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Words of Welcome from the Editors

Dear Reader,

We are pleased to announce the release of Volume XV, Issue 5 (October 2021) of *Perspectives on Terrorism* (ISSN 2334-3745). Our independent online journal is an Open Access publication of the *Terrorism Research Initiative* (TRI), Vienna, and the *Institute of Security and Global Affairs* (ISGA) of Leiden University's Campus in The Hague. All past and recent issues are freely available online at URL: https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/perspectives-on-terrorism.

Perspectives on Terrorism (PoT) is indexed by JSTOR, SCOPUS, and Google Scholar where it ranks No. 3 of journals in the field of Terrorism Studies. Now in its 15th year, it has nearly 9,500 registered subscribers and many more occasional readers and website visitors in academia, government and civil society. The *Articles* of its six annual issues are fully peer-reviewed by external referees while its *Research Notes* and other content are subject to internal editorial quality control.

The current issue features six ***Articles***. The opening article, by Molly Amman and Reid Meloy, looks at indirect incitements to political violence picked up by receptive lone actors and extremist groups. Their contribution is followed by an article from the hands of Nilay Saiya, who profiles 60 jihadists behind the 9/11 and other Islamist attacks on U.S. soil. The next two articles focus on various aspects of terrorism in the West Balkans (written by Anita Perešin, Melisa Hasanović, and Kujtim Bytyqi) and in and around Nigeria (authored by Jacob Zenn and Caleb Weiss). Two more articles focus on terrorist financing from Finland (by Lotta Tuomaala-Järvinen and Juha Saarinen) and on the difficulties of implementing terrorism prevention measures in Lebanon along the lines of the 2015 UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (by Sharaf Hussein).

These articles are followed by a ***Rejoinder*** from Bart Schuurman, who takes issue with some statements in Lorne Dawson's article in the August issue of our journal on the role of religion in terrorism.

The ***Resources*** section features five brief book reviews by Joshua Sinai, the Book Reviews Editor of our journal. This is followed by a longer review of a new dissertation by Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn on 'Meaning-Making after Terrorist Attacks in Western Europe' by Alex Schmid. In the light of the 20th anniversary of Al-Qaeda's 9/11 attack, Information Resources Editor Judith Tinnes scopes the newer literature on AQ. Then David Teiner, Marta Furlan, Ayse D. Lokmanoglu and Brody MacDonald present a shorter bibliography on Rebel Governance, while Berto Jongman presents his regular survey of recent online resources on terrorism and related subjects.

Finally, in ***Announcements***, Olivia Kearney presents her regular Conference Calendar which, due to COVID, is still dominated by online meetings.

The articles and other texts of the current issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism* have been selected and edited by James Forest and Alex Schmid, the journal's principal editors. Editorial Assistant Jodi Moore handled proof-reading, while the technical online launch of the October 2021 issue of our journal has been in the hands of Associate Editor for IT Christine Boelema Robertus.

Stochastic Terrorism: A Linguistic and Psychological Analysis

by Molly Amman and J. Reid Meloy

Abstract

Stochastic terrorism has been bandied about in recent public discourse. However, it has received little scholarly attention, particularly in understanding its mechanics and the deeper psychological context in which it might flourish. The history and phenomenology of the term are elaborated upon, and its psychological meaning is explored through the application of linguistic pragmatics, the psychoanalysis of large group regression—what we term "poliregression"—and terrorism risk assessment. The January 6 Capitol siege and other historical events are used as illustrations.

Keywords: Stochastic terrorism, incitement, pragmatics, legitimation, insurrection, poliregression

Introduction

"Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?" These infamous words, attributed to Henry II of England, ominously preceded the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Beckett's murder in 1170. To be clear, the king neither participated in, nor ordered, the notorious assassination, yet he is widely accepted as being largely responsible for it. Historical accounts reveal that Beckett, in a long-running disagreement with King Henry II, had recently excommunicated bishops supportive of Henry II, infuriating the king. Variations of the saying differ slightly, but Henry II is quoted as having said in full, "[w]hat miserable drones and traitors have I nurtured and promoted in my household who let their lord be treated with such shameful contempt by a low-born cleric! Will none of these lazy insignificant persons, whom I maintain, deliver me from this turbulent priest?"[1] The king's implication was clear—failure to support his desires through action would amount to treason in his mind. Ostensibly upon hearing their king's thoughts—directed at his own household, no less—four of his knights formed a plan and traveled to Canterbury. Lyttleton chronicled an original intention of confronting the archbishop and perhaps kidnapping him, but they ultimately killed Beckett when he resisted their attempts at arrest.[2] There has never been a credible suggestion that Henry II ordered violence against the archbishop. What his speech did, however, was trigger a chain of events directly ending in murder and making that result much more likely to occur than if he had never spoken.

Almost nine hundred years later, the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 forced most states to close or severely limit public activity at certain businesses such as bars, restaurants and gyms—and required masks to be worn in public, in order to slow the spread of the virus. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer enacted several such measures relatively early in the pandemic, triggering criticism and protests from extreme-right groups. President Donald Trump publicly supported those protests, dismissively referring to Governor Whitmer as "that woman from Michigan" on Twitter, and tweeting on April 17, 2020, "LIBERATE MICHIGAN!" He also issued a call to "save" the Second Amendment, because it was "under siege." Two days later, several individuals including some from a previously organized extreme right-wing group, the Wolverine Watchmen, began discussions about taking action, starting with finding the governor's home address.[3] Over the next few months, they plotted to kidnap and potentially murder the governor, motivated by the belief she was exercising unrestrained authority. On April 30, 2020, they joined others who armed themselves and physically invaded the state capitol to protest; some protestors waved "Trump" flags and at least one wore a mask reading, "Liberate Michigan." The following morning, President Trump tweeted support for the protestors. Encouraged, the April plotters continued their research, planning and preparations. The FBI arrested them on October 7, and on the following day, President Trump tweeted, "…I do not tolerate ANY extreme violence. Defending ALL Americans, even those who oppose and attack me, is what I will always do as your President! Governor Whitmer—open up your state, open up your schools, and open up your churches!"[4]

Stochastic terrorism has been defined as the incitement of a violent act through public demonization of a group or individual.[5] Stated another way, the term has been said to mean "acts of violence by random extremists, triggered by political demagoguery."[6] It describes a pattern that cannot be predicted precisely but can be analyzed statistically.[7] In other words, a specific act against the demonized person or group cannot be forecast, but the probability of an act occurring has increased due to the rhetoric of a public figure. There is no formal, legal definition of stochastic terrorism in statutory or case law. Indeed, it is an academic, rather than legal, term. The word *stochastic* means random, stemming from the Greek *stochastikos*, meaning "proceeding by guesswork" or "skillful in aiming",[8] in contrast to determinism which is considered nonrandom. Terrorism has a number of statutory and research-oriented definitions, but in its simplest terms it refers to ideologically motivated or political violence against noncombatants, usually civilian populations. The joining of the two words, stochastic and terrorism, is originally attributable to mathematician and catastrophist Gordon Woo, who used the term to suggest a quantifiable relationship between seemingly random acts of terrorism and the goal of perpetuating fear through mass media's coverage of the violence. Woo thought the pace of attacks may be driven to an extent by the way news coverage of them unfolded.[9] The term was next taken up by anonymous blogger G2geek, who reversed the order and described it as incitement to violence through mass communication—speech first, then violence.[10]

We adopt this order of events for our own discussion of the phenomenon. G2geek's particular vision of stochastic terrorism also holds that the terrorist is the user of inciting speech rather than the person actually committing the violent act. The speech-then-violence ordering has since been discussed, specifically in reference to speech by political leaders, in recent sociopolitical commentary regarding events in the United States and elsewhere.[11] Stochastic terrorism, moreover, is not a new term for a "lone-wolf terrorist" since it is a statistical construct rather than an adjectival inference concerning the asocial nature of an individual. In fact, recent research has found that the term "lone wolf" is a misnomer since the social networks of individuals who carry out acts of violence without any external command or control are often broad and deep, exist both online and on the ground, and often contribute to the inspiration for an attack—even though the attack is done alone.[12]

The purpose of this article is to advance the exploration of the concepts of stochastic terrorism and incitement to violence from both clinical and forensic psychological perspectives. After first describing stochastic terrorism's practical application, we approach the concepts from three perspectives: linguistic pragmatics, large-group psychoanalysis, and terrorism risk assessment utilizing an approach known as structured professional judgment.

The Phenomenology of Stochastic Terrorism

How does stochastic terrorism unfold in the course of real-world events? We propose a practical description of stochastic terrorism as an interactive process between the originator of a message, its amplifiers, and one or more ultimate receivers. A charismatic public figure, or perhaps an organization, lobs hostile rhetoric against a targeted out-group or individual into the public discourse to further some political or social objective. An unrelated consumer of the rhetoric absorbs and reacts with anger, contempt or disgust, often mirroring the speaker's emotional state, and adding his own fear and anxiety to that cocktail of negative emotionality; the fear and anxiety may be intentionally provoked by the speaker to substantiate the need for his leadership and enforce the feeling that some growing harm posed by the out-group will personally impact the speaker's in-group, which is portrayed as both special and persecuted.[13,14,15] The speaker's rhetoric may range from bombastic declarations that the target is a threat by some measure, to "jokes" about violent solutions, or to the shared problem posed by the target—always stopping short of requesting or directing an attack for reasons of plausible deniability. Social and news mass media outlets are exploited to spread and amplify the message.[16,17] Gradual degradation and dehumanization of the target may occur through escalation of verbal attacks on the target's personal virtues, combined with repetition and saturation of the overall message.[18] Once he reaches his personal tipping point, a consumer of the rhetoric, unknown to the speaker, mounts an attack against the targeted out-group or individual. In the aftermath, the speaker condemns the violence generally or specifically, or asserts his or her pro–law and order stance, or denies that anyone could have seen the violent incident coming, or all three, all of which have the effect of inoculating the speaker against subsequent blame,

even if the assertions themselves are unconvincing.[19,20]

While these attacks may defy specific predictability, like any act of targeted violence, their likelihood is greatly increased by the public demonization process described above. The speaker puts out a call, knowing that someone may answer that call even if there is no way to predict who or when someone will pick up the veiled message. The intent of the speaker to cause such violence may range from unwitting naivete—in the sense of an accidental sin—to full knowledge and hope that such violence will happen, the risk magnified by his or her public speech. The exact motivation, however, is often untraceable.

Although a legal analysis of stochastic terrorism is beyond the scope of this article and will be addressed separately in another publication, here is a very brief description of the law as it would be most likely to apply. Generally speaking, hate speech is protected by the First Amendment to the US Constitution. However, one class of unprotected speech is "incitement to imminent lawless action." In 1969, the US Supreme Court ruled in the landmark case of *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, holding that speech has no such protection when it is (1) intended to incite or produce imminent lawless action and (2) is likely, in fact, to do so.[21] This differs from stochastic terrorism in that actual violence is not required, but intent to incite is.

Clinical and Forensic Psychological Analysis

Linguistic Pragmatics

Viewing stochastic terrorism and incitement to violence from a linguistic standpoint offers an opportunity to understand the underlying rhetorical processes at play and examine how a speaker manipulates with words. Linguistic pragmatics deals with the meaning of language as understood from both the words and the context in which they are uttered; both literal and nonliteral aspects of language are considered when perceiving the ultimate meaning of a linguistic communication. We find it useful in the present context.

It has been argued that most public communication by leaders is inherently coercive due to the strategies employed in furtherance of legitimizing policies and actions.[22] Exploitation of fear and anxiety in order to facilitate agreement to a course of action can be observed throughout the history of public discourse. Two mild examples: in 2010, President Barack Obama proposed a plan to recoup the taxpayer funds used to rescue the large banks credited with causing the 2008 American financial crisis. In his speech, he warned of an impending return to business as usual by the big banks, implying the American consumer may be damaged once again by abusive corporate behavior, as a harmful alternative if his plan did not pass into law.[23] In 1964, Ronald Reagan, in his "A Time for Choosing" speech, described liberal elites as a threat to the American ideal of self-governance itself, in a bid to position the doomed Goldwater campaign as the superior alternative.[24]

Clearly, coercion in political speech need not necessarily lead to acts of violence. Public communications may adopt a threat-fear-solution pattern for different purposes and follow very different scripts. For example, establishing the public need for a civic arts project might tap into the pattern in this manner: (a) Threat: inner-city poverty is limiting exposure to the arts; (b) Fear: inner-city children with PTSD will never have access to arts-based PTSD therapy and therefore continue to suffer; (c) Solution: a publicly funded arts program will result in the therapy being offered, and therefore emotionally healthier children in the inner city. Advocacy for an interventionist military policy following this pattern might look more like this: (a) Threat: Iraq is developing a functioning weapon of mass destruction (WMD) (b) Fear: if Iraq acquires a WMD, it—or a proxy like Al-Qaeda—will use it against Americans; (c) Solution: invading Iraq and capturing its WMD capabilities will preserve American lives and make the world a safer place. Both examples—whether subsequently found factual or not—may be considered legitimate uses of threat discourse. Other versions of this script might be thought of as illegitimate, on the other hand, such as speech that incites criminal violence. The Islamic State terror group used such an approach: the West hates Islam; the West is intent on destroying Islam and Muslims; therefore, it is every Muslim's obligation to kill unbelievers wherever they may be found. The threat, fear, solution-through-violence motif is a common one in the use of the discrete emotion of fear to induce terrorist violence.[25]

Whether an act or a course of action is legitimate as a practical or moral matter is not the same thing as the process of legitimation by a public speaker. "Legitimate" surely has many standards depending on what is being measured—legality of behavior is one standard of legitimacy, whereas moral rightness is another. *Legitimation* (also called legitimization), on the other hand, is the intentional deployment of linguistic behaviors to establish, first and foremost, the speaker's right to be obeyed.[26] In the context of public speech, a primary objective of legitimation has been defined as "broad social mobilization around a common goal."[27] In our observations, that goal can be:

a. A previously existing and clearly identifiable ambition held by a broad segment of society. An example would be framing a mainstream political party platform as the rightful agenda of the United States.

b. Molded into a more refined state by a speaker, from an indeterminate but broad sensibility. An example might be a call to build a wall between the US and Mexico in response to a generalized sentiment by a large segment of society that illegal immigration is a problem and current strategies are not working.

c. Broadened by the speaker from a narrow sensibility held by a small minority of society. An example might be adopting elements of the Q-Anon conspiracy theory and weaving these into a wide-ranging election fraud stance in support of calls to overturn an election.

d. Created entirely *de novo* by the speaker. This could be exemplified by a cult leader establishing a bespoke ideology with himself positioned as a divine entity at its center. David Koresh, the leader of the Branch Davidians, established himself as such a divine entity, ultimately resulting in the deaths of 75 men, women, and children in Waco, Texas, on April 19, 1993.[28] This event inflamed the passions of anti-government militia groups, and became a moral outrage that Timothy McVeigh nurtured, culminating in the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City exactly two years later.[29]

In addition to the rhetorical devices of the speaker, legitimation is aided by praise of the speaker's values and vision, his or her sanity and justification, and rightful authority;[30] it can be accomplished by the speaker or her/his surrogates, and it can be spontaneous or crafted by the object of praise. The darker side of legitimation is, of course, delegitimation of an opposing viewpoint, person or group. This strategy is frequently used in American political speech as a means of making a speaker's proposal that much more attractive when weighed against the "bad" choice. Delegitimation involves attacking the motives, justification, intelligence or even sanity of the "other;" blaming and scapegoating the other for society's troubles; marginalizing or devaluing the other on a personal level; and even dehumanizing the oppositional other.[31] For example, among former President Trump's nicknames and comments about 2020 Candidate Biden were: mentally weak, slow, crazy, corrupt, sleepy and creepy. By contrast, President Trump frequently described his accomplishments in superlative terms such as "Nobody respects women more than me" and "nobody knows more about taxes than me, maybe in the history of the world."[32]

Assertions and implicature also have roles in establishing legitimation.[33,34] Assertions shore up a speaker's credibility in part by referencing undeniable content such as facts and historically accepted ideas—providing a common ground between speaker and listener.[35] They tend to be used in sequences that collectively build up credibility needed to gain support for a desired, and potentially controversial, action or policy.[36] Living now, as we do in the United States, in the age of dual realities in which a common set of facts no longer exists between sociopolitical groups, assertions by any given leader (a) establish common frames of reference with smaller groups of people than they used to, and (b) silo groups off from one another by placing them in separate realities. The long-term effects of this phenomenon remain to be seen. One striking example by former President Trump was his statement, "I am a very stable genius."[37] Viewed from his political opposition, it was a laughable exaggeration. Viewed from his political base, it was a positive self-assertion that confirmed what they already knew. These completely opposite understandings of the world are often reinforced by the viewpoints and philosophical stances of mass media outlets who, at least in the United States, are not required to present information in a balanced and honest way.[38] These oppositional understandings are imbued with a false equivalency in the public mind, regardless of their actual merits.

Implicature, as it sounds, is a cousin of assertion that implies truth rather than stating fact. Implicature is particularly advantageous to the speaker in that its true meaning can incorporate a greater degree of subjectivity by the receiver than an assertion, allowing the speaker to communicate an idea without openly committing him- or herself to it.[39] Knowing his/her audience well, a clever speaker can imply something controversial without having to say it outright and know it will be interpreted in a predictable way. Should that interpretation land him in hot water, the beauty of implicature is that it provides an escape when a speaker needs to cancel an interpretation by simply adding more content.[40] It is a flexible and adaptive mechanism. A prime example was observed in former President Trump's various statements about the Mexican border wall. On the 2016 campaign trail, he stated, seemingly unambiguously, that Mexico would pay for the wall: "I would build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me, and I'll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great wall on our southern border and I'll have Mexico pay for that wall."[41] He reiterated this multiple times while campaigning. When it became clear that Mexico had no intention whatsoever of paying for a border wall, the President began to blur the meaning of his earlier statements: "Obviously…I never meant they're going to write out a check. Mexico is paying for the wall indirectly…many, many, many times over by the really great trade deal we just made..."[42] The implication of his first statement was that Mexico would directly fund the wall. Later, the President added content to this implication in order to change its meaning and avoid the impression of breaking a campaign promise. His supporters provided legitimation of the President's added content by praising his understanding of trade negotiations as a key aspect of his overall border wall policy.[43]

The role of personal consequence in legitimation is also notable. Threatening visions and expectancies tend to appeal to an audience when they are considered to be personally consequential.[44] The audience is presented with a threat-harm-solution scenario, framed as a dichotomous choice between "speaker/in-group/good" and "other/out-group/bad." In the 2020 Presidential campaign, President Trump framed the choice for American voters, "A vote for any Democrat in 2020 is a vote for the rise of radical socialism and the destruction of the American dream." He called Democrats "unhinged" and stated they "want to destroy you and they want to destroy our country as we know it."[45] It would be difficult to conjure a better example of the "othering" that forms the backbone of this dichotomy. Use of such rhetoric is further linked to Proximization Theory (PT).

In the framework of PT, which meshes several aspects of threat discourse into a single, coherent theory, a threat is presented as an escalating one, creating pressure to react by following the speaker's leadership as a means of averting a disaster which would personally impact the audience in a consequential way.[46] Praise and attack, and assertions and implicature are rhetorical tools used to legitimize the speaker's position and thereby shore up support. Usually, it can be assumed that a speaker's ultimate goal is to ensure popular support for his/her agenda. However, either unknown and unforeseen by the speaker, or a darker possibility, by design or by aspiration of the speaker, the receiver of rhetoric may take matters into his/her own hands and act independently. This is the operational outcome of the perlocutionary effect: meaning statements are made with the intention of producing an effect on an interlocutor—an engaged receiver—even if that effect sometimes manifests itself differently than expected by the speaker.[47]

A thread which runs through all such discourse and demagogic rhetoric is the communicating of urgency and the need to act. Time is compressed, violent action is necessary, typically to ward off an existential threat. If the threat can be successfully defined in this manner, institutions of democracy, and by extension, the guardrails of normative behavior, are subverted.

Threat discourse and stochastic terrorism do not, as generally understood, seem to entirely overlap. Though many differences between them could be resolved to coincide under the right circumstances, the published discourse literature typically envisions a leader promoting threat discourse to generate support for his or her own policy or action, rather than to inspire lawless action by others completely separate and apart from the leader. We think that the more legitimate the leader's ascension to power, such as within a functioning democracy, the greater the likelihood that advocacy for lawless action would be opaque; it would be much more transparent in an illegitimate leader's rhetoric, such as a leader of a terrorist group or an autocrat.

The power and speed of social and other media to accelerate and amplify this process, as referenced in our

stochastic terrorism process description, is an important aspect of the mechanics of demagoguery resulting in action in the cyber age. A detailed analysis of this aspect will be taken up in a subsequent publication.

Large-Group Psychoanalysis

The study of linguistic pragmatics invites reflection on the role of large group dynamics in shaping the impact of words upon the individual. There has been much psychoanalytic thinking about the topic of mass psychology, substantially shaped by the work of Freud.[48] Studies have ranged from small group dynamics to the dynamics of genocide and the geopolitical maneuvering of states.[49,50,51] What is most relevant to the discussion of incitement to violence and stochastic terrorism is large group regression of an unstructured group as explained by Kernberg, a process we term "poliregression."[52]

In the absence of specific and reasonable tasks, a large group can regress under the influence of a narcissistic or paranoid leader, the regression closely mirroring the oftentimes primitive defenses of a severe personality disorder. Kernberg writes, "a narcissistic regression of the group…stimulates the emergence of a narcissistic, self-congratulatory, self-assured leader who thrives on the admiration of others and assumes the role of an 'all giving' parental authority, on whom everybody else can depend for sustenance and security. In the throes of its regression, the group's members become passive and dependent upon that leader, and assume that it is their right to be fed and taken care of."[53] A benign sense of specialness and entitlement suffuses the group, much as it does the personality of the leader. Kernberg then goes on to explain the more dangerous paranoid regression of the group:

> "A group involved in a paranoid regression becomes hyper-alert and tense, as if there were some danger against which it would have to establish an aggressive defense. The group selects a leader with a strong paranoid potential, a hypersensitive, suspicious, aggressive and dominant person, ready to experience and define some slight or danger against which he and the group following him need to protect themselves and fight back. The members of the group, in turn, tend to divide between an 'in-group', rallying around the group leader, and an 'out-group' who are suspect and need to be fought off. The mutual recriminations and fights between the in-group and the out-group give a frankly hostile and paranoid quality to the entire group, and may lead either to splitting into paranoid splinter groups, or the discovery of an external enemy against whom the entire group can consolidate around the leader. The fight then evolves between that paranoid group and the external world."[54]

This shift from a more benign narcissistic group regression to a paranoid group regression was recounted by Michael Sherwin, who initially led the federal prosecution's inquiry into the January 6, 2021, US Capitol siege. He happened to witness the regression as it unfolded: "after he dressed in his running clothes and entered the crowd at the rally near the White House, he observed a 'carnival environment' of people listening to speeches and selling T-shirts and snacks. 'I noticed there were some people in tactical gear. They were tacked up with Kevlar vests…those individuals, I noticed, left the speeches early. Where it was initially pro-Trump, it digressed to anti-government, anti-Congress, anti-institutional…when I saw people climbing up the scaffolding, hanging from it, hanging flags, I was like, this is going bad fast.'"[55]

Kernberg's writings are prescient of the January 6 Capitol siege almost two decades later, and further help us to understand the nexus between incitement to violence and the mob violence that emerged that January 2021 afternoon. Such *poliregression* in particular helps explain the remarkably paradoxical violence by some members of the mob who were either law enforcement or military toward other law enforcement officers, the US Capitol Police, some of whom were also retired military. This is the most factually based, dramatic, and unexpected example of the emotional power of poliregression. It also illustrates how group dynamics will overwhelm individual discretion, even among trained military and police officers.

In paranoid regression, the incitement to violence of the leader's speech defines the large group as threatened by an out-group against which violence must be used to fend off an attack. In other words, defensive violence is necessary against the threat from the outside, and furthermore, the threat is both *imminent* and *existential.*

Such language advancing the need for imminent action can be highly persuasive once the group is convinced of the immediacy and magnitude of the threat. By characterizing the threat in this manner, certain psychological and biological changes follow: first, the existential nature of the threat overrides any commitment to nonviolent organizational and political forms of governance. For example, an intellectual commitment to central elements of democracy, such as free and fair elections, is subsumed by the emotional drive for the violence of action now. Second, hidden within the paranoid regression is a pathologically narcissistic belief that the group is special and entitled to such targeting given the secrets to which it is privy—as the old saying goes, it is better to be wanted by the FBI than not wanted at all. There is an "intolerance of indifference" in paranoid regression.[56] For example, the paranoid group alone holds the conspiratorial secrets of the rigged election. Third, beliefs shared among group members become more simplistic, binary, and absolute—what we term "extreme overvalued beliefs"—once the out-group is clearly identified.[57] For example, the group believes they are the sole defenders of democracy, and must use violence to ensure a victory over antidemocratic forces, the Republicans in Name Only (RINOs), a term utilized by Trump in his speech just hours before the Capitol siege. Fourth, the compression of time and portrayal of an imminent threat also resolves whatever cognitive dissonance the receiver may have had concerning his heretofore self-identity as a nonviolent person, and the fact that he or she is now setting forth on a violent pathway. The resolution is found by redefining the act of violence as a *defensive* necessity to fend off an imminent threat, and therefore is justified. What was plainly observed by televised media as offensive violence in the Capitol assault, for example—a mob of individuals breaking into the building and some members of the mob assaulting police officers—was likely rationalized in the minds of many of the mob that they were carrying out an act of defensive violence, largely due to its characterization as necessary in the face of an existential and imminent threat. In addition, such psychological processes are deeply intertwined with the activation of the autonomic nervous system, specifically the amygdala and other related areas of the limbic system, whenever an imminent threat to survival is perceived—conveyed by the persuasive rhetoric of the leader. Such limbic reactivity is both faster and less discerning than cognitive processing in higher cortical areas of the brain; the former is evolutionarily predisposed to prompt immediate action rather than ponder the reasons for such action.[58] Human survival on the African savannah was not enhanced by pondering the movement in the bush—is it the wind or a lion?—but instead by taking action: freeze, flee, or fight. In the case discussed here, it was the third option for many of those marching to the Capitol as they were instructed to "fight like hell" (the words of President Trump) and engage in "trial by combat" (the words of his personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani).

The demographics and behaviors of those who breached the Capitol on January 6, moreover, ranged from those caught up in the poliregression of the group, to those with more planned and purposeful intent, organizing beforehand with the conscious agenda of overturning the election through violent means. We think that these individuals, most amply illustrated by members of the "Oath Keepers," an extremist group largely composed of retired law enforcement and military who have been federally charged with a variety of crimes, were the exception to the poliregression of most; and by virtue of their professional training, advanced on the Capitol cognizant of their pathway to violence.

Terrorism Risk Assessment

Measuring the risk for violence as a result of stochastic terrorism and incitement to violence within a group is daunting. However, the validation of a risk assessment instrument, the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol, when applied to lone-actor terrorists, provides some insight into characteristics of receivers—as described in our stochastic terrorism process description—of such persuasion by political leadership.[59]

The TRAP-18—developed by the second author—is a structured professional judgment instrument composed of 18 indicators: eight proximal warning behaviors and ten distal characteristics. The proximal warning behaviors, most notably *pathway, identification, and last resort*, have been shown to discriminate between terrorist attackers and those persons of national security concern who do not attack;[60,61,62] the proximal warning behaviors also form a cluster among terrorist attackers as opposed to non-attacking persons of national security concern in multidimensional scaling analysis;[63] and finally, the warning behaviors directly precede

an attack—and follow the distal characteristics—through the application of time sequence analysis as predicted by the theoretical model.[64]

Pathway warning behavior is measured by late-stage markers in behavior, including research, planning, preparation, and implementation of an attack.[65] By the time these behaviors are occurring, the receiver of such persuasive language would likely have already decided that violence was the only solution to the perceived problem; he or she would intend to be violent, and would be beginning to mobilize for such violence. Reasoned action theory has empirically demonstrated the sequential movement of such psychology, progressing from belief to attitude to intent to act.[66]

Identification warning behavior is defined in the TRAP-18 instrument as a psychological desire to be a pseudo-commando, or have a warrior mentality;[67,68] closely associate with weapons or other military or law enforcement paraphernalia; identify with previous attackers or assassins; or, in the case of the individual terrorist, to identify oneself as a soldier or agent to advance a particular cause or belief system. We have discussed this warning behavior in detail in another publication.[69] In the context of the receiver characteristics of persuasive speech implicating violence as the solution to the problem at hand, identification as a warrior or soldier for a cause helps mobilizing for violence. However, research has also found that *fixation*, another proximal warning behavior which is defined as preoccupation with a person or a cause, occurs in >80% of targeted violence cases, yet does not discriminate between attackers and non-attackers.[70,71] What does discriminate is the evolution from fixation—what one thinks about all the time—to identification—what one becomes.[72] Such "identity claims" may appear in words and visual images. Striking examples seen at the January 6, 2021, assault on the US Capitol included statements, flags and banners, and militia uniforms—but most relevant to incitement to violence and stochastic terrorism is the intent to act and the capability to do so as a self-appointed soldier for the cause after receiving direction from the leadership.[73] Without such a self-identity, there may be enthusiasm and even righteous indignation, but there is no intent to be physically violent toward the target.

Last resort, the third proximal warning behavior which separates attackers from non-attackers in the TRAP-18 research, is defined as a "violent action/time imperative".[74, 75] It is typically expressed in words or in deeds, i.e., final statements or "final acts."[76] Simply put, the subject believes that he must act violently, and he must act now. This proximal warning behavior is often preceded by a triggering or precipitating event, and in the context of incitement to violence, such a trigger is demagogic rhetoric. The fact that last resort behavior significantly discriminates between terrorist attackers and non-attackers underscores the centrality of time compression and urgency in incitement to violence. It is captured by the word "imminent" in the *Brandenburg* case cited above, but the importance of imminency of the threat, often falsely portrayed as existential, is underappreciated as the primary accelerator for violent action by the receiver of the persuasive speech. That sense of imminent threat is fundamental to the necessity for immediate violent action by the listener, whose intent and capability have already been established. But for the urgent time element in incitement to violence, the heightened probability of risk of violence is smaller.

There are other terrorism risk assessment instruments, such as the VERA 2R,[77] that will also help understand both the push and pull factors related to such violence—and the importance of protective factors to mitigate such risk. The TRAP-18, however, measures behaviors that are in close time proximity to a violent attack—which other terrorist violence measures do not—making it most applicable to our analysis.

Conclusion

We have attempted to advance a psychological understanding of stochastic terrorism and incitement to violence through the lens of linguistic pragmatics, large-group psychoanalysis, and terrorism risk assessment. There are other theories which help to understand the weaponizing of words,[78] but here we have emphasized the cognitive and emotional impact of demagogic rhetoric upon the receiver or listener, and the movement from idea to violent action. The signals for violence are often hidden in the noise of extremist rhetoric, particularly when coming from those who purport to be the voice of the people. But the signals resonate loudly and clearly with primed receivers. Lone offenders and regressed groups, when reacting to threat discourse, want to act

quickly given the seemingly urgent nature of the threat communicated by the speaker. They feel compelled to engage in imminent violent action. Public safety professionals, in turn, must act even more efficiently in order to somehow identify and prevent such bad acts, which can rapidly unfold. It is as dire as it sounds. As often said by law enforcement officials, they have to win the race every time, but a violent actor only has to win once.

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Who Attacks America? Islamist Attacks on the American Homeland

by Nilay Saiya

Abstract

The twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist strikes presents a good occasion for scholars and policymakers to take stock of what has been learned about Islamist, anti-American terrorists. In this article, the author evaluates a number of proposed causes of terrorism against the empirical record of 60 individuals who, claiming to have been motivated by their understanding of Islam, have plotted or carried out attacks against the American homeland. The analysis finds that while many theories of terrorism fail to explain the phenomenon of Islamist, anti-American terrorism, these terrorists do share a few traits, namely that they tend to be well-educated, young men reared in countries characterized by government repression, many of which happen to be security partners of the United States. The insights of this analysis suggest a number of policy prescriptions.

Keywords: 9/11, causes of terrorism, Islamism, repression, terrorist profiles, United States

Introduction

Twenty years ago, the United States was the target of the most devastating terrorist attack in modern history, when 19 Islamist extremists hijacked four airliners and skillfully guided three of them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Since that time, dozens more individuals have attacked or plotted attacks against the American homeland, claiming to be motivated by Islamic political principles or by a Muslim religious and communal identity.[1] What have we learned about Islamist, anti-American terrorists in the 20 years since 9/11? In this article, the author evaluates a number of proposed causes of terrorism against the empirical record of all 60 Islamist terrorists who have plotted or carried out attacks against the American homeland. Over the past 20 years, a number of explanations for anti-American terrorism have been proffered by policymakers and academics. Some accounts of terrorism point to *individual* characteristics such as personal impoverishment and mental illness. Others identify *country-level* variables like poverty or misguided foreign policies instead. How well do these contending theories of terrorism—both at the individual and country level—hold up when examining the history of Islamist, anti-American terrorism? Do these terrorists share common traits? These are important questions. Beliefs about the root causes of terrorism have driven central foreign and domestic policies of the United States. The ability to build a profile of potential terrorists could help policymakers develop more effective policies to combat terrorism and allocate resources effectively. The analysis reveals two important findings: (1) most explanations for anti-American terrorism developed over the years cannot adequately explain Islamist, anti-American terrorism and (2) the traits most commonly shared by this set of terrorists include their gender, age, and their being raised in repressive countries, often backed by the United States through security partnerships and support. This analysis suggests that, in some cases, policies intended to combat terrorism may, in fact, be encouraging it.

The present study builds on previous work in three ways. First, the article draws on the most comprehensive data set of Islamist, anti-American terrorism to date, one which contains information on every terrorist or potential terrorist who carried out or attempted to carry out an attack on American soil and who claimed to be motivated by the teachings of Islam. This study builds upon previous work by considering both homegrown *and* international anti-American, Islamist terrorists who attempted to commit terrorist attacks on American soil, whereas many previous studies have focused mainly on domestic terrorists.[2] Second, it attempts to consider individual and country-level explanations for Islamist, anti-American terrorism *simultaneously*, whereas previous work examines one or the other. This study differs from previous ones in that it does not take a country-level quantitative approach using cross-sectional, time-series analysis, nor does it focus on a

specific terrorist organization as is common in qualitative studies of terrorism. In taking a "middle approach" that considers the entire history of cases of Islamist, anti-American terrorism from 1990 through 2017, the present study provides a more holistic understanding of the roots of this form of terrorism than previous accounts by examining 11 theorized causal explanations for Islamist, anti-American terrorism. Third, and relatedly, the analysis takes an interdisciplinary approach to the study of anti-American terrorism. Because it does not seek to advance any particular theoretical viewpoint or work from within any particular discipline, it is able to incorporate into the analysis psychological, sociological, economic, and political explanations for terrorism.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify the scope of this study. First, the author does not put forward a novel theory of terrorism. Instead, an attempt is made to evaluate existing theoretical explanations against the universe of cases of Islamist terrorism against the United States homeland. Second, the author's survey is concerned with a specific subset of terrorists: those motivated by extremist interpretations of Islam. To be sure, anti-American terrorism can take many forms—including a virulent and spreading form of white supremacist terrorism—but the focus of this article is on those individuals who acted on their extremist interpretations of Islam in plotting or committing attacks on the American homeland. There are practical reasons for examining only cases of attacks or plotted attacks against the American homeland by Islamist extremists as opposed to anti-American terrorism in general. There have been many hundreds of terrorist attacks committed against Americans in the Middle East, especially in the war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan. In many of these cases, the perpetrators have not been identified. Furthermore, in the cases where attackers have been positively identified, it is nearly impossible to obtain reliable information on their backgrounds. It is also the case that the attacks that are most worrisome to American policymakers and the American public are attacks on the territory of the United States itself. Moreover, past scholarship has shown terrorism to be a heterogeneous category, with different forms of terrorism being driven by different factors.[3] Focusing on attacks on the American homeland is thus a reasonable way to scope the project, while still obtaining useful information, even if it applies only to a certain subset of terrorism. Third, terrorism is examined here at the individual rather than the group level. The reason for this is that this author finds little evidence that the terrorists surveyed in this study were more likely to have substantive ties to established terrorist organizations than they were to be acting of their own accord. The major exception here, of course, are the 9/11 hijackers. In the two decades since 9/11, there is only one case of a jihadist foreign terrorist organization directing or coordinating a deadly attack inside the United States, or of a deadly jihadist attacker receiving training or support from groups abroad—namely in the case of the attack at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola on December 6, 2019. While some terrorists might claim to be acting on behalf of extremist groups—and the groups themselves might take credit for the attacks—most terrorists in the data set did not appear to be taking direct orders from established organizations. This is indicative of the changing nature of terrorism, which at one time was hierarchical and driven by established organizations, but today is more decentralized and often committed by lone wolves. Fourth, the goal of this study is not to establish causality between independent and dependent variables but rather to identify traits common to anti-American, Islamist terrorists.

This article proceeds in three parts. The next section details various proposed causes of terrorism. It groups these explanations into individual- and country-level determinants. The second part evaluates these explanations against the universe of cases of Islamist, anti-American terrorism, dating back from the end of the Cold War through 2017. The concluding section situates the findings in the context of policy.

Explanations for Terrorism

What makes terrorists tick? Answering that question has long been at the heart of terrorism studies well before the attacks of September 11, 2001. After those attacks, though, the question took on a whole new urgency. Since 9/11, both policymakers and scholars have attempted to elucidate the "root causes of terrorism".[4] These theories of terrorism have had a direct bearing on the foreign and domestic policies of the United States and its allies.

Some explanations for terrorism have focused on the personal factors that drive people to partake in political violence. Other work has looked instead at how country-level factors can drive terrorism by creating pools of potential terrorist recruits. Now, 20 years after the deadliest terrorist attack in world history, how well do these different explanations clarify the roots of Islamist, anti-American terrorism? Are we any closer to unearthing the root causes of terrorism? In the following, six proposed individual-level causes of terrorism are examined.

Individual-Level Explanations

At the individual level of analysis, scholars have pointed to a number of potential determinants of terrorism. These explanations include personal impoverishment, a lack of education, a history of mental illness, immigrant and refugee status, age, and gender. This section explains the rationale behind each of these explanations in turn.

Personal Impoverishment

Perhaps the oldest and most widely-held assumption about terrorism is that it is rooted in poverty.[5] The poverty-terrorism link is particularly popular among policymakers. After the 9/11 attacks, Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton were quick to link terrorism to economic conditions in the Middle East. "We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror," Bush proclaimed to a United Nations conference in Mexico.[6] American Secretary of State Colin Powell similarly declared: "I fully believe that the root cause of terrorism does come from situations where there is poverty…where people see no hope in their lives".[7] The poverty of resources and of life prospects may drive people who would ordinarily have no interest in terrorism to the point of desperation and to take greater risks, including attacking those believed to be responsible for their impoverished situations.[8] It is important to note, however, that much academic work has questioned the link between personal poverty and terrorism.[9]

Education

Along the same lines as the personal poverty thesis, many have conjectured that education can serve as an important deterrent to terrorism.[10] Popular in some counterterrorism circles is the refrain "With guns you can kill terrorists, with education you can kill terrorism"—a declaration popularized by Malala Yousafzai, the youngest Nobel Prize laureate and herself a victim of a brutal terrorist attack in her native Pakistan in 2012. Education can help combat terrorism by contesting stereotypes, confronting bigotry, and providing hope for a better future. In the words of Moza Bint Nasser, "Education is the world's vaccine against terrorism."[11] Acting on this belief, policymakers, especially those in global liberal institutions, often peddle expanded access to education as the most important antidote for terrorism.[12] Like the personal impoverishment thesis, however, the education thesis also has its share of critics.[13]

Mental Illness

Another popular view, especially prevalent in the media and in policy circles, links terrorism to mental illness.[14] As noted by an article in a popular magazine, "There is no doubt that the study of mental health and its implications has an important role to play in both the prevention of, and the response to, terrorist attacks."[15] This logic provides a seemingly straightforward explanation for the phenomenon of suicide terrorism in particular; only individuals with cognitive deficits would willingly kill innocent civilians and *themselves*. Terrorists are often compared to other mass murderers who engage in indiscriminate violence such as school shooters whom we later learned were, in fact, diagnosed with various mental illnesses. The scholarly consensus, however, has concluded, in the words of Jerrold Post, that "it is not going too far to assert that terrorists are psychologically normal—that is, not clinically psychotic."[16] In fact, Post argued that terrorist groups seek to *weed out* mentally unstable individuals who could compromise the mission of

the organization. Nevertheless, the idea that terrorists tend to be mentally ill remains a popular thesis among the general public, policymakers, and those in the media.

Immigrant and Refugee Status

One of the most provocative explanations for Islamist, anti-American terrorism points to the threat posed by immigrant and refugee populations. During his first week in office, American president Donald Trump signed an executive order temporarily banning citizens of seven Muslim countries—Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen—from entering the United States for a period of 90 days and, in the case of refugees from Syria, indefinitely. The executive order came on the heels of a presidential campaign in which Trump vowed to ban Muslims from entering the country. The president justified this unprecedented measure on national security grounds, believing that such a ban would deprive terrorists of the freedom of movement necessary to attack Americans. As noted in the executive order, the purpose of the ban was "to protect the American people from terrorist attacks by foreign nationals admitted to the United States… after receiving visitor, student, or employment visas, or who entered through the United States refugee resettlement program".[17] Critics of the administration's immigration policy, however, noted that citizens of the countries on the ban list had killed no American citizens in terrorist attacks. Empirical studies on the topic similarly find little relationship between immigrants or refugees and terrorism.[18]

Age

Young people may be especially susceptible to the appeal of terrorism, and, increasingly, are serving as a key source of support for terrorist organizations.[19] Terrorist organizations can help youth make sense of the world. The appeal of a group-based identity, the promise of combating cultural threats, the prospects of glory and dignity, and personal ties to terrorist networks can serve as powerful incentives for young people. Increasingly, teenagers and, in some cases, even younger individuals serve in combat roles. With time, knowledge, and experience, however, individuals tend to be less prone to terrorist appeals and propaganda.

Gender

Finally, at the individual level of analysis, some have suggested a gender difference in the making of terrorists.[20] The fact that the vast majority of the world's terrorists consists of men suggests that women might have more innate peaceful tendencies, owing to their natural propensity for dialogue, cooperation, egalitarianism, reconciliation, and anti-militarism.[21] As noted by psychologist Steven Pinker, "over the long sweep of history, women have been and will be a pacifying force. Traditional war is a man's game: tribal women never band together to raid neighboring villages to abduct grooms".[22] Young men, in particular, remain especially vulnerable to the appeal of terrorist recruiters for the reasons mentioned above.

Country-Level Explanations

Much of the "root causes of terrorism" literature focuses at the level of the country rather than the individual. While the individual-level causes of terrorism focus on the *direct motivation* for individual terrorists turning to the bomb or the gun, country-level explanations focus on the *general climate* that breeds terrorism. The next section highlights five of the most important proposed determinants of terrorism arising from research on, and popular beliefs about, the macro-level correlates of terrorism: political repression, mass poverty, country size, political stability, and states' foreign policies. These factors can have the effect of creating large pools of potential terrorists. The following section also explains the rationale behind each of these explanations in turn.

Repression

Among the country-level correlates of terrorism, perhaps none has proven to be more important than the belief that terrorism arises from environments of authoritarianism.[23] One month after the 9/11 attacks, the administration of George W. Bush embarked on a "global war on terror." This war was driven by the belief that countries which block access to political representation and thwart free expression alienate citizens, generate grievances among the population at large, and inspire terrorism because their governments do not provide legitimate, nonviolent channels for dissent, making the turn to political violence more likely. In the same vein, a commitment to civil liberties prevents liberal states from cracking down on peaceful dissent and overreacting to terrorism with excessive force, while engendering support from the population at large. Thus, democracies enjoy a robust advantage in combating terrorism.[24] For this reason, the Bush administration made democracy promotion the lodestar of its foreign policies in Iraq and Afghanistan. "[T]he best antidote to radicalism and terror is the tolerance kindled in free societies," Bush remarked during a speech at the National Defense University.[25] A number of scholarly studies have found support for the idea that freedom combats terrorism.[26] Other studies demur, finding that democracies tend to experience higher levels of terrorism.[27] Still others find a nonlinear relationship between regime type and terrorism, revealing instead that regime type has an "inverted U-shaped" impact on terrorism.[28]

Mass Poverty

Whereas personal impoverishment considers the financial conditions in which individuals find themselves, country-level poverty accounts for macroeconomic indicators of poverty, from GDP per capita to government expenditure. The argument linking widespread poverty to terrorism is as follows: because economic prosperity relieves competition over scarce resources, higher levels of wealth result in greater satisfaction among the general populace and thus reduce the likelihood of individuals turning to violence in order to redress their impoverished situations. Here again, the literature is inconclusive. Some work determines that economic development and equality indeed serve as a bulwark against terrorism.[29] Other work finds the opposite: wealthier countries are more prone to terrorism.[30] Still other cross-national studies find no relationship or a nonlinear one between poverty and terrorism.[31]

Country Population Size

Whereas poverty and repression concern the *motivation* for terrorism, country size and political unrest (discussed below) relate to the *opportunity* for terrorism. The size of a country—usually measured as total population—is another popular perceived correlate of terrorism. The logic linking the size of a country's population to terrorism is straightforward: the larger the population, the lesser the likelihood of terrorist detection by the government.[32] It has also been argued that high population growth rates generate socioeconomic problems such as income inequality and subsistence stress, which can lead to overall deprivation. This further creates a cause for political violence to be utilized by terrorists as a way to signal discontentment.[33]

Political Unrest

A country's level of political unrest has long been thought of as a significant cause of terrorism.[34] In this perspective, terrorism tends to be concentrated in states characterized by hybrid regimes that are neither highly repressive (where the costs of terrorism are prohibitive) nor highly free (where peaceful means exist to change the status quo). Countries in the middle thus experience the worst of both worlds. They do not yet have the institutions and political channels for citizens to peacefully express their dissatisfaction with the political status quo; at the same time, they do not have, or choose not to use, the tools of repression to undercut terrorist group formation and violence *a priori*.[35] Domestic political instability provides would-be terrorists with the opportunity to both organize and hone military and tactical skills required for terrorist

acts to be committed. Conversely, regime stability acts as a deterrent to terrorism. For this reason, new, transitional, or failing states are more likely to produce terrorists who attack both domestic and foreign targets.[36]

Foreign Policy

A final country-level explanation for anti-American terrorism points to the impact of American foreign policy. As noted by Burcu, Savun, and Phillips, "states that exhibit a certain type of foreign policy behavior are more likely to attract transnational terrorism".[37] For example, one study finds that support for anti-American terrorism is disproportionately more likely among those who hold negative views about American foreign policy.[38] Another revealed that "negative international relations" on the part of Western countries—most prominently the United States—is correlated with more support for terrorism.[39] In this view, the aggressive foreign policies adopted by the United States as part of its counterterrorism strategy have served to embitter local populations against the United States and make it more vulnerable to terrorism committed by these aggrieved individuals. One popular theory links anti-American terrorism to its military occupation of other countries.[40] Similarly, states which back controversial foreign policies of the United States may also give rise to both domestic and transnational terrorism.

Evaluation of Explanations

How well do these proposed causes of terrorism hold up against the empirical record of attacks on the American homeland by Islamist extremists? In order to evaluate the legitimacy of these explanations, they were compared against the universe of cases of Islamist, anti-American terrorism from the end of the Cold War through the end of 2017. In all the cases, individuals who committed or plotted attacks made it clear that they were motivated by an extremist interpretation of Islamic texts or traditions. These terrorists were identified by sifting information from various sources like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database, widely considered the "gold standard" in terrorism data collection, to create a comprehensive data set of Islamist, anti-American terrorists. Detailed "biographies" were then created of every Islamist terrorist who either attempted or committed a terrorist attack on American soil, focusing on the different theories of terrorism identified above. From the biographies, a data set was constructed that was analyzed for commonalities between these terrorists. The data set uses the individual terrorist as the unit of analysis and codes information for the eleven proposed causes of terrorism described above. Individual-level characteristics were coded according to the information found in these biographies. For the country-level attributes, information on terrorists' native countries was coded, based on each terrorist's year of birth, thus allowing us to see the effects, if any, of social context on the production of Islamist, anti-American terrorism. The variable for repression is taken from Freedom House's measure of "civil liberties." The variables for poverty and population size come from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators*. The "political stability" variable is sourced from the Polity IV data set measure of "regime durability"—that is, the number of years a particular regime has been in place without a change in government (defined by a three-point change in the Polity democracy score over a period of three years or less). Table 1 shows how all the variables were coded.

Table 1: Variables and Coding

Variable	Coding
Personal Poverty	1. Lower class 2. Middle class 3. Upper class
Education	1.Primary schooling 2. Secondary schooling 3. Higher education
Mental Illness	1. No history of mental illness 2. History of mental illness
Immigrant/Refugee Status	1. Naturalized immigrant or refugee 2. American citizen by birth
Gender	1. Male 2. Female
Repression in Country of Birth	1. Low (1-2 on Freedom House scale) 2. Moderate (3-5 on Freedom House scale) 3. High (6-7 on Freedom House scale)
Population Size of Country of Birth	1. Low (top third of terrorists' home countries) 2. Moderate (second third of terrorists' home countries) 3. High (bottom third of terrorists' home countries)
Poverty Level in Country of Birth	1. High (GDP less than $10,000) 2. Moderate (GDP $10,000-$50,000) 3. Low (GDP more than $50,000)
Political Stability in Country of Birth	1. Regime in place 0-8 years 2. Regime in place 8-54 years 3. Regime in place more than 54 years
Foreign Policy of Country of Birth	1. Security partner of the United States 2. Not a security partner of the United States

Data summary tables appear at the end of this article. Analysis of the data set shows that theorized individual-level causes of terrorism appear to contribute little to our understanding of Islamist, anti-American terrorism. One common view of terrorism dismisses terrorists as mentally ill, but the results reveal that only 10 percent of terrorists had a history of mental illness. Of course, it could be the case that some instances of mental illness went undiagnosed or unreported, but it remains unlikely that mental illness was a main driver of the individuals surveyed here. Another view, especially popular in certain policy circles today, sees terrorism as arising primarily from immigrant or refugee populations. This logic served as the basis behind the various incarnations of the Trump administration's travel bans. It is, in fact, the case that most of the terrorists hailed from outside the United States; 75 percent of Islamist, anti-American terrorists were born abroad (some of whom eventually became naturalized American citizens)—but there is little reason to believe that immigrants and refugees pose a greater risk to American national security than American citizens by birth. Only 11 terrorists were naturalized citizens. Regarding the claim that a lack of education creates a fertile breeding ground for prejudice, radicalization, and recruitment, this analysis finds the opposite: in the 42

cases where a terrorist's level of education could be determined, 33 terrorists (79 percent) had attended an institution of higher education. This finding suggests that higher levels of education are *positively* correlated with terrorism—a verdict in line with the findings of other studies.[41] Research has also shown that many members of terrorist groups enjoy a higher standard of living and better education than the general populace.[42] A surprisingly high proportion of terrorists has professional occupations.[43] One possible counterargument is that terrorists may have studied at Islamic institutions of higher education where they were steeped in radical traditions, but the present analysis shows that in most cases terrorists attended or completed their studies at Western colleges and universities, such as the University of Hamburg, University of Arizona, University of Pennsylvania, Washington State University, and University College London, thus casting doubt on this account. Finally, it appears that personal impoverishment does not lead to anti-American attacks. In about half of cases, terrorists came from middle- or upper-class backgrounds.

The two individual-level traits that most Islamist, anti-American terrorists share are their gender and age. All but one of the terrorists were male, the lone exception being Tashfeen Malik, one of the two perpetrators of a terrorist attack at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California, on December 2, 2015. Regarding age, in a vast majority of cases (77 percent) the attackers were 30 years old or younger. These findings echo the verdicts of some previous studies.[44]

While the analysis of the individual-level attributes relates to both domestic and international anti-American terrorists, the analysis of country-level correlates of terrorism pertains only to international terrorists—those born outside the United States. Many of the country-level attributes likewise fail to sufficiently explain the phenomenon of anti-American, Islamist terrorism. For example, the size of the country appears not to be a strong correlate of this form of terrorism. In a slight majority of cases, terrorists hailed from less populous countries, suggesting that population size has little bearing on the production of anti-American, Islamist terrorists. Country-level poverty, like personal impoverishment, also does not appear to correlate to attacks on the American homeland. Only five terrorists came from countries with a per capita GDP of under $1000; conversely, eight terrorists came from countries with per capita GDPs of over $100,000. The average country GDP for all terrorists is slightly less than $43,000. In fact, correlational analysis shows that anti-American terrorists are more likely to come from *richer* countries. With respect to political unrest in terrorists' countries of birth, about half of non-American terrorists were born in countries with relatively new or transitioning governments, while the other half were born in countries marked by stable governments. Here again we find no correlation.

However, the analysis does reveal two important findings with respect to country-level attributes of terrorism. The first concerns the foreign policies of countries from where terrorists originate. In 66 percent of non-American cases, terrorists hailed from countries that are security partners of the United States: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Pakistan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and, more recently, Iraq and Afghanistan (until August 2021). In total, in 46 out of 60 cases, terrorists were either Americans or from American-allied countries. The second important country-level finding pertains to the level of repression in these countries. When excluding the cases of homegrown terrorism, in 87 percent of the international cases, terrorists were born and raised in conditions of serious political, social, or religious repression. The countries that produced anti-American terrorists and were formal security partners of the United States averaged 5.7 on Freedom House's seven-point scale of civil liberties, meaning that these individuals were born and raised in conditions of high repression.

Might it be the case that the inclusion of the 9/11 attackers is skewing the results? To account for this possibility, the analysis was performed again, this time removing the 19 September 11 hijackers. The results remain very similar, with no notable changes in the overall results (though it should be noted that the sample size is reduced considerably).

In summary, analysis of Islamist, anti-American terrorism has found scant support for many of the proposed causes of terrorism. At the individual level, these include personal impoverishment, level of education, a history of mental illness, and immigrant/refugee status. It does, however, appear that men—and in

particular well-educated, young men—are especially prone to terrorist recruitment. Likewise, few country-level attributes appear to explain attacks on the American homeland by Islamist extremists, including mass poverty, country population size, and political unrest. Two of these characteristics, however, do stand out as being particularly important: repressive countries that are also security partners of the United States. These findings have important implications for the counterterrorism strategy of the United States.

Conclusion

Addressing the root causes of Islamist, anti-American terrorism requires attention at the level of both the individual and the country. An examination of the universe of cases of Islamist terrorists who have plotted or carried out attacks against the American homeland reveals that a number of widely-held theories of terrorism find little or no support in the empirical record. At the individual level of analysis, anti-American Islamist terrorism is not a function of personal impoverishment, a lack of education, mental illness, or immigration status. At the level of the country, mass poverty, countries' sizes of population, and political stability also do not explain terrorism. Rather, the examination of terrorism here has shown terrorism to be carried out by well-educated, young men who were born and raised in countries experiencing political repression. Disturbingly, the repression in these countries has often been abetted by Washington itself through security partnerships, which likely sets into motion a vicious cycle of state repression and non-state terrorism.

The findings presented here also suggest some counterterrorism strategies and policies the US could use in the fight against terrorism. These might include programs targeted at deterring young men from subscribing to extremist worldviews, a reexamination of security partnerships with repressive regimes, and the promotion of liberty abroad. To be sure, these measures will not prevent every plot or attack against the American homeland by Islamist extremists, as the pathways to terrorism are multiple. Nevertheless, given the commonalities shared by terrorists who have attempted or committed attacks against the United States, there is good reason to believe that these steps could reduce America's vulnerability to terrorism by removing key sources of grievance in the Islamic world.

Finally, it has to be stressed that the nature of this study is not without its limitations. First, despite including the universe of cases of Islamist, anti-American terrorism, the so-called ecological fallacy may be at work by linking macro-level attributes like repression and American foreign policies to individual acts of terrorism. It might be the case, for example, that even though terrorism is incubated in conditions of repression, individual terrorists themselves might or might not have experienced such repression. Here detailed case studies of individual terrorists can help to ascertain if, in fact, country-level characteristics figured prominently in their decisions to turn to the gun. Second, the lack of a control group means that comparing terrorists to non-terrorists remains beyond the scope of this study. Future work might address this by generating a comparable control group or by employing comparative case studies of individual terrorists using the method of difference in order to isolate proposed explanations for terrorism. Third, although all of the perpetrators identified in this study have been charged with terrorist activities, it is within the realm of possibility that at least a few of them were entrapped by overly zealous law enforcement officials. We thus leave it to future work to disentangle cases of entrapment from the overall record of Islamist, anti-American terrorism. These limitations present important avenues for future research.

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Appendix

Individual Attributes

Perpetrator	Attack Date	Male	30 or Under	Criminal Record	No University Education	Mental Illness	Lower Class	Naturalized Citizen or Refugee
El Sayyid Nosair	11/5/1990	X						X
Mehrdad Safari	4/5/1992	X	X					
Asad Daryani	4/5/1992	X	X					
Ali Fattahi	4/5/1992	X						
Amir Farokhy	4/5/1992	X						
Kambis Parvaresh	4/5/1992	X						
Muhammad Atta	9/11/2001	X						
Abd alAziz alUmari	9/11/2001	X	X				X	
Wail alShehri	9/11/2001	X	X					
Walid alShehri	9/11/2001	X	X					
Satam alSuqami	9/11/2001	X	X	X			X	
Marwan alShehhi	9/11/2001	X	X					
Fayiz Ahmad	9/11/2001	X	X					
Mohand alShehri	9/11/2001	X	X					
Hamza alGhamdi	9/11/2001	X	X		X		X	
Ahmed alGhamdi	9/11/2001	X	X		X		X	
Hani Hanjour	9/11/2001	X	X					
Khalid alMihdhar	9/11/2001	X	X		X			
Majed Moqed	9/11/2001	X	X					
Nawaf alHazmi	9/11/2001	X	X					
Salim alHazmi	9/11/2001	X	X					
Ziad Jarrah	9/11/2001	X	X					
Ahmad alHaznawi	9/11/2001	X	X				X	
Ahmad alNami	9/11/2001	X	X				X	
Saeed alGhamdi	9/11/2001	X	X				X	
Charles Bishop	1/5/2002	X	X		X			
Hesham Mohamed Hadayet	7/4/2002	X					X	X
Preston Lit	5/13/2002	X		X				
Eid Elwirelwir	3/31/2003	X	X	X				
Mohammed Reza Taheriazar	3/3/2006	X	X	X				X
Naveed Afzal Haq	7/28/2006	X	X	X				
Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammed	5/31/2009	X	X					
Nidal Malik Hasan	11/5/2009	X						
Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab	12/25/2009	X	X					
Falsal Shahzad	5/1/2010	X						X
Yonathan Melaku	10/16/2010	X	X		X			X
Luis Ibarra Hernandez	1/8/2012	X	X					
Abdullatif Ali Aldosary	11/30/2012	X						
Tamerlan Tsarnaev	4/15/2013	X	X	X			X	X
Dzhokhar Tsarnaev	5/15/2013	X	X	X			X	X
Ali Muhammad Brown	4/27/2014	X	X	X				

Zail Thompson	10/23/2014	X		X				
Justin Nojan Sullivan	12/18/2014	X	X	X	X			
Elton Simpson	5/3/2015	X	X	X	X			
Nadir Soofi	5/3/2015	X		X			X	
Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez	7/16/2015	X	X	X		X	X	X
Rasheed Abdul Aziz	9/15/2015	X		X				
Faisal Mohammed	11/4/2015	X	X	X				
Syed Rizwan Farood	12/2/2015	X	X			X		
Tashfeen Malik	12/2/2015		X			X		
Edward Archer	1/7/2016	X	X	X			X	
Omar Mateen	6/12/2016	X	X	X		X	X	
Ahmad Khan Rahami	9/17/2016	X	X	X	X		X	X
Dahir Ahmed Adan	9/17/2016	X	X	X				X
Abdul Razak Ali Artan	11/28/2016	X	X					
Esteban Santiago	1/6/2017	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Joshua Cummings	1/31/2017	X					X	
Devon Arthurs	1/19/2017	X	X					
Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov	10/31/2017	X	X					
Akayed Ullah	12/11/2017	X	X			X		

Country Attributes

Perpetrator	Attack Date	US Strategic Partner	High Repression	Mass Poverty	Political Unrest	Large Population
El Sayyid Nosair	11/5/1990	X	X	X	X	
Mehrdad Safari	4/5/1992		X	X		
Asad Daryani	4/5/1992		X	X	X	
Ali Fattahi	4/5/1992		X	X	X	
Amir Farokhy	4/5/1992		X	X	X	
Kambis Parvaresh	4/5/1992		X	X	X	
Muhammad Atta	9/11/2001	X	X			
Abd alAziz alUmari	9/11/2001	X	X			
Wail alShehri	9/11/2001	X	X			
Walid alShehri	9/11/2001	X	X			
Satam alSuqami	9/11/2001	X	X			
Marwan alShehhi	9/11/2001	X	X			
Fayiz Ahmad	9/11/2001	X	X			
Mohand alShehri	9/11/2001	X	X			
Hamza alGhamdi	9/11/2001	X	X			
Ahmed alGhamdi	9/11/2001	X	X			
Hani Hanjour	9/11/2001	X	X			
Khalid alMihdhar	9/11/2001	X	X			
Majed Moqed	9/11/2001	X	X			
Nawaf alHazmi	9/11/2001	X	X			
Salim alHazmi	9/11/2001	X	X			

Ziad Jarrah	9/11/2001	X				
Ahmad alHaznawi	9/11/2001	X	X			
Ahmad alNami	9/11/2001	X	X			
Saeed alGhamdi	9/11/2001	X	X			
Charles Bishop	1/5/2002					X
Hesham Mohamed Hadayet	7/4/2002	X	X	X		
Preston Lit	5/13/2002					X
Eid Elwirelwir	3/31/2003					
Mohammed Reza Taheriazar	3/3/2006		X		X	
Naveed Afzal Haq	7/28/2006	X	X	X	X	X
Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammed	5/31/2009					X
Nidal Malik Hasan	11/5/2009					
Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab	12/25/2009	X		X	X	X
Falsal Shahzad	5/1/2010	X		X	X	X
Yonathan Melaku	10/16/2010	X	X	X		
Luis Ibarra Hernandez	1/8/2012					
Abdullatif Ali Aldosary	11/30/2012	X				
Tamerlan Tsarnaev	15/4/2013			X	X	
Dzhokhar Tsarnaev	15/4/2013			X	X	
Ali Muhammad Brown	4/27/2014					X
Zail Thompson	10/23/2014					X
Justin Nojan Sullivan	12/18/2014					X
Elton Simpson	5/3/2015					X
Nadir Soofi	5/3/2015					X
Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez	7/16/2015	X			X	
Rasheed Abdul Aziz	9/15/2015					
Faisal Mohammed	11/4/2015					X
Syed Rizwan Farood	12/2/2015				X	X
Tashfeen Malik	12/2/2015	X				X
Edward Archer	1/7/2016					X
Omar Mateen	6/12/2016					X
Ahmad Khan Rahami	9/17/2016	X	X			
Dahir Ahmed Adan	9/17/2016		X		X	
Abdul Razak Ali Artan	11/28/2016		X		X	
Esteban Santiago	1/6/2017					X
Joshua Cummings	1/31/2017					X
Devon Arthurs	1/19/2017					X
Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov	10/31/2017				X	
Akayed Ullah	12/11/2017	X			X	X

Female Returnees from Syria to the Western Balkans: Between Regret and 'Caliphate Nostalgia'

by Anita Perešin, Melisa Hasanović, and Kujtim Bytyqi

Abstract

From the beginning of the armed conflict in Syria, in 2012, more than a thousand foreign terrorist fighters and their family members moved from Western Balkan countries to Syria and Iraq, many of whom ended up joining ISIS. The countries with the highest number of departures—Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Albania—are also the countries with the highest concentration of returnees, primarily women and children. This article aims to explain and compare the motivations and expectations that fueled the decisions of women to travel initially to the war zone and their feelings and aspirations after return. It also provides insights into their lives in the 'Islamic State' and explores their sentiments toward the 'caliphate' after returning to their home countries—something that can affect their reintegration. The article seeks to shed light on women from Western Balkan countries who supported or participated in violent extremist organizations as well as the potential consequences stemming from this.

Keywords: Balkans, caliphate nostalgia, female returnees from Syria and Iraq, foreign fighters, ISIS

Introduction

In 2012, upon the start of armed conflict in Syria, the Western Balkans saw an unprecedented outflow of volunteer fighters to the Syrian theater; having once attracted foreign fighters to aid Bosnian Muslims during the 1990s, the region became an active supplier of fighters willing to return the favor to oppressed Muslims in the Middle East. For several years, some 1,070 foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their family members moved to Syria and Iraq from the Western Balkans.[1] In 2014, their motivation grew with the proclamation of the caliphate and ISIS leader al-Baghdadi's call for Muslims around the world to migrate to ISIS-held territory and help build the self-declared 'Islamic State'—framed as a modern-day *hijrah* (the journey of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina): "Therefore, rush O Muslims to your state. Yes, it is your state. ...O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing *hijrah* to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because *hijrah* to the land of Islam is obligatory."[2] A willingness among people within the region to both return the favor paid in the 1990s and perform the religious duty of *hijrah*—along with the promise of a life of luxury in Syria that made the weak economic potential in their home countries even less appealing—resulted in one of the highest rates of mobilization into terrorist organizations in Europe relative to population size.[3]

Although the whole region has been affected by the foreign fighter phenomenon, the countries with the highest number of departures from 2012 to 2016, when most countries recorded their last foreign fighter departure, are: Kosovo, with approximately 355[4]; Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), with around 297[5]; North Macedonia, with 156[6]; and Albania, with 140.[7] The Western Balkans also currently has the highest concentration of *returned* FTFs and their family members in Europe. Some 485 of them have either returned on their own or were repatriated in coordinated actions supported by the governments of their home countries.[8] This organized repatriation from Syrian camps started in 2018 and is intended to involve all remaining nationals from the four countries mentioned above, however these operations are currently postponed or scaled down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. So far, organized repatriations have returned 10 citizens to North Macedonia, in August 2018 and April 2020; 110 citizens to Kosovo in April 2019; 25 citizens to BiH in December 2019; and five citizens to Albania, in October 2020. Kosovo's 2019 repatriation of 110 individuals at once makes it one of the few countries in the world that has returned that many of its nationals from Syria in a single operation. These first repatriations have been mostly of women and young children.[9] Children—including many born there—as well as women, make up the majority of the 475 individuals who remain in the Western Balkan

contingent in Syria and Iraq.[10]

This article explores the experience of women from these Western Balkan countries with the highest number of travelers and returnees,[11] both during their stay in Syria and Iraq and after their return home, revealing their expectations and real-life experiences in ISIS-held territory and their sentiments toward the 'caliphate' after their return—something which might affect their reintegration. These findings contribute to better understanding the current level of sympathy these women hold for extremist ideologies, by comparing the motivation and expectations that fueled their decision to move to the 'Islamic State' some years ago with their feelings and aspirations after returning to their home countries.

Only women who were repatriated in organized operations after 2018 are included in this study, including one woman and two children from North Macedonia,[12] 32 women and 74 children from Kosovo, six women and 12 children from BiH, and one woman and four children from Albania.[13] We conducted research interviews with these women, as well as with some of the frontline practitioners who have provided them care and interventions since their return.[14] In interviews, women returnees were asked questions on issues like: the various motivations and vulnerabilities that drove them to depart for Syria and Iraq; the experience of interviewees under ISIS rule related to their family, lifestyle, and work; their views of what was positive and negative about ISIS; any disillusionment or doubts they felt; any traumatic experiences they had in ISIS territory; their perception of how women were treated (including slave ownership) and their role in marriages; feelings and doubts that may have arisen upon their return; and to what degree they feel any 'caliphate nostalgia.'

The Wider Context: Comparable Findings from Recent Studies in Western Countries

Numerous publications have emerged in the recent years on various aspects of the foreign fighter phenomenon, as researchers aim to better understand the profiles and possible motivations of the estimated 5,600 individuals who have departed Western countries to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq.[15] According to Dawson (2021), the vast majority of Western foreign fighters have been young men from Muslim immigrant families with an average age of approximately 26 years. Still, women appear to account for between 10 and 20 percent of those who left the West for Syria and Iraq; they were generally much younger, on average around 21 years.[16]

Findings of recent studies of radicalization and the jihadist foreign fighter phenomenon assign a causal role to the "pursuit of greater purpose, meaning, identity, and belonging" in explaining, at least in part, why some individuals radicalize and resort to violence or become foreign fighters.[17] The biographies of Dutch foreign fighters were the focus of work by Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol in a 2014 study,[18] and of Bakker and Grol in a 2015 study,[19] leading them to the conclusion that individuals who departed for Syria and Iraq likely experienced "strong frustrations about their own societal position"[20], "a feeling of apathy and lack of meaningfulness in their lives," or "the loss of a loved one" and "difficulties at school or work and trouble with authorities."[21] In addition, the subjects of both studies were in their early twenties, came predominantly from Islamic immigrant families in the lower or lower-middle classes, and had attained modest levels of education. Before leaving for Syria—which researchers said "seemed to provide them with a sense of purpose and fulfill their need to belong"[22]—most of these individuals had become isolated from their past social networks. Instead, they developed bonds with new networks that helped reinforce their radical views, or they came under the influence of 'charismatic persons' and other 'inspiring figures.'[23] Weggemans et al. (2014) noted an "increased interest in religion" in the period before subjects had departed,[24] which these authors tied to the 'new beginning' many associated with the establishment of a caliphate and the religious duty to "help out Muslims in need."[25]

Similarly, Coolsaet's (2018) study of foreign fighters from Belgium demonstrated that, for many marginalized immigrant youths, travel to Syria served as an escape from a life 'without prospects,' as well as 'feelings of exclusion' and the 'absence of belonging' they felt while living in Belgian society.[26] Vidino and Hughes (2015) have also found that "a search for belonging, meaning, and/or identity appears to be a crucial motivator for many Americans (and other Westerners) who embrace ISIS's ideology."[27] Other studies have explicitly explored the

motivation of women to undertake *hijrah*, and the roles designated to women by ISIS.[28] However, findings regarding the number of women who departed for ISIS-held territory from Western countries varies somewhat. The 2018 report by Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State*, compiled figures related to some 41,490 individuals from 80 countries who traveled to Syria and Iraq and were affiliated with ISIS, determining that 10–13% of them were women.[29] In 2021, however, Dawson found the rate of females to be even higher, up to 18 percent.[30]

Creating a typical profile of these women has turned out to be elusive. In fact, Cook and Vale (2018) contend that there simply is "no singular profile of female affiliates [of FTFs] in Syria and Iraq."[31] They found that women who departed did so for very diverse reasons. In the jargon of radicalization research, these reasons were identified by Cook and Vale (2018) as either 'push' or 'pull' factors that had led women toward ISIS. They discovered that the most common push factors were "feelings of discrimination, persecution or those of not belonging to their society, seeking independence, and grievances related to foreign policy." According to them, a rather vast range of pull factors came into play, from ideology and portrayals by ISIS of women's empowerment within the 'Islamic State,' to "fulfillment of a perceived 'obligation' to make *hijrah* and live under strict Islamic jurisprudence and governance, supporting ISIS'S state-building project, seeking adventure, seeking a husband or traveling to join one already in theater, traveling with family (whether willingly or not), and even seeking free healthcare or education."[32] Regarding the 'role of ideology,' women were found to be often as 'ideologically motivated' as males.[33] These findings resemble other research showing that women departees have been motivated by "adventure, alienation, dissatisfaction with their lives, searching for alternatives, romantic disappointments, adolescent rebellion, or other forms of discontent."[34]

This brings us to our question: what do we know specifically about women from the Western Balkans who have become affiliated with ISIS? Our research reveals that most were motivated to depart for ISIS-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq for religious reasons; that they view their experiences there largely through the lens of a before-and-after experience, demarcated by the 2017 uptick in anti-ISIS military operations; and that their views of ISIS have shifted to varying degrees over time, with some now expressing outright disavowal of ISIS and its ideology, while others remain ambivalent and a handful continue to rationalize the group's rhetoric and actions.

Profiles of Western Balkan Female Returnees

Just as it has been a significant challenge to profile foreign terrorist fighters in general, and their female counterparts in particular, it is exceedingly difficult to recognize a single profile in women from the Western Balkans who migrated to ISIS territory. Nonetheless, some characteristics identified by Jakupi and Kelmendi [35] in Kosovar women migrants can be observed in a high percentage of other Western Balkan women who traveled to the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq. These are: (i) they were young; (ii) lacked information about the conflict; (iii) married at a young age (in their twenties); (iv) began practicing religion shortly before their departure; and (v) had experienced a traumatic event (the loss of a loved one or other significant personal crisis) earlier in their life. Further, in accordance with the conclusion of Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol [36] that departees from Western countries largely appear to be marginalized individuals with limited economic and social prospects who are experiencing various frustrations in their lives, this research also identified a lack of prospects and the hope for a better life as important push factors in the decision of many women to travel from the Western Balkans.

The fact that most of the female subjects of this research married early, and were married before departing (see Table 1), was, however, a point of divergence from other studies. For example, Dawson's recently published study, *A Comparative Analysis of the Data on Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Who Went and Why?*[37], indicates that a majority of women who migrated from the West to Syria and Iraq were single. In contrast, 33 of the 34 women from Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia who participated in our research had traveled to Syria and Iraq when already married, with the aim to perform traditional family-oriented roles and duties. And while all six of the women from BiH were unmarried when they departed, they had all joined Salafist

communities beforehand, had started to wear *niqab*, and each actively sought a husband within the community or online, hoping to marry under the provisions of *Sharia* law. Some left BiH newly married in unions that are not officially recognized, and without the knowledge or support of their parents. One unmarried Bosnian woman said that her desire to support the 'Islamic State' was so strong that she "couldn't wait to move to Syria to get married to an ISIS fighter there."[38]

Table 1. Age, Family Status, and Number of Children of Female Travelers at Moment of Departure [39]

Country	Age		Family status		Number of children	Children born in Syria
			married	unmarried		
Albania	30–39 y	1	1	-	2	2
BiH	20–29 y	2	-	6	1	10
	30–39 y	3				
	40–49 y	1				
Kosovo	20–29 y	19	31	1	32	33
	30–39 y	9				
	40–49 y	4				
North Macedonia	30–39 y	1	1	-	1	1

Despite concerns that some women from the region, especially those from traditionally patriarchal rural areas, may have been pressured to depart by their husbands or other male family members, our research established that such cases have been extremely rare (though this narrative is often advanced in court with the aim of obtaining a lower sentence); most women voluntarily joined their husbands, together with their children.[40] While initial departures from the Western Balkans to Syria and Iraq were dominated by men traveling to become fighters, usually with the intent of returning to their home countries one day, family departures began trending after the declaration of the 'caliphate' in June 2014 and interviews for this study revealed that when many families left—sometimes three generations, especially in Kosovo—they told relatives and friends that they had no intention of returning. However, not every woman who departed to Syria and Iraq was married, meaning they did not follow their husbands. In opposition to traditional norms, some wives refused to migrate, such as a woman from Pristina whose 8-year-old son was taken to Syria by his father, without her permission.[41] Still, some women have testified that they did leave voluntarily but were deceived by their husbands and led to believe that Turkey [42] or even Germany [43], and not Syria, would be their final destination, where they expected their husbands would find better-paying jobs.

Despite cases such as these, the influence of women as a driving force or strong support for the decision of many families to join the 'caliphate' should not be underestimated. Indeed, the criticism by Margolin and Winter [44], of the conventional wisdom that women are pulled into extremism because they are 'more compassionate and loving and less interested in politics and nation-building than men' as being 'stereotype-laden, problematic, and dangerous' is supported by our own research. One Kosovar woman, for example, accompanied her husband to Syria twice, fully aware of events on the ground as her husband had already traveled there before, and called the decision "one of the best… she has ever made."[45] A Mitrovica-based imam attributes this unquestioning support by many wives for their husbands will largely to an atavistic mentality that "the wife should be where the husband is."[46] This is reflecting a regional culture that still accedes to patriarchy and where to this day the position of women is highly unequal to that of men. In fact, Tudora, Banica, and Istrate [47] tested several dimensions of inequality—cultural stereotypes, reproductive health, unemployment, and longevity—to demonstrate that a number of related indicators of gender disparity are measurable in the Balkans today. The inequality faced by women in Western Balkan societies was also highlighted in a July 2018 European Parliament Briefing on "Gender equality in the EU accession process." It referred to 'unfinished business' in the

region when it comes to ensuring equality between women and men, noting that "traditional gender roles are deep-rooted and social attitudes and lack of awareness of women's rights are at the core of the problem."[48]

Another way in which women who participated in our research departed from wider trends had to do with their rate of religious conversion. For instance, Dawson concludes that, conservatively, about 15 percent of FTFs are converts, and that women affiliated with ISIS are even more likely to be converts than men.[49] Cook and Vale found similarly that between 6 and 23 percent of women migrants from the EU were converts to Islam.[50] Yet, almost the opposite is true of FTFs and their families from the Western Balkans, among whom the rate of conversion is negligible.[51] Unlike Muslim communities in Western Europe, which are composed mostly of recent immigrants, Balkan Muslims have been indigenous for more than five centuries.[52] Hence, all the women subjects of this research are native to the countries they departed and are Muslim by birth.

Dawson's research of 2021 also indicates a link between foreign fighting and lower socioeconomic status, lower levels of educational attainment, and higher levels of unemployment. Referencing a substantial number of studies with similar findings, he concludes that FTFs from Europe 'come disproportionately from the lower socioeconomic ranks of society,' and that their "education levels are lower and the levels of unemployment higher than what would appear to be the norm."[53] This suggests that forms of social and economic marginalization have influenced the mobilization of foreign fighters, at least in Europe. However, in the Western Balkans, it does not appear that citizens who joined the conflicts in Syria and Iraq overwhelmingly share the same socioeconomic circumstances. The women under study here fall into at least two socioeconomic categories. On the one hand, a considerable percentage of the Kosovar women who participated came from an impoverished economic background (as did one Albanian and one North Macedonian woman), while on the other hand, every repatriated Bosnian woman came from an urban area and enjoyed an average economic status.

These Bosnian returnees were also well educated, with at least a high school degree (4), up to university (1), and even a master's degree (1). The level of education of the 32 Kosovar women ranges more widely, from primary school (3) to university degree (6), with the highest number having received a high school education (23). The Albanian woman also completed high school, while the North Macedonian woman only completed primary school. All these women were unemployed at the time they departed but did not cite their financial situation as a prime reason for moving to ISIS territory, even though a better and more luxurious life were among the incentives their husbands used to coax them to migrate. Therefore, our research cannot establish any direct link between levels of education or employment status and the desire of women from the Western Balkans to depart for Syria and Iraq.

Table 2. Education Level and Employment Status at the Time of Departure [54]

Country	***Level of education***			***Employed***	***Unemployed***
	Primary school	*High school*	*University degree*		
Albania	-	**1**	-	-	**1**
BiH	**1**	**3**	**2**	-	**6**
Kosovo	**3**	**23**	**6**	-	**32**
North Macedonia	**1**	-	-	-	**1**

All the women who took part in this study returned with children, some from multiple marriages, but each with fathers from Western Balkan countries.[55] Of those who remain married (see Table 3), their husbands are still in Syria or, in a handful of cases, are incarcerated in their home countries (three in Kosovo and one in BiH).[56]

Table 3. Marital Status at the Time of Return

Country	Married	Widowed
Albania	-	1
BiH	4	2
Kosovo	13	19
North Macedonia	-	1

In general, female interviewees were reluctant to discuss their marriages in Syria and Iraq or the circumstances in which they lost their husbands. What they did speak more openly about were their expectations about life in the 'Islamic State' and the reality they found there, which was far from what many imagined.

Expectations vs. Reality: Life in the 'Islamic State'

Based on internal Islamic State documents, Margolin and Winter (2021) created a framework for understanding the complexities of women's lives under ISIS rule, and described the gendered theological-legislative system of control that was imposed on women under its governance.[57] Here, the focus is on what this meant practically for women who arrived from Western Balkan countries, how they perceived the way they were governed, and the life they lived under ISIS administration.

The relative success of ISIS in mobilizing female supporters from around the globe has aroused the interest of a number of experts, as well as the general public. It has sparked a wealth of research exploring the treatment of women affiliated with the group and how they engaged with the ISIS proto-state.[58] This curiosity about the inner lives and motivations of women who have traveled to battle zones in Syria and Iraq is further stimulated by the widely known reputation of ISIS as one of the most violent terrorist organizations in the world, and one that has promoted itself not only through horrific acts of violence directed against its enemies and the West but also through the brutal abuse, degradation, and mistreatment of 'out-group' women, or those considered enemies of the Islamic State; from Christian, Druze, Yazidi, and Shia Muslim communities, as well as Sunni Muslim women deemed 'apostates' for not adhering to the group's narrow interpretation of Islam.[59]

Despite a widespread assumption that ISIS wielded violence indiscriminately, it was systematic in targeting specific social groups with distinct forms of violence, including sexual violence. In a recent study, Revkin and Wood (2021) mapped the organization's patterns of violence and showed how it had adopted ideologically motivated policies that authorized the weaponization of certain forms of sexual violence—including sexual slavery, forced and child marriage—defined who could be targeted, and regulated the conditions under which such violence could be perpetrated.[60] While some of the women affiliated with ISIS tolerated the group's sexual slavery and gang rape, which required exclusive ownership and therefore exclusive sexual access, as unauthorized practices toward out-group Yazidi women, this does not mean that in-group Sunni Muslim women were protected from violence. They were undoubtedly exposed to forced and even child marriage, for example, such as in the case of a 14-year-old from the Western Balkans who returned to North Macedonia with a two-year-old child born in ISIS territory.

The high percentage of female travelers to ISIS territory from the Western Balkans, where some countries' foreign traveler contingents included up to 35 percent women,[61] has been particularly hard to understand due to the still-vivid war trauma experienced by some of these women or their family members in the 1990s in their homeland. Their willingness to travel to, live in, and raise children in a war-torn environment, under the brutal totalitarian rule of ISIS and under gender restrictions unimaginable in modern society, has therefore been difficult to make sense of, even many years after their departure. The female subjects of our research were driven to depart for Syria and Iraq for largely religious reasons, as well as due to socioeconomic prospects and the lure of recruiters.[62] In interviews, many women highlighted religious motivations such as a woman's traditional obligation to be with her husband. Moreover, even though Muslims constitute a significant part of

the population in their home countries,[63] some women cited the secular constitution and religious neutrality of their country's government, and headscarf bans in every country except BiH, as having moved them toward a more radical interpretation of Islam, often delivered to them by "organizations and countries with different interests."[64]

It is notable that many of these women lack a deep religious background, coming from only moderately religious families. Most of them began learning deeply about Islam shortly prior to departing, when their burgeoning commitment to religion was abused in some cases by recruiters, in an effort to lure them to Syria and Iraq. Given that radicalized actors have thus influenced their understanding of Islam, it is not surprising that some of these women emphasized feelings of having been discriminated against on religious grounds in the relatively liberal Western Balkans. For example, a woman from Kosovo expressed that her rights as a young Muslim woman are being disrespected as long as she is not allowed to attend a public high school while wearing *hijab.* [65] Similarly, another woman said she was drawn to travel to Syria 'to experience more [religious] freedom, to be allowed to be dressed as I wish [to wear *niqab*],'[66] and this sentiment was shared by many of the women who took part in this research, from all four countries. While the experience of discrimination alone does not turn someone into a supporter of violent extremism, Jakupi and Kelmendi [67] contend that it does fuel feelings of isolation within a larger community and a sense of distance from the culture or society in which one lives. This leaves an individual more vulnerable to extremist narratives, and to propaganda focused on developing a sense of belonging for recruits, with promises of rewards in both this life and the afterlife.

There are some variations in the ISIS propaganda that has been directed toward women in the Western Balkans, primarily in the way Albanian recruits have been targeted. While the group invested significant efforts to deploy gendered propaganda after its leaders produced a Manifesto [68] outlining the roles of women in ISIS, aiming to appeal to potential transnational recruits, there were nuances in how they approached women in certain cultures. For example, Ingram (2021) examined the gendered propaganda of ISIS directed toward English-speaking women in its magazines, *Dabiq* (2014–2016) and *Rumiyah* (2016–2017), and found that articles specifically targeting women relied on five female representations—three in-group archetypes, 'supporters,' 'mother/sister/wife,' and 'fighter'; and two out-group archetypes, 'victim,' and 'corruptor'—that were instrumentalized to motivate female readers "to develop their own identity in line with in-group archetypes…and denounce traits characteristic of out-group archetypes."[69] This links shame with empowerment by offering women the opportunity to redeem themselves by rejecting out-group archetypes and fulfillling the key roles of supporter or wife within ISIS.

But these gendered appeals to identity were not echoed in propaganda targeting women in the Western Balkans. Instead, it seems that ISIS is well aware of the cultural specificities in the region and the potential influence husbands and partners have on women. Therefore, it targeted its online propaganda primarily to men, relying on them to recruit women. In fact, in its research on the influence of ISIS propaganda, the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies could not find any propaganda videos targeting Albanian-speaking women, in contrast to several propaganda videos targeting Albanian-speaking men. For Jakupi and Kelmendi, this was proof that ISIS has put little effort into creating special recruitment materials tailored to Western Balkan women, focusing instead on how to equip already-radicalized men to use their relationships with susceptible women to become key recruiters.[70]

This propaganda has sometimes been instrumentalized within families, and an important influencing factor on many women who departed for Syria and Iraq was the propaganda promoted by their own partners or husbands. One imam noted that some women were seduced 'by the big houses and the propaganda about practicing life under Islamic law,' and were told that if they cooked and cared for their jihadist husbands, they would "receive a reward from Allah."[71] Notably, a majority of the women interviewed by us maintain a strong conviction that their decision to travel was the right one, and that their motives were valid, even as they now acknowledge the high level of disillusionment they experienced with life in the 'caliphate' and with its evolution, before its downfall.

Life with ISIS: Between Regret and the Myth of the Caliphate

Margolin and Winter (2021) have shown how the Islamic State implemented an elaborate gendered system of control in Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2017, a system that sought to penetrate almost every aspect of society, "regulating social relationships, extracting resources from local communities, and justifying the appropriation of material wealth and property for its own gain." They describe this system as a product of efforts "to balance ideology and pragmatism," predicated on the idea that "both individual and communal life should be governed in totality by what the Islamic State considered to be 'Islam.'"[72]

When women from the Western Balkans encountered this system, some were quickly disappointed that life under ISIS rule fell short of their expectations. Yet for others, it took time to recognize and reject the more nightmarish parts of their 'caliphate fantasy,' and a handful remain ambivalent about their experience to this day. Indeed, these women who spent from three to over six years in Syria and Iraq, and tended to view the domestic roles they had played there in glorified terms—"not as limiting but rather as spiritually righteous."[73] Interviews with these returnees revealed that they all served in supportive roles and did not actively engage in combat; but several women mentioned that they had been taught by their husbands to use weapons, but only for their own protection.

The stories told by Western Balkan women about life in ISIS territory are very similar, and yet can be divided into two extremely distinct phases, separated by the 2017 intensification of coalition operations against ISIS. Married women who departed in the early years to Syria and Iraq expressed satisfaction with their living conditions and the services provided to them. None were gainfully employed, reflecting the findings of Margolin and Winter (2021) that the vast majority of in-group women living under ISIS rule were not working outside their homes. However, as their research revealed, women were often beneficiaries of 'state' support and were granted resources or other forms of material assistance, sometimes through aid provided to husbands and fathers, who were instructed to list family members on military expense and salary forms. The women who participated in our research said they were satisfied with this support, and that almost all their basic needs were fulfilled to enable a normal life for their families (including free accommodation, an adequate monthly allowance, and access to food and other services). "When we arrived, we were receiving food and 50 USD per person for each family member, plus 30 USD for each child in monthly allowances,' one woman explained, but she noted that 'such payments soon stopped."[74] In those first years, another woman added, "all the children were born in the hospital with appropriate care to mothers and newborns."[75] These were conditions women who arrived later could only dream about.

The women we interviewed lived in groups, mainly with other women who spoke the same language, and interacted very little with people of other nationalities, even from other Western Balkan countries. According to one Bosnian woman, it was not only language but also their level of education, as well as cultural differences, that separated them from Albanian-speaking women.[76] "It was easier for us to live in small communities where we know each other and can speak our language. We were helping each other with children and spending our free time together. …we liked going shopping at local markets, where we could buy on sale the world's most famous brands of clothes."[77] Friendships were reportedly even harder to establish with Arab women, who interviewees said sometimes mistreated and oppressed them.

There were also women who arrived in these early years unmarried, or who were soon widowed They reported a more negative experience, reflecting their treatment and living conditions in a *maqqar* (a house for widowed or unmarried women)[78]—conditions which they described as "horrific, often cramped and dirty, without enough food."[79] Such conditions forced them to marry or re-marry as quickly as possible, to protect themselves and their children from a lack of care and in order to access basic needs. "It was not love but a strong wish to leave this crazy house that forced me to re-marry soon after I was widowed," said one woman.[80]

The second phase—after 2017—was characterized by incessant war and a sharp decrease in living conditions as services delivered formerly by 'state institutions', were no longer provided. At the same time, unremitting aerial bombardments forced people to move constantly in search of protection from military operations. Women returnees saw this as the time at which the 'Islamic State' lost its credibility as a state, where the values of

'pure Islam' and equality for all Muslims were promoted. Instead, they said, it became highly corrupt, and citizens were routinely mistreated, especially those of foreign or non-Arab origin. One woman explained that "greediness and the ignorance of our emirs disrupted the whole state system and its organizational structure. We didn't know who was responsible for what, or where to ask for help and support for our basic needs. We were forced to constantly change our residence; after 30…I stopped counting. It was not important to me anymore.... Nothing was important...just how my kids and I would survive."[81] A Kosovar woman recalled that "there was nothing left to eat. We lived on just one date per day and ate grass out of desperation."[82]

These conditions provoked deep disappointment in Western Balkan women regarding the basic principles of the 'Islamic State'. After all, it was these principles that had attracted many of them. Some women blamed the collapse of the 'state' on corrupt government employees who had abandoned the tenets of Islam for their own benefit. However, other repatriated women did not want to discuss the executions or other atrocities committed by ISIS at all.[83] They place blame on the West for disrupting their 'normal lives' and causing harm and suffering to people through military assaults. Some also protested against the treatment of ISIS and the 'caliphate' in Western media, expressing, for example, frustration at how ISIS has been presented, with one woman claiming that "only biased and distorted images and fake news about ISIS activities" are published in the news.[84]

Despite the fact that all the women returnees interviewed by us testified to grim conditions in Syria and Iraq, sharing a high level of disappointment with life in the post-2017 phase, it is important to emphasize that some of them still have positive feelings about the idea of a caliphate or a 'pure Islamic State' and life under the strict rules of *Sharia* law. Some women we spoke to do not regret having migrated, explaining for instance that "even though the Islamic State does not exist anymore and there was a lot of injustice there, I do not regret that I moved there, because I also experienced some nice things."[85] Another woman held positive feelings about how ISIS had implemented *Sharia* in the territory under its control, describing the required behavior of women and the brutal punishments for disrespecting strict religious rules as 'fully acceptable', adding that "all the women that have been punished deserved it. I pray for myself to avoid such temptations."[86]

In some interviews, it was clear that Margolin and Winter (2021) were right to warn that some women in the ISIS in-group actively aided in the abuse of women in the out-group. These women were systematically targeted and dehumanized, enslaved by the Islamic State, and even lost their lives. Women in the in-group—including some of the subjects of our study—turned a blind eye to slavery and sexual abuse. This may have been due, as Margolin and Winter suggest, to their own precarious situations under ISIS rule.[87] Among the women interviewed for our research project, there were some who showed support for the enslavement of Yazidi women, while some others were neutral on this issue. As a rationale, these women fell back on ISIS rhetoric, saying that such treatment is acceptable for 'unbelievers'. While these women also claimed that foreign fighters from the Western Balkans did not hold Yazidi sex slaves, they acknowledged that this was primarily due to a lack of financial means to buy and guard them. "Our men had no money for that. Slaves and the luxurious life were designated to rich Arab men."[88]

Findings like these bring us to the question: Do these women pose any threat to their countries of residence once they return from the conflict zone? Some women have undeniably remained committed to the ISIS cause even after leaving ISIS-controlled territory, such as a woman from Kosovo who described her involvement with ISIS as a 'great opportunity' compared to the life she led at home.[89] Notably, one of her highly educated compatriots also exhibited a willingness to continue to support ISIS after her return.[90] Similar sentiment was found among women from other Western Balkan countries as well; they still place primary blame on the West and coalition forces for the harm and negative experiences they suffered in Syria and Iraq.

This continued adherence to ISIS narratives even after returning home could indicate that these women are on one of the pathways described by Reed, de Roy van Zuijdewijn, and Bakker (2015) that may be cause for concern. Still, as they note, it is important to distinguish in such cases between deradicalization and disengagement and to understand that 'disengagement does not necessarily mean that people leave behind their radical ideas' but also that, "[s]ometimes people stay within these movements or scenes for a long time, even after they have

become disillusioned."[91]

In fact, several studies exploring the potential threat of returnees and their propensity to engage in violence have "shown that the risk of direct action (e.g., a terrorist attack) carried out by returning foreign fighters is historically quite low."[92] Hegghammer and Nesser (2015) found, for example, that the 'blowback rate' of attacks by Western returnees in the ISIS era appears to be just 1 in 360, adding that domestic-based plots which do not involve returnees are a greater threat.[93] Even among returnees who pose a threat, there appears to be a small time window within which they are likely to act. In their 2020 study, Malet and Hayes introduced new data on 'Lags in Attack Times of Extremist Returnees' (LATER), based on research involving 230 returnees to Western countries. Their findings indicate that a majority of attempted attacks among this population occur within one year, and most frequently within just four months after return, underscoring the importance of targeting reintegration efforts "within the critical six months after return, after which the risk of attack diminishes considerably."[94]

There are on the other hand women who returned quite disillusioned with the 'Islamic State', including from a religious perspective. They criticize its implementation of Islamic law, highlighting the unequal treatment of Arab and non-Arab foreign fighters and their families, and point at high corruption at all levels—which they view as a clear distortion of Islam. According to one woman, "they treated us as numbers who came here to die for their "cause"', which was strongly opposed to Islamic rules and values."[95] However, many women returnees agreed that if the conflict intensification had not impacted negatively on their lives, they would not have regretted continuing to live in Syria.[96] Some saw their living and social conditions improve immediately upon arriving in Syria, where they received a home to live in and enjoyed what one woman described as a 'happy life'.[97] Yet, their horrific experiences in the second phase, since 2017, and later in Syrian camps, led nearly all the women interviewed for our project to express gratitude for being repatriated.

Life after Return and Prospects for the Future

The women we interviewed were all satisfied with how their repatriation had been handled, as well as with the services and care provided to them after returning home. Their main fear was that they would be prosecuted and separated from their children, although most did not have to face such an outcome. They were also anxious about the fate of their husbands, especially those who were imprisoned in Syrian or Iraqi jails. "I only wish to visit him"[98] said one woman, who is concerned about the harsh conditions in which her husband is serving his prison sentence in Syria.

Still, perhaps the most pressing challenge for these women is how to rebuild their lives, resocialize into their communities, gain economic independence, and secure a future for themselves and their children. Not all of them are ready to readapt to the habits and behaviors in their home society. No matter what their feelings about life in the 'caliphate' were, the freedom to wear *niqab* without being condemned in public is still very important for many of these women, who continue to cover their face after their return even if this is not customary in their community or in their family. While this can hamper their reintegration and widen their separation from their families or community, many of these women are determined to maintain this practice. One remarked, "I expect people to accept me as I am and accept that I wear *niqab*."[99] The same sentiment was shared by a Kosovar woman who is the only member of her family who wears *niqab*, which she does not want to take off even at home. "Religion still plays a big role in my life," she explained.[100] Meanwhile, her father who was happy his daughter has returned, worries that he is not "able to really reach her", noting that "she is still very closed…it is strange for me that she prays so much and practices her beliefs so strictly."[101]

Another woman from Kosovo—who moved to Syria to join her fiancée at the age of 14, remained in Syria for three years, experienced desperate living conditions, lost her first husband, and gave birth in horrific circumstances in a Syrian camp—expressed that she could 'hardly reintegrate' back into Kosovar society, where she expected her prospects to be poor, largely due to the stigmatization and discrimination she anticipates from the rest of society. "For example, I cannot walk freely in my dress [*niqab*] as in Arab countries.... They [the Kosovan government] even want to ban it by law."[102] This woman did not wear *niqab* before she traveled to

Syria, and even though she considers her decision to move there a mistake, she cannot see a future in Kosovo, saying she "would like to move somewhere else...in some other Arab country...where you can practice your faith without being condemned in public." [103]

Beyond the degree to which they can reintegrate into families and societies, the future of women returnees and the success of their reintegration will depend significantly on their legal status (i.e., whether they are prosecuted and jailed) and their economic prospects. Gaining economic independence can be a factor in leading people away from extremist networks and narratives, but for these women, achieving this is a challenge for several reasons. For one, many suffer from serious psychological issues, including PTSD, which makes them incapable of holding employment, at least in the short term. Further, limited employment opportunities in their home countries make it difficult to find a job, especially for those stigmatized as returnees from ISIS territory. Even in the case of a vacancy, one woman expressed her apprehension that "no one will hire a woman with *niqab*."[104] Another woman highlighted the impossibility of married women working without their husband's permission, which is not feasible to get from husbands who have not returned or are imprisoned abroad.

There are some male returnees imprisoned in the Western Balkans as well, after returning and facing prosecution under domestic laws that prohibit foreign fighting. However, women returnees to the region have not faced jail time and only a few have been prosecuted. The prosecution of returnees has become an increasingly sensitive issue in many countries, in some cases—and certainly in the Western Balkans—because laws have been developed in response to the foreign fighting phenomenon not before traveling to the conflict zone became more widespread. Indeed, early returnees who traveled to ISIS territory in 2013 or early 2014 "could return virtually without any fear of being prosecuted." [105] However, this has changed as countries around the world have confronted the prospect of FTF returnees; and in the Western Balkans, significant numbers of returnees have forced governments to quickly adapt legislation.

Still, as Reed, de Roy van Zuijdewijn, and Bakker (2015) have noted, it is not a criminal offense in many countries "to join a fighting party as long as this party is not in direct conflict with [that] specific country. Therefore, countries either criminalize the act of joining a designated terrorist organization or charge foreign fighters for planning or executing a terrorist offense while in Syria/Iraq."[106] Some governments have thus "turned to existing legislation in innovative ways" to prosecute FTFs, including laws addressing organized crime, antidemocratic acts, and immigration.[107] Others have broadened their criminal codes to capture a greater range of 'terrorist activity,' both domestically and abroad, usually by expanding the scope of what constitutes a terrorist offense to include not only direct acts of terrorism but also acts that provide support to terrorist groups, such as propagandizing, fundraising, and recruiting. This aligns with UN Resolution 2178 (2014), which called on member states to criminalize the conduct of FTFs by making it illegal to travel (or attempt to travel), or fundraise for or organize travel, in order to "travel to a State other than their State…for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or providing or receiving terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict."[108]

While some EU countries already had laws that criminalized their citizens traveling abroad to join terrorist groups and participate in terrorist movements, other countries had to amend and expand their criminal codes to render these actions illegal. For example, Belgium has developed and reformed its criminal justice response to FTFs since 2015, making it a crime to travel with the intent of joining a terrorist group abroad, provide or receive terrorist training, or fund a terrorist organization.[109] This has also been the case in many Western Balkans states. In BiH, for instance, where legislation already criminalized conduct related to the illegal creation of military forces, including training or equipping such a force, amendments were adopted in 2014 to make it illegal to establish or join *foreign* paramilitary or parapolice units. As such, half of returned FTFs have faced prosecution under new foreign fighting statutes, and the other half under terrorism statutes that predated the foreign fighting phenomenon.[110]

Nonetheless, BiH has sentenced returned FTFs to fewer than two years in prison on average, and security analyst Adrian Shtuni has emphasized that sentences imposed in EU countries for individuals found guilty of joining foreign terrorist groups are twice as long as those imposed in Western Balkans countries, arguing

that courts in the region need to rethink their approach. Shtuni also notes that as of early 2020, the average sentence for these offenses had *decreased* in Kosovo, from an already relatively mild average of three and a half years.[111] According to Besa Kabashi, the challenges of prosecution are even greater when it comes to women returnees, "as it is hard to prove the position of a woman in a relationship' and 'it is hard to know for sure if her participation in a foreign conflict was voluntary or not, and in what capacity."[112] This view seems to be dominant among governments in the Western Balkans, where only Kosovo has pursued prosecution against any of the women who have returned from ISIS territory.

There has been no such differentiation between men and women returnees in EU Member States, at least in recent years; women have been treated as individuals with full agency, and therefore as potential perpetrators and not just victims. In Germany, for example, the radicalization of girls and women initially received little attention, meaning that women avoided prosecution upon return from Syria and Iraq. However, the state has since recognized that women may in fact have been perpetrators in Syria or Iraq and has begun to prosecute some women returnees. In the Western Balkans, perceptions of the threat women may pose is still likely influenced by entrenched social biases that underestimate the agency of women. In fact, in BiH, women returnees have even been exempted from testifying in trials before Bosnian courts against accused FTFs after being declared incapable witnesses due to the effects of the trauma they suffered in the conflict zone.[113]

Kosovo stands apart in the region, having prosecuted and sentenced all of the women who participated in our research. They were each charged with participating in a terrorist organization and, after pleading guilty, received an average of two to three years in suspended sentences.[114] Many of these women do not understand why they should be charged for membership in a terrorist organization when they were "only at home and did not do anything…had no bad intentions and only followed our men." This argument emerged regularly in interviews with returnees. While a majority of them feel that moving to Syria 'was a mistake' they still believe the decision was 'just', interpreting it as an obligation derived from Islamic scriptures.[115]

Conclusion

The findings of our study provide an overview of a small and diverse sample of Western Balkan women returnees, allowing us to obtain a glimpse of their lives in the 'Islamic State' and the challenges of reintegration in their home countries. Though this sample cannot be considered representative, consisting only of those repatriated after 2018 by their respective governments, it is large and diverse enough to provide interesting insights into their feelings before, during, and after their stay in Syria and Iraq. An analysis of the results reveals that female returnees can be divided into three groups: 1) those who expressed strong opinions against ISIS; 2) those who expressed disappointment with ISIS but remain supportive of a caliphate and of a 'pure Islamic State'; and 3) those who remain highly committed to ISIS. This indicates that a careful evaluation and risk assessment of women returnees is essential to determine whether they pose any threat and to make sure they receive the most appropriate support to facilitate their resocialization and reintegration.

Importantly, our study also found that ideological indoctrination by ISIS initially boosted the commitment of these women to the idea of a Muslim caliphate and a 'pure Islamic state' ruled by ISIS. However, over time many became disillusioned and their commitment waned. In most cases, this was due to negative experiences inside ISIS, and changes over the years in their living conditions, the deficient provision of services, and the treatment of non-Arab citizens. As a result of these factors, many women began to deradicalize prior to returning home. The level of disillusionment and self-deradicalization realized by these women *before* their return can be used to explore their willingness and ability to support deradicalization programs or to serve as counter-narrators against ISIS propaganda *after* their return.

Interestingly, the disappointment some of these women feel about the 'Islamic State' has not diminished their commitment to ISIS or to the militant jihadist ideology espoused by the group. This may further complicate their reintegration process and must therefore be carefully assessed and managed. Ultimately, however, any potential threat posed by returning women to their home countries must be countered through deradicalization programs that address the vulnerabilities, influences, and motivations that drove them toward an extremist

ideology in the first place, as well as the traumas they experienced while living under the rule of ISIS.

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Notes

[1] Two-thirds of those who traveled were at the time of departure male adults, while the remaining one-third was composed of minors (18%) and women (15%). A. Shtuni, "Returning Western Balkan Foreign Fighters: A Long-Term Challenge," (January 9, 2020). URL: https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/returning-western-balkans-foreign-fighters-long-term-challenge-24762, accessed 14 March 2020.

[2] H. J. Ingram, C. Whiteside, and C. Winter, *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 164; DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197501436.003.0008

[3] For more data on the Foreign Fighters' recruitment among general and Muslim population in the EU and in Western Balkan countries see: V. Azinović, "Regional Report: Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans" (June 2018). URL: https://www.britishcouncil.ba/sites/default/files/erf_report_western_balkans_2018.pdf, accessed 14 March 2020.

[4] K. Bytyqi and S. Mullins, "Returnee Foreign Fighters from Syria and Iraq: The Kosovan Experience", *CTC Sentinel,* Volume 12, Issue 7, (August 2019). URL: https://ctc.usma.edu/returnee-foreign-fighters-syria-iraq-kosovan-experience/. Among them there were 47 women and 92 children. See: V. Kelmendi, "Not Just Victims: Women in Terrorism from the Western Balkans" (February 2019). URL: https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Not%20Just%20Victims-%20Women%20in%20Terrorism%20from%20the%20Western%20Balkans.pdf, accessed 14 March 2020.

[5] Among them, 63 were women and 57 men. See: V. Kelmendi, 2019.

[6] E. Rosand, H. Ellis and S. Weine, "Repatriating ISIS Family Members: A North Macedonia Model?" (September 14, 2020). URL: https://www.justsecurity.org/72420/repatriating-isis-family-members-a-north-macedonian-model/. Among them there were 14 women. No data are available for children. See: V. Kelmendi, 2019.

[7] Among them there were 13 women and 31 children. See: G. Erabara, "Albanian Children to be Returned from Syrian Refugee Camps," *Balkan Insight* (October 26, 2020); URL: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/26/albanian-children-to-be-returned-from-syrian-refugee-camps/, accessed 16 March 2020.

[8] At least 260 individuals have been reported as having been killed. A. Shtuni, 2020.

[9] Of the 110 repatriated Kosovan citizens there were only four men, as well as only seven from BiH. So far, the number of men is only higher in the case of North Macedonia, where the ratio of men to women is 7:1. Albania repatriated four children and the mother of one of these.

[10] A. Shtuni, 2020.

[11] Statistics show that the highest number of women from the region of Western Balkans who have joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq in relation to the Muslim population is from Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia. On a per-capita level, the highest number of women who have joined the conflict is from Kosovo, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina. See: R. Jakupi and V. Kelmendi, "Women in Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned from Kosovo," Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (January 2017). URL: http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/women-in-ve-eng_594236.pdf, accessed 10 March 2020.

[12] One of whom, a 14-year-old girl is a mother of a two-year-old baby born in Syria.

[13] Nine of 74 children from Kosovo as well as one of 12 from BiH returned as orphans.

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Ansaru Resurgent: The Rebirth of Al-Qaeda's Nigerian Franchise

by Jacob Zenn and Caleb Weiss

Abstract

As jihadi violence spreads throughout the Sahel, Ansaru, al-Qaeda's franchise in Nigeria, has renewed its presence in the country's northwest. This has occurred as Ansaru's two rivals, the unaffiliated 'Boko Haram' and the Islamic State's West Africa Province, also announced their own branches or activities in northwestern Nigeria for the first time, which, like Ansaru, involved cooperation with bandits. Ansaru's renewed presence in northwestern Nigeria also coincides with al-Qaeda-affiliated fighters pushing further south from their historical bases in Mali into southern Burkina Faso and Niger. These simultaneous developments raise concerns about the growth of West African jihadist movements, interactions between Nigerian and Sahelian jihadists and both of them with bandits, and the possible realization of an 'arc of insurgency' in West Africa. Ansaru's renewed presence in northwestern Nigeria, amid the inability of the Nigerian state to provide security in that region, has ramifications for the growth of al-Qaeda in West Africa because it could lead to al-Qaeda's uniting its Sahelian and Nigerian jihad theaters for the first time.

Keywords: Ansaru, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Sahel, northwest Nigeria, banditry

Introduction

On January 15, 2020, six Nigerian soldiers were killed in an ambush as they escorted the emir of Potiskum from Nigeria's Yobe State through Kaduna State in northwestern Nigeria.[1][2] Few details were initially provided about the perpetrators except that the armed men wore military uniforms. Although this description would have been somewhat uncharacteristic of bandits, whose violence had been plaguing northwestern Nigeria in previous years, it was not particularly revealing given the preponderance of gangs, criminals, and small-scale armed groups in that region.[3] Two days later, however, Jamaat al-Ansar al-Muslimeen fi Bilad al-Sudan, better known as Ansaru, claimed the attack.[4] This was the group's first claimed operation inside Nigeria since 2013 and indicated the group's renewed presence in northwestern Nigeria.

Released through an al-Qaeda-linked propaganda channel, al-Hijrah, Ansaru's claim was intended to demonstrate to al-Qaeda's global followership the group's return to the northwestern Nigerian jihadist scene. After January 2020, Ansaru claimed three other attacks inside northwestern Nigeria between February and August 2020. With these sporadic claims coming after a half-decade of Ansaru's being virtually dormant operationally as well as on (social) media, it was apparent Ansaru's renewed presence was not yet set in stone, but the group was on an upswing. Northwestern Nigeria's widespread banditry and record of communal violence between ethnic Fulani herders and farming communities, as well as the increasing spread of jihadist violence across the Sahel and in northwestern Nigeria since at least 2019, means Ansaru, and thereby al-Qaeda, increasingly have opportunities to capitalize on the deteriorating regional security to support and promote Ansaru's resurgence in northwestern Nigeria.

Beginning with a brief history of Ansaru and its initial demise, the article proceeds to outline its activities after going underground by 2015, following an intense three-year rivalry with Abubakar Shekau-led 'Boko Haram.' The article then describes how Ansaru as well as its rivals, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) and 'Boko Haram,' are trying to establish themselves in the northwestern Nigerian jihadist scene. Finally, the article assesses the wider implications for both the Nigerian and Sahelian theaters of these developments.

Given the dangers and limitations of travel during the COVID-19 pandemic, field research was not possible for the authors. As such, this article mostly relies on primary source material from jihadist forums, publications, and websites, in addition to pre-COVID-19 interviews conducted by the authors with individuals in northern Nigeria. Other sources, such as reports from international organizations that did conduct field research for

their publications, were used where applicable to supplement relevant data points. Secondary sources, such as news reports from verified local media outlets, were also utilized. As a starting point for addressing the phenomenon of Ansaru's renewed presence in northwestern Nigeria amid Ansaru's own competition with ISWAP and Boko Haram in that theater, this article hopes future researchers can continue to shed light on this development as it evolves, including through in-country research where possible.

Ansaru's Beginnings

Like most jihadist groups, Ansaru was never devoid of factions, even though its factions were not easily apparent to outsiders. On one end, Ansaru represented al-Qaeda's, and particularly al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM), expansion into Nigeria through Nigerian jihadists who had trained with AQIM and formed Ansaru's 'militant wing.' On the other end, Ansaru reflected the inability of Nigerian Salafi preachers to curb jihadism after they began promoting al-Qaeda after the September 11, 2001, attacks, which resulted in their students eventually forming Ansaru's 'theological wing.'

Two Nigerian jihadist figures, in particular, illustrate the historical trajectories of Ansaru's factions and indicate how the "new" post-2019 Ansaru is a somewhat different entity than "original" Ansaru. The first figure, Khalid al-Barnawi, reportedly met Usama bin Laden or his deputy Muhammed Atef (Abu Hafs al-Masri) in Sudan in the 1990s and then fought with AQIM's earliest predecessor, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), in the Sahel.[5] This occurred after the GIA, under Afghan jihad veteran Hassan Allane, expanded GIA smuggling operations into Niger and eventually also into Nigeria in 1994.[6] Al-Barnawi later joined the GIA's successor, and AQIM's predecessor, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), in the late 1990s and became Mokhtar Belmokhtar's driver and companion.[7]

Al-Barnawi initially had little involvement in Nigeria-based jihadism. However, in 2003, Nigerian security forces cracked down on Nigeria's several-hundred-member-strong jihadi movement based in Kanama, Yobe State. It was led by Muhammed Ali, who had also been in Sudan and studied with young al-Qaeda ideologues, including Abu Yahya al-Libi, and facilitated his Nigerian followers' training with the GSPC and Sudanese paramilitaries in the mid-2000s.[8] Although Ali and his top disciples were killed in the Kanama crackdown, some surviving followers fled to the Sahel where they met al-Barnawi. There they trained and fought with the GSPC and later with AQIM.[9] Other followers of late Ali hid in Borno State, which borders Yobe, and launched several reprisal attacks on the army in late 2004.[10] The ties developed between Khalid al-Barnawi and these Nigerians with GSPC/AQIM provided the foundation for what became Ansaru's 'militant wing' in 2012.

Meanwhile, Ali's co-leader, Muhammed Yusuf, who had opposed Ali's rush to jihad in Kanama in 2003, fled Nigeria and traveled to Saudi Arabia for what turned out to be a short-term exile.[11] After receiving permission from Nigerian authorities and Salafi leaders to return to Nigeria in late 2004 on condition he would stop preaching against the state and accusing Salafis of apostasy for accepting 'man-made' laws, Yusuf flew back to Nigeria.[12] Although Yusuf was more patient than Ali, he still continued calling for jihad after returning to Nigeria, which led to a Nigerian government-Salafi alliance against him and his followers by 2007.[13]

Yusuf's jihad was launched in July 2009 in response to the Nigerian government's seeing Yusuf's growing popularity as a significant threat, especially as his preaching delegitimized the Nigerian state on Islamic grounds.[14] Salafi scholars, now supportive of the state, responded by labeling Yusuf and his followers "Boko Haram," meaning "Western education is sinful," to ridicule Yusuf's preaching.[15] This was despite Yusuf not giving his following any specific name and making clear that his preaching was principally for a jihad on al-Qaeda's model aiming to establish an Islamic state, and only secondarily for prohibiting Western education, or at least aspects of it that Yusuf believed contradicted the Quran.[16]

Yusuf was murdered while in government custody in July 2009. His followers, who numbered in the thousands, were psychologically more prepared for jihad than Ali's followers had been in 2003.[17] Khalid al-Barnawi led late Yusuf's followers, who were now under the leadership of Yusuf's deputy, Abubakar Shekau. It was Shekau

who renamed Yusuf's following as Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna Li Daw'ah wal-Jihad (the group, however, was still popularly known as 'Boko Haram'). They traveled to AQIM camps along the Mali-Niger border after Yusuf's death. Under Shekau, several "waves" of Yusuf's followers received training, funding, arms, and media support from AQIM.[18] The leader of AQIM, Abdelmalek Droukdel, and AQIM's Sahel-based commander, Abu Zeid, subsequently released statements about Boko Haram, including condolences for Yusuf's death, and oversaw the Boko Haram members' training under AQIM in the Sahel.[19] Around this time, Shekau pledged loyalty to al-Qaeda through another Boko Haram member who had previously been among Ali's followers in Kanamma.[20] With this pledge from Boko Haram's leader, Shekau, and the followers of the late preacher Yusuf's and the militant al-Barnawi brought together, the core of what would later become Ansaru's 'preaching' and 'militant' wings was formed by 2011.

Weeks before Yusuf's death, Yusuf's *shura* had selected Shekau as Yusuf's successor over Muhammed Auwal Ibrahim Gombe, among others. The young Salafi scholar, Gombe, had studied and even been supported in his youth by the family of a prominent Nigerian Salafi scholar, and future Nigerian minister of communication, Isa Ali Pantami.[21] Thus, Gombe was an astute young Salafi theologian. However, when Pantami and Yusuf debated each other and became rivals in 2006, Gombe sided with Yusuf, left the mainstream Nigerian Salafi fold, and eventually became Ansaru's first leader.[22]

Gombe represented a more Nigeria-focused and theological figure, whereas Khalid al-Barnawi represented a more global-oriented and al-Qaeda-experienced militant figure; hence they respectively led Ansaru's 'theological' and 'militant' wings. The two came together to lead Ansaru when Shekau started showing "signs of extremism and deviancy" by 2011, which forced Gombe and al-Barnawi to seek to revive Yusuf's legacy by separating from their overall leader, Shekau.[23] Al-Barnawi and other AQIM-trained Nigerians then explained Shekau's "excesses and deviance" to AQIM, which involved comparing him to the ultra-*takfiri* GIA. They ultimately received AQIM's approval to separate from Shekau in November 2011.[24]

In January 2012, Ansaru, the name chosen by AQIM, announced its formation shortly after Shekau had ordered a massive attack in Kano that killed nearly 200 people, mostly Muslim civilians.[25] Ansaru's messaging indicated it sought to defend Nigerian Muslims from Christians on the domestic level, which was consistent with the former preaching of Gombe's mentor, Pantami.[26] At the same time, Ansaru conveyed that it was aligned with al-Qaeda through its symbols and messaging. This included seeking vengeance on the West for the war in Afghanistan and responding to bans on the hijab in France.[27] Moreover, Ansaru's operations in northern Nigeria involved four kidnappings of nine foreign engineers, eight of whom were killed in rescue attempts while one managed to escape.[28] Thus, Ansaru's messaging and operations (including a prison break in Abuja and an ambush of Nigerian soldiers near Abuja who were preparing to deploy to Mali to combat al-Qaeda-aligned jihadists) reflected Khalid al-Barnawi's influence. Meanwhile, other aspects of Ansaru's messaging, and especially its theological aversion to killing Muslim civilians or even Christians who were not supporting the government or military, reflected Gombe's influence.[29]

Despite Ansaru's initial burst onto the scene with unprecedented kidnappings of foreigners in northern Nigeria, which deviated from Shekau-led Boko Haram's violent revenge campaign against Nigerian Salafis, government officials and civilians, Ansaru struggled soon after its founding.[30] Shekau further exacted revenge on Gombe by having him assassinated by Shekau's loyalists in 2013. Reportedly, Shekau even leaked details on Ansaru cells so security forces could eliminate them.[31] These events led to Ansaru's gradually becoming defunct. Some members even cooperated with Boko Haram and later with ISWAP, while others bided time in Nigeria and abroad until Ansaru could reemerge.[32]

Ansaru Underground

After the French-led military intervention in northern Mali in January 2013, Ansaru entered into a new phase of dormancy. Besides the group's problems with Shekau and with Nigerian security forces domestically, AQIM commanders who had long communicated, trained, and funded Ansaru were either killed, including Abu Zeid in northern Mali, or retreated into deep hiding, including Mokhtar Belmokhtar, in Libya.[33] Furthermore,

some Nigerian jihadists who had fought in Mali among Ansaru members, and Ansaru members themselves, including Khalid al-Barnawi, returned to Nigeria and cooperated with Abubakar Shekau, despite his previous retribution against other Ansaru members.[34] Some Ansaru members later followed Shekau into ISWAP and continued in ISWAP after Shekau's August 2016 ouster from that group, and even despite ISWAP's growing hostility toward their former group, Ansaru, which included the public execution of two of its members in 2020.[35]

Tolerating an alliance with Shekau was the result of al-Barnawi being less ideological than Gombe and understanding that in order to continue conducting operations in Nigeria, it would be necessary to find an accommodation with Shekau. As a result, al-Barnawi's fighters focused on northern Cameroon, after reaching an agreement with Shekau, which allowed al-Barnawi's fighters to conduct operations there. For example, from 2013 to 2015, al-Barnawi's fighters cooperated with Shekau's fighters and local northern Cameroonian road-robbers to conduct at least two, if not all, of five kidnappings of 22 foreigners.[36] All of these kidnappings, however, were conducted in Boko Haram's name and resulted in millions of dollars entering Boko Haram's coffers.[37]

More practically, al-Barnawi had little choice but to align with Shekau as Shekau had been killing off Ansaru members, including most notably Gombe, while other Ansaru members were beheaded by Shekau's loyalists as punishment for defecting from him.[38] Further, Nigeria's domestic intelligence services broke up key Ansaru cells, including its *shura* headquarters in Kaduna State, reportedly after receiving "tips" from Ansaru's rivals,[39] most likely Shekau loyalists.[40] Ansaru's pseudonymous leader in 2017 even claimed Shekau's loyalists had attempted to kill al-Barnawi, but had failed.[41] Thus, if al-Barnawi wanted to survive, let alone operate in Nigeria or its borderlands in Cameroon again, it was inevitable he had to subordinate to Shekau's authority.

Al-Barnawi's tacit cooperation with Shekau in northern Cameroon did not mean al-Barnawi was all-in with Shekau's agenda. However, it did mean that what remained of Ansaru lacked the operational capabilities to act more independently. Moreover, Ansaru began losing the theological agenda it once had as its main ideologues, including Gombe, were killed or forced to engage in robberies to acquire enough funds to survive. Muhammed Yusuf's son, and ISWAP's post-August 2016 leader after Shekau, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, stated in his 2018 book, that Ansaru began kidnapping hostages in Nigeria for pursuing wealth, not ideology, given their "interest was in their bellies and pockets." [42] Additionally, the remaining Ansaru members after 2014 tended to be from Kogi State, where ethnic Ebira Salafis had joined Ansaru in part because they welcomed its transnationalism compared to Shekau's ethnic Kanuri and Borno focus.[43]

Due to Ansaru's clandestine nature, it became difficult to track the group from 2014 onward. Among the only signs of its existence during this period was when the group established a Twitter account and released two videos in a two-week period before Shekau pledged loyalty to Islamic State in March 2015.[44] These two videos reconfirmed Ansaru's dedication to al-Qaeda's *modus operandi*, as they spoke of reviving Usman dan Fodio's precolonial caliphate and expressed aversion to Shekau's killing Muslims and his eccentric mannerisms.[45] After 2015, however, Ansaru relocated from Bauchi's forests in northeastern Nigeria to northwestern Nigeria because of continued pressure from the country's security forces.[46] This meant that Ansaru returned to the region where it had initially been based when its *shura* was located in Zaria, Kaduna State in 2012.[47]

From 2016 until 2019, however, little was heard from Ansaru while Nigerian security forces made significant gains against the group, beginning with the arrest of Khalid al-Barnawi in Kogi State in April 2016.[48] Furthermore, al-Barnawi's deputy was arrested in Kaduna near an arms stockpile shortly after al-Barnawi's arrest.[49] The deputy, a Fulani and Zamfara native, was known for cattle-rustling, which suggested that al-Barnawi had abandoned his accommodation with Shekau, attempted to restart Ansaru in northwestern Nigeria, and, accordingly, recruited a deputy familiar with that region. Despite al-Barnawi's detention, Ansaru's new pseudonymous leader's requesting God to free al-Barnawi from prison in an article in an al-Qaeda magazine, *al-Risalah*, one year later signaled that al-Barnawi remained in Ansaru's good graces.[50] Moreover, the article indicated that despite Ansaru's lack of being able to claim any attacks from 2016 to 2019, the group survived and remained within al-Qaeda's fold.

There were also several instances of Ansaru members being arrested by Nigerian security agencies before traveling to or returning from Libya in the 2016–2019 period.[51] In some cases, these members were alleged to have been allied with the Islamic State, which is unsurprising considering that some Ansaru members had reintegrated with Boko Haram or later ISWAP.[52] Other Ansaru members who had remained loyal to al-Qaeda, nevertheless also claimed to have been in Libya.[53] Thus, there were some Ansaru members in Libya, where the group remained dormant while biding time before returning to Nigeria.[54] In terms of media presence, Ansaru only released several *anasheed* (Islamic a cappella songs) in 2018, which reaffirmed the group's desire to revive Usman dan Fodio's caliphate and its desire to defend Muslim civilians.[55] It was not until late 2019, however, that the group transitioned to reactivation in Nigeria.

Ansaru's Renewed Presence in Northwestern Nigeria

While Ansaru was inactive, northwestern Nigeria was becoming the focus of large-scale violence emanating from "armed bandits" and other communal violence in the region.[56] The bandits, operating from Nigeria's Sokoto, Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, and Niger states, were responsible for many of the northwest's deadliest attacks.[57] Local researchers, including James Barnett who has conducted field research in the region, found that many of these armed bandit gangs are comprised of ethnic Fulani who have engaged in various violent crimes, as well as cattle-rustling across Nigeria's northwest.[58] Feeding into these problems are the larger communal conflicts emanating from competition between Fulani herders and the often-Christian farming communities of the region, which have also exacerbated the violence.[59]

Within this context, Ansaru was able to exploit several conditions inside the northwest and the wider Sahel to reestablish its presence in Nigeria. First, it blurred the lines between general banditry and jihadism. Nigerian journalist and researcher, Idris Mohammed, who covers the growing instability across northern Nigeria with a focus on Ansaru, found that Ansaru has often provided weapons or man power to armed gangs for many of these attacks.[60] Yusuf Anka, another Nigerian journalist focusing on armed banditry in the northwest, also found that Ansaru was mixing with bandit leaders.[61] Accordingly, Ansaru was suspected of being behind several attacks in the region, despite that it did not officially claim an operation until January 2020.[62]

Ansaru's record tracked with the larger trend in the Sahel that researcher Heni Nsaibia has dubbed the "jihadization of banditry," wherein jihadist organizations have often transformed local bandit or criminal networks into allied groups.[63] While this represents a long-occurring phenomenon between criminals and jihadists, in recent years this has become especially relevant for al-Qaeda's Katibat Macina in Mali and Burkina Faso, which has been able to utilize Fulani gangs as auxiliary forces across those two countries.[64] Ansaru is trying to replicate the success found by its Malian and Burkinabe counterparts.

Secondly, Ansaru, like its al-Qaeda allies elsewhere in the Sahel, has been able to exploit Fulani grievances to its advantage. This exploitation is most evident in reports about the group's recruiting efforts. Much like with the armed gangs, Ansaru has also facilitated and maintained relationships with the larger Fulani communities of the northwest.[65]

As a result, the jihadist group has been able to use these connections to recruit disaffected individuals for its own gain. It has also managed to build a support base needed for its comeback. In this regard, the International Crisis Group (ICG) has found, through fieldwork, that Ansaru "deployed clerics to discredit democratic rule and the state government's peace efforts, a 'hearts and minds' campaign aimed at winning support from rural communities."[66] These efforts largely conform to al-Qaeda's overall *modus operandi* of using and exploiting local grievances such as in central Mali where it has utilized preexisting communal and land conflicts to recruit, proselytize, and strengthen its own foothold in the area.[67]

Moreover, the da'wah-based approaches being used by Ansaru in northwestern Nigeria mirror similar proselytization efforts conducted by al-Qaeda groups in the wider Sahel and North Africa.[68] This approach was even broadcasted by the group itself in its first-ever Fulfulde-language [the language of the Fulani across West Africa] audio message released in May 2019.[69] That production featured a spokesman for the group

calling on the Fulani of northwestern Nigeria to support Ansaru and its efforts against the state, while lecturing about various religious aspects of the fight.[70]

Finally, the rising jihadist violence across the Sahel has facilitated a conducive environment for Ansaru to renew its presence. As the jihadist violence continues to push further south in both Burkina Faso and Niger, this has allowed Ansaru to strengthen connections with al-Qaeda's Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), of which Katiba Macina is one component. For example, the ICG also found evidence of JNIM supplying Ansaru with weapons captured from military raids across the Sahel.[71] Given the prior connections to al-Qaeda in Libya and known ties to JNIM, it is also plausible that Ansaru members have utilized JNIM bases inside the Sahel for training or as rear bases. However, due to the largely clandestine nature of Ansaru's activities, some of these claims have not yet been substantially verified.

All of these efforts, however, came into the fore in October 2019 when Ansaru began to publicly advertise its revival inside Nigeria. In late 2019, two *Telegram* channels emerged that purported to be run by Ansaru members. Posting in both English and Hausa, one channel featured commentary on events inside northwestern Nigeria next to general jihadist propaganda.[72] On October 27, 2019, al-Qaeda's Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), a propaganda outlet that acts as a clearinghouse for various groups within the al-Qaeda network, published a new photo of Ansaru members inside a forest, taken likely in northwestern Nigeria.[73] In the same statement, GIMF noted that Ansaru had created a new media foundation, Al-Yaqut Media Center, the same one that has subsequently featured on al-Qaeda's list of its own and affiliates' media channels.[74]

In November 2019, many jihadist channels on *Telegram* were shut down in a massive effort undertaken by the platform in cooperation with Europol.[75] As a response, al-Qaeda's media team created a main *Rocket Chat* server that acts as a central repository and forum for various groups within its network. Included in this server was a dedicated forum for Ansaru and its members and supporters.[76] One month later, the aforementioned *Telegram* channels posted yet another new photo of Ansaru members in an area resembling northwestern Nigeria's forest villages.[77] With these small propaganda releases, Ansaru affirmed to its supporters, and indeed the wider al-Qaeda network, that it was teasing out its eventual declaration of its renewal.

Finally, in January 2020, Ansaru officially claimed its first attack inside Nigeria since its renewal in northwestern Nigeria.[78] That attack, the aforementioned ambush on the Emir of Potiskum and his convoy in Kaduna, was posted online by two of al-Qaeda's propaganda channels, Al-Hijrah and Al-Thabat, which have continued to carry Ansaru's statements. Interestingly, the two Ansaru *Telegram* channels, while also taking credit for the attack, openly debated whether it was the right time to publicly announce Ansaru's renewed presence in the area or whether the group should remain in stealth, while also promising to free Khalid al-Barnawi and other Kogi State-origin preachers of the group from prison.[79] Nevertheless, this did not stop al-Qaeda and its supporters in widely sharing the group's claim of responsibility.

Seemingly confirming both Ansaru's responsibility for the ambush and its overall renewed presence in northwestern Nigeria, Nigerian security forces claimed that it had launched an offensive on Ansaru in early February 2020. State forces reported its units raided a large Ansaru camp in Kaduna, killing "no fewer than 250 terrorists and bandits."[80] In response, Ansaru released its own statement, claiming to have killed or wounded "more than 34" Nigerian soldiers while also shooting down a 'war plane' in the operation.[81] Although the Nigerian state did not confirm any fatalities on its side, it did, however, note that Ansaru forced a helicopter to a premature landing.[82]

Between February and August 2020, Ansaru's public communications were relatively dormant. However, on August 7, the silence was broken when it claimed another attack against Nigerian security forces.[83] In its statement, the group asserted that "more than 25 apostates were killed and 10 wounded in an attack on a position of the Nigerian army in Kaduna State in central Nigeria."[84] Three weeks later, on August 23, it claimed another assault on the Nigerian military in Kaduna, reporting that 35 troops were killed.[85] Both August attack claims remain unconfirmed by local media, as a series of violent attacks across the state that month made it difficult to pinpoint any specific incident to which Ansaru might have been referring. It should be noted, however, the claims coincided with reported bandit attacks on Christians.[86]

Ansaru has not publicly claimed an operation since August 2020. However, al-Qaeda's propaganda apparatus continues to include Ansaru within its sphere. For instance, in February 2021, a pro-al-Qaeda figure, Warith al-Kassam, who remains influential within the group's African activities, included Ansaru on a map of al-Qaeda in Africa.[87] In June 2021, the same person included Ansaru's aforementioned new media outlet, Al-Yaqut Media Center, on a list of official al-Qaeda propaganda outlets.[88] Al-Yaqut has yet to release any material, but its continued promotion within al-Qaeda's global network shows al-Qaeda recognizes Ansaru's renewal in northwestern Nigeria. This preceded a September 2021 *Daily Trust* report about Ansaru hoisting its flags in two towns in Zamfara, where bandits had previously reached a pact with farmers that allowed the bandits to access the towns' markets in return for the bandits not harassing the farmers.[89]

That Ansaru has chosen to hide or conceal many elements of its renewal in northwestern Nigeria is not surprising. This strategy follows similar attempts made by other al-Qaeda groups to hide their hand so as to limit any potential coordinated military offensives or international pressure against it. For instance, al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Somalia, previously sought to hide its foreign connections under the directions of al-Qaeda's senior leadership.[90]

Meanwhile, in Mali, AQIM also initially sought to conceal its involvement in the 2012 takeover and occupation of the country's northern regions by organizing its units under the banner of the ostensible local jihadist group Ansar Dine.[91] However, in both cases, in Somalia and Mali, international military offensives were inevitably conducted against both al-Shabaab and AQIM. It is possible that Ansaru has learned from these other Africa al-Qaeda affiliates and has deliberately opted for a more opaque operational approach in an attempt to provide a more conducive environment for its renewal while being relatively safe from international pressure.

Implications of Ansaru's Renewed Presence in Northwestern Nigeria

Ansaru's renewed presence in northwestern Nigeria involves several distinct factors that threaten not only Nigeria, but the Sahelian region writ large. First, and perhaps foremost, the dangerous cocktail of violence brewing in northwestern Nigeria between banditry and ethnic and communal violence stands to be exacerbated by further jihadist involvement.[92] As seen in other areas of the Sahel, such as in central Mali and parts of northern and eastern Burkina Faso, jihadist participation in communal conflicts has often accelerated retaliatory strikes and massacres, or has prompted more heavy-handed government responses that have in turn fueled cycles of violence.[93] Local militias such as Dan Na Ambassagou in central Mali and self-defense groups like Burkina Faso's Koglweogo or the nascent Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland have been emboldened to perpetrate crimes against rival ethnic groups and communities as a result of either state authorities failing to successfully disarm them or incorporating these outfits into their broad counter-terrorism campaigns, respectively.[94] It is not an unrealistic scenario for similar scenes to play out in northwestern Nigeria as the violence there continues to expand.

Additionally, there are worrying trends for the Nigerian jihadist scene more broadly. A sustained Ansaru insurgency in northwestern Nigeria would mean that jihadists from Nigeria's borders with Cameroon and Chad to the east and with Niger and Benin to the west will be challenging the state for control. While Nigeria has indeed launched some military operations against jihadists and other militants in the northwest, the vast majority of the military's focus, as well as the focus of the foreign troops supporting Nigeria, is predominantly on Boko Haram's jihadist insurgency in the country's northeast.[95] The relative lack of resources dedicated to containing violence in the northwest may mean there are opportunities for Ansaru to exploit security gaps as the group continues to recruit. Sustained small-scale assaults on Nigerian military outposts could further weaken the state's presence if more resources are not allocated to that front.

In anticipating growing jihadist violence in northwestern Nigeria, the country's military also needs to not only focus on Ansaru. In fact, the formerly Shekau-led Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna Li Daw'ah wal-Jihad [the official name for Shekau's 'Boko Haram' faction] announced Zamfara and Niger State branches as well as Lake Chad and Cameroon branches for the first time in 2020.[96] Considering Shekau's long history of animosity to Ansaru, it seems plausible that he sent fighters in northwestern Nigeria to rival the nascent Ansaru in that region. This

was evidenced most starkly through Shekau's claim of the kidnapping of over 300 schoolboys in Kankara, Katsina State in a video showing the schoolboys that the bandits exclusively provided to Shekau, as well as through Boko Haram's videos of militants and civilians praying in northwestern Nigeria and announcing their loyalty to Shekau.[97]

Meanwhile, ISWAP has also entered the fray and claimed its first attacks in northwestern Nigeria in October 2019. ISWAP's integration of Shekau's fighters after Shekau's death in May 2021, and ISWAP leader Abu Musab al-Barnawi's call specifically to Shekau's fighters in northwestern Nigerian to join ISWAP also means it is possible Shekau's loyalists in northwestern Nigeria will transfer loyalty to ISWAP.[98] In sum, Ansaru is now reviving in northwestern Nigeria at the same time ISWAP and Shekau's fighters, or at least his former fighters, are establishing their own presence in the region. This warrants significant attention from Nigerian security forces because ISWAP is, after all, a more lethal and larger fighting force than Ansaru and has a record of incorporating Ansaru defectors into its ranks while killing those who resist. At the same time, the continued fighting between ISWAP and late Shekau's fighters in northwestern Nigeria who have not reintegrated into ISWAP could distract both groups from their expansion plans in northwestern Nigeria, leaving Ansaru with more space to operate without either of those two groups interfering with Ansaru's operations.

Finally, a rising Ansaru fits into al-Qaeda's broader agenda for the Sahel and West Africa. Violence perpetrated by al-Qaeda's affiliate, JNIM, continues to expand out of Mali and into its neighboring states.[99] Over the last year, JNIM's attacks have pushed deeper into Burkina Faso and are now threatening to reach into several littoral West African states, including Ivory Coast, Togo, and Benin.[100] Ties between JNIM and Ansaru have already been documented by local researchers.[101] However, as Ansaru continues to grow and expand in northwest Nigeria, it is possible its long-term goals consist of trying to integrate its insurgency into a contiguous theater for al-Qaeda in West Africa, especially to compete against ISWAP, whose reincorporation of Shekau's fighters has been heavily promoted by Islamic State, including its spokesman and media wing in an ISWAP video.[102]

All of these factors, however, remain in flux. The future of Ansaru depends on whether it can sustain a renewed foothold inside northwestern Nigeria. However, given the current state of both the rising overall violence in the region and Nigerian military impotence in the northwest, the al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist group may indeed find favorable conditions to successfully mount a comeback inside Nigeria. Whether this will occur, or ISWAP will become the dominant jihadist group in northwestern Nigeria, remain key questions for scholars, analysts, researchers, and especially the Nigerian government and its international partners to answer.

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Notes

[1] In using 'northwestern Nigeria,' the authors are referring to the geographical area of Nigeria that includes the states of Kaduna, Niger, Katsina, Zamfara, Sokoto, and Kebbi. While Nigeria does have a national region called the 'northwest,' which includes additional states to the ones listed above, the term strictly refers to geography for the purposes of this article.

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Crime and Punishment: Jihadist Financing and Criminal Accountability in Finland

by Lotta Tuomaala-Järvinen and Juha Saarinen

Abstract

This article provides the first-ever empirical overview of patterns of jihadist financing in Finland. As jihadism has evolved in the country, particularly during the 2010s, financing-related activities have become increasingly present, also developing in quality and variance. While there are no upheld convictions on terrorist financing in Finland to date, the authors have identified at least three distinct types of jihadist financing present in the country. First, assets have been raised and moved to armed jihadist groups operating in conflict zones abroad. Second, foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq, predominantly to join IS, have self-financed their travel and equipment purchases, partly through illicit means, and, in at least one case, also moved assets for the benefit of the group they joined. Lastly, there have been assets raised in Finland and moved to individuals engaging in jihadist activities abroad. However, Finland faces notable challenges in investigating and prosecuting these offenses, hampering its efforts to promote criminal accountability for terrorist offenses.

Keywords: Finland, jihadism, jihadist financing, terrorist financing, Al-Shabaab, Ansar al-Islam, Islamic State (IS), Syria, Iraq, foreign fighters

Introduction

Finland has long been a peripheral country in the broader European jihadist milieu, far removed and isolated from its key nodes in the United Kingdom, France, and Belgium. Before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, it rarely had an issue with members of its Muslim population taking part in Islamist militancy, domestically or abroad. Indeed, Finland's first national counter-terrorism strategy from 2010 stated that there had been "no visible signs of wide-scale radicalization leading to violence" among the country's Muslim population.[1]

The lack of wide-scale radicalization and jihadist violence aside, a nascent jihadist milieu did in fact emerge in Finland in the 2000s. Initially, the phenomenon existed primarily in three contexts: within the Somali and Kurdish diasporas, and among converts. Early pioneers appear to have focused primarily on nonviolent activism, including recruitment and financing, although a small number of extremists also traveled abroad for terrorist training and foreign fighting.[2]

Reflecting broader trends in Western Europe in the 2010s, Finland's jihadist milieu has developed significantly. In a nutshell, an increasing number of individuals have become engaged in jihadist activities, predominantly through participation in the conflict in Syria and Iraq.[3] Further, extremist networks—with improved capacity for activism and outreach—have emerged, promoting the jihadist ideology, recruiting new members, and engaging in various types of activism.[4]

Consequently, jihadist activism in Finland has increased in quantity and developed in quality. Indeed, by the late 2010s the Finnish Security and Intelligence Service (Suojelupoliisi, Supo) stated it had observed significant terrorism-related activities in Finland, including dissemination of ideology and financing.[5] This is also reflected in Supo's terrorist threat assessments. Between June 2014 and June 2017, the organization elevated its threat assessment on three separate occasions. In August 2017, Finland experienced its first-ever jihadist attack when an Islamic State (IS)–inspired attack took place in the city of Turku.[6]

Yet, these trends stand in stark contrast to the limited number of pretrial investigations and prosecutions of terrorist offenses, particularly in the context of financing terrorism. To date, there has been only one upheld

conviction in Finland on terrorist offenses, and no upheld convictions on terrorist financing.

To better understand the evolution of jihadism and efforts to counter it in Finland, and to supplement knowledge generated by preexisting literature,[7] this article explores financing activities—including suspected and attempted activities—connected to jihadism in Finland between 2001 and 2020. Further, it examines the Finnish authorities' efforts to investigate and prosecute these activities, offering preliminary thoughts on why such activities have resulted in only few pretrial investigations, prosecutions, and zero upheld convictions.

In the context of this article, jihadist financing refers to actions that—directly or indirectly—raise, store, move, or use [8] assets of any kind in support of jihadist actors or activities.[9] It introduces a preliminary typology of jihadist financing that captures its variations and evolution in Finland over time. When applied to the gathered data, three distinct types of financing can be identified: raising and moving assets for armed jihadist groups abroad; raising assets for traveling to, and engaging in, jihadist activities in conflict zones abroad; and raising and moving assets for other individuals engaging in jihadist activities abroad.

This article is divided into five parts. After the introduction, it outlines its data sources and limitations. The third part introduces the preliminary typology by examining the three types of jihadist financing identified above. The fourth part examines Finland's efforts to investigate and prosecute financing activities connected to jihadism. It also offers a preliminary argument as to why Finnish authorities have struggled with investigating and prosecuting these activities. The fifth and final part summarizes the article's key findings and reflects on their broader implications for Finland's counter-terrorism efforts.

Data and Limitations

This article is based on primary and secondary data gathered from a variety of sources. First, the authors conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with law enforcement and intelligence officials, prosecution authority, journalists, governmental authorities, and professionals working on countering terrorist financing. Unfortunately, the organizations represented in the interviews alone were not able to provide a full and detailed panoramic view of jihadist financing and countering it in Finland. For instance, the authors contacted representatives of four instant loan providers and one money service provider, but each declined to be interviewed.[10]

Second, the authors collected data from relevant official documents which are not openly accessible. The authors were granted access to initial and pretrial investigation documents on suspected cases of terrorist financing connected to jihadism. Ongoing investigations, however, were excluded. The authors were also given access to suspicious activity reports and suspicious transaction reports submitted to the National Bureau of Investigation's (NBI) Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) between 2012 and 2019; these have been the basis of analysis conducted by the Unit.[11] Furthermore, the authors were also given access to the National Prosecution Authority's documents on all prosecution decisions made on suspected cases of terrorist financing between 2001 and 2019.

Third, the authors were given access to two reports published by the FIU on terrorist financing; these have since been made partially accessible to the public. The first report examined the characteristics of terrorist financing in Finland between 2017 and the first half of 2019, and the second looked at European convictions on terrorist financing between 2015 and 2020.

And lastly, the authors collected data from various openly accessible sources, including reports by international agencies, news articles, and the preexisting literature.

There are several limitations in this study. The most significant limitation was the lack of access to a key data source, intelligence gathered by Supo. Indeed, the organization has in recent years consistently stated that financing activities are one of the main manifestations of jihadism in Finland, and that there are "significant" financing-related activities in Finland.[12] Without access to such data, it is exceedingly difficult to provide

a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon and its evolution in the 2010s. Lack of access to Supo's archives also leaves a regrettable gap in terms of suspected jihadist financing activities before 2008 as there were no relevant pretrial investigations launched earlier, while only sporadic attention has been paid to jihadist activities in Finland in the 2000s in other data sources.

While there was a considerable wealth of data available on the few cases that have been investigated—and in two cases, prosecuted—by the authorities, it is unclear how representative these cases are. The access given to the authors by the authorities was exhaustive, but an additional hurdle is that currently terrorism-related pretrial investigation documents are archived in a problematic way and cannot be systematically searched in law enforcement databases. In the context of this study, the authors have strived to identify and access documents from all relevant investigations, but there are no guarantees that the list is exhaustive.

Additionally, as Finland is a peripheral country in the broader European jihadist milieu, much of the financing-related activity is international.[13] In many cases, assets raised in Finland were either transferred to armed groups or other jihadist actors abroad—predominantly in conflict zones—often via neighboring countries, or collected in Finland by individuals who later engaged in jihadist activities abroad.[14] Local authorities in these destination countries rarely had the capacity or inclination to aid in ongoing initial or pretrial investigations in Finland.[15] This constitutes a significant obstacle to investigating and prosecuting terrorist offenses, including financing. Furthermore, in the context of our study, criminal investigations opened abroad with connections to Finland—and investigated in cooperation with the Finnish authorities—were regrettably excluded from the material provided to the authors.

Lastly, a key deficiency from a methodological perspective is that the data were predominantly gathered from law enforcement and other official sources. The analysis on jihadist financing and its evolution in Finland would likely have been more detailed and nuanced had it been possible to conduct interviews with individuals who had participated in such activities in the past. However, the authors have tried to address this deficiency in part by including information collected from interviews of some of these individuals published by Finnish media.

A Preliminary Typology of Jihadist Financing in Finland

The limitations identified above notwithstanding, the gathered data clearly demonstrate that jihadist financing does occur in Finland, and that it has been increasing in quantity, quality, and variance throughout the 2010s.

Financing Armed Groups Abroad

Traditionally, financing armed groups abroad has been perceived by the authorities as one of the main forms of jihadist activism in Finland. In the early 2010s, it was highlighted as a key manifestation of the phenomenon in the country.[16] In this type of activity, individuals engaging in jihadist financing in Finland raise funds and move them abroad to persons directly connected with armed groups with the intention of supporting the group in question.

During the 2000s, Finnish law enforcement has on several occasions suspected that funds are being raised in Finland and moved to various armed groups operating in conflict zones abroad.[17] According to a Supo official who commented on jihadist financing in an interview in 2019, this type of financing in Finland has typically consisted of raising small sums of money—both from individuals aware and unaware of the funds' intended purpose or destination—and then bundling them together for transfer abroad, which often occurred through Hawala networks.[18] Both legitimate businesses and nonprofit organizations have been used in fundraising, and some of those raising funds may have pressed or even forced others to donate funds in some cases.[19]

One of the earliest public allegations of jihadist financing in Finland connects to Ansar al-Islam, an armed

group founded in Iraq in the early 2000s. The group had support networks in various countries in Western Europe—including Finland—during the decade, and these diaspora communities reportedly represented an important revenue source.[20] The existence and activities of Ansar al-Islam's supporters in Finland were made public when a local media reported—and Supo confirmed—in 2004 that approximately 30 Kurds residing in Finland had connections to the group. Some allegedly had received money from the network's leader, Mullah Krekar.[21] Several of the individuals connected to the group have been alleged to have raised funds for the group through donations and restaurant businesses.[22] To the knowledge of the authors, however, no investigations on the network's alleged activities were launched in Finland in the 2000s.[23]

The first formal pretrial investigation into suspected terrorist financing began in 2011, and it was connected to the Somalia-based al-Shabaab. According to the prosecution, four Somalis—three men and one woman—constituted a cell that sought to raise and transfer funds to al-Shabaab between 2008 and 2011.[24] The alleged cell members were suspected of several terrorist offenses, including financing of terrorism. The defendants had raised and moved funds—reportedly approximately 2,000–3,000 euros in total, partly through charitable donations—via a Hawala network to Somalia and Kenya. According to the prosecution, the funds were sent to al-Shabaab.

The main defendant—who reportedly maintained contacts with "radical preachers", was an ardent al-Shabaab supporter, and had gigabytes of jihadist content on his computer [25]—sent money to two al-Shabaab members. In addition to terrorist financing, he was charged with recruitment for the commission of a terrorist offense, and preparation of an offense to be committed with terrorist intent. These charges connected to his suspected plan to forcibly recruit his underaged nephews—aged 15 and 17 at the time—to join al-Shabaab. The plan included luring his nephews to Kenya under false pretenses, and then drugging and smuggling them to an al-Shabaab training camp in Somalia. While the District Court of Helsinki found there was enough evidence to find the defendants guilty of all charges in 2014, the conviction was overturned in March 2016. Ironically, the main defendant was acquitted in absentia as he had already relocated to Syria—together with his family—and joined not al-Shabaab but IS.[26]

While there were no related pretrial investigations or court cases in the 2010s in Finland, law enforcement and intelligence officials have recurringly identified—including those interviewed by the authors—raising and transferring funds to armed groups abroad as the most significant form of jihadist financing in the country.

Self-Financing

In the 2010s, self-financing had become a notable form of jihadist financing in the context of the foreign fighter mobilization from Finland to Syria and Iraq. In this form of financing, foreign fighters raise funds in Finland to cover their travel, equipment purchases, and other related expenses before departing to a conflict zone. There are also reports that some Finnish citizens residing in the conflict zone have continued to fund their living expenses through social welfare payments.[27]

To date, more than 80 adults—approximately a quarter of whom are women—and 30 underaged individuals from Finland have traveled to Syria and Iraq, the majority of them to join and live under IS.[28] The conflict in Syria and Iraq is not the first to attract foreign fighters from Finland in the context of jihadism. During the 2000s, foreign fighters from Finland have traveled to Somalia and possibly also to Iraq.[29] Further, a group of Finnish men—mostly converts—connected to the Salafi milieu formed around Roihuvuori mosque in eastern Helsinki showed interest in participating in the conflict in Chechnya in the mid-2000s, and a few allegedly went as far as arranging their travel to the Caucasus region.[30] One individual also attempted to enter the conflict zone, albeit unsuccessfully.[31] Regrettably, there is no data available to examine the financial dimension of these activities.

Even in the case of mobilization from Finland to Syria and Iraq, which occurred primarily from 2012–2016, there are only limited data available. Since there have not been terrorism-related charges brought

against any foreign fighters or other individuals engaging in jihadist activities in the conflict zone, it is challenging to obtain information on their self-financing activities. To the knowledge of the authors, only few initial investigations focusing on the 30–40 returnees to Finland have been opened, and to date, no pretrial investigations have been opened nor have charges been filed regarding terrorist financing offenses.

Two general observations, however, can be made concerning Finnish foreign fighters' self-financing activities. First, the travel to, and activities in, the conflict zone appear to have been financed in various ways, reflecting broader patterns in Europe.[32] Funds appear to have predominantly originated from legal sources, including personal savings, salaries, and income generated by legitimate businesses, as well as social welfare benefits.[33] For instance, in one case two IS foreign fighters used a credit card and funds of their place of employment—a restaurant in Helsinki—to cover their travel expenses.

Second, some foreign fighters have sought to generate funds for their activities through criminal means. Indeed, several foreign fighters from Finland appear to have resorted to criminal activities to fund their travel arrangements to, as well as equipment for, the conflict zone. One such individual is the main defendant in the Al-Shabaab trial, who traveled to Syria with his family at some point after spring 2015. He appears to have financed his—and his family's—travel arrangements to the conflict zone in part by credit fraud while also committing credit fraud to purchase equipment relevant to foreign fighting at a local sporting goods store.[34] While there is evidence of illicit financial activities in only a relatively small number of cases, it is highly likely that Finnish foreign fighters in general have resorted to similar self-financing methods as foreign fighters from other Nordic and Western countries.[35] These methods include credit card and consumer loan frauds, petty theft, VAT and other business fraud, lease/loans of vehicles,[36] social benefit fraud, and possibly also raising money through social media.[37]

Some of the jihadist groups active in Syria and Iraq, particularly IS, have actively sought to encourage and advise foreign fighters to raise funds and material and contribute these to their group's causes upon joining them.[38] Since there is a lack of evidence regarding multiple large-scale financing operations, it is relatively safe to assume criminal self-financing activities have largely been small-scale, individual-level schemes, with one notable exception: a group of young men connected to the aforementioned extremist Salafi milieu and the Roihuvuori mosque.

The core of the group consisted of at least five male congregants, several of whom were converts. According to the pretrial investigation documents, members of the group intended to travel to Syria in the summer of 2013 and join Kataib al-Muhajirin (KaM). Between the time the men reportedly decided to travel (around late 2012 and early 2013) and departed (June 2013), the head of KaM's "European foreign fighters' group" was Abu Salamah al-Finlandi. Abu Salamah was a Finnish-Namibian convert who had traveled to Syria together with his convert wife in the latter half of 2012. He was also a friend to at least two members of the group, and he likely played the role of a recruiter or at least a facilitator.[39] While not all of the group actually made it to Syria, most of the group's members participated in the activities of KaM, IS, and Katibat ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama'a.

Before the group departed to Syria, several men committed VAT frauds and other financial crimes.[40] Collectively, the amount of raised assets—in money and materiel—exceeded 120,000 euros. While fighting for IS in Syria, one of the group's members described—in a private email to a family member—his financial crimes as war loot (*ghanima)*, which has caused damage to the infidel nation of Finland.[41] According to pretrial investigation documents, similar sentiments were shared by others within the group. For instance, one individual—who later admitted in a media interview that he did not regret his financial crimes [42]—described the group's members in an internal chat as "Islamic Robin Hoods" stealing from the infidels *(kuffar)*. Further, another member depicted their activities as bringing "macaroni for terrorists". One member of the group in particular had previous experience in committing VAT frauds. He utilized this knowledge and expertise by providing the rest of the group a blueprint—referred to as the Action Plan—for committing similar frauds. At least two members of the group also formed a charitable organization, Northern Relief, which they used to gather additional resources.

The group's returnees were ultimately arrested in Finland in late 2014 and eventually prosecuted. They faced 12 charges, encompassing financial offenses including VAT frauds and accounting offenses, charges of preparation of an offense to be committed with terrorist intent, provision of training for the commission of a terrorist offense, and recruitment for the commission of a terrorist offence. The prosecution offered a wide collection of evidence, including pictures of two of the group's members in Syria, carrying weapons and standing in formation with other fighters in a KaM meeting.

In January 2018, the District Court of Helsinki found the men not guilty of terrorist offenses. At the time of the alleged terrorist offenses, the relevant legislation in Finland was limited. General financing of a terrorist group was criminalized only in 2015 and traveling abroad for the commission of a terrorist offense in 2016, so they could not be deployed in this case. The defendants were, however, convicted of the financial crimes they were charged for. The usage of the proceeds of their financial offenses was not investigated or prosecuted as terrorist financing. The only criminalized financing-related terrorist offense—according to existing Finnish legislation at the time—was financing of a specific terrorist act. As the prosecution was not able to connect the defendants' financing activities to specific terrorist acts, they chose to technically incorporate the funds raised through VAT frauds into the preparation of terrorist offenses charges.

Financing Individuals Engaging in Jihadist Activities Abroad

As an increasing number of individuals from Finland—and from Western Europe more broadly—have been actively engaging in jihadist activities abroad, it has opened opportunities for domestic extremists—and others—to raise and transfer funds to them. As Finland-originated individuals have predominantly joined or lived under IS in the 2010s, the destination of funds has been Syria and Iraq—with transfers mostly routed through Turkey.[43] Four cases are worth outlining in greater detail. The first case involves the Rawti Shax organization, which Brynjar Lia and Petter Nesser describe as a reconstitution of part of Ansar al-Islam's support networks in Europe during the 2000s.[44] Rawti Shax has been active in various parts of Europe, with local and national cells communicating and operating online. A key part of its modus operandi has been recruiting foreign fighters for jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, predominantly for IS, and providing financial support for them.[45] The network has also been active in Finland during the past decade, and one of its key leaders lived in the country between 2013 and 2014.[46] A former leader of Rawti Shax's Finnish "cell", Abu Muhajir al-Kurdi, reportedly partly financed a Kosovar-Albanian Rawti Shax member's travel to Syria and Iraq via Turkey in late 2013.[47] Al-Kurdi himself traveled to the conflict zone and joined IS in March 2014.[48]

The second case is a suspected money transfer to the Finland-originated IS fighter Abu Ismail al-Bengali by a Bangladeshi Imam residing in Finland. According to investigative reporter Tasneem Khalil, al-Bengali "was active in the Finnish jihadi/Islamist scene until 2013/2014 before migrating to Syria".[49] Before traveling, he briefly lived in Helsinki and worked in a Halal butcher shop with a fellow compatriot whom he had befriended (and who later also joined IS). Al-Bengali reportedly joined the group in July 2014 after traveling to Syria.[50] According to pretrial investigation documents, it was suspected that the imam—whose daughter al-Bengali had married—sent a money transfer of several thousand euros to al-Bengali after he had traveled to the conflict zone.

The third case connects to a Sweden-based activist, whose financing activities link directly to Finland. According to researcher Magnus Ranstorp, an influential Salafi preacher used his Finland-based company as a part of his illicit fundraising scheme in Sweden—a VAT fraud worth approximately 590,000 euros—in 2013. He purchased mobile phones from the UK and shipped these to his company in Finland before reselling the shipment to a Swedish foreign fighter and his Swedish-based company.[51]

The final case revolves around a cluster of suspected money transfers from Finland to the al-Hol internment camp in Syria. At least 11 women who had either traveled to the conflict zone from Finland or have Finnish citizenship—as well as 33 minors, most born in the conflict zone—have reportedly been detained in the camp.[52] Internment camps, such as al-Hol, present without a doubt a dire humanitarian situation, particularly

for the minors, but the issue what to do with the adult detainees who have participated in the activities and atrocities of IS residing in the camp presents a complex question with distinct legal, moral, political, security, and financial dimensions. From the perspective of terrorist financing and countering it, funds injected to the camp also present an acute issue. The more funds are injected to the camp, the more armed groups and their resident members, organized crime groups, corrupt officials, and security personnel benefit from them. Some of these beneficiaries may later deploy these funds to exacerbate instability in the camps, in the region, and beyond.[53]

Based on documents made available to the researchers, funds have been collected by at least some of the detainees' relatives and friends. Some of these fundraising activities have been organized, ultimately collecting significant sums: tens of thousands of euros, if not more. While the funds appear to have been wired to Turkey through various official mechanisms, it is unclear how the funds have been forwarded from there to the final recipients in al-Hol.

To date, reportedly two-thirds of the Finland-originated individuals—both women and minors—detained in al-Hol have returned to Finland. At least four women have escaped from the camp with their children, and three women with their children have been repatriated by the Finnish government.[54] It is highly likely that at least some of the identified money transfers reached their intended recipients and were subsequently used to fund their escapes. It is also highly likely that there have been more transfers from Finland than are known to the authors or authorities as escapes from al-Hol are known to be both common and expensive. According to Vera Mironova, the cost of an escape from al-Hol was at least 15,000 USD per family by mid-2020, with significant variance depending on nationality and number of children.[55] There are not many data available on the escapes of Finnish women or how they were funded, but at least one such case has been mentioned in the Finnish media. In a police interview, a Finnish woman of Central Asian origin reportedly claimed she had paid almost 25,000 dollars—which she allegedly received from her mother—for her escape from al-Hol to Istanbul.[56] While the details of her story cannot be corroborated, the sum appears plausible.

What makes the cluster of the suspected money transfers to al-Hol relevant from the perspective of jihadist financing is that at least in one specific case, a key individual involved in fundraising had explicitly articulated their awareness that the funds being collected and transferred could in part go to IS. Further, at least one intended recipient was still espousing pro-IS views at the time of the attempted transfer. These transfers could fit the legal definition of financing a terrorist group or an individual terrorist. While investigations of suspected offenses committed in Syria and Iraq are still ongoing, to date no returnees from al-Hol or those suspected of having sent money there have been prosecuted with regard to terrorist financing.

This coincides with a broader pattern. To date, none of Finland's approximately 30 adult returnees have been found guilty of terrorist offenses committed in the conflict zone, and only a few have been prosecuted, making Finland one of the few Western countries with a zero-percent conviction rate. The country has similarly struggled with investigating and prosecuting suspected terrorist offenses of domestically active extremists—with the exception of the Turku attacker. In the context of jihadist financing, it is both demonstrably clear that this sort of activism has both occurred and become more common and serious in the past decade. Why, then, is this trend not reflected in the numbers of pretrial investigations, prosecutions, and convictions?

Explaining the Lack of Pre-trial Investigations and Prosecutions

As this article has demonstrated, activities regarding jihadist financing have evolved and become more common in the 2010s. In addition to the more traditional money transfers to armed groups abroad, recent developments include assets sent to, or taken by, foreign fighters to the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq. Additionally, assets have been raised and transferred to individuals participating in jihadist activities abroad.

Yet in the context of terrorist financing, and despite numerous initial investigations, only three pretrial investigations have taken place, and only one launched after 2015.[57] To date, there are no upheld convictions on terrorist financing, despite Finnish authorities stating that there are significant terrorist

financing operations occurring in Finland.[58]

Investigating, prosecuting, and eventually convicting offenders who take part in jihadist financing—and jihadism more broadly—are prerequisites of a functioning legal system and counter-terrorism policy. Furthermore, pretrial investigations in particular help law enforcement to form and maintain a more thorough understanding of the local jihadi milieu, connections of various local actors both to each other and to comrades abroad, and to gain insight into their modus operandi. This will likely enhance the Finnish authorities' capacity to prosecute terrorist offenses in the future. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine reasons behind the scarceness of pretrial investigations, prosecutions, and convictions in Finland.

There is no one simple explanation; rather there are several contributing factors. First, jihadist financing activities in Finland appear not to be a significant phenomenon, recent developments notwithstanding. This applies to both the quantity of cases as well as to the quality. In most cases, the funds involved are low (measured usually only in hundreds or low thousands of euros).[59] Therefore, a low number of investigations, prosecutions, and convictions can be somewhat expected.

Second, Finnish law enforcement has struggled to adequately investigate terrorist financing cases connected to jihadism—as demonstrated above. This was also noted by the Financial Action Task Force in its evaluation of Finland in 2019.[60] This may in part derive from difficulties, which law enforcement officials—particularly in small countries with limited exposure to violent extremism—face in identifying and investigating cases, where funds have been either transferred or used abroad—particularly in conflict zones. Indeed, identifying the recipient of the transferred funds, let alone establishing for what activities the money has been or was intended to be used, is exceedingly challenging for law-enforcement organizations with limited exposure to the phenomenon. Further, the finite amount of funds connected to individual investigations likely raises the threshold for launching potentially lengthy and expensive pretrial investigations into jihadist financing in a situation where other investigations—e.g., into organized crime—may have to be prioritized due to limited resources.

Third, Finnish legislation on terrorist offenses was introduced in 2002, based on international commitments and may be regarded as reactive.[61] Indeed, as violent extremism and political violence have been rare phenomena in Finland after 1945, the country has had limited reasons to develop a robust counter-terrorism legislation—or policy more broadly—before the 2000s. Even during 2000s and 2010s, there are grounds to argue that Finland has had its own reasons for a cautious approach to terrorist crimes, since it has one of the lowest terrorism threat levels in Western Europe. However, it is also possible to argue that in the last two decades, there have been several cases, which likely would have resulted in prosecutions and convictions elsewhere in Europe.

On countering terrorist financing in particular, the international community has noticed Finland's lackluster approach. The country has received several notices from international actors regarding insufficiencies in terrorist-offense-related legislation.[62] Particularly in the context of funding armed groups abroad, the adopted legislation or its interpretation has historically been problematic from a pretrial investigation perspective, leaving law enforcement few tools to successfully investigate terrorist financing cases with an international element.[63] These insufficiencies were exposed in the al-Shabaab trial, where the defendants were acquitted despite sending funds to two of the group's members.[64] At the time of the alleged crimes the so-called general funding of terrorist actors had not yet been criminalized—a deficiency in the Finnish Criminal Code which has since been corrected. Indeed, at the time, one could only be found guilty of terrorist financing either if the offender was aware that money was to be used for a terrorist offence, or if the intention of the sender was to financially support an offense with terrorist intent—which are exceedingly difficult to prove.

While Finland has updated its counter-terrorism legislation in the 2010s—criminalizing general financing of a terrorist group, and training and recruitment for the commission of a terrorist offense in 2015; traveling abroad for the commission of a terrorist offense in 2016; and financing of an individual terrorist in April 2021—these had not led to any charges by late 2021.

While the financing of an individual terrorist was criminalized only in 2021, the question of whether to investigate and prosecute funds transferred in 2019–2020 by relatives and friends to al-Hol detainees—with some of the latter still supporting IS and engaging in activities promoting it at the time of the transfers—is still relevant. The transfers present a complex legal puzzle for Finnish—and European—authorities, as the criteria for financing a terrorist group or a specific terrorist act could materialize in certain circumstances, should the sender either have the intention or foreknowledge that part of the funds could be redirected to IS, or that its recipients would continue to engage in criminalized forms of jihadist activities after receiving funds. It appears that even within the Finnish National Bureau of Investigation there are different views on whether the cases in Finland ought to be investigated in terms of terrorist financing. However, similar activities have led to prosecutions and convictions elsewhere in the region.

The fourth contributing factor is that it is challenging for Finnish law enforcement to investigate terrorist financing offenses and gather sufficient evidence for prosecution due to the fact that although intelligence agencies both in Finland and abroad possess and share intelligence with law enforcement regarding terrorist activities, the data are often classified and may not be utilized—at least in full—to open pretrial investigations. Also, as most suspected terrorist financing offenses are international, and assets are either moved or used abroad, gathering evidence is extremely demanding and dependent on cooperation from local authorities—which may not have the willingness or capacity to help. However, these features are not typical for Finland alone—quite the contrary, the same challenges are characteristic for terrorist offenses' investigation and prosecution globally. Nevertheless, other EU member states have been more active and effective in investigating and prosecuting terrorist financing offenses.[65]

Fifth, the threshold of initiating pretrial investigations of terrorist financing—as well as terrorist offenses in general— seems to be set relatively high, a fact which has also led to public debates. The National Prosecution Authority (NPA) decides whether suspected terrorist crimes will be investigated in cases where the suspected offenses have occurred abroad and consults law enforcement on launching investigations on suspected domestic terrorist offenses. The NPA appears to have adopted an approach which favors a person's right not to be placed as a suspect of a crime without sufficient cause over the interest of solving a crime.[66] Yet, according to Finnish legislation, an investigation must be initiated when "there is reason to suspect that an offense has been committed".[67] If the officer in charge of an investigation has taken all reasonable preparatory actions to determine whether to initiate an investigation, but is still uncertain, he ought to initiate an investigation rather than not.[68] This is especially relevant in serious offenses which threaten the life, well-being, and security of people, such as terrorist offenses. Hence, the NPA's approach has led to public discussions [69] and criticism—including in several interviews conducted by the authors.

The notable challenges in investigating and prosecuting offenses relating to terrorist financing notwithstanding, the question does arise whether the Finnish criminal process regarding terrorist offenses and financing in particular has been sufficiently balanced and effective. Furthermore, from a policy perspective, it should be questioned whether the present situation corresponds with the aims and ambitions stated in the Finnish counter-terrorism strategy. And lastly, it should be asked whether Finnish authorities deem their contribution in combating terrorism—and terrorist financing—sufficient in the global fronts of countering terrorism as a responsible member of the UN, EU, and FATF.

Conclusion

While Finland is still a peripheral country in the broader European jihadi milieu, jihadism in Finland has developed significantly in the 2010s. This is largely due to the extraordinary appeal of the IS and the conflict in Syria and Iraq. As a part of this development, Finland has experienced an increase in the quality, quantity, and spectrum of jihadist activism, mainly in the context of the foreign fighter mobilization to Syria and Iraq—predominantly to the ranks of IS. This increase is poorly reflected in the number of initial and pretrial investigations looking into terrorist offenses in Finland, let alone trials and convictions.

Similar dynamics can be observed in the evolution of jihadist financing. In the 2010s, jihadist financing in

Finland has become more common and varied. However, only three investigations into terrorist financing have been launched in Finland during the decade, and only one since 2015.[70] Several factors have contributed to this, including the difficulty of investigating suspected crimes; limitations in the content and interpretation of relevant legislation; and somewhat lackluster and reactive efforts to update relevant legislation to effectively combat the phenomenon. While beyond the scope of this article, a comparative study on the modus operandi of jihadist financing as well as prosecution and conviction rates in the wider European or Nordic context would be beneficial to provide a more nuanced picture on the limitations of Finland's efforts to counter terrorist financing and terrorism more broadly. Differences in legislations are not significant enough to explain why Finland is the only country in the Nordic region where not a single returnee from Syria or Iraq has been convicted of terrorist offenses committed in the conflict zone.

Indeed, a more robust approach into investigating jihadist activities—including financing—within, or connected to Finland would better promote criminal accountability—the relative lack of which has been criticized by members of the international community. Opening new investigations when sufficient suspicions arise serves also as an opportunity to gain more knowledge on the phenomenon and its manifestations in Finland and to become more experienced in investigating and eventually prosecuting terrorist offenses—a key objective of any functioning counter-terrorism policy. In a situation where the Finnish jihadi milieu has grown, become more active, and to a greater degree transnationally connected than ever before, addressing such deficiencies should undoubtedly be a priority for Finnish policy makers and authorities. Failure to do so could embolden Finland-based extremists to act more openly and brazenly in the future.

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Notes

[1] Ministry of the Interior, *National counter-terrorism strategy, 2010*; URL: https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/80497/sm_242010.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y, p. 5.

[2] Leena Malkki and Juha Saarinen, *Evolution of Jihadism in Finland*. The Hague: ICCT Research Paper, 2021; URL: https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2021/05/evolution-of-jihadism-in-finland.pdf, pp. 3–7. For a more detailed analysis, see Leena Malkki and Juha Saarinen, *Jihadism in Finland,* Helsinki: Publications of the Ministry of the Interior, 2019:14; URL: http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-324-302-6, pp. 63–78.

[3] On Finnish foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, see Leena Malkki and Juha Saarinen, 2021, pp. 14–20.

[4] Supo, Year Book 2016; URL: https://supo.fi/documents/38197657/40760242/2016_EN_Supo_yearbook.pdf/a17d7df6-68b3-95a2-7a5a-eec9673d52c3/2016_EN_Supo_yearbook.pdf?t=1602666282005, p. 21.

[5] Supo, National Security Overview 2020; URL: https://supo.fi/documents/38197657/39761269/Supo_national-security-overview-2020.pdf/6234d8c5-9eec-c801-0eec-2529ed5be701/Supo_national-security-overview-2020.pdf?t=1603884700679.

[6] On the attack, see "Turku Stabbings on 18 August 2017," Safety Investigation Authority Investigation Report 7/2018, URL: https://turvallisuustutkinta.fi/material/attachments/otkes/tutkintaselostukset/en/muutonnettomuudet/2017/oNRjHqmjf/P2017-01_Turku_EN.pdf.

[7] See, for example, Leena Malkki and Juha Saarinen, 2021; Leena Malkki and Juha Saarinen 2019; Leena Malkki and Matti

Pohjonen, *Jihadist online communication and Finland,* Helsinki: Publications of the Ministry of the Interior, 2019:29, URL: http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-324-300-2.

[8] This mechanism framework is adopted e.g. in the FATF's Terrorist Financing Risk Assessment guidance; URL: https://www.fatf-gafi.org/media/fatf/documents/reports/Terrorist-Financing-Risk-Assessment-Guidance.pdf, p. 7–8.

[9] It is important to highlight that this article does not approach jihadist financing from a legal perspective, and thus its definition of jihadist financing is not identical to the definitions of terrorist offenses in Chapter 34a of the Criminal Code of Finland (19.12.1889/39). Therefore, some of the cases described in this article have not necessarily been criminalized, particularly at the time of alleged offenses, or led to convictions or even criminal charges.

[10] This is unfortunate, since it has been reported that instant loans have been widely used by Western foreign fighters and mentioned as a significant risk factor also by Finnish authorities. See e.g. Essi Isoaho and Ida-Ellen Kaski, *National risk assessment of money laundering and terrorist financing,* Helsinki: Publications of the Ministry of Finance 2021:17; URL: https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163051/VM_2021_17.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y, p. 92.

[11] It should be noted, however, that most of the data were unusable for the purpose of this article, as several reports were ambiguous and brief and often connected to other cases, the documents of which were not accessible to the authors.

[12] Supo, Year Book 2019; URL: https://supo.fi/documents/38197657/40760242/2019_EN_Supo_yearbook.pdf/9be682cf-bfb6-50d6-d7b7-cc903d8e5802/2019_EN_Supo_yearbook.pdf?t=1602666410607, p. 12; and Supo, Year Book 2020; URL: https://vuosikirja.supo.fi/documents/62399122/66519032/Supo+Year+Book+2020.pdf/65663bab-fcf6-5d86-9e15-9a12ab37c3a5/Supo+Year+Book+2020.pdf?t=1616408481574, p. 10.

[13] National Bureau of Investigation/Financial Intelligence Unit, *Report on characteristics of terrorist financing in Finland, 2020, public version*; URL: https://poliisi.fi/documents/25235045/67733116/KRP-Tiivistelm%C3%A4-Selvitys-terrorismin-rahoittamisen-ominaispiirteist%C3%A4-26.4.2021.pdf/841c8d78-ab02-56fe-695f-1da75962b7ff/KRP-Tiivistelm%C3%A4-Selvitys-terrorismin-rahoittamisen-ominaispiirteist%C3%A4-26.4.2021.pdf?t=1620827032585, p. 2.

[14] According to a recent National Risk Assessment, the most common country receiving assets connected to suspected terrorist financing is Turkey. Ibid.

[15] See e.g. Lasse Kerkelä, "Väitetty avustustoiminta Syyriaan toi useita syytteitä lelusalakuljettaja Rami Adhamille—epäillään nostaneen yhdistyksen tililtä satojatuhansia euroja," *Helsingin Sanomat,* 12.2.2018.

[16] See e.g. Ministry of the Interior, *Report on Violent Extremism in Finland, 2013;* URL: https://intermin.fi/documents/1410869/3723676/Vakivaltainen-ekstremismi-Suomessa-tilannekatsaus-1-2013.pdf/c153bd87-b4ff-4cb0-8843-0e0352be052c/Vakivaltainen-ekstremismi-Suomessa-tilannekatsaus-1-2013.pdf, p. 6.

[17] See, for example, Katja Kaartinen, "Krp tutkii terrorismin rahoitusta Suomessa – kaksi henkilöä pidätettynä," Turun *Sanomat,* 17.9.2011; URL: https://www.ts.fi/uutiset/kotimaa/257978/Krp+tutkii+terrorismin+rahoitusta+++Suomessa++kaksi+henkiloa+pidatettyna.

[18] Kati Pehkonen, "Starttirahaa pyhään sotaan: käsikirjoitus," *Yle,* 1.4.2019; URL: https://yle.fi/aihe/artikkeli/2019/04/01/starttirahaa-pyhaan-sotaan-kasikirjoitus.

[19] Supo, *Statement for the National risk assessment of money laundering and terrorist financing, 2021*; Kati Pehkonen, 2019.

[20] See e.g., Stanford University, *Mapping Militant Organizations. Ansar al-Islam, 2018;* URL: https://stanford.app.box.com/s/bjk3nu47vci4023mudxkw3kqdr1vcy5k, p. 4.

[21] Most of the network's alleged members were refugees resettled from Iraq in the 1990s, and resided in the city of Turku. *Yle*, "Suomesta yhteyksiä terroriepäiltyyn?". 15.10.2004; URL: https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-5193337. On Mullah Krekar, see e.g. Brynjar Lia and Petter Nesser, "Jihadism in Norway: A Typology of Militant Networks in a Peripheral European Country," *Perspectives on Terrorism,* Volume 10, Issue 6, (2016).

[22] Supo, Annual Report 2004, p. 6; Toby Archer & Ann-Nina Finne, "Pizzaa islamisteille," *Ulkopolitiikka* 4/2005.

[23] In the Finnish context, their activism has continued under the Rawti Shax organization in the 2010s.

[24] Stina Brännare, "Syyttäjä: terrorismista epäilty valmisteli lasten kaappaamista huumaamalla," *Yle,* 18.9.2014; URL: https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-7476191.

[25] Sara Rigatelli, "Somalimiehen hätkähdyttävä tarina: Vapautui Suomessa terrorismituomiosta, oli jo Isisissä," *Yle*, 4.3.2017; URL: https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-9460874.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Vera Mironova, "Impunity for Repatriated Islamic State Members," *Lawfare* blog, 3.8.2021; URL: https://www.lawfareblog.

com/impunity-repatriated-islamic-state-members.

[28] Ministry of the Interior, *Violent extremism in Finland - situation overview 2020*; URL: http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-324-621-8, p. 24.

[29] Leena Malkki and Juha Saarinen, 2019, pp. 69, 72.

[30] Leena Malkki and Juha Saarinen, 2021, p. 6.

[31] Mika Parkkonen, "Suomalainen muslimi halusi auttaa sodan piinaamia veljiään," *Helsingin Sanomat*, 15.9.2006; URL: https://www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000004425363.html.

[32] See e.g. Magnus Ranstorp, "Microfinancing the Caliphate: How the Islamic State is Unlocking the Assets of European Recruits?" *CTC Sentinel,* 9 (5) (2016); URL: https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/CTC-SENTINEL, pp. 13–14.

[33] Essi Isoaho and Ida-Ellen Kaski, 2021, p. 17.

[34] Kati Pehkonen, 2019.

[35] On Sweden e.g. see Magnus Normark and Magnus Ranstorp, and Filip Ahlin, *Financial activities linked to persons from Sweden and Denmark who joined terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq during the period 20132016*, Swedish Defence University, 2017; URL: http://fhs.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1119564/FULLTEXT01.pdf.

[36] Exclusively by those few foreign fighters, who traveled to the conflict zone from Finland in these vehicles.

[37] Magnus Ranstorp, 2016, pp. 13–14.

[38] Ibid, p. 11.

[39] On Abu Salamah, see Nuno Tiago Pinto, "Inside the Foreign Fighter Pipeline to Syria: A Case Study of a Portuguese Islamic State Network," 13 (8) (2020); URL: https://ctc.usma.edu/inside-the-foreign-fighter-pipeline-to-syria-a-case-study-of-a-portuguese-islamic-state-network/, note X.

[40] Helsinki District Court, judgment number 18/103187, 24 January 2018.

[41] Miika Viljakainen, "Espoolainen lähihoitaja Antti tuli uskoon vuonna 2012, kaksi vuotta myöhemmin hän oli Isis-taistelija—tässä koko uskomaton tarina," *Ilta-Sanomat*, 18.1.2020; URL: https://www.is.fi/kotimaa/art-2000007684174.html

[42] Kati Pehkonen, 2019.

[43] Amira El-Bash-Hilden, Viranomaisnäkökulma terrorismin rahoittamisen riskiin Suomessa, Laurea University of Applied Sciences, 2020, p. 27.

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[65] Legal traditions and legislation differ in EU member states, but since they are bound by the same international agreements and directives, some comparisons are possible. For example, between 2015 and 2020 there were 94 jihadis- terrorism-related court proceedings in EU member states. More than 90% of the prosecutions resulted in convictions and concerned foreign terrorist fighters. (National Bureau of Investigation/Financial Intelligence Unit, Report on European judgments relating to terrorist financing 2015–2020, 2021).

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Preventing Violent Extremism the Lebanese Way: A Critical Analysis of the Lebanese PVE Strategy

by Sharaf Hussein

Abstract

The people of Lebanon have suffered from decades of religious violence and terrorism. However, strategies for countering terrorism and violent extremism in Lebanon have been significantly obstructed by political divisions due to an exclusive security-driven approach. The unanimous adoption by the Lebanese Government of a "National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism" in 2018 has been viewed by many as a manifestation of the desire of political leaders to finally address the root causes of violence in the Land of the Cedars. This article seeks to show that this might be a mistaken perception as there persists a profound resistance from the political establishment to make the changes necessary to prevent and combat terrorism and violent extremism more effectively.

Keywords: Lebanon, extremism, terrorism, PVE, United Nations Plan of Action (PoA)

Introduction - Lebanon: A Country Rife with Political Violence

Lebanon's history is rife with violence. For almost two decades (1975–1990) the country experienced successive wars wrought by private militias and state-sponsored armed groups, costing the lives of around 120,000 Lebanese people and forcing a million others to flee their country.[1] The capital Beirut was the scene of numerous terrorist attacks, including the attack on the US embassy on 18 April 1983, which killed 63 people, and the attacks against the Multinational Force in Lebanon on 23 October 1983, which killed 307 people including 241 US and 58 French soldiers and several civilians.[2] After the end of the civil war in 1990, Lebanon remained under the political and military hegemony of its two powerful neighbors: Israel, which officially withdrew its troops in 2000, but conducted in 2006 a military operation against Hezbollah, killing thousands of civilians and leaving almost a million others displaced; and Syria, whose military was forced to leave the country following the popular uprising resulting from the assassination of former prime minister Rafic Hariri on 14 February 2005.[3]

In the aftermath of Hariri's assassination and the subsequent "Cedar Revolution", two major political coalitions, with opposing ideologies and foreign policy perspectives, emerged on the Lebanese political scene. The 8 March [4] alliance was formed of political parties united by their pro-Syrian posture, while the 14 March [5] alliance was united by its anti-Syrian stance.[6] The Syrian revolution in 2011, the armed conflict between the Syrian regime and its opposition, and the subsequent involvement of Hezbollah in the conflict Syrian civil war intensified political and sectarian divides within the Lebanese government as well.[7]

The Syrian civil war also reinvigorated radical Islamists in Lebanon. Palestinian camps in northern and southern Lebanon and in Tripoli, the country's second-largest city, became hubs for jihadis keen to fight alongside extremist armed groups—including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Following Hezbollah's armed intervention in the Syrian civil war, individuals closely affiliated with Sunni terrorist groups conducted a series of suicide and car bombings in Lebanon that further heightened sectarian tensions.[8]

While leaders on both blocs of the Lebanese political scene maintained their fundamental disagreements on almost every major political issue, they progressively agreed on the importance of addressing the threat posed by radicalized groups for Lebanon's national security and on the need for developing a comprehensive, long-term national strategy to prevent violent extremism.

In this context, Lebanon, along with Tunisia and Morocco, was among the first countries in the Middle East and North Africa to respond to the Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism ("PoA"), first presented by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on 24 December 2015. In 2017, the Lebanese government

launched a National Coordination Unit (NCU) in charge of drafting a national strategy to prevent violent extremism. The following year, the government unanimously adopted the "National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism" ("The Lebanese PVE Strategy"). Guided by the priority areas introduced by the UN's PoA, the Lebanese PVE Strategy includes nine pillars to prevent violent extremism as well as its own definition of the PVE concept tailored to Lebanon's social and political characteristics and trends.[9]This article seeks to provide a concise description of the Lebanese strategy to prevent violent extremism from its inception to its implementation. It also offers a detailed analysis of the strategy's main achievements and shortcomings. It demonstrates that, despite the rhetoric of the PVE strategy, there remains a profound resistance from the side of the political establishment to introduce the necessary reforms to prevent and combat violent extremism more effectively.

The Lebanese Response to the UN Call for the Implementation of National PVE Strategies

The UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: An Alternative Paradigm for Counter-Terrorism Policies

The Origin of the UN Plan of Action

In the aftermath of Al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks on the United States of America, countries around the globe rushed to implement counter-terrorism laws in an attempt to prevent terrorism. Over 140 states developed or revised laws related to countering-terrorism as a response to United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR), such as resolution 1368 (2001) calling states to "redouble their efforts to prevent and suppress terrorist acts,"[10] and resolution 1373 (2001) encouraging, among many other measures, intelligence sharing between states on terrorist groups to combat international terrorism.[11]

These policies heavily focused on "short-term" solutions taking, when nationally implemented, the form of coercive security measures which were often inconsistent with international standards.[12] In a number of countries, this resulted in grave violations of human rights and a substantial decrease in their protection.[13] Governments relied on law enforcement agencies, security and intelligence units and, in some cases, the military to execute and implement counter-terrorist strategies, excluding a wide range of key actors from civil society. New measures introduced also tended to decreased police accountability, established special courts in violation of established international law, and introduced severe punishments, such as the death penalty.[14]

While governments struggled to assess the efficacy of their domestic counter-terrorism strategies due to the lack of measurable variables and insufficient academic research on the matter,[15] most scholars tend to agree that the use of broad coercive measures failed to decrease violence caused by terrorism and caused a backlash in the long run.[16] Repressive counter-terrorism policies alone were gradually considered as insufficiently effective.

As a result, many states progressively departed from a predominantly reactive security perspective to a more holistic one. The new strategy included, *inter alia*, measures aimed at preventing violence and extremism conducive to terrorism, while focusing also on combatting new threats such as online recruitment and propaganda.[17]

In January 2016, in line with this new thinking and based on pillars 1 and 4 of the Global Counterterrorism Strategy from the year 2006,[18] and with the new American counter-terrorism doctrine of the Obama administration,[19] UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon presented a new UN Plan of Action for Preventing Violent Extremism (PoA) to the General Assembly, based on a more comprehensive and holistic perspective, urging member states to "consider developing a national plan of action to prevent violent extremism."[20]

Guiding Principles and Key Recommendations of the UN Plan of Action for Preventing Violent Extremism

At the outset, the UN secretary-general's Plan of Action recalled that, although "violent extremism" is not clearly and universally defined, it "encompasses a wider category of manifestations" than terrorist acts.[21] The PoA further highlights the diverse nature of violent extremism, not belonging to any particular belief system, nationality, or region.[22] While terrorism and violent extremism need a global response, the PoA underlines the importance for individual states to take action.

Therefore, the secretary-general invited member states to develop their "national counter-terrorism strategies" and addressing their local context guided by the recommendations of the UN PoA. He further called for an inclusive and multidisciplinary process, seeking input from governmental and nongovernmental actors (including members of civil society, women and youth) to pinpoint drivers of violent extremism present locally in each state.[23] The UN PoA also highlights the need for national plans to develop transparent and accountable institutions at all levels of the government and to ensure an inclusive and representative decision-making process.[24]

In recalling the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters, the PoA calls on UN member states to include provisions aimed at ensuring effective border controls and mechanisms preventing the financing of terrorism as directed by Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014).[25] The PoA further reminds states to abide by their obligations pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2199 (2015) including preventing terrorist groups and violent extremists from receiving donations, trading in antiquities and oil, and engaging in hostage-taking.[26]

In the Plan of Action, the secretary-general finally invited states to align their development policies with the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals,[27] and suggested that national plan allocate specific funding for their implementation in governmental and nongovernmental institutions.[28] He also stresses the importance for national plans to be regularly monitored and evaluated.[29]

A Road Map for National PVE Strategies

To assist state members in designing their own domestic strategies, the UN PoA offers general recommendations focused on a number of priority areas, namely: dialogue and conflict prevention; good governance, human rights and the rule of law; the engagement of communities; the empowerment of youth; gender equality and empowerment of women; education, skill development and employment facilitation; and strategic communications including the Internet and social media.[30] A brief description of these recommendations will be provided below.

- *Dialogue and Conflict Prevention*

Violent extremism has strong links with ongoing conflicts, as each one increases the risk of the other. The PoA highlights how inclusive and gender-sensitive dialogue between parties to a conflict offers a route for long-term solutions and recommends that member states should focus on engaging opposing parties, regional actors, and religious leaders early enough to prevent violent extremism. It further calls states to preserve diversity and cultural heritage to facilitate peace building and reconciliation through increasing people's knowledge of their own and other cultures, thereby strengthening a common sense of belonging. The PoA also suggests the development of programs providing citizens with educational and economic opportunities, as these are important in motivating people not to join violent extremist groups, and encourages resort to alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. Lastly, the PoA recommends the compliance with international laws and regulations when it comes to military action.[31]

- *Strengthening Good Governance, Human Rights and the Rule of Law*

Recalling that governments respecting human rights, fighting corruption and impunity, and promoting effective, inclusive and transparent governance are less at risk to suffer from violent extremism, the secretary-general recommends that member states establish a plan compliant with human rights and the rule of law, includ-

ing law reforms, access to justice, rehabilitation programs for prisoners and accountability for human-rights violations.[32]

- *Engaging Communities*

The PoA noted that the survival of violent extremists depends on their ability to find support within their community or from marginalized groups in society. In order to prevent violent extremists from gaining support from marginalized communities, the PoA recommends for governments to engage with communities by developing inclusive and community-based policies, as well as encouraging engagement with civil society on the local community level.[33]

- *Empowering Youth*

Recognizing how supporting youth plays a significant role in preventing violent extremism, the PoA invites UN member states to encourage the participation of young men and women in PVE activities, integrate them in decision-making processes, and ensure adequate funding for youth programs and initiatives dedicated to PVE.[34]

- *Gender Equality and Empowering Women*

Carrying out gender-sensitive initiatives that ensure the participation, integration and empowerment of women is pivotal for achieving effective plans to prevent violent extremism. In this respect, the secretary-general called for gender-sensitive national plans which acknowledge women's role in preventing violent extremism and support them both as actors and victims. The PoA further proposes to build women's capacities, ensure the appropriate funding of projects that adhere to their needs end empower them, and spread gender perspectives.[35]

- *Education, Skill Development and Employment Facilitation*

Through the provision of quality education and the facilitation of employment, youth are given the necessary tools to fight poverty and marginalization. Therefore, the PoA urges states to invest in high-quality and inclusive education, collaborate with local authorities to generate socioeconomic opportunities, and involve civil society and other private actors in efforts to create jobs and facilitate employment.[36]

- *Strategic Communications, the Internet and Social Media*

The PoA noted that social media are being used with a particular efficiency by violent extremists to recruit and promote their agenda. In response, PVE plans should build positive, tolerant and evidence-based counter-narratives and strategies in coordination with the private sector and social media companies. PVE plans should also identify and address the factors leading to violent extremism in order to develop appropriate strategic communications action plans. States should clearly define the legal basis related to online content, review laws related to surveillance and personal data collection, and make sure that they are in line with international human rights laws.[37]

Following General Assembly Resolution 70/291 of 16 July 2016, calling upon state members to implement the recommendations of the United Nations Plan of Action,[38] several member states (including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Central African Republic, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, Tajikistan, Tanzania and Somalia) and regional organizations (including the African Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the European Union) developed their own Plan of Action.[39] In the MENA region—a region particularly affected by terrorism and violent extremism—Lebanon was one of the first countries to respond to Ban Ki-moon's call and to develop a PVE strategy of its own.

The Lebanese National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism

The Establishment of the Lebanese PVE Strategy

In early 2017, Saad Hariri, then prime minister of Lebanon, called for the establishment of an "interministerial working group" with a mandate to design a Lebanese strategy for preventing violent extremism. He appointed Rubina Abu Zeinab as the national coordinator of this working group.[40]

The formulation of the Lebanese Strategy was based on a consultative process between the NCU, Lebanese ministries and other stakeholders. On 17 July 2017, the first high-level Consultative Meeting for the PVE Strategy was held at the Grand Serail, the headquarters of the prime minister.[41] In addition to Hariri and Abu Zeinab, the high-level meeting was attended by several ministers, representatives of security and military forces, and by Sigrid Kaag, United Nations general coordinator in Lebanon at the time. At the meeting, Abu Zeinab presented her proposed approach and the starting points for the preparation of the PVE strategy. Between September and October 2017, 29 separate meetings were held, one with the representative of each ministry, to discuss the objectives set by each ministry to prevent violent extremism. On 20 December 2017, a second high-level Consultative Meeting was convened by the prime minister during which Abu Zeinab presented the key steps required to carry out the national PVE Strategy, insisting on the importance of "political will and access to international expertise" to achieve positive results.[42]

In March 2018, after a year of consultations, the NCU submitted its program of a Lebanese PVE Strategy, which was approved by the Lebanese Council of Ministers on 27 March 2018. In February 2019, the national PVE Strategy was made public.

Key Features and Strategic Objectives of the Lebanese PVE Strategy

The Strategy features the Lebanese government's definitions of "violent extremism" and "prevention" in the context of PVE. It highlights the importance of trust among different government institutions for the prevention of violent extremism, offers short-, medium- and long-term plans and policies to prevent violent extremism, defines evaluation and monitoring strategies, and discusses factors in different spheres (social, cultural, and economic) that could constitute drivers of violent extremism in Lebanon. It also acknowledges the complexity of violent extremism and the wide range of groups of people it can affect.

The Lebanese PVE Strategy identifies, in analogy to the UN Plan of Action, nine pillars and areas of activity that have been agreed upon by the ministries.[43]

The pillar of "Dialogue and Conflict Prevention" recalls the importance of dialogue as a means to promote acceptance and peaceful methods of conflict resolution. It mainly targets youth and focuses on the promotion of cultural diversity, the empowerment of civil society, citizenship and tolerance. It also features educational programs on violent extremism and trainings on conflict resolution methods. It contains 18 strategic objectives addressed to eight different ministries.[44]

The pillar on the "Promotion of Good Governance" contains 33 strategic objectives for 13 ministries. The objectives contained in this second pillar focus on policies related to the development of the institutional and coordination capacities of state agencies and their staff's technical capacities. They also focus on the promotion of accountability and transparency of these agencies to fight corruption.[45]

The third pillar focusing on "Justice, Human Rights and the Rule of Law" sets out 46 strategic goals addressed to 15 different ministries. It contains objectives related to the impartial and equal enforcement of the law, Lebanon's respect of its human-rights obligations as stipulated in international conventions, the adoption of sustainable public policies, the empowerment of marginalized people, and prison reforms.[46]

The fourth pillar contains 31 recommendations addressed to 12 ministries in the field "Urban/Rural Development and Engagement with Local Communities." It offers recommendations on the development of national and local financial and economic policies, differences in development between regions, participation of local

communities in development programs, improvement of national industries, and urban transformations and their possible overall impact.[47]

Through its fifth pillar focusing on "Gender Equality and Empowering Women", the Strategy presents 22 strategic objectives, directed at eight ministries, aiming at educating women about their legal and constitutional rights and the risks of violent extremism, amending discriminatory legislation against women, encouraging women's participation in development, social and cultural activities, and boosting their involvement in policy and decision-making processes.[48]

The issues put forth in the sixth pillar, focusing on "Education, Training and Skills Development" present a total of 40 policies addressed to 17 different ministries, seeking to develop educational programs and learning skills related to PVE, and to facilitate youth employment through developing training programs that ensure young people's skills are in line with the job market's needs.[49]

The seventh pillar focuses on "Economic Development and Job Creation." It contains 49 strategic objectives addressed to 21 ministries, aiming to develop policies that encourage sustainable economic development and generate more job opportunities, address economic inequality, encourage capacity building, and create an entrepreneurship-friendly economic environment.[50]

The eight pillar related to "Strategic Communications, Informatics and Social Media" lists 55 recommendations for 22 ministries, encouraging the use of all communication methods and the Internet as a means to spread awareness of the risks of violent extremism, to spread messages of tolerance and acceptance, to show support toward the state and its institutions, and to prevent individuals from using social media to spread violent extremist ideologies.[51]

Finally, the last pillar focuses on "Empowering Youth." It contains 22 recommendations for 13 ministries, aiming to ensue the youth's involvement in decision-making processes, and building up young people's capacities to ease their transition into the labor market.[52]

Thus, the Lebanese PVE Strategy sets out a total of 316 recommendations. However, a large number of strategic goals in a variety of areas does not *by itself mean* that the Strategy has incorporated the secretary-general's recommendations to prevent violent extremism.

A Critical Assessment of the Lebanese PVE Strategy

A Positive Attempt to Adopt a Preventive Approach to Violent Extremism in Lebanon

A Willingness to Change the Paradigm of Addressing Counter-Terrorism and Violent Extremism Issues

As indicated before, for a long time, Lebanon's response to terrorism and violent extremism has been affected by partisan and security-focused approaches. However, in 2017, Lebanon decided to shift toward a more holistic and comprehensive approach and initiated the process of drafting the Lebanese PVE Strategy.

With that goal in mind, the NCU sought guidance and advice from a number of international organizations and representatives,[53] such as the resident representative of the secretary-general of the United Nations and the European Union's counter terrorism coordinator.[54] It further drew inspiration from other national strategies to prevent violent extremism, such as the Danish strategy (to be discussed below) and took into consideration practices relevant to the Lebanese context.[55] The NCU's efforts in gathering international expertise during the development process of the Lebanese PVE Strategy should be recognized as an indicator of the Lebanese government's willingness to embrace this knowledge, learn from it, and use it to draft a strategy fit for Lebanon that is based on best practices. As a result of this process, the Lebanese PVE Strategy introduced many relevant policies for each of its pillars, as suggested and encouraged by the UN secretary-general.

Furthermore, the appointment of Rubina Abu Zeinab as head of the NCU in drafting Lebanon's PVE Strategy was also an encouraging sign. In the Middle East, where it is uncommon to see women in leadership positions,

this appointment should be seen as the Lebanese government's awareness and readiness to embrace the important role of women in shaping an effective national PVE framework. Although it is uncertain to what degree Abu Zeinab's leadership had a direct influence on the policy recommendations proposed, it is noteworthy that the Lebanese PVE Strategy contains an abundance of policies focusing on gender equality. It could also be the reason behind the fifth pillar of the Strategy which includes policies aiming at repealing discriminatory legislation against women in Lebanon,[56] while there is no mention of repealing other discriminatory legislation in the national PVE Strategy.

A Desire to Replicate a Successful PVE Program

In 2015, Denmark's Aarhus PVE model gained international attention following its success just a year prior, when the city of Aarhus managed to reduce the number of individuals traveling to fight in Syria from 30 in 2013 to one.[57] The Aarhus model involves a PVE approach established on a multiagency research-based initiative requiring cooperation and information sharing between schools, social services, and police, known as the "SSP initiative". This kind of cooperation has existed in Danish municipalities since the 1970s, depending on each city's needs. Therefore, the Aarhus model contains practices customized for Aarhus's local community needs,[58] and involves targeting persons at risk of radicalization as well as those who have already become radicalized and intend to commit crimes. In this sense it is an addition to preexisting crime prevention structures in Denmark.[59] Thus, its efficiency relies on many factors previously present in Denmark due to years of practical development.

Lebanese policy makers have been profoundly inspired by this approach and have tried to replicate the successful Danish approach.[60] However, while Danish municipalities have played a key role in crime prevention for almost half a century, Lebanese municipalities have never taken on that responsibility.[61] Furthermore, Lebanon does not have a multiagency cooperation system in place to implement the Aarhus model. Therefore, Lebanon lacks the proper development and infrastructure to transfer and sustain this approach. Taking this into consideration, the Danish-Lebanese Strong Cities Network Partnership, in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities, established prevention networks in three Lebanese municipalities to strengthen their PVE abilities in a first attempt to replicate the Aarhus model in the Middle East.[62]

Despite the challenges present in the Lebanese context that could hinder or maybe even render it impossible for Lebanon to implement this approach anytime soon, the NCU's optimism and steps it has taken to bring home a successful model are an extremely positive sign that Lebanese policy makers are moving in the right direction.

A Necessary—but Lacking—Definition of Violent Extremism

As mentioned earlier, violent extremism does not have a universally accepted definition. Therefore, it is extremely important for states to develop their own definition of violent extremism, geared to national context to ensure uniform and unambiguous implementation.[63] The absence of a definition, or a clear one for that matter, would render the problem of violent extremism unidentifiable, and put individuals at risk of abuse.

The Lebanese Strategy has tried to overcome this issue and proposed a definition of violent extremism composed of three independent elements. According to the Lebanese PVE Strategy, violent extremism is "(1) the spread of individual and collective hatred that may lead to structural violence; (2) the rejection of diversity and nonacceptance of others, and the use of violence as a means of expression and influence; and (3) a behavior that threatens values that ensure social stability."[64]

While the NCU abided by the recommendation in this regard, the definition it put forth has some identifiable flaws. On one hand, it is too vague. For instance, it is unclear what constitutes a "rejection of diversity and nonacceptance of others." It is also not known which values in particular "ensure social stability" and how these values can be threatened. As a result, the ambiguity of the definition can put citizens at serious risk of being targeted by Lebanese authorities. On the other hand, it is unclear how this definition fits into the specificities

of the Lebanese context. In other words, it does not show how any of the drivers of violent extremism present in Lebanon are taken into consideration.

It is noteworthy to mention, though, that violent extremism is a particularly difficult term to define, as it is a "relational concept",[65] and countries around the world have struggled to present a clear, and sometimes, consistent definition for the term.[66] Therefore, although the NCU introduced an imperfect definition of violent extremism, the fact that it presented one at all is still commendable while taking into consideration the difficulty of this task. Through this act, the NCU showed its understanding of the importance of including a definition in the Strategy, even if it is flawed.

A Template Approach of the PVE Plan of Action?

If, at first sight, the Lebanese PVE strategy contains a large number of strategic objectives in line with the UN's Plan of Action recommendations, a closer analysis of its content reveals that it fails to address some key elements of PVE's conceptual foundations, in particular those related to the engagement of civil society. Furthermore, because of deficiencies in its methodology and the lack of provisions related to its implementation, it is almost impossible to measure its effectiveness.

A Non-inclusive and Government-centered Approach

As recalled by the UN secretary-general in the Plan of Action, to be effective, national PVE strategies should be developed in a multidisciplinary manner, and include input from a wide range of government actors, "as well as nongovernmental actors, including youth; families; women; religious, cultural and educational leaders; civil society organizations; the media; and the private sector."[67] This principle has been recalled in the strategic key positions of the Lebanese PVE Strategy.[68]

Despite this clear guidance, and while it claims "to ensure the optimal utilization of Lebanese human capital and to make the most of the creative human wealth embodied in Lebanon's social diversity,"[69] the NCU has adopted a top-bottom process of consultation focusing solely on governmental representatives, ignoring the entirety of civil society.

In a period where Lebanese society massively rejects the entire political class, its corruption and nepotism, the lack of inclusive consultation in the drafting process of the PVE Strategy is likely to provoke a profound distrust of local key actors in the government PVE Strategy and to deprive the Lebanese Strategy of the local support it critically needs to be effectively implemented.

Critical Omissions of the Lebanese PVE Strategy

While the Lebanese Strategy includes many of the PoA's recommendations, it has also overlooked several key aspects ensuring the prevention of violent extremism within the Lebanese context.

For example, the first pillar, related to Dialogue and Conflict Prevention and the third pillar, focusing on Justice, Human Rights and the Rule of Law fail to address and ensure the compliance of the government responses to violent extremism with international law, especially international human rights law.[70] The absence of such guarantees raises a red flag in the light of reports alleging ill-treatment and torture practiced by Lebanese security forces, and the absence of a satisfactory legal framework to control the use of torture.[71] Probably due to a defective consultancy process, the first pillar also fails to highlight the important role that numerous members of the civil society, including religious leaders, play in the prevention of violent extremism and in the identification of radicalized individuals. While this aspect may be less relevant in other countries' contexts, it constitutes a critical omission in a country with 18 different religious groups [72] and with ongoing sectarianism disputes.[73]

The sixth pillar [74] of the Strategy does not outline a policy aiming at ensuring the provision of compulsory education for all children in Lebanon. Compulsory childhood education is in principle provided for in the

amended Article 49 of Legislative Decree No. 134 of 1959.[75] However, the Council of Ministers has yet to adopt a decree determining the "regulations and conditions of this free and compulsory education."[76] The absence of a policy dedicated to this subject poses a problem when it comes to the implementation of the rest of this pillar's policy recommendations.

The Strategy's eighth pillar [77] has also disregarded some key recommendations from the UN Plan of Action. It does not present a policy related to the protection of the freedom of expression and opinion, media diversity, and journalism, neither does it provide for a policy dedicated to the empowerment of victims of violent extremism.

The Strategy does not address the issue of foreign terrorist fighters as recommended to states by the UN's Plan of Action, despite the presence of many terrorist groups operating in and from Lebanon.[78] This absence, which may well be the result of political pressure, reflects negatively on the purposes of the Lebanese National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism.

The Lack of Instruments to Measure the Implementation of the PVE Strategy

In its concluding part, the Lebanese PVE Strategy provides that the national coordinator for PVE will coordinate, in collaboration with ministerial representatives, government actions to measure indicators of progress in preventing violent extremism from a sector-by-sector perspective. It calls for the creation of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and clear indicators of the policies' impact on their target groups, and for periodic research studies on the impact of the Strategy's programs as a whole to prevent violent extremism.

An efficient implementation road map is key to the success of any good PVE strategy. In failing to include any clear and measurable objectives, outputs and timelines for each stakeholder, it is, in the current Lebanese political context, unlikely that any of the recommendations will be effectively implemented. Furthermore, the policy document does not contain precise indications about the financial resources needed for the implementation of these measures. In the current financial crisis in Lebanon, funds might be allocated to other priority areas, depriving the current Strategy of adequate funding and effective implementation.

However, it is notable to point out that after the issuance of the Lebanese PVE Strategy, the NCU began a process of organizing workshops to discuss an implementation action plan, involving individuals from both the private and public sectors, practitioners, academics and people from local communities to discuss how to use their expertise and experiences. This process constitutes "a series of nine consultative workshops to develop a national action plan to prevent violent extremism."[79] It is, however, at the time of this writing, unclear whether the consultations for an implementation mechanism are continuing.

Conclusion: Challenging the Status Quo in Lebanon?

Due to its regional environment, history and political context, the necessity of preventing and combatting terrorism and violent extremism is of crucial importance to Lebanon's national security.[80] However, for decades political responses to terrorism have been extremely polarized and addressed from a narrow security or military perspective.[81] This approach failed to address the structural causes of violent extremism and to stop the recurrence of terrorist attacks in the country.

As a result, and despite their disagreement on almost every single political issue, in particular related to internal security issues, political leaders from both coalition blocs gradually came to agree on the need for a comprehensive approach to countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism, addressing political-, social- and economic-development aspects. The real efforts of the Lebanese government to quickly introduce on the national level a strategy based on the United Nations' Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism must be acknowledged. Indeed, Lebanon can be seen as a pioneer amongst other countries in the Near and Middle East for its swift welcoming of this initiative, and its readiness to develop a national strategy.

This said, a close analysis of the Lebanese Strategy reveals major shortcomings which affect its potential for

success. Lebanon's lack of the necessary financial means and institutional capacity—something which only years of development can provide—will encumber the effective implementation of the policies introduced in the national PVE Strategy.

More importantly, no significant reforms, necessary to the effective implementation of the Strategy are likely to occur without a profound break with the political paradigm that emerged in the aftermath of the civil war, a situation marked by sectarianism, feudalism, clientelism, nepotism and corruption which is affecting almost every decision made at every level of government.[82]

Unfortunately, the Government's response to the Cedar revolution and, more recently, to the Beirut harbor explosion, have shown that the political apparatus is far from being ready to make such a change. In October 2019, when peaceful protestors took to the streets to complain against the financial mismanagement, the embezzlement of public funds, and, more generally, against the entire flawed political system, they were met with a great deal of violence and aggression on the government's part.[83] The political establishment has also demonstrated a lack of willingness to accept an impartial investigation of the massive explosion in Beirut's port on 4 August 2020, which took the lives of more than 200 people, injured over 6,500 others, and rendered close to 300,000 people homeless due to the unsafe storage of several tons of ammonium nitrate.[84]

Without abandoning the very system that has been the root cause of people's mistrust in the state—its poor governance, sectarianism and corruption among other shortcomings—Lebanon's government will fail to tackle the drivers of violent extremism conducive to terrorism in the country. Beyond the rhetoric of its PVE Strategy, the government's inaction to address the legitimate grievances of the people in recent crises has clearly shown that the political establishment is both unwilling and unable to make such a drastic change.

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N.B.: The statements contained herein reflect the personal view of the author only and do not necessarily reflect any views of the International Criminal Court.

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The Role of Beliefs in Motivating Involvement in Terrorism

A Response to Lorne L. Dawson's article "Bringing Religiosity Back In: Critical Reflection on the Explanation of Western Homegrown Religious Terrorism (Parts I & II)," *Perspectives on Terrorism* vol. 15, nos. 1 & 2 (February & April 2021)

by Bart Schuurman

Abstract

The causes of involvement in terrorism continue to be subject to a rich academic debate. In several recent contributions, Lorne Dawson, professor of new religious movements, has argued that terrorism researchers too often downplay the role of religious convictions. In setting out his arguments, Dawson has repeatedly referred to some of my own work as an example of this practice. In this article, I respond to Dawson's criticism in order to show that it does not accurately represent the views that my co-authors and I have put forward. Rather than dismiss the role of ideology, I have argued the need for its contextualization. Extremist beliefs certainly play an important role in motivating and justifying terrorist violence. But they are not sufficient as explanations for such violence because most people who hold extremist views will never act on them. Secondly, even fanatical adherents of extremist beliefs tend to be motivated by more than their convictions alone. Finally, the different degrees of ideological commitment found among terrorists further underline the need to remain critical of the explanatory power of extremist beliefs alone.

Key words: Ideology; terrorism; Hofstadgroup; Dawson; religion, response

Introduction

Is religious belief an important element in motivating involvement in jihadist terrorism? According to scholar of new religious movements Lorne Dawson, too many researchers on terrorism are inclined to answer 'not really'. In two recent contributions to *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Dawson takes a stance against what he sees as the unwarranted dismissal of religiosity as an explanation for involvement in jihadism. Rather than perceiving religious beliefs as an ideological veneer that masks underlying grievances of an economic, social, political or personal nature, Dawson makes a case for taking them at face value. Neither, he argues, should academics dismiss the motivating potential of religious beliefs in cases where an adherent only has a superficial understanding of religion.[1] To a large extent, I think these are convincing and important arguments. The trouble is that Dawson has repeatedly pointed to some of my work as an example of how terrorism scholars get the role of religious beliefs wrong.[2]

With this contribution, I aim to achieve two goals. First, to provide a response to Dawson's specific critiques of my work and so clarify that my alleged dismissal of the importance of religious beliefs rests on several misunderstandings. Second, to use this opportunity to respond to criticism to clarify how I view the importance of belief systems, whether religious or secular, for motivating and justifying involvement in terrorism. My intention is not to offer a point-for-point defense of the articles that Dawson criticizes. While I think his criticism is overstated in several important regards, he also points out some weaknesses in my own work that I can do little but agree with. Not only is hindsight a great adviser, but my thinking about the importance of extremist belief systems has developed slightly from where it was half a decade or so ago. Therefore, I would like to use this opportunity not just to offer a rebuttal to criticism that I think is unfounded, but to indicate areas of agreement as well.

Beliefs Alone are not Sufficient as Explanations

Dawson has written three articles that criticize what he sees as an unwarranted dismissal of the role that religious beliefs play in motivating involvement in jihadist terrorism. In two of them, he provides detailed critiques of specific publications that he views as epitomizing this incorrect appraisal of religiosity. One of these is 'Rationales for Terrorist Violence', which appeared in *Aggression and Violent Behavior* in 2016 and which I co-authored with John Horgan.[3] Although a standalone piece, this article came out of my doctoral research on how and why involvement in European homegrown jihadism occurs. That project focused specifically on the Dutch 'Hofstadgroup' which was active between 2002 and 2005 and became infamous after one of its participants murdered Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in November 2004 on the streets of Amsterdam. Looking back on this project now, I would point to the understated importance of religious beliefs as one of its weaknesses. For example, although the Hofstadgroup's participants are specifically placed within the Salafi-Jihadist current in one chapter, the importance of these beliefs to their behavior is often treated as a given in the remainder of the text.[4] When the group's extremist[5] beliefs are mentioned specifically, it is often to note that beliefs *alone* provide an insufficient explanation for the group's planned or perpetrated acts of terrorism.[6]

The assumption that extremist beliefs (religious ones in this case) are a key element in explaining involvement in terrorism, yet have insufficient explanatory power by themselves, is clearly reflected in the 'Rationales' paper with which Dawson takes issue. In fact, one of the main conclusions that John Horgan and I reach is summed up by the following quote from our article. Namely, that 'Van Gogh's murderer was primarily driven by his fanatical beliefs. Yet even in his case, convictions alone only provide part of his rationale for committing an act of terrorism'.[7] Like my doctoral thesis on which it is largely based, our co-authored article could, and perhaps should, have made more explicit that we see extremist beliefs as key components of the terrorism puzzle. Still, Dawson's criticism that we underplay the role of religiosity strikes me as odd given that he specifically uses the quoted sentence above to support his own argument. Rather than underplaying the importance of extremist religious beliefs for the behavior of Hofstadgroup participants (like the one who murdered Van Gogh), Horgan and I repeatedly emphasize their explanatory power, albeit with various qualifications.

My critical appraisal of the role that extremist beliefs can play in motivating involvement in terrorism had two main sources. First of all, my doctoral work continuously confronted me with a group of individuals who appeared to share similar degrees of commitment to jihadist convictions, who came from broadly comparable socioeconomic backgrounds and participated in similar social networks. Yet out of several dozen Hofstadgroup participants, only a handful acted or planned to act violently on their convictions. Even among the group's 'hard core', where extremist religious beliefs were most strongly manifest, different motivational elements for planned and executed acts of terrorism were present. Horgan and I make this point explicitly in the article, noting that Van Gogh's killer was mainly driven by his extremist beliefs whereas another 'inner circle' member's motivation to engage in terrorism was part religiosity, part personal hatred of the Dutch justice system and part desire to help Muslim victims of oppression and injustice in places like Palestine and Chechnya.[8]

The conclusion that involvement in terrorist violence cannot be explained by a single factor is, of course, not that surprising. Research has long established that there is a myriad of factors at play in drawing people and groups to terrorism, including feelings of belonging and a shared sense of purpose.[9] Yet it became a key point in my thesis as well as in the article that Dawson critiques for a second reason: the emphasis that the concept of radicalization places on the importance of beliefs as behavioral motivators. While no serious academic would claim that radicalization processes are characterized *solely* by the internalization of extremist beliefs, the centrality of such worldviews to explanations for terrorism was, at least in the early to mid-2010s, frequently encountered.[10] Beliefs are crucial elements of explanations for involvement in terrorism but insufficient as accounts by themselves. This seemed to me then, and still does today, an important argument to make. Rather than seeking to dismiss the role of extremist beliefs, Horgan and I sought to better understand their influence and relation to other relevant motivational forces.

Disentangling the Personal and the Ideological

Dawson's most convincing criticism of the 'Rationales for Terrorist Violence' article is his point that we tend to label motivations for terrorism as 'personal' in nature, even when they have a clearly religious character.[11] At least in part, this stems from the overall design of that article, which asks whether strategic or organizational rationales for terrorism, such as attaining clearly defined political goals or ensuring group survival, can explain the Hofstadgroup's planned and perpetrated attacks, only to conclude that they have their origin mostly at the level of the individual. Religious belief is one such individual-level motivator for terrorism but, for reasons described in the previous section, we are careful to qualify its influence even on the group's most fanatical and murderous participant and to point to a range of other individual-level motivational influences. Re-reading the article with Dawson's commentary in mind, however, I agree that 'personal' and 'religious' are unhelpfully presented as being juxtaposed at several points. Even though we are clear in our conclusions that fanatically-held beliefs and a desire to express newfound identities as 'true' Muslims were key factors in the group's planned and perpetrated acts of terrorism, our view on the relationship between the personal and the religious should have been stated less ambiguously.[12]

Reformulating my position on this relationship now, I would argue that the desire to act violently did not just stem from the content of Hofstadgroup participants' beliefs, e.g. religious injunctions to murder blasphemers. The adoption of these beliefs was predated by personal experiences, such as a loss-induced search for existential meaning, that functioned as 'cognitive openings' which, among a range of other factors, increased the likelihood that alternative worldviews would be found appealing.[13] While the personal and the religious are thus not somehow different categories of individual-level motivators for terrorism, it still makes sense to tease them apart. For the Hofstadgroup participants described in the article, religious extremism was able to take hold not just because jihadist ideology was somehow intrinsically attractive, but because other (individual-level) factors had made them angry, bored or spiritually lost enough to become amenable to the worldview proffered by Salafi-Jihadism. And as the previous paragraph argued, with the exception of Van Gogh's murderer, religious beliefs were not the only source of inspiration for the group's violent plans, since motives such as a desire to avenge a personal insult or gain admiration also played important roles.

Another point to keep in mind when assessing whether personal motives or ideological convictions influenced involvement in terrorism, is that it can be very hard to tease the two apart. On the one hand, this supports Dawson's criticism that Horgan and I treat religious and personal motives as separate where we should not have done so. On the other hand, however, it is a reminder that we should distinguish between ideology's ability to motivate as well as to justify the use of violence. For someone like Van Gogh's murderer, who became a fanatical adherent of Salafi-Jihadist views, both of these functions were clearly present when he carried out his attack. For the other members of the Hofstadgroup, however, it is much more difficult to assess the degree to which the justificatory function of extremist beliefs did not, at least to some extent, serve as a convenient cover for motives besides the strictly ideological. This is not to say that religious motives did not play a role in their planned terrorist acts; they most certainly did. But it does serve as a reminder that extremist beliefs can mask motives for violence outside of their ideological boundaries, and that through socialization extremists may also learn to describe their motivations in ideological terms.[14] As Cottee writes, '[r]eligion matters because it is a legitimizing resource of real potency […] This does not mean that religious ideology is the sole or exclusive cause of violence carried out in the name of religion'.[15]

Do Extremist Beliefs Predate or Follow Involvement in Terrorism?

Dawson also criticizes an argument that Max Taylor and I made in a 2018 contribution to *Perspectives on Terrorism* with the title 'Reconsidering Radicalization'. There, we argued that involvement in terrorism is not always preceded by the adoption of extremist beliefs.[16] According to Dawson, 'the vast majority of [terrorist] offenders do hold [extremist] views'[17] Part of the issue here is a lack of clarity around what we mean by involvement in terrorism. 'Reconsidering Radicalization' does not explicate that it follows Taylor

and Horgan's useful distinction between involvement and event decisions, which points out that most of the people who become involved in terrorist groups or movements do not actually go on to execute attacks themselves.[18] For most, their involvement is limited to lesser offences such as propagandizing, recruiting, fundraising, logistical support or simply being hangers-on. When Max Taylor and I criticized the notion frequently found in 'radicalization' theories that the adoption of radical beliefs precedes involvement in terrorism, we were referring to involvement in a broad sense of joining a terrorist group or movement, not just as meaning engagement in acts of terrorist violence. This is borne out by the examples we give in the article, but it should have been stated more explicitly.[19]

Presented more clearly, our argument is essentially that the internalization of extremist beliefs does not necessarily precede an individual's participation in an extremist or terrorist group or movement. Many members of the Provisional IRA only came to fully develop their political convictions and views on the utility of violence once they had been imprisoned, which gave them years of relative inactivity in which to discuss and reflect on these issues.[20] Similarly, as Merkle notes with regard to German left-wing terrorists, '[m]ost of the [Red Army Fraction] members hardly knew their Marx and Lenin before imprisonment gave them the opportunity to read them, and there is no reason to believe that any other German terrorist groups graduated from reading Marx, Engels, and Lenin to terrorist action'.[21] Numerous accounts of involvement in neo-Nazism are equally revealing when it comes to demonstrating that the initial appeal of these movements is frequently their ability to provide a countercultural identity, a source of excitement or a sense of belonging, with actual ideological engagement following later, if at all.[22]

Again, rather than dismissing the role of extremist ideology, my co-authors and I sought to better understand where, in the processes that can lead to extremism and terrorism, its influence becomes most salient. We took, and I still do so today, issue with the notion that involvement in extremist or terrorist groups or movements necessarily *follows* from an individual developing an initial interest in an extremist worldview. Of course, there are plentiful cases where this has happened. The Hofstadgroup participant who murdered Van Gogh being a clear example of this. But I would argue that it is more common for the adoption of extremist views to follow socialization into an extremist movement. Such socialization is itself predicated on a wide variety of factors, ranging from an individual identifying with the countercultural aesthetics found, for instance, in neo-Nazi rock music or developing an altruistic desire to help co-religionists in war-torn countries, to simply making friends with people who turn out to have extremist views.[23] It is precisely this nuanced yet certainly not dismissive view of extremist beliefs as one among several motivational drivers that Horgan and I put forward in our 2016 article, which makes Dawson's argument that we did not take beliefs seriously a spurious one.

The Degree of ideological Commitment Matters

Just as ideological radicalization does not necessarily form the 'jumping-off point' for engagement with extremist or terrorist groups or movements, so too should we be careful in seeing ideology as the prime mover of actual terrorist acts. While I agree with Dawson that 'the vast majority of [terrorist] offenders do hold [extremist] views', the degree of commitment to these views varies along with the influence of other motivational influences.[24] This was one of the points that Horgan and I made in 'Rationales for Terrorist Violence'. Yes, extremist ideology matters when explaining involvement in terrorist violence as it provides adherents with the motivation and justification to carry out their attacks. But, even among members of a relatively small entity like the Dutch Hofstadgroup, the degree to which ideology alone formed the motivational palette differed quite significantly. To recap briefly; Van Gogh's murderer appeared to be almost entirely consumed by extremist beliefs. But another individual with apparently advanced plans for multiple attacks complemented his ideological motives for violence with a distinctly personal element (hatred of the Dutch justice system for arresting him, scaring his wife and child in the process and being prevented from traveling abroad) as well as a more political rather than strictly religious one (advocacy of the Palestinian cause). A third person, also discussed in the article, wanted to carry out an attack in part because he too wanted a share of the hero-worship that he saw Van Gogh's murderer receiving from the broader jihadist

movement.[25]

In none of these three examples is extremist ideology absent as a motivational influence and I have not argued, as Dawson implies, that terrorist violence is likely to occur in the absence of some degree of ideological commitment.[26] My goal was, and remains, to *qualify* rather than dismiss outright the importance of commitment to an extremist ideology as an explanation for terrorist violence. To be clear, the Hofstadgroup-derived examples given above are in no way unique in demonstrating the varying degrees to which extremist worldviews can motivate terrorist violence. Consider, for instance, how Andreas Baader, one of the leaders of the aforementioned RAF, appears, at least initially, to have been less deeply ideologically committed than Ulrike Meinhof, another leader of the group's first incarnation, and was motivated to a greater degree by an attraction to the thrill, adventure and imagined romanticism of the underground life of a revolutionary on the run from the authorities.[27] Or take the case of Gundolf Köhler, who carried out the 1980 bombing of Munich's *Oktoberfest*, still the deadliest post-1945 act of right-wing extremist terrorism in Germany, while apparently going through a period in which he had begun exploring other political ideologies.[28]

My current research project, which looks at the differences between extremists who become directly involved in terrorist violence and those who do not, suggests that a higher degree of ideological commitment is more typical of extremists who carry out attacks, yet it is not ubiquitous for this subset of individuals, nor is a high degree of ideological commitment unheard of among extremists who do not turn to terrorism.[29] There is always likely to be some degree of cognitive radicalization among people involved in terrorism and terrorist violence, but that is precisely the problem.[30] This observation does little to help us distinguish between a) those involved in terrorist groups and movements who do become personally involved in attacks and b) the much larger group of individuals who share (elements) of a radicalized worldview but assume no personal role in acts of terrorist violence.

Where I do agree with Dawson is on his point that the depth of understanding of a particular extremist worldview does not appear to influence its ability to inspire (violent) behavior.[31] Jihadists who traveled to Syria with 'Islam for Dummies' in their backpack, for instance, could still be ideologically highly motivated.[32] Even a superficial understanding of a belief system can prove very inspirational and help justify and motivate the use of political violence. A sincere belief, however misguided or scripturally 'wrong', that Islam is under threat and that its defense is a personal duty of the utmost importance, to be rewarded with eternal life in paradise, would suffice to have the capacity for acting as a strong motivational influence. Similarly, most of the people serving in Western countries' armed forces are unlikely to have a particularly deep understanding of their states' constitution, electoral politics, or legal system, but this does not mean we need to question their dedication to defending democracy and their country. Degree of ideological commitment rather than degree of ideological knowledge seems to me to be the most important element here.

Conclusion

As Donatella della Porta has aptly put it when writing about left-wing terrorism in Italy and Germany, 'conversion to violence requires a specific redefinition of reality'.[33] In setting out motivations and justifications for violence, in sketching a utopian future and the obstacles standing in its way, or portraying an idealized community beset by existential dangers, ideologies are an important piece of the puzzle of why involvement in terrorism occurs.[34] But their importance is also at risk of being overstated, especially through the still ubiquitous concept of radicalization which, at least implicitly, centers the adoption of 'radical' worldviews as an explanation for terrorism. The qualifications that my co-authors and I have attached to the role of beliefs for explaining involvement in terrorism in past work, and which I still hold on to today, serve not to dismiss the importance of ideology, but to qualify it.

Principally, I argue that we need to keep in mind that extremist beliefs alone are insufficient to explain both involvement in extremist and terrorist groups generally, and involvement in the planning, preparation, or execution of terrorist attacks specifically. This is an obvious point, perhaps, but one that bears repeating as it remains an ongoing challenge for both scholars and counterterrorism practitioners to distinguish between

extremists who espouse violent views and those who act upon them. Secondly, even among extremists who are fully-committed to their ideologies, other influences found at the individual, group or structural levels of analysis are likely to exert influences that also need to be acknowledged if a full understanding of their behavior is to be gained. The fact remains that most people who embrace extremist beliefs do not go on to put into practice the violence they claim to support. This brings me to the closely related third point, namely that the degree of extremists' ideological commitment is likely to vary. While this may not be easily observable, given that statements of ideological fidelity and other outward appearances of commitment are ubiquitous among extremists, it further underlines the need to look to other motivational influences and reminds us that the justificatory mechanism offered by extremist ideologies can also be conveniently used to mask motives of a more personal rather than ideological nature.

It is important to keep debating the roles that extremist beliefs play in bringing about involvement in terrorism. Dawson's arguments in favor of taking such views at face value are a welcome antidote to notions that beliefs, religious or otherwise, amount to little more than window-dressing for underlying motives. But, as I have wanted to demonstrate with this rebuttal, Dawson has argued his case in part by presenting some of the work of my co-authors and myself in a way that does not do justice to our actual views on the role of extremist worldviews. Rather than exemplifying a dismissive attitude to the role of extremist belief systems, the articles that Dawson critiques sought to highlight the shortcomings of explanations for terrorism that rely too heavily on beliefs alone. My co-authors and I underline that even when ideological fanatics are driven to terrorist violence, they are likely to do so based on more than convictions alone.

Getting the role that extremist beliefs play in motivating involvement in terrorism right matters. Not just to advance academic understanding, but also because the topic has ramifications and concrete implications for counterterrorism policy and practice. Perhaps the clearest example of this lies in the field of reintegration or deradicalization programs. If the importance of extremist beliefs to involvement in terrorism is exaggerated, then such programs may suffer from one-sidedness as they prioritize cognitive deradicalization even for individuals who were mainly attracted to extremism for non-ideological reasons. Conversely, dismissing ideology as just a convenient veneer masking underlying political, economic, or personal grievances is also likely to be mistaken. Academics and those working in the security sector will benefit most when we acknowledge the importance of extremist beliefs while remembering that we need to qualify and contextualize their influence.

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Notes

[1] Lorne L. Dawson, "Bringing Religiosity Back In: Critical Reflection on the Explanation of Western Homegrown Religious Terrorism (Part I)," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 1 (February 2021): 2–3.

[2] Lorne L. Dawson, "Challenging the Curious Erasure of Religion from the Study of Religious Terrorism," *Numen* 65, no. 2–3 (March 15, 2018): 141–64; URL: https://doi.org/10.1163/15685276-12341492; Lorne L. Dawson, "Bringing Religiosity Back In: Critical Reflection on the Explanation of Western Homegrown Religious Terrorism (Part II)," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 2 (April 2021): 1–21.

[3] Bart Schuurman and John G. Horgan, "Rationales for Terrorist Violence in Homegrown Jihadist Groups: A Case Study from the Netherlands," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 27 (April 2016): 55–63; URL: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2016.02.005.

[4] Bart Schuurman, *Becoming a European Homegrown Jihadist: A Multilevel Analysis of Involvement in the Dutch Hofstadgroup, 2002-2005* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 79–87.

[5] Extremism is used here to denote worldviews that advocate revolutionary social or political change and see the use of violence as the most effective way of doing so. See: Alex P. Schmid, "Radicalisation, de-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review," ICCT Research Paper, 4, no. 2 (March 2013): 8–11.

[6] Schuurman, *Becoming a European Homegrown Jihadist*, 171–81.

[7] Schuurman and Horgan, "Rationales for Terrorist Violence," 60.

[8] Schuurman and Horgan, 59–61.

[9] Arie W. Kruglanski, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, and Rohan Gunaratna, *The Three Pillars of Radicalization: Needs, Narratives, and Networks* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 35–64; Max Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy," *International Security* 32, no. 4 (April 2008): 78–105;URL: https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2008.32.4.78.

[10] Bart Schuurman and Max Taylor, "Reconsidering Radicalization: Fanaticism and the Link between Ideas and Violence," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 1 (February 2018): 7–10.

[11] Dawson, "Bringing Religiosity Back in (Part 2)," 7–8.

[12] Schuurman and Horgan, "Rationales for Terrorist Violence," 55, 61.

[13] Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Joining the Cause: Al-Muhajiroun and Radical Islam" (The Roots of Islamic Radicalism, New Haven: Yale University, May 8, 2004), 1.

[14] John Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618, no. 1 (July 2008): 81, 86–87; URL: https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716208317539; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 2003), xi.

[15] Simon Cottee, "'What ISIS Really Wants' Revisited: Religion Matters in *Jihadist* Violence, but How?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 6 (June 3, 2017): 448; URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1221258.

[16] Dawson, "Bringing Religiosity Back in (Part 2)," 14.

[17] Dawson, 14.

[18] Max Taylor and John Horgan, "A Conceptual Framework for Addressing Psychological Process in the Development of the Terrorist," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 4 (2006): 591–592; URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546550600897413; Max Taylor, "Is Terrorism a Group Phenomenon?," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 15, no. 2 (2010): 125; URL: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2009.09.001.

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[21] Peter H. Merkle, "West German Left-Wing Terrorism"; in. Martha Crenshaw (Ed.) *Terrorism in Context*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 199.

[22] E.g.: Michaela Köttig, *Lebensgeschichten Rechtsextrem Orientierter Mädchen und Junger Frauen: Biografische Verläufe im Kontext der Familien- und Gruppendynamik*, Originalausgabe, Reihe "Forschung Psychosozial" (Giessen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2004); Jessika Devert and Anna-Lena Joners Larsson, *Nazibruden: en sann historia* (Stockholm: HarperCollins Nordic, 2016); Christine Hewicker, *Die Aussteigerin: Autobiografie einer ehemaligen Rechtsextremistin*, Überarb. Ausg, Acabus Biografie (Hamburg: Acabus Verl, 2012).

[23] Ryan Shaffer, "The Soundtrack of Neo-Fascism: Youth and Music in the National Front," *Patterns of Prejudice* 47, no. 4–5 (September 2013): 458–82,:URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2013.842289.

[24] Dawson, "Bringing Religiosity Back in (Part 2)," 14.

[25] Schuurman and Horgan, "Rationales for Terrorist Violence."

[26] Dawson, "Bringing Religiosity Back in (Part 2)," 14.

[27] Konrad Kellen, "Ideology and Rebellion: Terrorism in West Germany"; in: Walter Reich (Ed.), *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, (Washington, D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998), 55–56; Stefan Aust, *Der Baader-Meinhof-Komplex*, 1. Auflage der Neuausgabe (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2017), 30–34, 44–56, 64–68, 75–79, 135–36.

[28] Ulrich Chaussy, *Das Oktoberfest-Attentat und der Doppelmord von Erlangen: wie Rechtsterrorismus und Antisemitismus seit 1980 verdrängt werden* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2020), 185.

[29] The project is currently still in the data-collection phase. For background on the research, please see: Bart Schuurman, "Non-Involvement in Terrorist Violence: Understanding the Most Common Outcome of Radicalization Processes," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 6 (December 2020): 14–26.

[30] Donald Holbrook and John Horgan, "Terrorism and Ideology: Cracking the Nut," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 6 (December 2019): 10.

[31] Dawson, "Bringing Religiosity Back in (Part 1)," 2–3.

[32] Vikram Dodd, "Two British Men Admit to Linking up with Extremist Group in Syria," *The Guardian*, July 8, 2014; URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/08/two-british-men-admit-linking-extremist-group-syria.

[33] Donatella della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 136.

[34] Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences* (New York / Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 90; Jonathan Leader Maynard, "Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (2014): 828–29; URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.796934.

Counterterrorism Bookshelf: 5 Books on Terrorism & Counter-Terrorism-Related Subjects

Reviewed by Joshua Sinai

So many books are published on terrorism- and counterterrorism-related subjects that it is difficult to catch up on a large backlog of monographs and volumes received for review. In order to deal with this backlog, this column consists of capsule reviews and tables of contents of five recently published books.

Peter Bergen, The Rise and Fall of Osama bin Laden (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 416 pp., US $ 30.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-9821-7052-3.

The author was one of the first Western journalists to interview Osama bin Laden prior to 9/11, which produced his first book, the best-selling *Holy War Inc: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (2001). As a CNN journalist, he continued to investigate bin Laden and al Qaida. In *The Rise and Fall of Osama bin Laden*, Mr. Bergen provides an updated account of bin Laden as a leader of a terrorist organization, a 'family man', as well as details about the U.S. government's mission to kill him on May 2, 2011 in his hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan. In the conclusion, the author writes that "Killing bin Laden didn't kill his ideas, which lingered on among al-Qaeda's affiliates in Afghanistan, Iraq, North Africa, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen; and they also lived on among Islamist militants around the globe, magnified by the internet, where bin Laden remained an inspirational figure to every new generation of jihadists" (p. 245). This authoritative, detailed and extensively sourced account includes interviews with family members and associates, including recently unearthed documents that shed additional light on bin Laden and his activities. The author is a veteran journalist who has written and edited previously eight books, including several on bin Laden. He is a vice president at the New America public policy research institute and a professor at Arizona State University.

Table of Contents: Bin Laden Family Tree Prologue: Hopes and Dreams and Fears; Part I: Holy Warrior; Sphinx Without a Riddle?; Zealot; Jihad; Al-Qaeda; Part II: War With the U.S.; Radical; "The Head of the Snake"; A Declaration of War; The U.S. Slowly Grasps the Threat; The War Begins; The Road to 9/11; Part III: On the Run; Striking Back; The Great Escape; A-Qaeda Revives; The Hunt; A Lion in Winter; Operation Neptune Spear; After bin Laden.

Ilan Berman,(Ed.), Wars of Ideas: Theology, Interpretation and Power in the Muslim World (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 172 pp., US $ 50.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-5381-5547-9.

The contributors to this well-informed and important volume, examine, as the editor writes, "the current shape of the intellectual 'battlefield' in our struggle against radical Islam, and the substantive initiatives that potential partner nations from around the Muslim world are pursuing in this arena" (p. 3). The partner nations engaged in countering the violent Islamist narratives that are insightfully covered in the volume include those in Central Asia, Morocco, Indonesia, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. In the editor's concluding chapter, he observes that "the most successful national responses to Islamist extremism catalogued herein all share the presence of a comprehensive national plan to identify, marginalize and counter extremist ideas"(p. 149). He adds that it is "most effective when it is a collaborative enterprise. The larger the number of 'stakeholders' (be they corporations, individuals or governments) that gravitate around a durable consensus regarding values and ideas in the religious sphere, the more robust the counter-narrative that can be deployed against extremist interpretations of the Islamic faith"(p. 153). The volume's editor is Senior Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.

Table of Contents: Introduction; The Islamic State, And After; State and Religion in Central Asia; Morocco's Answer to Religious Extremism; Understanding Indonesia's "Third Way" Islam; The Emirates and the Struggle Against Islamic Extremism; Jordan Navigates the Intellectual Battlefield; Saudi Arabia: A Post-Salafist Trajectory?; Learning From Allies.

Carla Power, Home, Land, Security: Deradicalization and the Journey Back from Extremism (New York, NY: One World, 2021), 352 pp., US $ 28.00, ISBN: 978-0-5255-1057-4.

In examining the trajectory of susceptible individuals into becoming violent extremists and the methods used by governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to deradicalize some of them, it is crucial to analyze how these processes play out 'on the ground.' This is one of the important contributions of this volume as Carla Power, a veteran England-based foreign affairs journalist, examines the causes and motivations that draw some young Muslims into religious militancy by traveling to countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Indonesia, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and closely observing the programs established by these countries to deradicalize and, hopefully, reintegrate them into society. Some of the author's findings are that extremism is the product of "people's yearnings for belonging, meaning, and transcendence" (p. 271), and that for deradicalization programs to be effective "Training a lens on 'violent extremism' rather than on broader issues, like corruption or repression, can be risky in the long run" (p. 243). Such insights which are generated by the author's 'on-the-ground' reporting on numerous cases of radicalized and deradicalized youth, make this book essential reading for those interested in understanding how young individuals might become radicalized and the measures required to persuade them to moderate their extremist views and reintegrate into society to achieve their objectives through non-violent means. The author is a veteran journalist and author, based in East Sussex, England, UK.

Table of Contents: Introduction; Part I: Children Who Leave, Mothers Who Wait; The Lost Boy, "You're the Mother of a Terrorist"; The Godmother and Her Goddaughters; Part II: Change Makers; Trust Exercises; By the Book; The "Terrorist Drop-Off Center"; On Meeting the Beheader; Loss of Faith; Only God Knows the Human Heart; Great Games; The World's Best Deradicalization Program; Part III: A Wider View; American Blowback; Quantum Entanglement; How to Deradicalize Your Town.

Mark D. Silinsky, Empire of Terror: Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books/ An Imprint of the University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 328 pp., US $ 34.95 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-6401-2313-7.

This is one of the most comprehensive and detailed accounts of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. It focuses, in particular, on the Guards' domestic security wing, the Basij, and their expeditionary arm, the Qods Force. As the author points out, both work in tandem with the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). The Guards, the author explains, consist of "intelligence and security personnel; paramilitary land, air, and sea forces; special operators; prison guards; and interrogators. They are morality police, cyber-warriors, university professors, and business operators"(p. xvii). One of the book's unique contributions is its profiling of the Guards' leaders and activities, as well as an itemization of their 'enemies list'. In the conclusion, the author offers his personal reflections on the likelihood that Iranians will overturn their government in the next five years, how the Guards are likely to react if public opposition to the regime escalates, whether Iran will ever turn to Western-style reform, and whether the Guards are likely be brought to trial if their grip on power collapses. The author is a senior intelligence analyst for the U.S. Department of Defense, based in the Washington, DC area. He is the author of several books on terrorism, counterterrorism, Jihadism, and Pakistan.

Table of Contents: List of Illustrations; List of Tables; Introduction; Events and Ideas Behind the Guards; The Guards as a New Tool of Power; The Guards' Domestic Policy; The People's Militia; The Guards' Foreign Policy; The Guards' Unconventional Toolbox; The Guards, Inc.; Empire of Terror; Appendix: Important Personalities.

Craig Whitlock, The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 368 pp., US $ 30.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-9821-5900-9.

This is a groundbreaking investigative account of how three successive American presidential administrations managed America's longest war campaign in Afghanistan, from late 2001 to the 2020 [it does not cover the Biden Administration]. By coincidence, its critique of the U.S. counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan foreshadowed the Taliban's surprisingly easy recapture of the country in August 2021. Considered comparable in its public impact to the *Pentagon Papers* on the future course of the Vietnam War, *The Afghanistan Papers*, which is based on hundreds of interviews as well as primary documents, contains numerous revelations from government officials who played a role in managing the war effort, with many admitting that the U.S. counterinsurgency campaign's strategies were badly considered and executed. To be fair, one criticism of such assessments is that the last Afghan government is largely to blame for its overthrow by the Taliban insurgents, since one of the rules for successful intervention by a foreign power is for the local government to be wholeheartedly committed to effective governance, with its military and security forces capable of fighting insurgent adversaries – factors that were largely absent in Afghanistan. This is an important contribution to helping us understand why and how the U.S.-led counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan had failed in so many ways. The author is a veteran investigative reporter for *The Washington Post*, who had covered the global war on terrorism for his newspaper since 2001.

Table of Contents: Foreword; Part One: A False Taste of Victory, 2001-2002; A Muddled Mission; "Who Are the Bad Guys?"; The Nation-Building Project; Part Two: The Great Distraction, 2003-2005; Afghanistan Becomes an Afterthought; Raising an Army from the Ashes; Islam for Dummies; Playing Both Sides; Part Three: The Taliban Comes Back, 2006-2008; Lies and Spin; An Incoherent Strategy; The Warlords; A War on Opium; Part Four: Obama's Overreach, 2009-2010; Doubling Down; "A Dark Pit of Endless Money"; From Friend to Foe; Consumed by Corruption; Part Five: Things Fall Apart, 2011-2016; At War with the Truth; The Enemy Within; The Grand Illusion; Part Six: Stalemate, 2017-2021; Trump's Turn; The Narco-State; Talking with the Taliban.

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Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, *The Aftermath: Meaning-making After Terrorist Attacks in Western Europe.* (Leiden, The Netherlands: University Dissertation, 2021) (337 pp.)

Reviewed by Alex P. Schmid

It is widely accepted that terrorists use violence for communication - but how effective is their communication strategy? To find out, the author of this dissertation looked at the aftermath of four terrorist attacks which were directly or indirectly linked to the Islamic State (IS): *Brussels* (22 March 2015: 33 persons killed, 340 injured), *Nice* (14 July 2016: 87 persons killed, 458 injured), *Berlin* (19 December 2016: 12 persons killed, 56 injured) and *Manchester* (22 May 2017: 22 persons killed, 512 injured). Terrorists want to send a message to one or more audiences, but the message sent and intended is not necessarily the message received and accepted. While in the case of an assassination the victim and target are the same, making the meaning more obvious, this is not the case when it comes to terrorist attacks against civilians – the direct victims of violence are not the ultimate targets. There are a number of terrorist target audiences: the enemy government, the enemy society, the constituency the terrorists claim to represent, members of their own and other terrorist organisations, the media – to name but the most important ones.

Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, the dissertation's author, focuses on the first two, exploring how government authorities and the general public (citizens) responded to acts of terrorism against them. In her own words, she "…aimed to establish an in-depth picture of who is doing what, how and when" (p.269) at three moments in time: on the day after the attack, in the first week thereafter and on the first anniversary of these attacks against unarmed civilians. Her main research question was: "how do different actors engage in various forms of meaning-making in the first year after a terrorist attack?" (p. 227). The author finds that both governments and members of society engage in meaning-making with the help of frames, rituals and symbols to respond and to make sense of what in the eyes of most people is senseless violence. operationalises "meaning-making in terms of interpretation frames, rituals and symbols (p. 43). She distinguishes between diagnostic frames (what is the issue and why has the attack happened?), prognostic frames (what needs to be done in response to the attack?) and motivational frames (what should people do now?). She looks at rituals that take the form of "symbolic behaviour that is socially standardized and repetitive," and at symbols characterised by the "elements of condensation, multivocality and ambiguity…signs that stand for something other than itself" (p. 44). The author found that the rituals and symbols served, in the four cases studied, one or more of these purposes: "commemoration, compassion, reassurance, solidarity and resilience" (p. 256).

With their attacks, successful terrorists manage to drive a wedge between government and (parts of) society while also seeking to increase polarization and foster radicalisation of sympathisers in their religious, ethnic, racial, or ideological constituencies. The Islamic State sought to portray these four attacks as responses to offensive military operations of Western states in the Middle East in the hope that citizens of the "crusader" countries (France, Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom) would put pressure on their governments to withdraw their military forces from the Muslim world (p. 72, p. 249). In the case of the Brussels attacks, IS offered on the message service Telegram no fewer than "10 Main Reasons for Brussels Attacks" (p. 89). However, in none of these four attacks did the perpetrators achieve their ultimate goal. Their message was drowned in counter-messages from citizens and representatives of the state which denied them any legitimacy of their struggle (p. 252). There was, at various points of measurement, more often than not a large degree of unity between government and society in the wake of these attacks, although some opposition politicians and fringe groups tried to exploit the situation, playing blame games (p. 116). Manifestations of solidarity marginalised efforts at polarisation and division. The meaning-making attempts of the terrorists were no match to what the authorities and citizens of these countries could muster in terms of creating alternative and opposing meanings about what these wanton attacks on civilians stood for.

The author concludes on the basis of her four empirical case studies that "Terrorism does not seem to be an effective violent communication strategy…." (p. 258). Yet, can this finding be generalised beyond these four cases to situations where terrorism is chronic rather than sporadic? The author does not make such a claim in her explorative study and suggests that this should be "an area for future research" (p. 274). Another issue is: what is the meaning of "meaning-making"? The author admits that "It is difficult to demarcate what counts as meaning-making" (p. 268). Her operationalisation of meaning-making in terms of frames, rituals and symbols, while fruitful, does, in the view of this reviewer, not catch the whole scope of what an act of terrorism, or a series of attacks, can "mean". This is linked to a third problem: the author only looks at the responses of two actor groups – government and general public. Other actors, including the media at home and in the Muslim world, are not discussed as independent entities. The author readily recognises some of these limitations but nevertheless over-generalizes in her conclusion when writing: "…. terrorism is not only an unsuccessful political strategy – as is widely noted – but also a rather unsuccessful communication strategy. Attention does not equal understanding, acceptance or even dissemination of the message of the terrorists. While terrorists receive attention for their 'opening acts', the violent performances, their main audiences – authorities and citizens – are not focusing on their core message and goals" (p. 262). However, perhaps the "main audiences" terrorists seek to impress are in the end members of their own and other terrorist groups and their constituencies and – in the case of religious terrorists – those who "guard the gates of paradise."

To conclude, these few critical remarks should not detract from the merits of what is an eminently readable, well documented and richly illustrated original scholarly study.

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About the Reviewer: **Alex P. Schmid** *is Editor-in-Chief of 'Perspectives on Terrorism' and principal author of* Violence as Communication *(Sage, 1982).*

Bibliography: Al-Qaeda and its Affiliated Organizations (Part 2)

Compiled and selected by Judith Tinnes

[Bibliographic Series of Perspectives on Terrorism – BSPT-JT-2021-5]

Abstract

This bibliography contains journal articles, book chapters, books, edited volumes, theses, grey literature, and other resources, including other bibliographies, on Al-Qaeda and its affiliated organizations. To keep up with rapidly changing political events, the most recent publications have been prioritized during the selection process. The literature has been retrieved by manually browsing more than 200 core and periphery sources in the field of Terrorism Studies. Additionally, full-text and reference retrieval systems have been employed to broaden the search.

Keywords: bibliography, resources, literature, Al-Qaeda; affiliates; franchises; branches; AQC; AQAP; AQIM; AQIS; AQI; Osama bin Laden; Ayman al-Zawahiri

NB: All websites were last visited on 20.09.2021. This subject bibliography is a sequel to an earlier bibliography (Part 1). To avoid duplication, this compilation only includes literature not contained in the previous part. However, meta-resources, such as bibliographies, were also included in the sequel.

- See also Note for the Reader at the end of this literature list.

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Bibliography: Rebel Governance

Compiled and selected by David Teiner, Marta Furlan, Ayse D. Lokmanoglu, and Brody McDonald

Abstract

This bibliography contains books, edited volumes, journal articles, book chapters, theses, grey literature, and other resources on rebel governance, which refers to the informal takeover of state authority and political-administrative activities by insurgent non-state actors. The publications compiled herein represent the major thematic fields of research on rebel governance, covering political-administrative institutions of rebel groups, interventions in the economy, civilian life under, and responses to, rebel rule, provision of social services, the enhancement of perceived legitimacy, rebel diplomacy, and symbolic governance. Considering the multidisciplinary nature of this field of study, this bibliography should not be considered exhaustive but offers a useful insights into the constantly evolving research on rebel governance.

Keywords: Rebel governance, insurgent non-state actors, proto-states, civilian responsiveness, rebel diplomacy

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Note for the Reader

Whenever retrievable, URLs for freely available versions of subscription-based publications have been provided. In some cases, articles may only be cited after obtaining permission by the author(s).

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Recent Online Resources for the Analysis of Terrorism and Related Subjects

by Berto Jongman

Most of the clickable items included below became available online between August and October 2021. They are categorized under thirteen headings (as well as sub-headings, not listed below):

1. Non-Religious Terrorism
2. Religious Terrorism
3. Terrorist Strategies and Tactics
4. Conflict, Crime and Political Violence other than Terrorism
5. Extremism, Radicalization
6. Counterterrorism - General
7. Counterterrorism: Specific Operations and/or Specific Policy Measures
8. Prevention, Preparedness and Resilience and Rehabilitation Studies
9. State Repression, Civil War and Clandestine Warfare
10. Intelligence Operations
11. Cyber Operations
12. Risk and Threat Assessments, Forecasts and Analytical Studies
13. Also Worth to Read/Listen/Watch

N.B. *Recent Online Resources for the Analysis of Terrorism and Related Subjects* is a regular feature in 'Perspectives on Terrorism'. For past listings, search under 'Archive' at www.universiteitleiden.nl/PoT

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***About the Compiler*: Berto Jongman** *is Associate Editor of 'Perspectives on Terrorism'. He is a former senior Military Intelligence Analyst and currently serves as an International Consultant on CBRN issues. A sociologist by training, he previously also worked for Swedish and Dutch civilian research institutes. Drs. Jongman was the recipient of the Golden Candle Award for his World Conflict & Human Rights Maps, published by PIOOM. He is editor of the volume* Contemporary Genocides *(1996) and has also contributed to various editions of* Political Terrorism*, the award-winning handbook of terrorism research edited by Alex P. Schmid.*

Conference Monitor/Calendar of Events

(October 2021 and beyond)

Compiled by Olivia Kearney

The Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI), in its mission to provide a platform for academics and practitioners in the field of terrorism and counter-terrorism, compiles an online calendar, listing recent and upcoming academic and professional conferences, symposia and similar events that are directly or indirectly relevant to the readers of *Perspectives on Terrorism*. The calendar includes academic and (inter-) governmental conferences, professional expert meetings, civil society events and educational programs organised between October and December 2021 (with a few shortly thereafter). The listed events are organised by a wide variety of governmental and non-governmental institutions, including several key (counter) terrorism research centres and institutes listed in the February 2021 issue of this journal.

We encourage readers to contact the journal's Associate Editor for Conference Monitoring, Olivia Kearney, and provide her with relevant information, preferably in the same format as the items listed below. Olivia Kearney can be reached at <oliviaj.kearney@gmail.com> or via Twitter: @oliviajkearney.

October 2021

Webinar on the Far Right in the Philippines
Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), Online
6 October, *Norway*
Website: visit | Twitter: @CrexUiO

Eurojust Virtual Open Day
Eurojust, Online
8 October, *The Netherlands*
Website: visit | Twitter: @Eurojust

6th Meeting of the Global Counter-Terrorism Compact Coordination Committee
UNODC, Online
8 October, *United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @UN_OCT

Covering January 6th
George Washington Program on Extremism (GWPOE), Online
12 October, *United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @gwupoe

Contending with New and Old Threats: A French Perspective on Counterterrorism
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Online
12 October, *United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @WashInstitute

Global Security Forum
The Soufan Center, Online
12-14 October, *Qatar*
Website: visit | Twitter: @GSECForum

Special Event | What's Next for Afghanistan?
Center for a New American Security (CNAS), Online
13 October, *United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @CNASdc

Will Central America be our next Afghanistan?
Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center (TraCC), Online
14 October, *United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @TraCCCatGMU

The Extreme Right in Europe and the USA: Hijacking the Covid-19 Pandemic
Macquarie University, Online
14 October, *Australia*
Website: visit | Twitter: @Macquarie_Uni

Religion and the Far-Right Series
AVERT, Online
14 October, *Australia*
Website: visit | Twitter: @AvertResNet

Online Campaigning in P/CVE
RAN Europe, Online
14 October, *Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RANEurope

The Evolution of Nonstate Armed Actors in the Middle East
The Brookings Institute, Online
14 October, *United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @BrookingsInst

Launching the 2021 Global Women, Peace and Security Index
Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, Online
19 October, *United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @giwps

Roundtable Discussion on Polarization
Flemish Peace Institute, Online
25 October, *Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: @Vredesinstituut

Contemporary Online Islamist Extremism (in English)
RAN Europe, Online
26 October, *Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RANEurope

Contemporary Online Islamist Extremism (in German)
RAN Europe, Online
27 October, *Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RANEurope

Contemporary Online Islamist Extremism (in French)
RAN Europe, Online
28 October, *Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RANEurope

Global Collaboration against Terrorism in the 1970s
Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV), Online
28 October, *United Kingdom*
Website: visit | Twitter: @CSTPV

Online Terrorist Financing: Assessing the Risks and Mitigation Strategies
Tech Against Terrorism & GIFCT, Online
28 October, *Online*
Website: visit | Twitter: @GIFCT_official

November 2021

Webinar on the Far Right in Russia
Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), Online
3 November, *Norway*
Website: visit | Twitter: @CrexUiO

Transnational Threat, Global Perspectives: Launching RUSI's Far-Right Extremism and Terrorism (FRET) Programme
Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Online
3 November, *United Kingdom*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RUSI_Org

Joint P/CVE Training on Mental Health Aspects in P/CVE
RAN Europe, Online
4-5 November, *Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RANEurope

Small-scale Meeting on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Exploring Post-Conflict Reconciliation
RAN Europe, Online
8 November, *Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RANEurope

Battlefields of the Future: Trends of Conflict and Warfare in the 21st Century
Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Stockholm
8-11 November, *Sweden*
Website: visit | Twitter: @SIPRIorg

Governing Through Crisis – Conflict, Crises and the Politics of Cyberspace
The Hague Program for Cyber Norms, The Hague
9-11 November, *Netherlands*
Website: visit | Twitter: @HagueCyberNorms

The Modern Foreign Fighters Phenomenon – Repatriation, Prosecutions and/or Repatriation?
Asser Institute, Online
15-16 November, *Netherlands*
Website: visit | Twitter: @TMCAsser

Conspiracy Narratives: Current State and Future Expectations for P/CVE in Europe
RAN Europe, Online
16-17 November, *Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RANEurope

Working With (Violent) Right Wing Extremists in Your Community
RAN Europe, Online
23-24 November, *Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RANEurope

December 2021

Webinar on the Far Right in Israel
Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), Online
1 December, *Norway*
Website: visit | Twitter: @CrexUiO

January & Beyond 2022

Webinar on the Far Right in Malaysia
Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), Online
12 January, *Norway*
Website: visit | Twitter: @CrexUiO

Hate Crimes, Terrorism, and the Framing of White Supremacy
Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), Online
18 January, *United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @FSIStandford

GLOBSEC 2022 Bratislava Forum
Globsec, Bratislava
2-4 June, *Bratislava*
Website: visit | Twitter: @Globsec

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About *Perspectives on Terrorism*

Perspectives on Terrorism (PoT) is a joint publication of the Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI), headquartered in Vienna, Austria, and the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA) of Leiden University, Campus The Hague. Now in its 15th year, PoT is published six times annually as a free, independent, scholarly peer-reviewed online journal available at the URL: **https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/perspectives-on-terrorism**.

Perspectives on Terrorism has recently been ranked by Google Scholar again as No. 3 in 'Terrorism Studies" (as well as No. 5 in "Military Studies"). PoT has close to 9,500 registered subscribers and many more occasional readers.

Our journal seeks to provide a platform for established scholars as well as academics and professionals entering the interdisciplinary fields of (Counter-)Terrorism, Political Violence and Conflict Studies.

The editors invite researchers and readers to:

- use the journal as a forum for debate and commentary on issues related to the above.
- present their perspectives on the prevention of, and response to, terrorism and related forms of violent conflict;
- submit to the journal accounts of evidence-based, empirical scientific research and analyses on terrorism;

Perspectives on Terrorism has sometimes been characterised as 'non-traditional' in that it dispenses with some of the rigidities associated with commercial print journals. Topical articles can be published at short notice and reach, through the Internet, a much larger audience than subscription-fee based paper journals. Our online journal also offers contributors a higher degree of flexibility in terms of content, style and length of articles – but without compromising professional scholarly standards. The journal's Research Notes, Special Correspondence, Op-Eds and other content are reviewed by members of the Editorial Team, while its Articles are peer-reviewed (double-blind) by outside academic experts and professionals. Due to the hundreds of submissions we receive every year, only the most promising and original ones can be sent for external peer-review.

While aiming to be policy-relevant, PoT does not support any partisan policies regarding (counter-) terrorism and waging conflicts. Impartiality, objectivity and accuracy are guiding principles that we require contributors to adhere to. They are responsible for the content of their contributions and retain the copyright of their publication.