the Iron March forums.[10] Heimbach is best known for participating in extensive networking efforts among extreme far-right movements, such as the short-lived Nationalist Front that united the Traditionalist Workers Party, National Socialist Movement, Vanguard America,[c] and League of the South under one banner.[11] Heimbach also forged numerous transnational linkages to neo-fascist movements like Golden Dawn in Greece and the Russian Imperial Movement, which is now a U.S.-designated terrorist organization.[12] Vanguard America and Patriot Front[d] also originate from organizing efforts on the website.[13]

Yet Iron March's most impactful legacy was facilitating the development of a transnational network of openly neo-fascist accelerationist groups. Many of these groups explicitly advocated for the violent overthrow of governments and the creation of totalitarian Aryan nations. After its inception, Iron March provided a natural consolidation point for a number of extant accelerationist subnetworks; members of historically important groups such as the Azov Battalion in Ukraine, CasaPound in Italy, and the transnational white supremacist group Blood and Honour had adopted the forum early on.[14] Over time, Iron March increasingly became the de facto gathering place for the global accelerationist movement. The user base grew more strongly linked, and transnational relationships were developed.[15]

Even as users participated in in-person organizing, training, and activism, the center of gravity remained on Iron March. At its height, the website and the network it had facilitated allowed extremist and terrorist groups to outsource certain important infrastructural and developmental tasks to the crowd, such as the creation of propaganda materials and collaboration on organizational development.[16] Users also shared tactical guidebooks alongside ideological and philosophical material, ranging from bomb-making manuals to Nazi tracts and occult books.[17]

Iron March users ultimately created a number of extreme far-right organizations, including the Australia-based Antipodean Resistance, the U.K.-based National Action,[18 e] and Atomwaffen Division. These groups boasted mutual support from the Nordic Resistance Movement, Greece's Golden Dawn, CasaPound, Serbian Action, and Azov Battalion.[19] Atomwaffen Division thus arose in a cauldron of multinational, multicultural revolutionary fascism, and even in its nascent stages, it could not be easily distinguished from its various affiliations. Iron March data shows that Atomwaffen co-founder Devon Arthurs even reached out on Iron March to a member of the Azov Battalion. Two months before Atomwaffen was announced, Arthurs was actively attempting to get recruited into Azov and travel to Ukraine for training or action.[20]

c Vanguard America is a neo-fascist organization that is led by Dillon Hopper. Members participated in the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. James Fields, who committed a terrorist attack at Unite the Right, marched with the group. Vanguard America splintered in 2017-2018, resulting in Patriot Front and the National Socialist Legion. See "Vanguard America," Anti-Defamation League.

d Patriot Front is a neo-fascist group that arose from infighting within Vanguard America. It is led by Thomas Rousseau and is active in flyering and stickering campaigns across the country. See "Patriot Front," Southern Poverty Law Center.

e National Action founder Benjamin Raymond was an administrator of Iron March, and the web forum helped the group recruit and propagandize. However, National Action also arose during the decline of British far-right political parties, and it served as a bridge between the era of the British National Party and English Defence League, and the era of Iron March and more violent Siegist groups. For more on National Action and its co-founders, see Graham Macklin, "'Only Bullets Will Stop Us!' – The Banning of National Action in Britain," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12:6 (2018): pp. 104-122.

Atomwaffen Division was officially unveiled to the Iron March community on October 12, 2015. Founders Brandon Russell and Devon Arthurs had been discussing the group for several months beforehand, and Russell claimed to have been actively organizing and recruiting for the group since at least 2012, although evidence supporting this is scant.[21] He and Arthurs spent the next two years engaging with dozens of interested users from across the world, as well as leading in-person action like flyering and military training.[22]

Atomwaffen based its ideology and goals on infamous neo-Nazi James Mason's book, *Siege*, which espouses a form of neo-Nazi accelerationism that emphasizes decentralized, small-cell terrorist violence over mass mobilization.[23] *Siege*, a collection of Mason's newsletters that was first published in book form in 1992, has been influential in extreme right-wing communities, resulting in the creation of Siegism and Siege Culture as specific threads within the neo-Nazi milieu.[24] Throughout its heyday, Atomwaffen leadership required new recruits to read *Siege* before gaining membership in the group.[25]

During Atomwaffen's Iron March era, it promoted the use of Siegism as a branding strategy in order to bring in new recruits while attempting to incite fear and uncertainty in outside observers. *Siege* and Siegist culture figured heavily into the branding of Atomwaffen. Its propaganda often uses hyper-violent imagery and Nazi iconography, and slogans promote revolutionary upheaval, genocide, and fascist governance.[26]

Iron March took on development of Atomwaffen propaganda in a crowdsourced fashion. Users who appear to never have taken an active role in the group helped create some of its first designs and slogans. Over the years, the aesthetic that became associated with Atomwaffen (such as certain markers like adding the Totenkopf symbol[f] to hide faces in photographs or the use of specific fonts) was adopted by various other groups to display alignment with the goals of both Atomwaffen and the greater Iron March network.[27]

Collapse and Reshuffle

In 2017, violent behavior by Atomwaffen's members sparked the first widespread series of law enforcement action against the group. In May of that year, Devon Arthurs was charged with murdering two of his roommates, Atomwaffen Division members Jeremy Himmelman and Andrew Oneschuk.[28] Arthurs attested that they had been mocking him for converting to Islam.[29][g] He has since been deemed unfit for trial, and he suffers from diagnosed schizophrenia and autism.[30] During the murder investigation, law enforcement also arrested Atomwaffen co-founder Brandon Russell (who had been living with Arthurs, Oneschuk, and Himmelman as well), and they discovered a cache of explosive materials.[31] Russell was subsequently charged with unlawful possession of unregistered explosives, to which he pleaded guilty. He is now serving a five-year prison sentence.[32]

In addition to the Atomwaffen co-founders, other members were arrested for violent acts as well. At the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017, Atomwaffen member Vasillios Pistolis—an active-duty lance corporal in the U.S. Marine Corps—assaulted an activist with a flagpole.[33] Later that year, Atomwaffen member Nicholas Giampa[h] allegedly murdered his girlfriend's parents as a result of their disapproval of his neo-Nazi views.[34] Then, in January 2018, Samuel Woodward[i] was charged with the murder of Blaze Bernstein, a gay Jewish college student.[35]

These high-profile crimes brought notoriety to the group but also increased attention from law enforcement. With the arrest of Russell, Arthurs, and several other members, Atomwaffen underwent a leadership shuffle. John Cameron Denton, a member of Atomwaffen since its founding, assumed control of the group and instituted changes in ideology, posture, and branding, bringing in much stronger inspiration from violent occultism as well as a stricter focus on *Siege*-influenced insurrection.[36] In 2017, a teenage Colorado-based Atomwaffen member developed a friendship with *Siege* author James Mason, who lives in Denver. Mason grew to have a large influence on the group, describing himself as an advisor.[37] This connection to Mason was often exploited by Atomwaffen in order to build its reputation within the accelerationist milieu.[38]

Atomwaffen's Networked Legacy

Following the high-profile violence of 2017 and early 2018, Atomwaffen's worldwide reputation among neo-Nazi accelerationists rose dramatically. Denton's ascension to power coincided with the creation of a number of new groups evoking the same "Siegist," occultist, and hyper-militarized rhetoric and aesthetics of Atomwaffen. Most importantly, though, these groups often shared numerous members, resulting in a free flow of information and memes. It also resulted in intrinsically close alignment between Atomwaffen and these groups, to the extent that some have been called proxies for Atomwaffen.

At its peak in 2017-2018, Atomwaffen had cultivated a fairly large and geographically diverse presence organized in rough accordance with the tactics presented in *Siege*.[39] At one point active in 23 U.S. states, it also cultivated relationships with a few overseas Atomwaffen-branded branches, most notably Atomwaffen Division Deutschland in Germany and Atomwaffen Division Russland in Russia. While the nature of the relationships is still unclear, the German branch was directly promoted and announced by Atomwaffen's main social media presence, while the Russian branch was promoted by its German counterpart.[40]

While Atomwaffen-branded branches clearly attempted to evoke affiliation with the central group, evidence from leaked chat logs and reporting suggests that other groups often described as Atomwaffen

f The Totenkopf is a skull-and-crossbones symbol that had been used by the German/Prussian military since the early 19th century. It was adopted as an insignia of the Nazi SS, which led to its resurrection by white power and accelerationist movements following World War II. See "Totenkopf," Anti-Defamation League.

g Arthurs' conversion to Islam is not as unusual as it might seem on its face. Neo-fascist accelerationists have not infrequently professed idolization for Islamism and especially jihadism, resulting in the coining of the term "White jihad." While many accelerationists originally used "White jihad" ironically or exclusively to gain media attention, some have since taken it more seriously. These observations are based on the author's research on Iron March conversations.

h Giampa will stand trial as an adult, as decided in a preliminary hearing in September 2019. See Justin Jouvenal, "Va. teen accused of killing girlfriend's parents to be tried as an adult," *Washington Post*, September 24, 2019.

i Woodward has pleaded not guilty. His trial is tentatively scheduled to begin in 2021. See Sean Emery, "After pandemic-related delays, high-profile Orange County court cases looming in 2021," *Orange County Register*, December 30, 2020.

affiliates or foreign branches had more implicit and less hierarchical ties.[41] These groups generally maintain distinct identities and commanders, but often share many of the same members, ideological and aesthetic inspirations, and even communications channels.[42] Relationships of this sort reflect how the Iron March network and its ideologues, including Mukhitdinov, encouraged localized autonomy and de-emphasized direct oversight, even while providing significant operational support. As a result, Atomwaffen and its connected groups have operated largely as nodes in an overarching neo-fascist accelerationist network, rather than proxies for Atomwaffen central. This article specifically focuses on three of the most prominent and violent nodes, which have themselves facilitated the creation of additional groups: the Sonnenkrieg Division, the Feuerkrieg Division, and The Base.

Sonnenkrieg Division

Sonnenkrieg Division emerged in early 2018 with a propaganda campaign on the online messaging platform Gab.[43] Research on the group has frequently characterized Sonnenkrieg as an offshoot or branch of Atomwaffen; evidence for an explicit leadership link between the two, however, is scarce.[44] What is known is that early Sonnenkrieg propaganda clearly mirrors Atomwaffen's, from the use of the same font to the inclusion of the Siege Culture website URL.[45] In addition, some Atomwaffen members on Gab changed their profile descriptions to include call-outs to Sonnenkrieg.[46] Some Sonnenkrieg propaganda was designed by an artist going by the pseudonym "Dark Foreigner," who has a long history of working with Atomwaffen.[47] Finally, according to a BBC report, founder and leader Andrew Dymock has described Sonnenkrieg as "Atomwaffen Division with less guns," and members from both groups are known to have communicated in the same chat groups.[48] However, its "Siegist" aesthetics and rhetoric evoked a trend widely popular among the whole Iron March user base, rather than being exclusive to Atomwaffen.[49]

Sonnenkrieg appears to be the first example of splinters from existing groups breaking off to form closer relationships with Atomwaffen. Sonnenkrieg members Dymock, Oskar Dunn-Koczorowski, and Michal Szewczuk were all reportedly involved with U.K.-based terrorist group National Action[50]—which had itself cultivated ties to Atomwaffen, with leader Ben Raymond even meeting Atomwaffen co-founder Brandon Russell in person.[51] Dymock, Koczorowski, and Szewczuk had participated in the System Resistance Network, which is generally considered an alias or spinoff of National Action.[52] According to third-party reports, the System Resistance Network broke up due to infighting, leading to Dymock starting up Sonnenkrieg as a dedicated "esoteric National Socialist" organization with a core emphasis on violent occultism.[53]

During its relatively short existence from 2018-2020, Sonnenkrieg gave rise to several plots to commit violence and provided an outlet for the currents of violent occultism that had caused fractures within National Action. Soon after its creation, members called for the murder of Britain's Prince Harry, violence against police officers, and execution of white women who date non-white men.[54] In chat rooms, members also expressed adoration of and calls for the weaponization of sexual violence and pedophilia, which is heavily associated with violent occult communities.[55] The advocacy group Hope Not Hate states that Sonnenkrieg members are facing allegations of carrying out some of those fantasies.[56]

In spite of some recruitment success in the United Kingdom, Sonnenkrieg struggled to expand elsewhere. The proscription of National Action in 2016 by the U.K. government likely contributed to the creation of Sonnenkrieg in the first place, but it also seems to have given British authorities leeway to target Sonnekrieg. In mid-2019, Koczorowski and Szewczuk were imprisoned for terrorism crimes, and Dymock was arrested on charges of terrorism in late 2019;[j] finally, in February 2020, the British government banned System Resistance Network and Sonnenkrieg Division.[57]

Since its designation by the U.K. government in February 2020, Sonnenkrieg Division activity has mostly disappeared from public view, although this does not mean that the group has fully collapsed. Further research and monitoring are needed to ascertain whether members continue to organize covertly under the Sonnenkrieg banner or if another linked group has absorbed them.

Feuerkrieg Division

The neo-fascist accelerationist network's reach was given a boost with the establishment in 2018 of Feuerkrieg Division, which rapidly recruited throughout Europe and North America.[58] Much like Sonnenkrieg, Feuerkrieg also evoked the aesthetics of Siege Culture and Atomwaffen, clearly drawing inspiration from the American group. It nevertheless retained a separate identity, network of cells, and set of ambitions.[59]

Feuerkrieg emerged in the Baltic region in late 2018, founded and led by a person who went by the alias "Commander" and who would later be revealed as a 13-year-old Estonian boy.[60] In spite of his youth, "Commander" spearheaded global recruitment, facilitated propaganda creation, and showed deep familiarity with neo-fascist doctrine.[61][k] Leaked chats also show that "Commander" had a deep knowledge of *Siege* and related literature.[62]

The group's leadership initially intended to focus efforts in Central and Eastern Europe, but ambitions quickly grew. "Commander" and early members produced dozens of pieces of propaganda that were aimed directly at recruiting people from across the world.[63] Anti-fascist activists who infiltrated Feuerkrieg chats state that the group was designed to be geographically dispersed, and membership only required ideological commitment. Members were not forced to carry out physical action.[64] The author's own review of leaked Feuerkrieg chats revealed significant transnational communication and frequent calls for violence. Feuerkrieg's social media accounts frequently posted recruitment calls to action, seeking to establish or grow cells in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, Canada, and especially the United States.[65]

Knowing well that Atomwaffen *also* had transnational ambitions and extant Atomwaffen cells operated across Europe and North

j Andrew Dymock pleaded not guilty to terrorism and hate charges. He is currently on trial. See "Bath Student Denies Neo-Nazi Terrorism Offences," BBC, May 18, 2020, and "Andrew Dymock: Accused said Hitler was 'greatest feminist,'" BBC, May 12, 2021.

k Estonian media reporting, leaked materials, and a personal Facebook account support the allegations that "Commander" was 13 years old when he founded Feuerkrieg Division. The Feuerkrieg chats suggest that he considered himself its leader, controlled much of its interactions with other groups, and was thought of as the leader by many of its members. As revealed in the chats, "Commander" clearly believed he controlled the Feuerkrieg brand and spearheaded recruitment worldwide. However, considering Feuerkrieg's decentralized structure, the Estonian newspaper *Eesti Ekspress* cautions ascribing leadership to "Commander." See Michael Kunzelman and Jari Tanner, "He Led a Neo-Nazi Group Linked to Bomb Plots. He Was 13," Associated Press, April 11, 2020.

America, these recruitment initiatives suggest that Feuerkrieg may have been trying to develop alongside U.S.-based accelerationists. From the onset, "Commander" appears to have felt invested in making sure that the Feuerkrieg identity remained independent from and equal to Atomwaffen. Feuerkrieg's chats reveal that "Commander" frequently lashed out at members who suggested that they merge or even directly affiliate with Atomwaffen.[66] He expressed particular frustration when journalists referred to his group as Atomwaffen's Baltic cell.[67] "Commander" stressed allegiance to higher ideas, namely "Siegist" culture and the accelerationist doctrine.[68]

The strained relationship between "Commander" and his Atomwaffen Division counterparts reached a zenith in mid-2019, when American Atomwaffen member Richard Tobin reached out with an offer to completely absorb Feuerkrieg.[69] Under this deal, "Commander" would run Atomwaffen Europe but would report to American leadership, while all American Feuerkrieg members would be transferred to Atomwaffen. "Commander" vehemently rejected this proposal.[70]

"Commander's" frustration reached a point where he even officially forbade Feuerkrieg members from joining other groups.[71] Members, however, ignored this order. Feuerkrieg membership has frequently overlapped with other neo-Nazi accelerationist groups, and the boundaries between them are increasingly blurry. There are numerous instances of people holding joint membership in Atomwaffen and Feuerkrieg, such as Taylor Parker-Dipeppe, who took charge of Feuerkrieg Division following "Commander's" exit from the group in January 2020. It is likely that this exit coincided with Estonian authorities taking action to prevent "Commander" from continuing to lead the group. Although his youth prohibits the Estonian government from talking specifically about what action the authorities took, "Commander" was no longer the leader of Feuerkrieg as of early 2020.[72]

During its most active period, Feuerkrieg members were arrested for multiple attempted or thwarted attacks across Europe and the United States. In Europe, Feuerkrieg took responsibility for a failed bombing of Western Union offices in Lithuania in October 2019.[73] In addition, a 16-year-old boy from Durham, England, who was linked to Feuerkrieg, planned arson attacks against English synagogues in September 2019; in Feuerkrieg chats, this arrest sparked anger, discussion of calling in bomb threats, and death threats against a police officer.[74] In December 2020, Feuerkrieg member Luke Hunter was convicted of terrorism charges for promoting and propagandizing accelerationist violence. He was involved in the social media campaign targeting the police officer who arrested the Durham youth.[75]

In the United States, federal authorities prevented several other Feuerkrieg attacks. In 2020, Conor Climo admitted to discussing a plan to commit arson against a Las Vegas synagogue, plotting to attack the Anti-Defamation League, and making explosive devices. In a search of his residence, the FBI also discovered explosive precursors, components, and firearms.[76] Jarrett William Smith, a 24-year-old soldier, was arrested in September 2019 and pleaded guilty for planning to attack anti-fascist activists and plotting a bombing of a major U.S. news station's headquarters.[77] Notably, Smith was a bridge to at least one additional accelerationist group, as he was in close contact with National Socialist Movement member and attempted terrorist Timothy Wilson. Wilson and Smith had shared information about bomb-making in furtherance of their neo-fascist accelerationist goals; Wilson was later killed in a shootout with the FBI in early 2020 while trying to bomb a hospital.[78]

Feuerkrieg's success at establishing such a geographically dispersed presence also resulted in numerous ex-Feuerkrieg members surfacing in a number of other "Siegist" groups in the last two years. Although explicit Feuerkrieg activity has waned since the arrest of Taylor Parker-Dipeppe in February 2020, membership has migrated toward other groups much like Atomwaffen's did in early 2018.[79] In line with accelerationist efforts to target pre-teen and young teen recruitment, teenaged ex-Feuerkrieg members have sometimes set up youth-oriented groups. For example, the American neo-fascist group Iron Youth has operated since at least 2019 and has largely run alongside other, more prominent groups. In February 2021, FBI charged Iron Youth members Christian Mackey and Caleb Nathaniel Oliver with weapons crimes.[80] Mackey's social media accounts show that he was involved in Feuerkrieg recruiting, as was a teenage New Hampshire Iron Youth member, who also participated in The Base.[81]

The Base

The most obvious example of Atomwaffen's role as a node in a larger network emerged in 2018 when Rinaldo Nazzaro, going by the alias Norman Spear, began recruiting for an organization called The Base.[82] Arising entirely after the demise of Iron March, The Base's structure and strategies in effect filled some of the same roles for neo-fascist accelerationists. Rather than fashioning itself as a distinct group, The Base from the beginning operated as a decentralized network of "survivalism and self-defense" training camps. It also retained comms channels with many members in Atomwaffen Division.[83]

Very little is known about Nazzaro. Reports have revealed that he is an American who moved to Russia from New York in the late 2010s, and that he was contracted with the Department of Homeland Security in the past and reportedly the Department of Defense and U.S. Special Forces previously as well.[84] No investigations have found an Iron March account owned by Nazzaro. However, his intentions for The Base were clear. According to leaked chats and audio, Nazzaro wanted to recruit members from all over the world to establish Base cells.[85] He also frequently asserted that membership in other groups was welcome.[86]

As a result of this permissive attitude and narrow focus on connecting neo-fascist accelerationists, Nazzaro's group greatly appealed to members of Atomwaffen and Feuerkrieg, as well as many other similar groups. For example, Feuerkrieg's leader "Commander" was reportedly in touch with and solicited advice from Nazzaro[87] and American Atomwaffen member Tobin. The latter had previously attempted to absorb Feuerkrieg into Atomwaffen and reportedly coordinated The Base's synagogue vandalism campaign in 2019.[88]

The Base also provided a bridge between serial founders of smaller groups and the wider community of neo-fascist accelerationists. The aforementioned teenager from New Hampshire spent his high school years involved in a wide array of extreme far-right organizational efforts. He was a member of Feuerkrieg until the February 2020 arrest of Feuerkrieg leader

Parker-Dipeppe, and he claimed to also be active in Invictus Youth[l] and Iron Youth.[89] Nazzaro commended the New Hampshire teen for joining The Base following the crackdown against it in early 2020 (which is described in greater detail below).[90] In addition, The Base proved to be a welcoming umbrella organization for Green Brigade, a violent eco-fascist[m] group that had members in Oregon and Sweden.[91] Green Brigade was initially only linked to The Base, but later merged with The Base and became its eco-fascist wing.[92] It continued to operate as an autonomous cell of The Base throughout its existence.[n] Although Green Brigade never had more than a handful of members, it nonetheless allegedly carried out the only known example of successful real-world violence by The Base's network, when two Swedish members burnt down several buildings at a mink farm in Sweden.[93]

Finally, leaked chats have also revealed that The Base has helped forge further connections between the extreme Siege-focused accelerationist groups like Atomwaffen and groups with less explicit interest in apocalyptic violence, such as Patriot Front[94] and fight clubs like Nationalist Social Club 131 (NSC-131).[95] Chris Hood, for instance, who led the New England chapter of Patriot Front, was seemingly the first Patriot Front member to seek admittance to The Base. Hood later founded and now leads NSC-131.[96] NSC-131 itself developed a network of cells and affiliates, with "NSC"-branded chapters in the southern and midwestern United States, as well as the Rhine-Hesse region of Germany.[97] The German chapter has since claimed to have disbanded due to raids,[98] and NSC-Dixie has been rebranded the Appalachian Brotherhood; the core New England chapter has stated that it will no longer support other affiliates or cells.[99]

Situating Atomwaffen in the History of Accelerationism

The pattern of group development shown by Feuerkrieg, Sonnenkrieg, The Base, NSC-131, Patriot Front, and Green Brigade, among others, challenges the conventional wisdom of Atomwaffen as a root, umbrella, or dominant group in the accelerationist network. In the scope of development of the global network, Atomwaffen was and remains important. It played the role of a "Siegism" catalyst, bringing James Mason back to the forefront of accelerationist activity and fully embracing the operational strategies laid out in *Siege*. To a significant extent, Atomwaffen popularized "Siege culture" and demonstrated to the Iron March community that "Siegism" could succeed in recruitment, radicalization, and mobilization to violence.[100]

However, Atomwaffen's strategies, structure, and doctrine were not novel. They emerged from a community on Iron March that had already helped facilitate the development of the like-minded and like-branded group National Action.[101] In addition, this community had been nurtured by established groups like Azov Battalion, Nordic Resistance Movement, and Golden Dawn, which provided inspiration and explicit guidance for Atomwaffen.[102] Even "Siegist" aesthetics and rhetoric are products of Iron March as a whole, rather than Atomwaffen alone.[103] Feuerkrieg, Sonnenkrieg, and The Base similarly emerged from ecosystems of more mature, hardened accelerationists communicating and sharing strategies to destroy Western civilization. As such, when compared to treating Atomwaffen as an umbrella group, concentrating on the network of individuals tied together by common aesthetics, goals, and philosophies is likely better for both researching and responding to accelerationist violence.

The Evolution of the Network

High-profile and widespread action from law enforcement agencies and governments worldwide have disrupted the first wave of recruitment and in-person activities from some nodes in the neo-fascist accelerationist network. Many of the most influential Atomwaffen members have been arrested on suspicion of crimes ranging from illegal weapons possession to murder; some, including founder Brandon Russell, are now in prison.[104] In addition, Western governments have increasingly designated Atomwaffen and the National Socialist Order as terrorist organizations, allowing for more extensive law enforcement action to take place.

Law enforcement has made progress in cracking down on the second wave of accelerationist activity as well. The FBI carried out a large disruption effort against The Base in early 2020, which resulted in the virtual collapse of the first iteration of the group.[105] Between January and April 2020, federal authorities charged eight members with animal cruelty in connection with a now-infamous "ritual sacrifice" of a ram on a member's property in Georgia.[106] The event included members from both Maryland and Georgia cells of The Base, as well as an ex-Canadian Armed Forces member named Patrik Mathews. Mathews, who served as a recruiter for the group and had illegally jumped the border into the United States, provided paramilitary training at the gathering.[107] Mathews and two Maryland-based members had also been charged with weapons-related crimes in early 2020,[108] and three Georgia-based members had been indicted for conspiracy to commit murder soon after that.[109] Then, in October 2020, the FBI also arrested self-proclaimed Base leader Justen Watkins[o] and member Alfred Gorman, who participated in a Michigan-based cell, and charged them in connection with an attempt to intimidate a podcaster at their home.[110]

Feuerkrieg, too, has waned in activity following arrests of

l Little is known about Invictus Youth beyond the leaked chats where the New Hampshire teen references it. It is likely that it is or was a small, Siege-inspired group with only a few members. Author's analysis of screenshots of purported leaked chats obtained and published by the activist outlet Eugene Antifa.

m Eco-fascism is a strand of far-right extremism that focuses on environmental concerns and climate change as justification for extreme nativism, white supremacy, and accelerationist violence. Eco-fascism is heavily influenced by niche fascist sub-currents, such as Esoteric Hitlerism. For analysis on contemporary eco-fascism, see Alex Amend, "Blood and Vanishing Topsoil," Political Research Associates, July 9, 2020, and Alexander Reid Ross and Emmi Bevensee, "CARR Research Insight Series: Confronting the Rise of Eco-Fascism Means Grappling with Complex Systems," Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, July 7, 2020.

n The sheer number of different named cells and splinter groups has the effect of inflating the number of members involved in the accelerationist network. In reality, groups like the Green Brigade and Iron Youth generally have fewer than 10 members involved, while larger groups like Atomwaffen and Feuerkrieg number in the dozens. In spite of this, the hardened beliefs and desire for violence mean that these groups pose significant threats to public safety.

o Watkins claimed at the time to be the current leader of The Base, although these claims are difficult to reconcile with the active role Nazzaro had at the time. See Mack Lamoureux and Ben Makuch, "A Leader of Neo-Nazi Terror Group the Base was just Arrested in Michigan," Vice News, April 19, 2020.

some of its members. Parker-Dipeppe, who had reportedly assumed leadership of the group following the disengagement of "Commander," pleaded guilty to federal conspiracy charges in connection with a harassment campaign in 2020.[111] A wave of similar arrests against transnational members resulted in Feuerkrieg declaring that it was disbanding in February 2020.[112]

However, the aftermath of the first "collapse" of the Atomwaffen Division in late 2017 should dissuade claims that the network itself is defunct. Feuerkrieg, Sonnenkrieg, and The Base, alongside an array of smaller groups, all demonstrated a fluidity of membership, an ease with which new groups and brands are created, and continually open lines of communication via encrypted messaging apps.[113] Together, these created a network that does not rely on any one leader or group, and instead persists beyond periodic disruptions. Members even purposefully use this disband-and-rebrand cycle to try to evade prosecutions under terrorism designations abroad, such as National Action's schisms into multiple aliases after its proscription by the U.K. government in December 2016.[114] As a result, the network does not depend on the survival of any one leader, group, or "brand," but rather relies on its own decentralization and fluidity for resilience.

In fact, the neo-fascist accelerationist network is currently in a reshuffling phase, and evidence is just recently appearing about new efforts to organize. Nazzaro, still living in Russia, has indicated that he intends to reforge The Base's transnational cells[115] and recently worked on recruiting in Australia.[116] Some of his recruitment targets included members of the Lads Society, a neo-fascist group with membership links to Antipodean Resistance and its successor, National Socialist Network.[117]

In addition, reports about the collapse of Atomwaffen likely overstate the impact that arrests have had. It is true that public activity under the Atomwaffen Division name in the United States has largely ceased,[118] but as this article has shown, its transnational and cross-group linkages remain powerful forces for continuing terrorist activity. The Atomwaffen brand continues to be used in Europe in particular, and in April 2021, it was reported that a group of far-right extremists had started organizing "Atomwaffen Division Europe." This cell has no proven link to original Atomwaffen members, but it evokes the same "Siegist" imagery and symbolism.[119] Atomwaffen Division Europe's founding members largely appear to be youth connected to the accelerationist network via Telegram chats.[120]

Original Atomwaffen members have not disappeared either. As noted at the beginning of this article, in 2020, ex-Atomwaffen members launched a direct successor group, called the National Socialist Order, specifically aiming to continue where Atomwaffen left off. NSO is closely collaborating with the administrators of a fascist website that also publishes James Mason.[121] The website, alongside NSO, has begun publishing a series of essays written by Brandon Russell from prison.[122] NSO also announced a recruitment push on the website in March 2021.[123]

Finally, accelerationists have pushed for new online gathering locations to replace Iron March. Fascist Forge, for instance, was created by a member of The Base explicitly aimed to be the new Iron March,[124] and leaked user lists reviewed by the author show that several known accelerationists used the site. Fascist Forge itself went defunct in 2020,[125] and individuals and groups now generally rely on Telegram, Wire, and an array of other encrypted and alternative apps for communication. Many small cells and groups still seemingly propagandize openly on public Telegram channels.[126]

Reports show that increased attention from law enforcement has had an effect on the organizational strategies of neo-fascist accelerationists. On Telegram, where this network interacts most openly, users suggested that the age of public brands and propaganda is over, and that accelerationists should focus on small-cell, clandestine, in-person organization.[127] However, the biggest risk that counterterrorism authorities face is that a network of recruitment, radicalization, and organization is already established, and a focus on specific groups may not be tackling the root of the issue. Enforcement against individuals and groups is necessary but not sufficient for mitigating the threat posed by neo-fascist accelerationists. As its legacy shows, Atomwaffen was one node in a dynamic network spanning the globe—and treating it as such may allow for more comprehensive, preventative action. CTC

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Iran's Currency Laundromats in the Emirates

By Peter Kirechu

Since 2014, the United States has sanctioned dozens of Iranian nationals and commercial entities for the illicit acquisition of U.S. and other foreign currencies. A close review of these designations reveals the organized character of Iran's illicit currency laundering operations and the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in their orchestration. It also shows that Iran relies on a diverse network of illicit commercial entrepreneurs to covertly access foreign currencies abroad. These actors operate under the cover of legitimate commerce and exploit the vulnerabilities of regional economic centers—such as the United Arab Emirates—to provide covert financial resources to the Revolutionary Guards. Yet, by operating under a commercial veneer, these actors increase their risk of public exposure as publicly available information on transnational illicit networks becomes more widely available, making it more difficult to hide their illicit operations. While this resource is currently underutilized, it can expand the enforcement surface available to U.S. and Emirati authorities as they seek to counter a key financial resource for the IRGC and its global operations.

Back in December 2014, the Obama administration sanctioned a network of Iranian nationals for the illicit laundering of U.S. dollars to the Iranian government using non-bank intermediaries.[a] The sanctioned network operated in and through the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and included two Iranian nationals: Asadollah Seifi and Teymour Ameri. The two were individually sanctioned for delivering hundreds of millions of dollars of illicitly acquired U.S. bank notes to Iran, though the effect of the designation appeared limited if not entirely fleeting.[1]

As will be outlined in this article, both Seifi and Ameri resurfaced within five years—this time as part of two seemingly separate, yet ultimately connected currency laundering schemes. Their appearance in both plots revealed unexpected insights about the commercial entrepreneurs that enable Iran's illicit currency laundering operations.

An open-source review of publicly available Iranian and Emirati business registries[b] shows that Seifi and Ameri operated in the murky world of transnational foreign currency exchanges where the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is deeply imbedded.[2] Here, the two men connected with other currency launderers, including Mohammad Vakili, an alleged former Central Bank of Iran official who operated out of the UAE, channeling hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars—including in cash—to the Revolutionary Guards, according to the U.S. Department of the Treasury.[c]

Seifi (the 2014 designee) was sanctioned again in 2019, this time alongside Vakili in the same U.S. enforcement action that exposed

a On December 30, 2014, the U.S. government sanctioned a network of five Iranian nationals and one Afghan citizen for the illicit acquisition and delivery of U.S. dollars to the Iranian government. These sanctions were authorized by Executive Order 13622, which prohibited, among other activities, the purchase or acquisition of U.S. bank notes or precious metals by the government of Iran. See "Treasury Designates Additional Individuals and Entities Under Iran-related Authorities," U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 30, 2014, and "Executive Order 13622, Authorizing Additional Sanctions with Respect to Iran," Archive of Iran-related Frequently Asked Questions, U.S. Department of the Treasury.

b A business or commercial register is a listing of commercial organizations based on the jurisdiction in which a commercial organization operates. Commercial registers often vary in the type, format, and depth of data recorded but generally lend visibility into the locations, ownership structures, business activities, and operational histories of a commercial organization by jurisdiction. Some commercial registers are open to the public while others are not. Those that are publicly available often vary in quality and ease of access, but are essential tools in the investigation of individuals, groups, and networks involved in illicit or criminal activities. Both Iran and the UAE have a variety of publicly available business registries that provide entity-level information (names, registration numbers, locations, ownership structures (to include directorship and shareholding), and business activity data (including sectors of operations, commercial affiliates, and in some cases scale and size of financial operations).

c Mohammad Vakili was identified as a UAE-based currency broker and former Central Bank official in multiple domestic news reports covering the prosecution of his accused collaborator, Teymour Ameri, in Iran. See AftabNews.ir reporting on the Teymour Ameri prosecution. Vakili was separately identified as a key figure in a multi-million-dollar currency laundering network sanctioned by the U.S. government in 2019 for illicitly channeling U.S. bank notes and other foreign currencies to Iranian entities, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps through UAE-based companies. See "United States Disrupts Large Scale Front Company Network Transferring Hundreds of Millions of Dollars and Euros to the IRGC and Iran's Ministry of Defense," U.S. Department of the Treasury, March 26, 2019.

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several of their commercial holdings in Iran and the UAE.[d] Their relationship to Ameri was not as apparent, however. A survey of local news reporting on judicial proceedings inside Iran reveals connections between Ameri and Vakili that would be difficult to discern without domestic news sources. This reporting suggests that Ameri and Vakili were seemingly cast aside by their regime patrons and prosecuted for fraud after they reportedly sought personal enrichment from their currency laundering activities.[e] In 2019, both men were indicted in Tehran, forcing Vakili into exile and leaving Ameri at the mercy of domestic authorities.[3]

Their apparent fall from grace is instructive from an investigative perspective. It suggests that these actors hazard the dual threat of international sanctions while operating abroad and potential retribution at home if suspected of self-profiting at the expense of their patrons. This exposure provides U.S. and UAE authorities with opportunities to identify potential cooperators who can enhance their knowledge and understanding of Iran's—and the IRGC's—transnational currency laundering activities. But to fully exploit this potential, U.S. authorities would need to further incorporate publicly available information into their investigative techniques and tactics.

This article makes that case. It begins with a brief survey of the tactics used by illicit commercial actors in Iran's foreign currency exchange The next section describes the huge depreciation of Iran's currency last decade, which both necessitated and created opportunities for currency laundering. The article then outlines how Iran uses these actors to relieve U.S. sanctions pressure, drawing heavily on publicly available information in exposing their transnational operations. It lastly examines Ameri and Vakili's apparent fall from regime favor and suggests that the ability of these commercial surrogates to operate across commercial jurisdictions is both a benefit (and vulnerability). Their activities abroad ultimately create enforcement opportunities for both U.S. and Emirati authorities to counter Iran's illicit currency laundering activities.

The Currency Laundromat and its Machinery

Asadollah Seifi and Teymour Ameri were originally sanctioned in 2014 alongside three other Iranian nationals, two of whom held Emirati residency.[f] The 2014 designation was short on specifics, but it alleged that the network used a mix of hand couriers, and at least one UAE-based company, to convert foreign currencies into U.S. bank notes before cycling them back to Iran.[4]

The tactics used by this network combined common features of both courier and trade-based money laundering.[5] The first tactic—involving hand-carried bank notes—is one of the most common forms of money laundering.[6] It allows illicit actors to move large sums of cash across borders—in person—in order to avoid the electronic records created by electronic payment systems. This tactic is effective because it breaks a crucial audit trail. It relies on human beings to create physical distance between the proceeds of a criminal or illicit activity and the predicate offense itself.

The Seifi and Ameri network also appeared to exploit the volume and complexity of regional trade flows between Iran and the Emirates to illicitly access U.S. bank notes. One of the companies sanctioned in the December 2014 action—Belfast General Trading LLC—was a self-declared import and export company that operated in Dubai, a prominent, regional commercial center often targeted by sanctions evaders, weapons traffickers, and high-end money launderers to mask illicit commerce.[7]

As import and export businesses shift goods and services through the Emirates, and Dubai specifically, they often require access to multiple foreign currencies in order to finance trade arrangements, settle debts, and resolve cross-currency transactions. This broad access to foreign currencies creates opportunities for illicit infiltration—first, by currency speculators seeking to profit from arbitrage in the exchange rate, and second, by trade-based money launderers who disguise criminal proceeds through import and export transactions.[8]

Trade-based money launderers may falsify the price of a good or service in order to undercut fair market prices, harvesting profits that are often transferred to a colluding partner abroad.[9] In Iran, the Central Bank has historically artificially strengthened the rial in relation to foreign currencies (lowering the number of Iranian rials it takes to buy, for example, a Euro) to help merchants access foreign currencies that they use to purchase goods and products abroad.[10] The official, government-subsidized exchange rate overvalues the rial compared to the rate available on the black market. This disparity creates incentives for regime-connected traders to inflate the price, size, or quantity of their imports in order to receive more foreign currency than needed from the Central Bank.[11] This foreign currency surplus is either pocketed or sold on the black market at a higher premium.[12] The tactics may differ, but they create an illicit financial reserve that the Revolutionary Guards can use to finance operations abroad.

These tactics provide broad access to multiple foreign currencies, including U.S. dollars, which regime-connected merchants operating abroad can access on the government's behalf. In 2020, Iranian officials threatened to revoke the export licenses of merchants who failed to repatriate their foreign earnings back to

d The U.S. Department of the Treasury identified Mohammad Vakili as the owner of Atlas Exchange, a currency exchange firm located on Kish Island and used to illicitly procure and transfer millions of dollars to the Iranian government. The same designation identified Asadollah Seifi as the owner of two UAE-based companies: Golden Commodities LLC and the Best Leader General Trading LLC. U.S. authorities claimed that Seifi used both companies to access and transfer U.S. currency to Iran as part of a broader multi-million-dollar scheme. See "United States Disrupts Large Scale Front Company Network Transferring Hundreds of Millions of Dollars and Euros to the IRGC and Iran's Ministry of Defense" and "Specially Designated Nationals List Update," U.S. Department of the Treasury, March 26, 2019.

e Teymour Ameri and Mohammad Vakili were indicted by local prosecutors in Iran under fraud and currency manipulation charges in 2019. They were indicted alongside 15 co-defendants: Mehdi Khoramipour, Mohammad Khoramipour, Alireza Ameri Ameri, Maki Soltani, Kazem Najafabadi Farahani, Mohammad Hossein Zandieh, Omid Saber Khayabani, Mohammad Zandieh, Shahram Teymouri, Ali Asghar Soltani Gohar, Masoumeh Khoramipour, Monira Khormipour, Seyed Hamidreza Mostafa, Majid Shafiei, and Babak Hosseini. The indictment also included three Iran-based commercial companies reportedly used by the defendants in this scheme. See "150 Million Corruption Case of Zandieh, Khorimipour, and Timur Ameri Families [Translated]," AftabNews.ir, November 11, 2009.

f The December 30, 2014, sanctions on Asadollah Seifi and Teymour Ameri included two Iranian nationals, Hossein Zeidi and Seyed Kamal Yasini, and one Afghan national, Azizullah Asadullah Qulandry. Hossein Zeidi and Azizullah Asadullah Qulandry held UAE national identification cards and allegedly worked together to convert non-Iranian local currencies to U.S. dollars before delivering them back to Iran. See "Treasury Designates Additional Individuals and Entities Under Iran-related Authorities."

The Dubai skyline on April 6, 2021 (Kamran Jebreili/AP Photo)

Iran in a likely bid to bolster dwindling foreign currency reserves.[13] Faced with escalating sanctions limiting the government's ability to formally access export earnings through traditional banking pathways, Tehran seemingly turned to non-bank intermediaries such as Asadollah Seifi, Teymour Ameri, and Mohammad Vakili. These commercial actors provided a relatively easy way for Iran to access U.S. dollars under the cover of official commerce. They ultimately provided an important alternative financial resource to the Iranian government at a time of immense currency volatility and escalating economic strain.[14]

Inside Iran's Currency Free Fall

Between 2011 and 2014, the Iranian rial traded at an estimated 10,000 to 27,000 rials to the dollar.[g] This period coincided with a significant increase in U.S.-led sanctions levied by the Obama administration and concluded with the 2015 signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement, which is more commonly known as the Iran Nuclear Deal. By the time the deal was finalized on July 14, 2015, the Iranian rial traded at nearly 30,000 rials to the dollar.[h]

Tehran initially expected immediate currency relief from the JCPOA, but downward pressure on the rial continued during the JCPOA's short-lived tenure.[i] The rial recorded a near 40 percent drop in trade value to the dollar between January 16, 2016—the date of the JCPOA's implementation—and May 8, 2018, when the United States withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal.

And when the United States withdrew from the JCPOA agreement in May 2018, the effect was swift and devastating. Domestic foreign currency reserves fell from approximately $120 billion in 2018, to nearly $12.7 billion in 2019, and then a mere $8.8 billion by 2020.[15]

By blocking Iran's access to the foreign currency earnings that Tehran had hoped to generate from exports in oil, petrochemicals, metals, and refined petroleum products, the U.S. government forced the Iranian government to expend more and more of its foreign currency reserves to finance imports.[16] This isolation was primarily

g The Iranian rial officially traded at approximately 10,354 rials to the dollar on January 1, 2012. See IRR-USD exchange rate: January 1, 2012. The value of the rial dropped to an estimated 27,106 rials to the dollar by December 31, 2014. See IRR-USD exchange rate: December 31, 2014.

h The Iranian rial officially traded at an estimated 29,472 rials to the dollar when the JCPOA was finalized on July 14, 2015. See IRR-USD exchange rate: July 14, 2015, and "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action at a Glance," Arms Control Association, March 2021.

i The Iranian rial officially traded at approximately 30,175 rials to the dollar on January 16, 2016, the date of the JCPOA's implementation. See IRR-USD exchange rate: January 16, 2016. When the United States withdrew from the JCPOA on May 8, 2018, the rial officially traded at an estimated 42,025 rials to the dollar. See IRR-USD exchange rate: May 8, 2018.

achieved under the threat of secondary sanctions. Third-party commercial firms and financial institutions that would normally finance or process import and export transactions for Iran were forced to either sever ties with Iranian firms or risk steep financial penalties—and summary isolation from the dollar-dominated international financial system.

U.S. sanctions disabled Iran's ability to legitimately finance critical imports while forcing Tehran to expend reserves it could not readily replenish. These conditions, however, created new opportunities for the underground economy, long-dominated by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.[17] With the local currency in freefall and domestic foreign currency reserves nearing depletion, it was the IRGC—through commercial surrogates such as Seifi, Ameri, and Vakili—that appeared to provide an important financial lifeline to the beleaguered regime. While it is difficult to assess the total scale of their financial activities using public data, it was their ability to operate together, across multiple jurisdictions—under commercial cover—that made them both an essential asset, and vulnerability, to their regime patrons.

The IRGC's Commercial Surrogates in Action

On March 26, 2019, just over four years after his first U.S. Treasury Department designation, Asadollah Seifi was sanctioned once more, this time under terrorism sanctions authorities.[j] The U.S. Treasury Department identified Seifi as a key figure in a broad currency laundering scheme that used two of his UAE-based companies to procure U.S. dollars and other foreign currencies on behalf of the IRGC.[18] [k] While the transactional details were not disclosed by U.S. authorities, the organizational links between Seifi's UAE-based companies, and their counterparts inside Iran, pointed to a professional operation developed with discernable links to the Revolutionary Guards.

Seifi's designation revealed that two of his UAE-based companies—Golden Commodities General Trading LLC and the Best Leader General Trading LLC—worked in concert with two counterparts based in Iran: Atlas Exchange (located on Kish Island) and Ansar Exchange (based in Tehran).[19] The two Iran-based companies specialized in the purchase and sale of foreign currencies abroad as well as the trade in precious metals, according to publicly available registries of domestically registered companies.[l]

Together, all four companies allegedly traded, converted, and transferred U.S. dollars from the UAE to Iran.[20] Some of these funds were dispatched to Ansar Bank, an IRGC-owned and controlled bank created by the Revolutionary Guards to provide financial services to its personnel.[m] Ansar Bank and Ansar Exchange shared a common corporate officer, Ayatollah Ebrahimi, who allegedly joined the IRGC at age 14.[21] [n] Ebrahimi allegedly used this position to provide Euros and Emirati dirhams to his patrons in the Revolutionary Guards.[22]

Rogue Launderers?

When Asadollah Seifi was first sanctioned as a currency launderer in 2014, Teymour Ameri appeared in the same designation as a co-conspirator.[23] Like Seifi, Ameri resurfaced in 2019 but this time as a defendant in Iran.[24] Ameri was reportedly indicted alongside 17 other co-defendants, including two of his sons.[25] Local prosecutors alleged that Ameri and his co-conspirators deceived the Iranian government into financing phantom imports organized through a UAE-based facilitator identified as Mohammad Vakili.[26] Ameri and his partners then reportedly transferred the subsidized foreign currency that they received from the Iranian government to the

j Asadollah Seifi was first sanctioned as a currency launderer on December 30, 2014. See "Treasury Designates Additional Individuals and Entities Under Iran-related Authorities." He was later sanctioned under terrorism authorities on March 26, 2019. See "United States Disrupts Large Scale Front Company Network Transferring Hundreds of Millions of Dollars and Euros to the IRGC and Iran's Ministry of Defense."

k Asadollah Seifi appeared as a registered corporate officer in two UAE-based companies included in the March 26, 2019, designation: Best Leader General Trading LLC (later renamed to Wilmington General Trading LLC) and Golden Commodities General Trading LLC. The two companies shared the same Dubai address and a corporate officer, Mohammad Vakili, also included in the March 26, 2019, designation. See "United States Disrupts Large Scale Front Company Network Transferring Hundreds of Millions of Dollars and Euros to the IRGC and Iran's Ministry of Defense."

l Company registration records from the Iranian corporate gazette show that Ansar Exchange and Atlas Exchange were domestically registered as foreign exchange service providers. Each company's physical location, address, and scope of operation is included in these records and can be viewed through Vinsabt.com and Rasmi.io, two public aggregators of Iranian corporate records. See "Ansar Exchange Private Joint Stock Company," company registration record, Vinsabt.com; Ansar Exchange Company registration record, Rasmi.io; and Atlas Exchange company registration record, Rasmi.io

m Ansar Bank is an Iran-based financial institution first sanctioned by the U.S. government on December 21, 2010, under Executive Order 13882, which targets individuals, entities, and organizations that provide financial services to the IRGC. See "Fact Sheet: Treasury Designates Iranian Entities Tied to the IRGC and IRISL," U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 21, 2010. Ansar Bank was established by Bonyad Taavon Sepah (also known as the IRGC Cooperative Foundation), an IRGC-controlled parastatal organization that exercises extralegal control of key sectors of the Iranian economy. When Ansar Bank was sanctioned by the U.S. government in 2010, it was for providing services in furtherance of Iran's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and nuclear proliferation programs. See "Bonyad Taavon Sepah," Iran Watch, January 1, 2012. The bank was also sanctioned on March 26, 2019, under terrorism authorities as part of the broader Asadollah Seifi currency laundering scheme. See "United States Disrupts Large Scale Front Company Network Transferring Hundreds of Millions of Dollars and Euros to the IRGC and Iran's Ministry of Defense."

According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, Ansar Bank maintained and operated financial accounts for IRGC-Quds Force officers. Ansar Bank also used currency exchange providers such as Meghdad Amini, an Iranian national sanctioned on May 10, 2018, for laundering hard currency from Iran to the UAE for subsequent exchange. See "United States and United Arab Emirates Disrupt Large Scale Currency Exchange Network Transferring Millions of Dollars to the IRGC-QF," U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 10, 2018.

n Ayatollah Ebrahimi appears as the inaugural chairman of the Ansar Exchange board of directors, according to the Iranian corporate gazette. He is also listed as a board member in the IRGC-controlled Ansar Bank, which operates as Ansar Bank's parent company. Both roles are certified by the dual listing of his national identification number in the company registration records for Ansar Bank and Ansar Exchange. See Ansar Bank company registration records, Rasmi.io, and Ansar Exchange company registration record, Rasmi.io

Emirates, generating profits that the network allegedly pocketed and failed to return to government financiers.[27]

According to local news coverage of the prosecution, Ameri was identified as a prominent foreign currency exchange operator in Iran.[28] Local reports characterized his UAE-based partner Mohammad Vakili, as a Central Bank of Iran official who reportedly escaped arrest alongside 10 of the 17 other named co-defendants.[29] The Mohammad Vakili described during Ameri's prosecution seemed to match the U.S. government's own description of the UAE-based currency launderer sanctioned for aiding Asadollah Seifi in the 2019 currency smuggling scheme.[30] A close review of publicly available corporate records in Iran and the UAE revealed that an identically named Iranian national identified as "Mohammad Vakili" was listed as the co-owner of the two UAE-based companies operated by Asadollah Seifi.[o] This individual ("Mohammad Vakili") also appeared as the managing director of Atlas Exchange, the Kish Island-based currency exchange service used to transfer U.S. dollars from the Emirates to Iran on behalf of the Revolutionary Guards.[p] These findings marked a rare moment of unexpected U.S. and Iranian concurrence on the likely identity (and role) of a key figure in a transnational laundering operation, albeit for different reasons.

A close reading of Ameri's prosecution suggests that Tehran's crackdown was quite possibly a response to the launderers' failure to direct profits back to their patrons in Iran.[q] Ameri had after all been sanctioned by the U.S. government in 2014 for similar cash laundering activities, but without retributive action taken by Iranian authorities. The prosecution also narrowed in on the wealth that he and his sons allegedly accumulated in the form of expensive cars and properties, though Ameri denied these claims.[31]

Ameri's prosecution seemed to defy the common assumption that illicit actors aiding IRGC activities might be shielded from adverse government action.[32] Iranian authorities are known to insulate from punishment individuals involved in the illicit economy based on their relationship to the regime and its most powerful organs, of which the IRGC is first among rivals.[33]

Ameri and his UAE-based partner, Mohammad Vakili, also appeared to be separately affiliated to the Central Bank of Iran as former bank officials.[34] Their provision of illicit services to the Iranian government—and the Revolutionary Guards in particular—makes their later prosecution more difficult to discern. It is possible that their prosecution served as both punishment and deterrence to other currency launderers who may seek to profit individually from their services to the state.

Lastly, it is also likely that Ameri and Vakili simply outlived their utility and were set aside as a result of their exposure to external enforcement actions. Such an approach would create strategic distance from the government and create the public perception that domestic authorities were taking decisive action against 'currency manipulators,' as their network was described by the local prosecution.[35] Despite this luckless outcome, Ameri and his network (including those like Vakili who fled arrest) still demonstrate the ties between the Revolutionary Guards and the illicit merchants and commercial entrepreneurs that enable their laundering operations.

While it is difficult to assess the exact scale of Ameri, Seifi, and Vakili's financial activities, the cornerstone of their operation was rooted in the ability to operate across borders, under commercial cover. While this dynamic provided a veneer of separation and distance from the Revolutionary Guards, it also seemingly made them easy to dispense of, as in the case of Ameri and Vakili. The transnational nature of their operations provided access to financial and commercial facilities abroad, but also subjected them to operational requirements in the commercial world (such as the formal registration of company owners, shareholders, and corporate officers) that made their activities discoverable through public data. It is this imperative to operate partially in the open and partially in the shadows that made them vulnerable to eventual detection. And it is a vulnerability that Iran must continually manage as it seeks to evade U.S. sanctions measures, but one that U.S. and Emirati authorities can better exploit through publicly available information.

Conclusion

Iran's Revolutionary Guards have long exploited U.S. sanctions to expand their grip on both the formal and informal sectors of the Iranian economy.[36] They control nearly all formal sectors of the Iranian economy from construction to shipping, finance, telecommunications, mining, and manufacturing.[37] They also operate extensive transnational smuggling networks and control access to Iranian ports used to smuggle fuel, electronics, and other forms of contraband.[38] They are protected by their proximity—and ideological alignment—with the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.[39] This relationship makes them the principal benefactors of his largesse, and that of his well-heeled patronage networks.[40] This relationship also allows the Revolutionary Guards to operate autonomously both inside and outside of Iran. They have leveraged this influence over the years to direct the country's foreign policy to their benefit, as confirmed by the laments of the current foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, in a now-infamously leaked interview.[41]

Yet unlike many of Iran's post-revolution institutions, which were created to enforce clerical state control, the Revolutionary Guards have become the most dominant actors in Iran's shadow economy.[42] They have achieved this status through the size and scale of their domestic resources—and their ability to access financial and commercial facilities abroad. This extraterritorial reach was made possible by networks of commercial surrogates such as Asadollah

o Mohammad Vakili appeared as the co-owner of Golden Commodities LLC and the Best Leader General Trading LLC, according to Cedar Rose and ICP Credit Limited, two commercial aggregators of company registration records in the Middle East and North Africa.

p Mohammad Vakili is listed as the Managing Director of Atlas Exchange in the Iranian corporate gazette. He appears as the company's Chief Operating Officer and Member of the Board of Directors. See Tazamoni Vakili and Partners company registration record, Vinsabt.com. Atlas Exchange is also affiliated with several aliases including: Tazamoni Vakili and Partners, within these records. Several of Atlas Exchange's other aliases include Atlas Currency Exchange, Vakili Joint Partnership, and Atlas Sarafi. See Atlas Exchange company aliases, "Sanctions Explorer," Center for Advanced Defense Studies (C4ADS). Mohammad Vakili is listed as Atlas Exchange's Chief Operating Officer and Member of the Board of Directors. See Tazamoni Vakili and Partners company registration record, Vinsabt.com. Atlas Exchange's property address and national ID number match the identifying information included in the March 2019 Department of the Treasury designation. See "Iran-related Designations and Designations Updates; Counter Terrorism Designations; Non-proliferation Designations Updates," U.S. Department of the Treasury, March 26, 2019.

q Teymour Ameri was questioned about alleged deposits made to the accounts of his co-conspirators. These deposits were identified as evidence of potential violations of domestic laws combating currency manipulation and smuggling. See MehrNews.com reporting on the Teymour Ameri prosecution.

Seifi, Teymour Ameri, and Mohammad Vakili. These actors, and others like them, provide access to regional trading hubs, such as the Emirates, where high commercial traffic and low transparency standards create opportunities for illicit infiltration.[43] As seen in the Seifi, Ameri, and Vakili case, some of these commercial brokers and surrogates have professional backgrounds within the financial services, while others operate with keen knowledge of the rather murky universe of illicit imports and exports. Yet the combination of open data resources, including publicly accessible commercial registries, judicial proceedings, and domestic news sources, can expose a variety of their operations.

The Ameri and Vakili ordeal exposes the inherent handicap (and hazards) facing commercial surrogates that operate partially in the open and partially in the shadows. The brilliance of their illicit operations is made vulnerable by the expansion of public data on illicit transnational activities, which U.S. and Emirati authorities can better exploit to enhance their understanding of the unknown elements of Iran's currency laundering operations. The combination of broader exploitation of publicly available information, open-source investigative techniques, and insider insights can collectively improve the ability to effectively target and degrade the transnational commercial networks that support the IRGC's global operations. CTC

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