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FEATURE ARTICLE

Soleimani Is Dead: The Road Ahead for Iranian-Backed Militias in Iraq

MICHAEL KNIGHTS

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Lessons from the Islamic State's 'Milestone' Texts and Speeches

HARORO J. INGRAM, CRAIG WHITESIDE,
AND CHARLIE WINTER

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FROM THE EDITOR

The January 3, 2020, U.S. drone strike that killed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani and Kata'ib Hezbollah leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis at Baghdad International Airport will likely have consequences that reverberate across the region and beyond for years. In our first feature article, Michael Knights focuses on the potential consequences for Iraq. He writes that the removal of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, "in combination with resistance from protestors, religious leaders, and the international community, could slow or stall the consolidation of [Tehran-backed] militia power in Iraq." Ariane Tabatabai assesses that although Soleimani "was perhaps unparalleled in his ability to advance Iranian national interests as viewed by the regime," the Quds Force is "unlikely to change its modus operandi significantly and that the new Quds Force commander, Esmail Qarani, is likely to ensure a smooth transition."

In our second feature article, Haroro Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter—the authors of the soon-to-be-published book *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement*—“present three frames through which to understand the [Islamic State] movement's ability to navigate through spectacular highs and crippling lows.”

Our interview is with Rob Saale, who between 2017 and 2019 was the director of the U.S. Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, an interagency group housed at the FBI. Gina Vale examines a collection of 24 internal Islamic State documents obtained by U.S. military forces operating in Iraq and Syria and declassified through the Combating Terrorism Center's Harmony Program. She writes that the documents indicate “the Islamic State sought to translate citizens' compliance with pious ideals into long-term acceptance of the group's ideological legitimacy and governing authority.” The full collection of documents, including English translation, is now available on the CTC's website.

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Cover: Iraqi militiamen carry a picture of Soleimani (left) and al-Muhandis during the funeral of Iran's top general Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of Iran-backed militias in Iraq known as the Popular Mobilization Forces, in Baghdad, Iraq, on January 4, 2020. (Nasser Nasser/AP Photo)

Soleimani Is Dead: The Road Ahead for Iranian-Backed Militias in Iraq

By Michael Knights

The killing by U.S. airstrike of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis struck right at the core of the Iranian and militia projects in Iraq, and it occurred after months of anti-government protests had already shaken the militia's towering control of the Iraqi state. Before the protests, al-Muhandis and the Iran-backed militias were at the zenith of their power. They controlled the prime minister's office, dominated any security portfolios they selected, and were positioned to divert value from many major economic ventures to Iraqi militias, Iran's Revolutionary Guard, and Lebanese Hezbollah. This unnatural level of consolidation was built and sustained by Soleimani and al-Muhandis. Their removal, in combination with resistance from protestors, religious leaders, and the international community, could slow or stall the consolidation of militia power in Iraq. Iran's most favored allies have been clearly defined in the twin crises: Badr, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Kata'ib Sayyed al-Shuhada, Saraya Talia al-Khurasani, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. They failed to defeat the Sadrist-backed protests, and they look unlikely to evict U.S. forces from Iraq. The Revolutionary Guard will likely face an uphill struggle to prevent greater disharmony and fragmentation in the militia ranks, where the likely focus will be a race for positions, resources, and self-preservation.

In August 2019, this author noted that the 60,000-strong Iran-backed militias in Iraq had achieved unprecedented size and influence, and warned that their operational commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and the movement he formed, Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), were "the central nervous system of IRGC-QF (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force) influence in Iraq."¹ Today, al-Muhandis is dead, killed along with his IRGC-QF sponsor Qassem Soleimani in a U.S. airstrike on January 3, 2020. Days beforehand, five Kata'ib Hezbollah sites were also targeted by the United States, killing 25 KH members and wounding over 50.²

This article will ask what happens next to the effort by IRGC-QF and Iran-backed militias in Iraq now that their "central nervous system" has been severely disrupted. Even before the killing of

Soleimani and al-Muhandis, the latest three months have been very bruising for the militias, both in terms of popular and elite dismay at their counter-protestor actions and as a result of U.S. airstrikes. Will such militias rally and cooperate under new leadership, or will they fragment in disarray? In what manner will they confront the U.S. presence in Iraq and seek to protect their political, military, and economic assets? The first two sections outline what was learned about the Iran-backed militias as they organized the Iraqi state's reaction to major protests. Thereafter, the piece looks at the militias' decision to risk a showdown with the United States, leading to the deaths of key militia leaders. The internal relations repercussions for IRGC-QF and Iran-backed militias are next discussed in turn, and the piece ends with an assessment of what may be the next steps for militias as they seek to recover.

The interface between IRGC-QF, militias, and Iraqi political and business elites is a murky one, understood quite clearly by Iraqi insiders but with very little detailed coverage in open sources. In order to build a solid picture of the manner in which the militias have operated, the author undertook two interlinked research processes in the 2018-2020 period. First, the author visited Iraq on six occasions and interviewed over 60 major political, military, and business figures. The conversations were substantive, often up to two hours of focused discussion purely on Iranian influence and militia topics. The interviewees included very senior politicians, many of whom were Shi'a leaders with strong ties to IRGC-QF. Many were interviewed multiple times, with very detailed notes taken. All the interviews were undertaken on deep background due to the severe physical security threat posed by militias, and great care was taken, and is needed in the future, to ensure that such individuals are not exposed to intimidation for cooperating with researchers.^a Alongside face-to-face interviews, the author also undertook communications with Iraqi interviewees using secure messaging applications, amounting to hundreds of specific information requests to verify data and multi-source points of detail. The author used his 16-year track record of interviewing Iraqis to assess information and did his best to verify and triangulate all information contained in this article.

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a Iran-backed militias pay close attention to what is written about them and who says it and who interviewers meet. Answering a question about Western think-tanks, al-Muhandis noted on January 13, 2019, "They have a writer, Michael Knights, who is an expert who has seen some of my friends but that I have not seen yet. He has great expertise and is truly very specific. He has very specific and exceptional information." See "The seminar of the Union of Strategic Experts welcomes Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis to discuss security challenges," PMF, war media team, via YouTube, January 15, 2019.

September 2019: Pro-Tehran Militia Dominance in Iraq

This author published the *CTC Sentinel* article “Iran’s Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups” in late August 2019, just as the Iran-backed militias in Iraq achieved the zenith of their power.³ As the author’s interviews with senior political leaders in Baghdad showed, the Iraqi Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) was dominated by the twinned influence of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, with a pro-IRGC-QF official, Abu Jihad (Mohammed al-Hashemi), installed as the prime minister’s chief of staff.⁴ IRGC-QF-vetted Iraqi militiamen were installed as security and office workers at the PMO.⁵ Damagingly, al-Muhandis had effectively sown distrust between Prime Minister Adel Abd’al-Mahdi and his non-militia security forces, creating concern that the Counter-Terrorism Service and the Iraqi National Intelligence Service were plotting against the prime minister.⁶ When Iran-backed militias assisted IRGC-QF in firing drones at a Saudi Arabian oil pipeline from Iraq on May 14, 2019,⁷ the government took al-Muhandis’ word that the incident never happened.⁸ Based on a significant number of interviews and many dozens of conversations, the author has sensed that al-Muhandis became the embodiment and the central node of IRGC-QF influence in Iraq in 2019. In the author’s view, the best way to express the preeminent position that al-Muhandis achieved by the time of his death is that he was widely perceived within Iraq’s political elite to be Iran’s military governor of Iraq, controlling a puppet civilian government at its head.

The Iran-backed militias were also dominant in business affairs, directly benefitting themselves, Iranian interests, and Lebanese Hezbollah. U.S.-designated terrorist Shibl al-Zaydi, founder of Kata’ib al-Imam Ali (Popular Mobilization Forces brigade 40),⁹ has become one of the richest men in Iraq, with a sprawling business empire and a controlling interest over the Ministry of Communications.¹⁰ Major militia leaders leveraged their muscle to build large real estate portfolios.¹¹ Lebanese Hezbollah piggybacked on this economic dominance to becoming involved in numerous Iraqi contract awards¹² through the partnership between Iran-allied Iraqi politicians and Specially Designated Global Terrorists Mohammed al-Kawtharani¹³ and Adnan Hussein Kawtharani.¹⁴ At least four private banks run by militia-controlled businessmen continue to use Central Bank of Iraq dollar auctions to secure hard currency for Iran.¹⁵ The QiCard payment system used to pay government salaries^b was penetrated by militias, who inserted fake employees into the electronic system and skimmed their allocated salaries in schemes worth tens of millions of dollars each month.¹⁶ Militias control small oilfields such as Najma, Qayyarah, Pulkhana, and Alas.¹⁷ Militia-controlled logistics and shipping companies in Basra provide cover for the smuggling of sanctioned Iranian crude (rebadged as Iraqi crude after being loaded in Iran).¹⁸ At ports and free trade zones, the militias export Iraqi crude oil and oil products stolen from local industries, dominate customs evasion, and levy

b QiCard is a popular debit card in Iraq that many government departments now use to directly deposit electronic payments to their employees, as opposed to the cash payment systems used until 2019. Employees must show their government ID to cash out, but there is still potential for corruption if fictional employees are created and loaded into the payroll system, which is exactly what has occurred across multiple militia-controlled ministries. The cards are taken to banks where militia members use fake ID linked to the card to withdraw the cash.

taxes for goods coming into the country.¹⁹ Iran-backed Badr organization’s former head of intelligence Ali Taqqi took over as director of Baghdad International Airport,²⁰ and transferred the baggage handling contract to a front company controlled by U.S.-designated terrorist movement Kata’ib Hezbollah.²¹

By September 2019, the Iran-backed militias also had curtailed the U.S.-led coalition’s effectiveness in helping Iraq fight the Islamic State and professionalizing the Iraqi security forces.²² From March 2019 onward, in response to al-Muhandis’ instructions, the chairman of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Falah al-Fayyadh cut off the coalition’s access to predominately Sunni tribal mobilization forces, who had previously been an important source of intelligence and operational partnership in Islamic State redoubts like Nineveh and Anbar.²³ From about the same time, Badr took over the Iraqi Civil Aviation Authority²⁴ and began closing airspace to coalition surveillance flights.²⁵ Iraqi army commanders reported growing pressure to exclude U.S. advisors from counterinsurgency operations.^d A mounting series of non-lethal militia rocket strikes on coalition bases forced the coalition into a less active, more protective posture by September 2019.²⁶ Meanwhile, Iran-backed militias used their control of the PMO to remove some of Iraq’s most seasoned soldiers, including Iraq’s most admired combat commander, Counter Terrorism Command’s Staff Lieutenant General Abd’al-Wahab al-Saadi.²⁷ Considering the balance of power in Iraq, this author assesses that the conventional military was likely to face a future of declining budget share and declining influence compared to al-Muhandis’ politically dominant, Iran-backed PMF.

The October 2019 Crackdown by Militias

As the Iran-backed militias reached the zenith of their domestic power, they faced their first major tests as the new operators of the Iraqi state—a test that they disastrously flunked. In late September and early October 2019, the militias stepped forward to lead the security forces in handling protests by a wide cross-section of Iranian society.²⁸ The contours of the militia hierarchy were visible in the crisis cell that met in villas in the upscale Jadriya neighborhood of Baghdad and within the International Zone.²⁹ The meetings were led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, supported by his putative boss Falah al-Fayyadh and the PMO’s Abu Jihad.³⁰ Next in line of seniority was Abu Muntadher al-Husseini (birth name: Tahseen Abid Mutar al-Abboudi), a Badr veteran, former PMF chief of operations, and current advisor for PMF affairs to the PMO.³¹ Badr also sent Abu Turab al-Husseini (birth name: Thamir Mohammed Ismail), a veteran militiaman and now head of the Minister of Interior’s Rapid Response Division (also known as the Emergency Response Division).³²

Aside from Badr, three Iran-backed militias were prominent in the sniper attacks and repression targeted on protesters. The first was Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH, comprising PMF brigades 41, 42, and

c Badr organization was originally created as a formation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps during the Iran-Iraq War. For open source profiles of Badr, see Michael Knights, “Iraq’s Bekaa Valley,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 16, 2015. See also Susannah George, “Breaking Badr,” *Foreign Policy*, November 6, 2014.

d In some cases, Iraqi general officers were ordered to remove coalition forces from operations by militia commanders with the rank of captain or major. Author interviews, multiple coalition officers, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).



Mourners march during the funeral of Iran's top general Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of Iran-backed militias in Iraq known as the Popular Mobilization Forces, in Baghdad, Iraq, on January 4, 2020. (Nasser Nasser/AP Photo)

43, plus 15 MPs in parliament),³³ represented by Qais al-Khazali, who had been previously toeing a cautious line in the summer³⁴ as his advocates in the Iraqi government lobbied to keep him from being targeted with U.S. sanctions.³⁵ Toward late summer, al-Khazali became more outspoken against the United States and his militias seemed to begin to rocket U.S. bases in their areas of control (i.e., Taji³⁶ and Balad³⁷). In October 2019, al-Khazali chose to align his movement with the anti-protest crackdown,³⁸ one of a number of rhetorical and operational indicators that AAH had decided in the summer to sail closer to IRGC-QF and al-Muhandis, even at the risk of receiving a sanctions designation by the United States.

A second major militia commander present in the crisis cell was Abu Ala al-Walal (birth name: Hashim Bunyan al-Siraji), commander of the Iran-backed militia Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (PMF Brigade 14).³⁹ The final militia commander present was Hamid al-Jazayeri, commander of Saraya Talia al-Khurasani (PMF brigade 18).⁴⁰ Notable by their absence in the crisis cell were some other militias that might have been expected to be drawn into the

effort, such as Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali (PMF brigade 40), Kata'ib Jund al-Imam (PMF brigade 6), and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (PMF brigade 12), to name a few.⁴¹ If such militias fed into counter-protest activities, they were curiously not represented at leadership level.

Al-Muhandis' own personal cadre took care of much of the operational management of the crackdown on protestors, with day-to-day operations led by Abu Zainab al-Lami (birth name: Hussein Falah al-Lami), the head of the Central Security Division (CSD) of the PMF.⁴² Lami relied upon two of his assistants, Abu Baqir (the CSD's director for the Rusafa district of Baghdad, where the Tahrir Square protest site was located) and Haji Ghaliab (CSD head of interrogations), who helped manage the mass detentions.⁴³ Abu Iman al-Bahali, the head of the PMF Intelligence Directorate, collocated hit lists of civil society activists and journalists in partnership with IRGC-QF cyber-intelligence officials and a 19-person Baghdad-based cell of Lebanese Hezbollah media operatives.⁴³ On-the-ground tactical leadership in Baghdad was provided by Hamid al-Jazayeri, commander of Saraya Talia al-Khurasani, who was highly visible in ordering around Iraqi security forces in the

e Throughout 2019, there was a concerted Iraqi elite effort to hold off U.S. sanctioning of al-Khazali, part of a putative effort to splinter al-Khazali away from the Iran-backed camp. The author had numerous conversations with the highest-ranked Iraqi leaders on this exact issue.

f Rocket attacks on Balad involved controversial arrests of AAH members, at exactly the same time Qais al-Khazali was privately denying their involvement. The U.S. government, according to the author's multiple U.S. government interviews, strongly attributed the attacks to AAH.

g Other Iran-backed militias that might have expected to be been involved, but which were absent, include Harakat al-Abdal (PMF brigade 39), Saraya al-Jihad (PMF brigade 17), Liwa al-Tafuf (brigade 13), Liwa al-Muntadher (brigade 7), Ansar Allah al-Tawfiya (brigade 19), Saraya Ansar al-Aqeeda (brigade 28), Kata'ib Ansar al-Hujja (brigade 29), Quwwat al-Shahid al-Sadr al-Awwal (brigade 25), Quwwat al-Shahid al-Sadr (brigade 35), and Kata'ib al-Tayyar al-Risali (brigade 31).

International Zone.⁴⁴ Ali al-Yaseri, another senior commander of Saraya Talia al-Khurasani, held down protests in southern Baghdad.⁴⁵ AAH seemed to focus on Maysan, and Badr handled the deep south, Basra and Dhi Qar.⁴⁶

The counter-protest crackdown was not the quick and easy operation that al-Muhandis and the Iran-backed militias had anticipated. The clashes drew the militias into intense fighting with protestors, followers of Moqtada al-Sadr, and tribal forces.⁴⁷ Of interest, the samurai sword-wielding Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali celebrity fighter Abu Azrael^h was badly wounded by protesters in Baghdad,⁴⁸ though it is unknown whether Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali openly took part in suppression activities. New U.S. Global Magnitsky sanctionsⁱ were imposed on Qais al-Khazali, his brother Laith al-Khazali (who led the AAH actions on the ground), and Abu Zainab al-Lami.⁴⁹ IRGC-QF and militia control of the PMO, carefully crafted over the prior year, began to unravel in the face of strong domestic criticism by the Shi'a religious leadership, Sadrist,^j and protestors, plus international condemnation.⁵⁰ Prime Minister Adel Abd'al-Mahdi's resignation was accepted by parliament on December 1, 2019.⁵¹ Even if Abd'al-Mahdi's resignation gets rescinded, he is unlikely to have the same authority as before the protests.

Militias Choose to Engage the United States

Against this backdrop, al-Muhandis' militias also appear to have decided to intensify their harassment of coalition bases in Iraq, even at the risk of killing international personnel, a line they had been careful not to cross until November 2019.^k Within the inner circles of the Iraqi and U.S. governments, it was the understanding that IRGC-QF (working through al-Muhandis) had placed a prohibition on attacks likely to kill U.S. forces^l in response to U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's warning on May 7, 2019, that retaliation would strike Iranian interests in Iraq.⁵² In the first 10 months of 2019, 32 attacks were undertaken by Iran-backed militias on U.S. bases but no U.S. casualties were caused due to the rocket salvos being limited

in size (one or two 107mm rockets) and usually "aimed-to-miss."^m

Something seems to have changed in militia calculations from November 2019 onward, perhaps related to the seriousness of the political crisis in Iraq, Lebanon, and increasingly within Iran itself.ⁿ According to the author's interviews with Iraqi officials of cabinet level and below, the prevalent impression with the government is that Iranian and Iraqi militia leaders genuinely viewed the protests as a foreign plot,^{53 o} and they may have been trying to shock the United States into ceasing some imagined support for the demonstrations. From November 2019 onward, Iran-backed militia attacks on U.S. bases became more reckless, including a heavy rocket attack (involving at least 17 munitions) on coalition forces at Qayyarah West airbase on November 7⁵⁴ and later two attacks on coalition forces in Baghdad on December 9 and 11, 2019, that (unusually) used large 240mm rockets.⁵⁵ On December 27, 2019, another large 15-rocket salvo killed a U.S. contractor at K-1 base in Kirkuk.⁵⁶ U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff General Mark Milley announced that the attack was assessed as having been a deliberate effort to kill Americans.⁵⁷

On December 29, 2019, the United States unleashed what was likely a pre-vetted "response option" of airstrikes against five Kata'ib Hezbollah sites, including three in Iraq's Anbar province and two in adjacent areas of Syria.⁵⁸ The sites appear to have been sites that Kata'ib Hezbollah used for the transfer of missile or rocket forces to Syria, located along known smuggling routes west of the formal border crossing points in Al-Qaim.^{59 p} (On August 25, 2019, an apparent Israeli airstrike hit vehicles moving between two of the sites targeted on December 29, 2019, underlining the intense focus on the chain of bases.⁶⁰) Twenty-five Kata'ib Hezbollah members were killed and over 50 wounded on December 29, 2019, with the dead including four mid-level leaders.⁶¹ This was the heaviest single-day casualties taken by Kata'ib Hezbollah throughout its decade-plus existence.^q

On December 31, 2019, the Iran-backed militias mounted a show of force at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, where nearly all the major

h Abu Azrael is irresistible 'clickbait' for today's electronic media. For example, see "The 'Archangel of Death' fighting Islamic State," BBC, March 18, 2015.

i The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act is a U.S. law that enables the U.S. government to target perpetrators of serious human rights abuses and corruption. The Global Magnitsky Act prevents entry to the United States, complicates visa issuance by other countries, and may be flagged by automated screening systems at airlines. See "Frequently Asked Questions, Global Magnitsky Sanctions," U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 21, 2017.

j The term "Sadrist" nowadays refers to the followers of Moqtada al-Sadr, the populist Shi'a Iraqi leader.

k Until November 2019, militias seemed to deliberately avoid killing Americans. "Aim to miss" dynamics are discussed in Michael Knights, "Washington Should Reverse Its Retreat in Basra," *PolicyWatch* 3025, October 2, 2018. Both the U.S. Embassy complex in Baghdad and the U.S. Consulate in Basra are large enough that highly experienced militia rocketeers do not have to entirely miss these facilities unless they intend to do so.

l The author's interviews repeatedly turned up unprompted mention of an order passed by IRGC-QF to seek approval before taking actions that would kill Americans. Author interviews, multiple coalition officers and Iraqi contacts, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

m The author maintains a count of rocket attacks on U.S. bases, including detailing of munitions used and the size of salvos. This dataset uses open source and interviews with multiple Iraqi and U.S. contacts (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

n This is the author's supposition. In the summer and early fall of 2019, Iran and her proxies were careful not to kill Americans. The only proximate change in local conditions between the non-lethal and lethal phases of rocket attacks on U.S. bases was the worsening of demonstrations and their spread to Iran.

o The author undertook a wide sampling of views to ensure a good degree of confidence that militias really did view the protests as foreign backed. To give an open source reference, as early as three days into protests, just as the Iran-backed security cell activated, a member of the PMO publicly speculated on the involvement of "the electronic army of the US embassy" in the protests. See Suadad al-Salhy, "Third person dies as protests continue in Baghdad," Arab News, October 4, 2019.

p During the pre-2011 period, the author spent time on the ground in the exact area of the strikes. The ranches in this area are traditional smuggler staging bases that appear to have been taken over by Kata'ib Hezbollah and Liwa al-Tafuf (brigade 13). For detail on their operations in Anbar, see Michael Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups," *CTC Sentinel* 12:7 (2019): pp. 5-6.

q The author has been tracking Kata'ib Hezbollah operations since 2008. Neither the United States pre-2011, nor the Islamic State, nor Israeli strikes seem to have previously caused more than a handful of Kata'ib Hezbollah casualties in single battles or strikes.

Iran-backed militia leaders were present⁶²—for the last time ever, as it turned out. Secretary Pompeo identified al-Muhandis, al-Khazali, al-Fayyadh, and Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri as organizers of the attack on the embassy.⁶³ On January 2, 2020, U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper warned of pre-emptive U.S. strikes on Iranian and Iran-backed targets if the United States was again threatened.⁶⁴ On January 3, 2020, the U.S. government claims to have reacted to an ongoing stream of threat warnings, performing the drone strike⁶⁵ at Baghdad International Airport that killed Soleimani, al-Muhandis, and a number of IRGC-QF staff officers and PMF functionaries.⁶⁶ Also on January 3, the U.S. State Department designated AAH as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and designated Qais al-Khazali and Laith al-Khazali as Specially Designated Global Terrorists.⁶⁷ In a 24-hour period, some of the biggest policy quandaries facing the United States on IRGC-QF and Iraqi militia issues were suddenly resolved: after years of debating and hand-wringing, Soleimani and al-Muhandis were dead^r and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and its leaders were sanctioned as terrorists.^s Beyond Washington, the reverberations were even more consequential, upending the balance of power among Iran-backed militias and between Iran-backed militias and other political factions.

Ripple Effects in Iraq's Militia Scene

The simultaneous killing of the two giants of the Iraqi militia scene—Soleimani and al-Muhandis—was clearly deeply shocking to other militia leaders. As has been the case when faced with prior calamities, such as the successful counter-militia operations by U.S. and Iraqi military forces in 2008,⁶⁸ some key leaders fled to Iran. Abu Ala al-Walai of Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Akram Kaabi of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba were photographed⁶⁹ with the new IRGC-QF commander, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani.⁷⁰ A range of militia leaders also met Moqtada al-Sadr and his military commanders^t in Qom, Iran, including Akram Kaabi, Abu Ala al-

Walai, Laith al-Khazali, and Sheikh Sami Massoudi (deputy Hajj and Umrah commissioner and Iraqi aide to Qassem Soleimani).⁷¹ Qais al-Khazali mostly kept a low profile and made no public appearances in the weeks following the January 3, 2020, airstrike.⁷² Perhaps underlining his desire to focus on business and distance himself from militia affairs, Shibl al-Zaydi was in Lebanon when the current crisis broke in late December 2019, and he only returned to Iraq for al-Muhandis' funeral and did not appear in any photographs at either the funeral or subsequently at the militia huddle in Iran.^{73 u}

The loss of both Soleimani and al-Muhandis at the same moment will cause deep and widespread disruption to the militia system in Iraq. The two men worked as a unit, one with day-to-day ground access and the other as the ultimate tie-breaker if al-Muhandis faced stubborn opposition. No Iraqi leader can now count on Soleimani's efficient and decisive support, backed all the way up to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.⁷⁴ Though IRGC-QF has powerful residual relationships in Iraq—run by Soleimani's informal deputies such as Iranian ambassador to Baghdad Iraj Masjedi^{75 v} and Colonel Haj Ali Iqbalpour (the long-standing Kirkuk area liaison⁷⁶)—no one has the unique combination of senior backing, Iraqi track record, and personal characteristics that Soleimani brought to his godfathering of the Iraqi militias. The new IRGC-QF commander, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani, knew Soleimani's playbook well, but he is less charismatic, a stranger to Iraqis, lacking in Arabic, and more knowledgeable about Iran's eastern front.⁷⁷ Iranian ambassador to Baghdad Iraj Masjedi, also an IRGC-QF veteran, will be the stop gap, and may gamble that he has significant freedom of movement due to his diplomatic immunity. A potential reinforcement could be Abdul Reza Shahlai, IRGC-QF's "man in Yemen" who has prior experience with Iraq's militias.⁷⁸ Also likely to take up some of Soleimani's duties in Iraq is General Muhammad Hussein-Zada Hejazi, whose promotion to IRGC-QF deputy commander was announced on January 20, 2020.⁷⁹ Hejazi has more experience in the Arab world, specifically Lebanon, than Qaani, and was designated by the United States for proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in 2007.⁸⁰

Nor does IRGC-QF have a ready-made replacement main interlocutor of similar quality in the Iraqi militias. Al-Muhandis was a unique individual and cannot be easily replaced. His stature far outweighed any other single militia or political leader, in part due to the strong backing he received from Soleimani but also due to his personal characteristics and history.⁸¹ Al-Muhandis was much more effective, intelligent, and intimidating than his closest contemporary, his old Badr subordinate Hadi al-Ameri.⁸² Al-Muhandis' seniority was grudgingly recognized by veteran fighters like Abu Muntadher al-Husseini, Abu Turab al-Husseini, and Abu Mustapha al-Sheibani, and respected by young guns like Abu Ala al-Walai,

r Lethal targeting of both Soleimani and al-Muhandis was actively considered for over a decade before they were killed, with a number of spurned opportunities. For a look at one exercise in which the costs and benefits were reviewed, see Michael Knights, "How Soleimani's Killing Could Make a Stronger Iraq," *Politico*, January 5, 2020. See also Carol E. Lee and Courtney Kube, "Trump authorized Soleimani's killing 7 months ago, with conditions," *NBC News*, January 13, 2020.

s AAH has long been a hotly debated special case. It was not designated as a terrorist movement in 2007-2011, despite numerous anti-U.S. actions, most notoriously the killing of five U.S. soldiers in the January 2007 "Karbala Raid." Until the present time, many observers have called for the sanctioning of AAH and its leaders. In 2019, three U.S. congressional bills were in process to get AAH sanctioned: U.S. House of Representatives, H.R.361 - Iranian Proxies Terrorist Sanctions Act of 2019, U.S. House of Representatives, H.R.571, Preventing Destabilization of Iraq Act of 2019; and U.S. House of Representatives, H.R.5276 - Iraq Human Rights and Accountability Act of 2019. For a discussion of the key issues, see Michael Knights and Frzand Sherko, "Can Asaib Ahl al-Haq Join the Political Mainstream?" *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 14, 2019. Eventually, Qais al-Khazali and Laith al-Khazali were sanctioned under Global Magnitsky for human rights abuses ("Treasury Sanctions Iran-Backed Militia Leaders Who Killed Innocent Demonstrators in Iraq," U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 6, 2019). Only on January 3, 2020, did they—and their movement—receive full designation as terrorists.

t Moqtada al-Sadr was accompanied by Saraya Salam commanders Abu Dua al-Issawi (a special advisor for security affairs) and Sayyid Yasir (personal bodyguard and aide). See Will Fulton, "Leaders of 'Iraqi resistance groups' met in Qom yesterday to discuss events in Iraq and their path forward" *Twitter*, January 14, 2020.

u Shibl al-Zaydi was reported by two of the author's contacts to have attended al-Muhandis' funeral.

v Masjedi has handled a lot of stakeholder engagement with provincial governors and Sunni groups, but like al-Muhandis, he always previously had the figure of Soleimani standing behind him, bringing added authority, Iraq knowledge, and senior leader relationships. For an example of Masjedi's meetings, see Ahmad Majidiyar, "Tehran's envoy to Baghdad meets Iraqi leaders in run-up to parliamentary vote," *Middle East Institute*, April 6, 2018.

Akram Kaabi, and the Sadrist leaders.^{83 w} Neither Hadi al-Ameri nor Moqtada al-Sadr is skilled enough, feared enough, or well-respected enough to marshal the 50-plus factions of the PMF.⁸⁴

The consolidation plan being designed by al-Muhandis and Abu Jihad was built around the unique Soleimani-Muhandis powerbase and may now grid to a halt.⁸⁵ As the author's August 2019 *CTC Sentinel* article⁸⁶ explored, al-Muhandis had centralized the key directorates of the PMF—finance, administration, internal security, intelligence, religious affairs, and special weapons—under his own loyalists. His consolidation process within the PMF was heading toward success at the time of his death, with a budget exceeding \$2.1 billion and few obstacles to further expansion under his leadership, backed by Soleimani.⁸⁷ Now this harnessing and focusing of militia power is likely to give way to greater disharmony and disorder. There is no easy replacement for al-Muhandis and no Soleimani to call to designate a successor and enforce his judgment.⁸⁸

IRGC-QF's apparent reaching out to Moqtada al-Sadr in the aftermath of Soleimani's death⁸⁹ was a predictable step for an organization whose Plan A now lays in tatters. Overinvestment in Soleimani and his Iraqi clone al-Muhandis has left IRGC-QF and the PMF in disarray, perhaps temporarily or perhaps for a longer period. On paper, the incorporation of al-Sadr into a resistance front seems logical. He has steadfastly refused to meet with U.S. officials and has banned his followers from doing so, and he has consistently sought the removal of foreign forces from Iraq.⁹⁰ Less promisingly for IRGC-QF, al-Sadr is unpredictable, only partially in control of his followers, and notoriously difficult to work with.^{91 x} Al-Sadr may one day seek an informal version of the Iran-style *velayat-e faqih* (religious jurisprudence) system in Iraq, but under his own leadership,⁹² definitely not that of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei or Lebanese Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah.^y Al-Sadr views Iran-backed leaders such as Hadi al-Ameri as rivals,^{93 z} and others (such as Nouri al-Maliki and Qais al-Khazali) as bitter foes, an enmity that is entirely mutual.^{94 aa} Many protestors killed since October 2019 by Iran-backed militias were either young Sadrists within the protests or the relatives of Sadrists from east Baghdad, meaning that a lot of Sadrist blood has very recently been spilled by

w Al-Muhandis' closeness to Soleimani gave him added *wasta* (influence), but it was arguably earned, not only by al-Muhandis' efficiency and also long service alongside Soleimani and other IRGC-QF officers. Based on the author's interviews with Iraqi leaders in 2019, al-Muhandis' seniority was grudgingly recognized by Iraqi militia leaders. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts in 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

x Moqtada al-Sadr has proven to be a flighty and difficult partner, leaving and joining coalitions at a whim.

y Rumors flew in January 2020 that Hassan Nasrallah might be given some role in crafting cohesion between Iraqi militias. For a good rendition of this somewhat unlikely story, see Suadad al-Salhy, "Iran tasked Nasrallah with uniting Iraqi proxies after Soleimani's death," *Middle East Eye*, January 14, 2020. Most likely, Nasrallah's involvement would knock Moqtada al-Sadr out of any nascent Iraqi 'resistance front' due to their rivalry.

z Moqtada al-Sadr has a long history of competing with Badr and Hadi al-Ameri particularly.

aa Moqtada al-Sadr fought al-Maliki in the military operations of 2008 and has never forgiven his defeat then. Al-Khazali is a lifelong rival of Moqtada's, having challenged Moqtada for control of Moqtada's father's organization, the Office of the Martyr Sadr.

Iran's militia allies in Iraq.^{ab}

Militia Next Steps in Iraq

The above review of events since last summer is intended to illustrate that a series of very challenging circumstances befell al-Muhandis' network of Iran-backed militias just as they reached the apex of their control of the Iraqi state. In the view of the author, based on years of close observation of Iraqi leadership dynamics, with Soleimani at his back, al-Muhandis had become the single most important man in Iraq. Yet now Iran's military governor of Iraq is suddenly gone forever, and there is no apparent succession plan.

For the reasons outlined in the previous section, it may take some years for the power balance within the PMF to settle. As the author's August 2019 *CTC Sentinel* article described in detail, the command structure of the Iran-backed militias was extraordinarily complex and hard to manage at the best of times.⁹⁵ Even the very capable al-Muhandis with Soleimani at his back had a full-time job keeping the militias partially in line. There is strong potential for infighting.⁹⁶ Al-Muhandis had begun to splinter and cannibalize his alma mater, the Badr movement, moving his preferred factions (Kata'ib Hezbollah and Kata'ib al-Imam Ali) into historic Badr territories such as Kirkuk, Tuz Khurmatu, Tal Afar, and Diyala.⁹⁷ Now Badr might try to reclaim its pole position as the biggest militia in Iraq, reeling back in recalcitrant Turkoman militia leaders like Abu Ridha Yilmaz al-Najjar, the highest profile example of a breakaway to al-Muhandis.⁹⁸ Alternately, Hadi al-Ameri's rivals (Abu Muntadher, Abu Turab, and others) might continue the slow break-up of Badr into uncooperative camps.⁹⁹

Of the smaller militias, Kata'ib Hezbollah is likely to stay the closest to IRGC-QF and will likely be its most dependable proxy. Much more needs to be done to research the leadership and structure of Kata'ib Hezbollah, about which very little detail has been written. The events since October 2019 have shown Abu Ala al-Walail of Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Akram Kaabi of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba to be preferred proxies. Large groups like Kata'ib al-Imam Ali and AAH, each of which has a nominal political wing^{ac} (including 15 AAH parliamentarians),¹⁰⁰ are in a tough position: they are clearly in the U.S. crosshairs and could be subjected to kinetic targeting if they threaten U.S. persons,^{ad} and they have much to lose if sanctions are energetically implemented against their business networks. It may be that IRGC-QF and Lebanese

ab Neither Moqtada al-Sadr's militias nor Sadrists within the protest movement were defeated in the street battles since October 2019, and they have much cause for grievance against the Iran-backed militias. See Phillip Smyth, "Iran Is Losing Iraq's Tribes," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 4, 2019.

ac Kata'ib al-Imam Ali has a nominal political wing called Harakat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah. See Matthew Levitt and Phillip Smyth, "Kataib al-Imam Ali: Portrait of an Iraqi Shiite Militant Group Fighting ISIS," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 5, 2015.

ad U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper noted on January 2, 2020: "There are some indications out there that they may be planning additional attacks." He added, "if we get word of attacks, we will take preemptive action as well to protect American forces, protect American lives. The game has changed." In combination with the Soleimani and al-Muhandis strike, fear of leadership targeting is likely to be high within militias. See Wesley Morgan, "The game has changed": Defense secretary warns of preemptive strikes on Iranian group," *Politico*, January 2, 2020.

Hezbollah partners choose to leave such elements with the latitude to gradually distance themselves from the anti-U.S. “resistance” factions.¹⁰¹ Alternately, as AAH is now sanctioned by the United States, they may go ‘all in’ with the resistance bloc. One indication of this was given on January 22, 2019, when al-Khazali called for a new uprising against the United States in the 100th year after the 1920 Iraqi revolution against the British.¹⁰²

Former parliamentarian al-Muhandis was personally very active in ‘whipping’ the Iraqi parliament on key votes, though he never did succeed in passing legislation to remove U.S. forces, a likely indicator of the difficulty of forcing consensus on this issue.¹⁰³ ^{ae} The January 7, 2020, parliamentary vote to remove foreign forces showed that Iran-backed militias still lack the ability to construct parliamentary majorities in the post-Soleimani and post-Muhandis period. In a 329-seat parliament, requiring 165 seats to reach quorum, the anti-U.S. bloc could only muster 130 MPs into the parliamentary chamber, despite having attempted physical threats against many of the Kurdish, Sunni, and other MPs who refused to attend.¹⁰⁴ Evidently missing was Soleimani and al-Muhandis’ ability to make up for the shortfall in raw numbers by policing unity within the Shi`a ranks, strong-arming Sunnis overawed by al-Muhandis’ toughness, and messaging the Kurds through Soleimani. This underlines the combined impact of killing both men on January 3; had either survived, the parliamentary vote might have gone differently.

Getting U.S. forces removed from Iraq by parliamentary action will likely continue to prove difficult in the future. The alternative way of removing foreign forces—striking back hard at U.S. forces—could trigger powerful new blows on militia leaders in Iraq and Syria. More likely, the militias will pepper U.S. bases with a desultory rain of non-lethal “aim to miss” rocket attacks and perhaps even roadside bombings of logistics convoys.^{af} Even groups like Kata’ib Hezbollah may hesitate to needlessly draw retaliation, having suffered painful strikes from Israel and the United States in the last six months. Preservation of strength may be the priority for Iran-backed militias in all scenarios short of a general war between

Iran and the United States.

The powerful political, economic, and military machine that crested in September 2019 will not disappear overnight and need not be shattered by the deaths of its two architects. Conscious and sustained effort by rival forces will be needed to do further, irreparable damage to the Iran-backed militias in Iraq. The bench of highly capable militia leaders is quite shallow. It can be confidently predicted that the militias will not cede their recent level of control without a fight. As outlined in the author’s prior August 2019 *CTC Sentinel* article, a range of Iran-backed militias have carved out expeditionary colonies in northern and western Iraq, far from their primarily southern Iraqi recruiting grounds, and they will not surrender them easily.¹⁰⁵

Whether under a weakened Prime Minister Abd’al-Mahdi or a new leader, al-Muhandis’ complete control of the PMO is unlikely to be replicated due to a lack of similarly skilled militia politicians. Protestors may prove difficult for the militias to openly drive from the protest sites due to ongoing Sadrist, religious establishment and international vigilance. Assassinations against journalists, civil society organizers, activists, and pro-Western personalities can be expected to increase,¹⁰⁶ particularly if Iraq does head toward early elections as the Sadrists and other factions are pushing for.¹⁰⁷ ^{ag} In those elections, the Iran-backed groups like Badr and AAH may be very vulnerable to electoral diminishment due to the well-publicized role they played in protestor deaths.¹⁰⁸ These factors may lead the militias to become very violent at the local level to eliminate and intimidate opponents in specific constituencies where their candidates are competing, which may drive further resistance to them in elections. Electoral fraud, as was evident in the much-criticized 2018 elections, may also become a more important priority for threatened militias.^{ah} The militias will also focus a great deal of effort on mafia-type defense of their economic powerbases—in banking, contracting, property, oil smuggling, and currency exchanges. All of the actions described above may hasten the reduction of open militia presence in Iraq’s cities, a measure that has broad political, religious, and public support.¹⁰⁹ **CTC**

^{ae} A former parliamentarian himself, al-Muhandis personally leaned on many politicians in an effort to deliver parliamentary majorities when needed.

^{af} On August 6, 2019, an Iran-backed group detonated a sophisticated passive infrared-triggered roadside bomb against an armored oil contractor vehicle in Basra. The claymore-type, ball-bearing warhead could not penetrate the armored vehicle but sent a message. Similar devices were found around a number of foreign-operated oilfields in southern Iraq. Previously, U.S. logistical convoys were hit in Basra by small roadside bombs on July 6, 2019. For details, see Michael Knights and Alexandre Mello, “Militias Are Threatening Public Safety in Iraq,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 14, 2019.

^{ag} The next scheduled elections will take place in May 2022, but protestors and religious authorities may push for early elections in late 2020 or more likely in 2021.

^{ah} The May 2018 elections were widely received as one of the worst elections, if not the worst, in terms of vote-rigging, voter suppression, and voter intimidation. See “UN Urges Probe into Alleged Fraud in Iraq Election,” Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), May 18, 2018, and Bilal Wahab, “Recount Will Test the Integrity of Iraq’s Elections,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 11, 2018.

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- 1 Michael Knights, “Iran’s Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups,” *CTC Sentinel* 12:7 (2019).
- 2 Qassim Abdul-Zahra, “Iran-backed Iraqi militia vows revenge to US strikes,” Associated Press, December 30, 2019.
- 3 Knights, “Iran’s Expanding Militia Army in Iraq.”
- 4 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political figures, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). The author

interviewed Abu Jihad in the summer of 2019 and spoke to a range of other officials and politicians about his role and background. Abu Jihad (Mohammed al-Hashemi) is a long-term Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq politician, with historic ties to Adel Abd’al-Mahdi, Badr, and the Iran-based opposition. For an open source reference to him, see Muhammad Al-Waeli, “Is Iraq Finally Getting a Real Opposition?” 1001 Iraqi Thoughts, July 3, 2019.

- 5 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political figures, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). The author visited the PMO on a number of occasions in 2018-2019, interviewing a range of officials. These officials were able to describe how the office functioned in this term of government and how its personnel were selected. As the author has interviewed persons in every PMO since 2005, there is good background understanding to make comparative assessments of the levels of IRGC-QF influence, which peaked in 2018-2019 in the author's view.
- 6 Ibid. The author's interviews in the PMO and amongst colleagues of the premier were very explicit on these issues. Interviews with Iraqi officials outside the PMO confirmed the data that the premier had been strongly influenced in favor of a regime protection effort designed to protect his administration from U.S.-backed forces.
- 7 Isabel Coles and Dion Nissenbaum, "U.S.: Saudi Pipeline Attacks Originated From Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, June 28, 2019.
- 8 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political figures, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). Multiple interviews conducted after the May 2019 incident confirmed that Abdal-Mahdi asked al-Muhandis if the Saudi pipeline drone attacks were launched from Iraq, and that the premier accepted his denial, even when U.S. officials and investigative reporting (see Coles and Nissenbaum) suggested otherwise.
- 9 "Treasury Sanctions Key Hizballah, IRGC-QF Networks in Iraq," U.S. Department of the Treasury, November 13, 2018.
- 10 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and business figures, 2019 and 2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). The author has worked with multiple interviewees in the Iraqi political and business scene to confirm details of militia figures placed at very high level within the ministry, and of corrupt deals in the telecommunications sector designed to benefit Lebanese Hezbollah. It will be recalled that Shibl al-Zaydi was sanctioned for his support to Hezbollah networks. "Treasury Sanctions Key Hizballah, IRGC-QF Networks in Iraq."
- 11 Ibid. The author received accounts from multiple Iraqi political and business figures of the widely known domination of militia leaders in seizing high-end vacant real estate in Baghdad and also in dominating the vacant housing rental markets in liberated areas.
- 12 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political figures, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). In these interviews, the author was told that the Kawthrani brothers and other Lebanese businessmen associated with Hezbollah and Amal are very active nowadays in Iraq's business scene, with a "cut" of many large deals being directed to Lebanon. This is fertile ground for original research, investigating whether IRGC-QF may have earmarked Iraq to carry the burden of financially supporting Lebanese Hezbollah at a time of financial austerity in Iran.
- 13 "Treasury Sanctions Hizballah Leadership," U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 22, 2013.
- 14 "Treasury Sanctions Key Hizballah, IRGC-QF Networks in Iraq."
- 15 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political figures, 2019 and 2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). In these interviews, the author received multiple accounts of the ongoing Iranian efforts to secure hard currency through militia-allied bankers in Iraq. Four banks recurred multiple times in the interviews and their names and owners have been shared with U.S. agencies.
- 16 Ibid. The author is aware, through intelligence contacts, of one \$32 million per month scheme at an Iraqi ministry. Other ministries and security forces are also using QiCard and are likely to also be under pressure to allow militias to abuse the system, and the author has been told by contacts that this is the case. Iraq's pension system uses QiCard and is also open to abuse.
- 17 Ibid. Anyone who interviews Iraqi leaders understands this is an 'open secret' in Iraq. This issue is also covered in the discussion of militia areas of responsibility in Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq," pp. 6-10.
- 18 Ibid. Those who know Iraqi oil trading can readily provide lists of oil traders involved in exporting Iranian crude presented as Iraqi crude, the exact inverse of how Iraqi crude was smuggled in the 1990s while Saddam's Iraq was under sanctions. One of the only open source identification of such a trader is the United Against a Nuclear Iran (UANI) profile of Al-Iraqia Shipping Services and Oil Trading (AISSOT) owned by an Iraqi Kurdish magnate. See the UANI company profile of AISSOT at <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/company/aissot>. Another profile can be found at Iranian Regime - Frauds, Manipulations, Atrocities, Human Rights Violations, Threats (IFMAT), Connected entities with AISSOT – networks, see <https://www.ifmat.org/connected-entities-with-aissot-networks/>
- 19 Ibid. The author received multiple accounts of militias controlling port berths, free trade zones, and border-crossing points, as well as internal customs monitoring points set back from land borders. This issue is also covered in the discussion of militia areas of responsibility in Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq," pp. 6-10.
- 20 For a news item mentioning Ali Taqqi, see "CAA launches a premium passenger card service at airports," *Iraq News*, January 30, 2019.
- 21 Ibid. The author received this information via multiple contacts, and the issue of overturning the ground handling contract is now being pursued by the U.S. and U.K. governments, underlining its veracity. The author has the contract in its original Arabic form. Of interest, as soon as the U.S. and U.K. investigations began, the Iraqi government transferred control of the Civil Aviation Authority from the PMO back to its usual placement under the Ministry of Transportation, probably to distance the PMO from militia activities at the Civil Aviation Authority, in which Ali Taqqi is also the deputy director and the dominant voice, multiple interviewees confirmed.
- 22 Author interviews, multiple coalition officers, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). The author received multiple accounts of militia disruption of coalition involvement in operations.
- 23 Ibid. The author received multiple accounts of militia disruption of Falah al-Fayyadh's direct involvement in the cut-off of contact between coalition forces and tribal forces. The author also interviewed al-Fayyadh on the issue and confirmed the shut-down.
- 24 Ibid. As noted in the previous citation on the Civil Aviation Authority, multiple interviewees have explained Badr's takeover of CAA with the promotion of Badr member Ali Taqqi to the deputy directorship of CAA in early 2019, where he asserts the strongest voice.
- 25 Ibid. In March 2019, multiple U.S. government interviewees confirm, Iraq began to close airspace to coalition intelligence flights, particularly around Kata'ib Hezbollah's Jurf as-Sakr base but also in other places. After apparent Israeli airstrikes started in Iraq in July 2019, the militia-controlled CAA took additional steps to remove access. For an open source reference to this, see Suadad al-Salhy, "Iraqi government cancels permission for anti-Daesh," *Arab News*, August 16, 2019. The so-called Restricted Operating Zones requested by the Iraqi government initially included the whole of Iraq from Mosul south, which would have prevented any aerial support and was negotiated down to specific areas.
- 26 Michael Knights, "Responding to Iranian Harassment of U.S. Facilities in Iraq," *PolicyWatch* 3125, May 21, 2019.
- 27 Michael Knights and Alexandre Mello, "Reshuffling Iraqi Generals: Who Benefits?" *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 6, 2019; Michael Knights, "Helping Iraq Take Charge of Its Command-and-Control Structure," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 30, 2019.
- 28 Alissa Rubin, "'Our patience is over': Why Iraqis are protesting," *New York Times*, November 20, 2019.
- 29 Michael Knights, "Exposing and Sanctioning Human Rights Violations by Iraqi Militias," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 22, 2019. The author received multiple accounts of the locations of the crisis cell meetings, down to street addresses. As these meetings drew together high-level officials at well-known militia locations, the locations are quite widely known among Iraqi politicians.
- 30 Ibid. This piece was based on the author's interviews with multiple Iraqi political contacts in 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). The author received multiple accounts of the attendance of the crisis cell meetings. If a name was not multiple-sourced, it has not been included here nor in other pieces by the author.
- 31 Ibid. The author received multiple accounts of the attendance of the crisis cell meetings. If a name was not multiple-sourced, it has not been included here nor in other pieces by the author.
- 32 Ibid. The author received multiple accounts of the attendance of the crisis cell meetings. If a name was not multiple-sourced, it has not been included here nor in other pieces by the author.
- 33 Michael Knights and Frzand Sherko, "Can Asaib Ahl al-Haq Join the Political Mainstream?" *PolicyWatch* 3078, February 14, 2019. The author received multiple accounts of the attendance of the crisis cell meetings. If a name was not multiple-sourced, it has not been included here nor in other pieces by the author.

- 34 Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq," p. 9.
- 35 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political figures, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).
- 36 Seth Frantzman, "Iraq investigating alleged rocket fire that landed near US forces in Camp Taji," *Jerusalem Post*, June 18, 2019.
- 37 Author interviews, multiple coalition officers, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).
- 38 Knights, "Exposing and Sanctioning Human Rights Violations by Iraqi Militias."
- 39 "Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Mapping Militant Organizations," Stanford University, January 2020. For discussion of his presence and actions, see Knights, "Exposing and Sanctioning Human Rights Violations by Iraqi Militias."
- 40 For the earliest profile of STK, see Phillip Smyth, "Hizballah Cavalcade: Sariyya al-Tali'a al-Khurasani: A New Combat-Tested Shia Militia in Syria," *Jihadology*, October 29, 2013. For discussion of al-Jazayeri's presence and actions, see Knights, "Exposing and Sanctioning Human Rights Violations by Iraqi Militias." For video of al-Jazayeri directing militia and non-militia security forces during the protests, see "Al-Khorasani militias blocks protestors from reaching the Green Zone," Iraqi (IQ) Reporters, via YouTube, May 3, 2016.
- 41 Knights, "Exposing and Sanctioning Human Rights Violations by Iraqi Militias;" Michael Knights, "Punishing Iran's Triggermen in Iraq: Opening Moves in a Long Campaign," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 6, 2019.
- 42 Ibid. These articles were based on interviews with multiple Iraqi political contacts in 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). If names were not confirmed by multiple interviews, they were not included.
- 43 Ibid. The author has a list of the IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah operatives in the cell and the street address of the cell. The information has been passed to the U.S. government for further consideration.
- 44 Ibid. Confirmed by multiple interviewees.
- 45 Ibid. Confirmed by multiple interviewees.
- 46 Ibid. Confirmed by multiple interviewees.
- 47 Phillip Smyth, "Iran Is Losing Iraq's Tribes," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 4, 2019.
- 48 Adam Lucente, "Mosul joins the protests in Iraq but in a different way," *Al-Monitor*, January 3, 2020.
- 49 "Treasury Sanctions Iran-Backed Militia Leaders Who Killed Innocent Demonstrators in Iraq," U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 6, 2019. See also Knights, "Punishing Iran's Triggermen in Iraq."
- 50 Isabel Coles and Ghassan Adnan, "Iraq's Prime Minister to Resign Amid Protests After Cleric's Criticism," *Wall Street Journal*, November 29, 2019.
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- 52 This was the message according to both U.S. and Iraqi officials interviewed by the author since May 2019.
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- 54 Author's dataset of rocket attacks on U.S. bases, including detailing of munitions used and the size of salvos.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley said: "We know that the intent of this last attack was in fact to kill." See Wesley Morgan, "'The game has changed': Defense secretary warns of preemptive strikes on Iranian group," *Politico*, January 2, 2020.
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Lessons from the Islamic State's 'Milestone' Texts and Speeches

By Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter

Since 2014, numerous publications have analyzed different aspects of the Islamic State, from its military tactics and ideological doctrines to its governance and media operations. This article summarizes key lessons from the authors' efforts to collect, analyze, and present a holistic perspective of this movement through its own works and words dating as far back as its inception in the late 1990s. The authors present three frames through which to understand the movement's ability to navigate through spectacular highs and crippling lows: the centrality of territory and population control to its revolutionary warfare campaigns, the deliberate routinization of its leadership and organization, and the way its propaganda has continuously been deployed to support its leaders and strategy. Seen through the retrospective lens presented here, the Islamic State movement demonstrates an approach to institutional learning and adaption that has long been central to its innovations and resilience as an insurgency.

The start of the new year was marked by a potentially fatal blow to the Global Coalition Against Daesh's efforts to achieve the permanent defeat of the Islamic State movement. Increased pressure by Iranian proxies in Iraq to drive the United States out and the United States' targeted killing of both Qassem Soleimani, commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy chief of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units, has led the coalition to shift its focus from training local partners to its own force protection.¹ While it resumed counter-Islamic State operations after a brief pause, the medium- and long-term impact of the new operational risks posed by potential Iranian backlash could jeopardize the significant progress made to prevent another resurgence of the group in Iraq.²

To be sure, the United States and its partners have been here before. Ten years ago, the Islamic State movement was on its knees, struggling to survive the dual decapitation raid in April 2010 that

killed its then top leaders, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (also known as Abu Ayyub al-Masri, an Egyptian al-Qa`ida veteran).³ Not long after this strike, the United States announced that it was drawing down its presence in Iraq and handing the bulk of its counterinsurgency operations over to local forces. This, coupled with the disintegration of Syria at around the same time, was exactly what the movement needed to survive. In the years that followed, through a combination of tactical opportunism and strategic prowess, instead of just weathering the storm, it thrived.

Currently, the war against the Islamic State is on the cusp of another turning point—one from which gains against it will either be consolidated or undermined—and as policymakers weigh up what to do next, this is as good a time as any to review what drives the movement in a holistic manner that considers its full history, not just the last few years. To that end, to tell the inside story of this group in a manner that informs as to its future and not just its past, the authors have compiled a 15-chapter compendium called *The ISIS Reader* (Hurst/Oxford University Press).⁴ In it, the authors trace the Islamic State movement^a from its inauspicious beginnings in the 1990s as a small cadre led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi⁵ to the near total decimation of its first proto-state in Iraq in 2007-2008⁶ and then its remarkable resurgence less than a decade later, which saw it declare a transnational caliphate,⁷ through to its most recent decline and the death of its first caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in October 2019.⁸ The picture that emerges from this decades-long history is one of a strategic, methodical, and opportunistic organization that learns from its successes and failures, institutionalizes and indoctrinates those lessons to improve future performance, and ruthlessly exploits its adversaries' inattention and misunderstanding.

The authors approached this as observers who have spent their careers in counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, advisory, and capacity-building roles—cumulative experience that has highlighted to them the invaluable role of primary sources in understanding this group's decision-making on the one hand and devising effective counterstrategies on the other. While the authors hope there are many lessons for scholars and practitioners in this telling of its history, in this article, they focus on just three themes: strategic culture, leadership, and propaganda. In part one, they trace the Islamic State movement's evolution since the 1990s; in part two, they identify successes and failures of its strategy formulation and

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a A note on terms of reference: as the authors consider the Islamic State and all of its previous manifestations since 2003, this includes—in consecutive order—Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, al-Qa`ida in the Land of the Two Rivers (better known as al-Qa`ida in Iraq), the Islamic State of Iraq, the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and finally the Islamic State. The authors use the term "Islamic State movement" to refer to the overarching phenomenon to capture the fact that its current and previous iterations are the result of continuous evolution dating back decades.

implementation over time, as well as lessons that appear to have been ingrained into its politico-military approach; in part three, they consider the vital role of its leaders, outlining how the interplay of leadership, strategy, and organizational configuration has complementarily evolved over time; and, finally, in part four, they examine the strategic pillars that have persistently shaped and driven its approach to influencing both friend and foe—in other words, its media jihad.

Part One: The Four Phases of the Islamic State Movement

The history of the Islamic State can usefully be divided into four broadly distinct periods, each of which is characterized by not only certain leadership, organizational, and strategic traits, but aspirational qualities reflective of how the group intended to apply its *manhaj* (methodology).

The first period is defined by the leadership of the movement's founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.⁹ It spans from the 1990s to 2006, when al-Zarqawi was killed and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was declared. While his militant group Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (JtJ) rose to notoriety during the Iraqi insurgency, it is clear from al-Zarqawi's first public speech in 1994 that the ideological influence on its strategy had deep roots.¹⁰ A relatively young Jordanian (he was in his early 30s at the time) with no formal religious education, al-Zarqawi led the future cohort of JtJ from Afghanistan to the battlefields of Iraq wherein it would eventually, in 2004, rebrand as al-Qa`ida in the Land of the Two Rivers (better known as al-Qa`ida in Iraq or AQI).

The second strategic phase in its history spans from the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006 to its near decimation by the Sunni Awakening and U.S. forces in 2007-2008 and the five-year rebuild it went through in its aftermath.¹¹ This was a period characterized by the largely covert but capable leadership from Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, known at the time as 'the two sheikhs,' not to mention Abu Umar's successor for the top spot, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. It was during this period that much of the organizational, strategic, and leadership traits that would later bear fruit for the movement in the 2010s were established.

The third phase spans from 2011 to 2016 and is characterized by transnational expansion and the establishment of the Islamic State caliphate.¹² Under al-Baghdadi's direction, ISI members were dispatched in late 2011 to Syria to set up shop, eventually resulting, in January 2012, in the unveiling of Jabhat al-Nusra and, in April 2013, the announcement of ISIS, the Islamic State in Iraq and ash-Sham.¹³ Especially after the declaration of its caliphate just over a year later, it was during this phase that the Islamic State attracted an historically unprecedented wave of foreigners to Syria and Iraq and established a string of formal and aspirant provinces elsewhere across the region and, indeed, the rest of the world. To ensure its global networks adhered to the organizational and strategic requirements of its *manhaj*,¹⁴ it produced reams of doctrine during this period, spanning anything from the role of women in its ranks¹⁵ to its approach to propaganda.¹⁶

By mid-2016, the Islamic State's advances stalled and began to reverse,¹⁷ something that marked the fourth and current phase of its history. It was around this time that then spokesmen Abu Muhammad al-Adnani prepared the movement and its supporters for its imminent decline in (unbeknownst to him) his final address.¹⁸ This

period is characterized by a spiraling decline in territory, resources, and personnel, which ultimately resulted in the group being routed from its last area of control in Syria—Baghouz—in March 2019. By the end of that year, al-Adnani's replacement as spokesman (Abul Hasan al-Muhajir) and the movement's first caliph (al-Baghdadi) would be dead. But with its now well-established global network, the Islamic State movement continues to wage a global 'archipelagic' insurgency from West Africa to East Asia, with a new guerrilla caliph at its helm.¹⁹

Part Two: The Islamic State's Shifting Strategies

Studying Islamic State strategy over the arc of its existence, from its precursor groups to the post-territorial caliphate, helped the authors understand how the movement overcame existential challenges in the past, developed a strategic culture that informs decision-making,²⁰ and is able to manage the prospect of defeat today.^{21b} The group's sequential strategies, as documented in its captured and self-published documents, have led to both stunning successes—for instance, its establishment of a caliphate proto-state—and dismal failures—consider the grinding defeat of its conventional forces at the hands of the coalition in 2019.²² Studying them, the authors found ample evidence of learning from past missteps reflected in new strategies, only to discover new pitfalls as the movement expanded beyond its core heartland of Iraq and Syria.²³

Analysts attempting to make sense of the Islamic State movement's strategy often reference Abu Bakr Naji's *Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Islamic Nation Will Pass* (2004).²⁴ However, while noting that the general logic of Naji's blueprint was similar in many ways to its own, the group pointed out errors in his pragmatic views about dealing with dissenters.^c This is something that the Islamic State—with its infamous take on *takfir* (excommunication)—took great issue with. *Takfir*, which acts as its legal justification for killing collaborators and Sunni Muslims accused of supporting its enemies, played a strong role in the formulation of strategy since its inception. More importantly, though, it is too simple to describe Naji's doctrinal framework as a strategy, which is a group's application of a basket of coercive methods and tactics (ways) in combination with appropriate military, financial, and information resources (means) to achieve its political objectives (ends).²⁵ Strategies, as opposed to doctrine, are completely context-dependent and specific to time, place, technology, and opponents. And, unlike doctrine, they are ever-changing in order to match shifts in political fortunes and opponent counter-strategies.²⁶ As is set out below, the authors' analysis of the Islamic State's progressive strategies found that its ways, means, and ends were largely created, debated, and refined

b Since territorial loss is defeat for the movement, that is what the authors have decided to call it. By every measure, the group is defeated, but it is not destroyed and it remains active. Defeat is not permanent, as Clausewitz says. The authors' aim in the book is to highlight both what the group has succeeded in doing and what they have failed at. Their political objective is in shambles, even if it can survive as a stage-one insurgency for some time. Indeed, a key aim of *The ISIS Reader* is to analyze the group during these periods of defeat and understand its ability to regenerate.

c The Islamic State media department did note that "although Naji's book describes very precisely the overall strategy of the mujahidin, Naji made some errors on the issue of takfiri elements in parties who forcefully resist shari'a and its laws." See "The Revival of Jihad in Bengal," *Dabiq*, no. 12 (2015): p. 39.



This file photo shows a motorist passing by a flag of the Islamic State group in central Rawah, Iraq, on July 22, 2014. (File/AP Photo)

in house by its own leaders who were largely competent analysts of their environment.^{27 d}

Across the four historical periods that helped to shape how the authors think about the Islamic State's evolution, several lessons emerged that are indicative of its strategic culture. During al-Zarqawi's tenure as leader, he demonstrated not only an appreciation for adopting and applying a coherent strategy but, as part of that approach, focused on a mix of narrative-led activities and actions that were designed to shape environmental conditions. A letter written by him to the leaders of al-Qa`ida that was captured by coalition forces in 2004 painted him as a field commander who had developed a realistic assessment of the landscape in Iraq and, accordingly, had devised a plan to transform its post-invasion chaos into a sectarian bloodbath that would ultimately benefit his cohort.²⁸ In this context, according to al-Zarqawi's calculations, Iraq's minority Sunni population would, "whether they like it or not ... stand with the *mujahidin*."²⁹ The strategy paid dividends, and al-Zarqawi was quick to become the face and image of this ruthless and bloody methodology, his group transforming from a minor sideshow to the central player in Iraq's insurgency in a matter of months.

Fundamentally, his approach relied on the deployment of highly visible acts of terror as a way to outbid much larger and popular-

ly supported rival insurgent groups, while provoking government and Shi`a militia atrocities. Crucially, the sum of these acts enabled it to spoil the U.S. occupation and its nation-building democracy project.³⁰ As a result, al-Zarqawi was able to sabotage the nascent state before it was able to recruit large numbers of rank-and-file rural Sunni Iraqis—whom he perceived to be his natural constituency—to its cause and, in turn, undermine his narrative of looming existential and sectarian civil war. Simultaneously, then, he tried to convey to Iraqi Sunnis that their new state was illegitimate while also goading Shi`a-dominated militias into killing Sunnis in reprisal attacks.^e This approach had a high degree of success through mid-2006. The group, then calling itself al-Qa`ida in the Land of the Two Rivers, expanded from dozens to several thousand members at its peak³¹ and controlled territory intermittently in Qaim, Mosul, Baquba, Ramadi, and famously Fallujah.³² Al-Zarqawi's strategy, which was more concerned with shaping the political landscape and societal environment by targeting enemies, paid off. His sectarian focus and prolific terror campaign—not to mention the Shi`a death squads that hit back—pushed thousands of fence-sitting Iraqis into his ranks.

d Cole Bunzel shaped the authors' thinking on Management of Savagery in an unpublished paper he shared with them at Stanford's Hoover Institute. Critically, Najji's process of forming a caliphate is very different from the way the Islamic State consolidated political power in 2014.

e Doug Ollivant echoes a point made by Nir Rosen that many Sunnis realized they had been beaten in the civil war (started largely as a consequence of al-Zarqawi's provocation strategy) by 2006. Nonetheless, those who did not want to reconcile via the Awakening vehicle continued to fight and are the core of the Islamic State fighters that lasted through the next era. See "Countering the New Orthodoxy: Reinterpreting Counterinsurgency in Iraq," *New America Foundation*, June 2011, p. 4.

Months after al-Zarqawi's June 2006 death, the groundwork having been laid through these early successes, his associates took a fateful leap of faith and declared the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).³³ This was a critically important ideological, political, and strategic milestone for the global jihadi movement. Now under the leadership of 'the two sheikhs'—Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir—ISI entered into a period of critical reflection to revise its strategic approach and to reprioritize the in-group (i.e., Sunni Muslims) for both outreach and targeting. This was brought on by the tribulations it faced in 2007, when large numbers of rival Sunni insurgents, warily viewing ISI's rise as a threat to their political futures, rejected its unification initiative and instead opportunistically joined the tribal rebellion known as the "Sunni Awakening."³⁴ The resultant fighting near Ramadi, which could be described as the beginning of a Sunni civil war in Iraq, was instrumental in depriving ISI of its safe havens, which were increasingly in need in the face of the United States' mounting counterinsurgency operations.^{35f} Together, this unlikely (and unstable) coalition dealt the group its first defeat, one from which it took five long years to recover.

This loss of popular support and dramatic territorial loss, both of which came hot on the heels of its declaration of an Islamic state, could have spelled the end of the movement.³⁶ Certainly, this is what U.S. officials thought at the time, with one famously reporting to Congress that ISI had been "weakened almost to the point of outright defeat in Iraq."³⁷ But instead, it transitioned into survival mode, withdrawing from scrutiny and making its base near Mosul, far from Baghdad.³⁸ Its leaders took the time to reexamine the way it was engaging in tribal relations, media outreach, and guerilla warfare, and adapted their attitude on coercion to one of carrots *and* sticks. An early self-critique entitled, "Analysis of the State of the Islamic State of Iraq" (2007), communicates how stunned and bitter members of ISI were by their perceived betrayal at the hands of certain Sunni tribes, but also how keen they were to learn from the mistakes that got them there.³⁹ This was followed in 2009 by a more developed, 55-page strategy document nicknamed the "Fallujah Memorandum," which argued for the creation of a jihadi version of tribal Awakening units, which, in a distinctly Maoist move, would connect the group closer to the rural population. Among other things, a tribal engagement council was proposed to lead diplomatic efforts among amenable tribes⁴⁰ and the media office was revamped, a process that was accelerated following the release of al-Adnani, who from 2010 became an increasingly important spokesman for ISI.⁴¹

What was perhaps most interesting about the strategy proposed in the "Fallujah Memorandum" was its relegation of the U.S. military to the lowest priority in order to save bullets for "apostate" Sunni Muslims (traitors).^g Most of the discussion spared details on guerilla tactics and subversion, and urged a focus on preparing for the political battles among Iraq's Sunni population once the 'Crusaders' had left and its financial sponsorship of the Awakening dried

up.⁴² The principal goals were to compete with the Iraqi Islamic Party (Muslim Brotherhood), recruit from rival resistance groups that refused to reconcile with the government, and break up Awakening units helping the Iraqi Security Forces secure Sunni-majority provinces.⁴³ Politicians, government officials, and tribal leaders who failed to assist the growing influence of ISI ended up on assassination lists approved by Abu Umar al-Baghdadi himself.⁴⁴ Winning the battle for political influence became the leadership's priority, and its impact on the next period was great.^h

This particular phase in the Islamic State movement's history is thinly researched. Nevertheless, it was one of its strategic high-points, during which, while operating with limited resources, it managed to navigate through material decimation and territorial diffusion. By approaching fence-sitters more diplomatically and attacking its (chiefly Sunni) foes in a more discriminate manner than it did in 2006/2007, it succeeded in avoiding another Awakening-style backlash—an approach that can be seen in its contemporary demonization of all Sunni opposition to the Islamic State as "Awakening" movements.ⁱ The key to this success was honest, meaningful reflection, the adoption of ideas that would firm up its standing in the Sunni community, and a recognition that there was a need to be more pragmatic when dealing with what it perceived to be its own kind.^j

January 2012 was the first month in nearly a decade without a persistent U.S. presence in Iraq, and the Islamic State movement wasted no time making the most of it, transitioning as it did to a new, more overt and offensive strategy. It kicked off a patient campaign of attrition against Iraqi security forces (ISF) garrisons in Sunni-majority provinces with a company-sized special operation in March of that year that resulted in the takeover of the city of Haditha and the execution of more than a dozen police and key Sunni Awakening leaders.⁴⁵ Already infused with veterans from reconciliation amnesties as part of the closure of the U.S. detention center at Camp Bucca, ISI then launched the "Breaking the Walls" campaign, which targeted Iraq's penal security infrastructure in particular and resulted in multiple jailbreaks.⁴⁶ In turn, this facilitated its expansion into Syria, which gave it access to a new in-flow of foreign fighters and materiel. By the end of the year, the group, which was then operating as ISI in Iraq and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, had coopted large swathes of the latter's rebel milieu.⁴⁷

Syria's chaotic political landscape was highly amenable to this move. It was full of armed groups and organizations—many still in embryonic form—that were no match for the Islamic State's strong

f In the Iraq context of 2006-2007, counterinsurgency operations also included a robust task force focused on the targeting of AQI/ISI terror networks (including suicide bombing), which facilitated the cultivation of Sunni tribes and rival insurgent groups.

g The phrase in the "Fallujah Memorandum" was "nine bullets for the apostates, one for the crusaders." For more on this, see Craig Whiteside, "Nine Bullets for the Traitors, One for Crusaders; the Slogans and Strategies of the Islamic State's Counter-Sahwa Campaign," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague 9 (2018).

h The primacy of politics in war—the idea that all military action is driven by political necessity and does not serve itself—and its elevated importance in irregular warfare is something the group has quietly become adept at, with great cost to stability and local populations caught in the crossfire.

i Abu Muhammad al-Adnani called Syrian resistance to the Syria Regime "Sahwa" (Awakening in Arabic) as early as January 2014 as a way to unfavorably compare them to Sunnis who sided with the Americans during the Iraq War. This was prior to the caliphate announcement and a great indicator that this lesson has been ingrained in the group's strategic calculations, specifically identification of risks. See Whiteside, "Nine Bullets for the Traitors, One for the Enemy," pp. 23-25.

j For example, in "Chapter 5: The Fallujah Memorandum," the authors of the tract propose jihadi Awakening councils and credit the United States with the idea. They simply felt they could do it better once they better understood the motivations of the tribes. See Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, *The ISIS Reader* (London: Hurst & Company, 2020).

pedigree in insurgent organization and deployment. This enabled it to muscle in on its rivals, commandeer their manpower and resources, and ultimately capture, control and administer large territories and populations. Indeed, while most people look at the fall of Mosul as the principal governance milestone for this movement, it was its early gains in Syria in 2013 that really enabled it to sharpen its administrative skills.⁴⁸ Its experience during this period meant that, just over a year later, maintaining a cohesive proto-state across multiple fronts against conventional forces like the Peshmerga was not too much for it. So too did it facilitate its sweeping, post-Mosul advances through the Iraqi provinces of Anbar, Nineveh, Salahuddin, and parts of Diyala and Babil.

This period of ascendancy was, however, not set to last. The rapid expansion of the Islamic State caliphate, which was declared in the summer of 2014, brought with it the seeds of defeat. The parallels with 2006/2007 in this regard are numerous. The drive to control territory supported elements of its ideology and jurisprudence and, in turn, facilitated growth in financial resources and recruiting. It is the *sine qua non* of insurgents, the desire to compete in quality of governance of populations against incumbent regimes.⁴⁹ Like the backlash it inspired in the Awakening, this move to openly control territory would also inspire external intervention when local regimes proved incapable of managing its seemingly inexorable spread.^k In the end then, the group's extensive expertise in managing relations with local actors in the context of a regional war was insufficient for it to navigate unscathed through one that had become global.

The Islamic State's successful drive to control territory in 2013—which, among other things, culminated in its 2014 declaration of the caliphate—enabled it to stake a claim as the flag-bearer of the global jihadi movement.⁵⁰ To further these ends and in an attempt to build on its successful sectarian polarization efforts in Iraq, it deployed a series of terror attacks in Europe from 2015 onward—a number of which had been put into motion before the coalition's intervention in September 2014.⁵¹ In its words, these were geared toward “exterminat[ing] the gray zone”—i.e., poisoning relations between Muslims and non-Muslims and fomenting communal strife.⁵² To be sure, questions remain as to whether this “gray zone” logic was the principal driver of Islamic State external operations—an alternative explanation is its attitude toward provocation—but in any case, while this approach had worked in the past in Iraq and Syria, it had little chance of succeeding on the same scale in Europe or the United States. Instead, it backfired, steeling the resolve of interventionists to destroy the Islamic State and eliminate its ability to inspire terrorism, and to continue with efforts to assist in containing the group's possible resurgence in Iraq and Syria.⁵³ The decrease in global terror attacks attributed to the Islamic State since 2016 is an indicator that⁵⁴ despite fears that its ‘virtual caliphate’

could sustain a massive terror campaign,^l it was its real-world iteration—and the resultant legitimacy that territorial control brings—that did the lion's share of the ‘inspiring.’⁵⁵

One aspect of the group's global political strategy during this period that has received much less attention than its atrocities (both far and near) was its calculated development of foreign fighters in Syria into global cadres capable of extending its influence into Muslim-majority countries outside of the Levant in the hopes of seeding future franchises.^m These actions, many of which took place before the official split with al-Qa`ida, reinforce perceptions that al-Qa`ida/Islamic State relations have never been what they were advertised.⁵⁶ To an extent, these perceptions are immaterial because the strategy paid dividends. Indeed, in a matter of years, the Islamic State cultivated a series of global affiliates from Africa to East Asia, all of which had formally pledged allegiance to its caliph. In exchange for expertise and financial resources, they agreed adhere to its ideology and say over leadership and tactics and largely subordinate their own outreach efforts to its Central Media Diwan.⁵⁷ The lesson to emerge from this period is that the Islamic State demonstrably recognized the importance of applying and moving through the phases of revolutionary warfare and exporting its *manhaj* to international affiliates.⁵⁸

By late 2017, the Islamic State's encirclement and battering at the hands of the coalition's massive air campaign triggered its decision to begin an economy of force-based defense of urban areas as part of a scorched earth campaign.⁵⁹ Many of its fighters were subsequently shifted from conventional units back to guerrilla cells to return to insurgency. This flexible stage-based framework for insurgencyⁿ emphasizes the necessity of returning to early phases of revolutionary war to survive strategic setbacks like these.⁶⁰ Hence, more than a year before its defeat at Baghouz, weapons caches, hideouts, and money were redistributed away from the centralized caliphate to support its future insurgency.⁶¹ And by the end of 2017, long before the fall of the caliphate's last territory in 2019,⁶² it had returned—uniformly across all of its contested zones—to a very familiar style of assassinations, ambush, and rocket/mortar fire that is the hallmark

l The Islamic State's online presence is essential to its global spread, yet still an adjunct to its drive to control territory and cannot substitute (for long) in its efforts in the core or local affiliates to influence populations. This discussion is reasonable yet misses the continuous and very real efforts to gain control of territory by the group. See General Joseph L. Votel, LTC Christina Bembenek, Charles Hans, Jeffery Mouton, and Amanda Spencer, “#VirtualCaliphate: Defeating ISIL on the Physical Battlefield is not Enough,” CNAS, January 12, 2017.

m Libya is a prime example of the group sending some of its best leaders from central Iraq to the periphery, presumably with local connections made in Syria, to lead the entire effort. See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Eulogy to Abu Nabil al-Anbari: Islamic State leader in Libya,” aymennjawad.org, January 7, 2016.

n Spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani describes the group's adoption of the fluid nature of progressing through the phases of insurgency—up and down when needed—in a 2016 speech excerpted in *The ISIS Reader*: “Or do you, O America, consider defeat to be the loss of a city or the loss of land? Were we defeated when we lost the cities in Iraq and were in the desert without any city or land? And would we be defeated, and you victorious, if you were to take Mosul or Sirte or Raqqa, or even all the cities, and we were to return to our initial condition? Certainly not! True defeat is the loss of willpower and desire to fight.” See Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter, *The ISIS Reader*, p. 91. Naji also deemphasizes the need for a territorial-based population. The Islamic State cultivates populations afar, but still has governance of a set population under sharia as its *raison d'être*.

k The beheading of foreign captives, the genocide of members of the Yazidi sect, and the advance of Islamic State military elements toward the U.S. consulate in Erbil inspired more than a limited intervention. The U.S. intervention, and subsequent terror attacks across Europe, inspired the building of the 81-state coalition to defeat Daesh.

of the rural guerrilla.⁶³ In this guise, it could lie in wait for another opportunity like that of 2011/2012, wherein state collapse in Syria and state failure in Iraq fanned oxygen onto what were then ISI's embers.

Part Three: The Role and Legitimacy of the Islamic State Leader

Projecting authority is essential for any movement but especially one like the Islamic State, which presents and views itself as divinely guided. After all, it must simultaneously convince its supporters of the credibility of its divine project and its effectiveness as a politico-military force while all the time out-competing the counterclaims of its adversaries with a mix of words and actions. Throughout its history, the Islamic State's top leaders have been central players in these efforts. Indeed, the inter-relationship between the evolution of its leadership, its strategy, and its organizational configuration has become starkly clear over the last two decades. During the early years under al-Zarqawi, it was, like many other newly established revolutionary groups, founded and led by a charismatic leader. The authority of this mode of leadership relied on emotion-based leader-follower bonds that emerged due to the perceived extraordinariness of the leader in question.⁶⁴ Such figures tend to lead nascent movements because of their ability to attract supporters to 'the cause' despite the inevitably rudimentary nature of the group in question's organizational and strategic development.

Yet, as al-Zarqawi's group grew in membership, prominence, and influence, it would need to organizationally and strategically transform to achieve its goal of establishing an Islamic state de facto and de jure. This would mean a more formally structured, bureaucratized and conventional approach to, for example, its deployment of violence and governance efforts.⁶⁵ Such a strategic transformation required a shift in leadership style away from the more fluid and volatile charismatic type of authority to the comparatively more stable and tangibly grounded form of authority that is based upon legal-rational (adherence to law or legally enshrined processes) or traditional criteria (based on established order/custom).⁶⁶ Besides being comparatively more stable, this form of leadership lends itself to resilience, too: replacing the latter type of leader tends to be far less disruptive to other leaders, the organization, and broader support base because, unlike the volatility that typifies the routinization of a charismatic leader, legal-rational/traditional leaders are replaced via a formalized process with tangible criteria.

With the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq, the movement's organizational structures and processes became more formal and bureaucratic than they had ever been previously. Driven by and facilitating the shifts in strategy necessary to transform from an insurgency on the run to a proto-state (if only briefly), this was a critical step in its formative years.⁶⁷ Abu Umar al-Baghdadi emerged as al-Zarqawi's replacement only after satisfying certain criteria in the eyes of the ISI Shura Council, which was said to be following a structured designation process.⁶⁸ This allowed for the emergence of a more complementary relationship between leadership, strategy, and organization. It was also during this period that a broad spectrum of military, governance, propaganda, and administrative practices were formally documented and indoctrinated into both the organization and its strategy development.⁶⁹ These bureaucratic structures and processes, first formalized within ISI back in 2006/2007, became ingrained into the DNA of the Islamic State movement writ large—and this included its leadership

succession practices.⁷⁰

When ISI spread transnationally to become ISIS in 2012/2013 and announced the establishment of its caliphate in 2014,⁷¹ it appeared to be pursuing a strategy that was almost two decades in the making. Its central claim since then has been that its particular Islamic state is the sole authority for the global *ummah* based on its declaration of the caliphate (organizational), the designation of its leader as rightful caliph (leadership), and its consistent application of the 'Prophetic' *manhaj* (methodology).⁶ This not only helps to explain the legitimacy-focused evolution of the Islamic State movement and the logic of its decision-making to date, but acts as a frame through which its current and even future decision-making can be understood.

These dynamics also highlight that while al-Zarqawi is undoubtedly a crucial figure in the movement's history as its founder, he is an anomaly in many respects due to the nature of his leadership and his personality. At least initially, al-Zarqawi's authority was principally borne of his charisma, something which he appeared to be well aware of: he repeatedly sought to amplify it through emotionally charged speeches⁷² and the use of propaganda to construct his image as a fearless and ruthless *mujahid* commander.⁷³ During his tenure as leader, a foundational period in the movement's history, he came to epitomize the benefits and costs of having a charismatic figure at the helm of a newly established but growing revolutionary movement. He was masterful at attracting media attention and, with it, bolstering his support base. However, he also attracted the scrutiny and attention of his adversaries, and as his group grew in membership and influence, it increasingly had to consider how it was being perceived by different Sunni constituents and partners both in Iraq and beyond. It was long clear that tensions were building between al-Zarqawi and his inner circle due to his increasingly polarizing image among Sunni jihadis.⁷⁴ With this in mind, al-Zarqawi's death in June 2006 may have been a blessing for the Islamic State movement because it meant that with the establishment of its first proto-state, it could fill his vacuum with a formal succession process and, thus, replace him with a line of leaders whose authority was predominantly based on legal-rational/traditional grounds and projected as such.

Leadership succession emerges as a highly important way for the Islamic State movement to project its authority claims as legitimate. Indeed, it was in the aftermath of al-Zarqawi's killing and the establishment of ISI that the movement's formal leadership succession practices became more publicly apparent and recognizable. Whether it was Abu Umar al-Baghdadi succeeding al-Zarqawi in 2006, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi replacing Abu Umar al-Baghdadi in 2010, or Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi ascending in 2019, the process appeared broadly similar for all three. Prior to each appointment, a formal consultation process by the Islamic State's Shura Council was said to have ensured that whoever filled the top position satisfied certain criteria.⁷⁵ All three leaders were (or, at least, were presented to be) jurisprudential scholars and war veterans with a Qurashi tribal lineage. And unlike al-Zarqawi, as the head of a 'state,' all adopted the honorific 'commander of the faithful' (*amir*

o This is a consistent theme in the texts and speeches produced by the Islamic State from this moment in its history forward. For more, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, "Part III: The Caliphate" and "Part IV: Purification," *The ISIS Reader* (London: Hurst & Company, 2020), pp. 147-231 and pp. 233-301, respectively.

al-mu'minin). This broadly uniform leadership succession process has resulted in the selection of individuals who share similar core traits, and in all three men, the Shura Council found individuals who, unlike al-Zarqawi, eschewed the media spotlight seemingly because they favored security and organizational and strategic stability over self-promotion.

To help smooth their transitions to the top, all three leaders were given *kunyas* (*noms de guerre*) that obscured their identities not just from adversaries but many in the movement itself. Beyond protecting the leader in question and giving them an opportunity to settle into the position, this practice may also have the effect of signaling the primacy of the position over the personality, of institution over individual. This, in turn, further underscores the legal-rational and traditional basis of their authority.

While, internally at least, the institution of this process in 2006 had the effect of creating a measure of stability in the top ranks of the Islamic State movement, it also provided it with the legalistic structures it needed to outcompete its jihadi rivals to become the flagship of the global jihad. That it was established in the immediate aftermath of its most crushing defeats—a great advantage for the group in years to come—is testimony to its strategic culture and the foresight of its leaders.

What is clear is that, speaking beyond the context of the Islamic State's top leadership, this is a movement that appreciates the value of hierarchical models of leadership at all levels of organization. For example, while Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi only emerged into the public spotlight during strategically pivotal moments, his charismatic spokesman al-Adnani was able to forge his own global reputation during ISIS' feud with al-Qa`ida, a reputation which grew exponentially as he delivered his famously stirring speeches—anything from announcing the establishment of the caliphate to calling for terrorist attacks in the West⁷⁶ and, in his last speech, preparing supporters for another period of decline.⁷⁷ Concurrently, the movement also produced reams of meticulously detailed documentation designed to establish the legitimacy and aid the authority of its field commanders,⁷⁸ female members,⁷⁹ and propagandists⁸⁰ underscoring, to varying degrees, its acknowledgment of the importance of shaping current and future leaders in its ranks.

Part Four: The Enduring Nature of Islamic State Media Warfare

In this section, the authors consider the global outreach activities of the Islamic State movement, something for which it has become especially infamous in recent years.^p In doing so, they again draw attention to the movement's enduring strategic culture and the importance it places on not just projecting its authority as legitimate but outcompeting its adversaries' counter-claims. Notwithstanding the fact that most discussions on this issue revolve around the group's propaganda practices since 2014, when it captured the city of Mosul and launched its most recognizable releases to date—the “Jihadi John” execution video series⁸¹—its propaganda pedigree is

decades-old.^q The core principles underlying it are something the group has made no attempt to hide, whether now or in its earliest years. Indeed, repeatedly since the formal inception of the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006, its leadership has detailed exactly what it is they want from their propagandists.

Three official Islamic State treatises on media jihad have been published over the course of the last decade (in 2010, 2015, and 2019, respectively), and each speaks with exacting precision to the group's overarching outreach objectives. The first⁸² is a speech attributed to the aforementioned Abu Hamza al-Muhajir. Entitled “To those entrusted with the message,” it was published in 2010, months after al-Muhajir's death when the group was at one of its lowest ebbs. The second⁸³ is a propaganda explainer for Islamic State media operatives that was published by the al-Himmah Library in 2015. Entitled “Media operative, you are also a mujahid,” it emerged when the Islamic State was at its strongest in Syria and Iraq and consolidating territorial gains elsewhere in Libya, Afghanistan, and West Africa. The last⁸⁴ surfaced in November 2019—in other words, in the immediate aftermath of the mass-takedown of Islamic State channels on Telegram, the Islamic State's biggest cyber setback since mid-2016 when it was first ousted from Twitter.⁸⁵ Entitled “Victorious in the media war by the permission of Allah,” it was published in the 209th issue of Al Naba, the Islamic State's official newspaper.⁸⁶

While each document appeared in a very different context—the first when the movement's insurgent prospects were hanging by a mere thread in Iraq,⁸⁷ the second when it was presiding over a Syrian-Iraqi proto-state home to millions of people,⁸⁸ and the third when its proto-state project had been aborted and its two most senior leaders killed⁸⁹—they speak to the same propaganda playbook. In each, there is explicit and repeated recognition of a tripartite logic of propaganda, and in each, this logic is dismantled and explained along near-identical lines. Essentially, each text holds that the media jihad should revolve around three poles: organizational propagation, ideological legitimization, and adversarial intimidation.^r

The first pole, *organizational propagation*, refers to efforts to expand the material and human strength of the Islamic State movement. Abu Hamza al-Muhajir's 2010 speech conceptualizes this line of effort as a way of “raising [the mujahidin's] spirits” and making its supporters “appear as one *ummah* fighting for one objective on many fronts.”⁹⁰ To this end, he explains, it is all about emboldening sympathizers and projecting a tangible sense of strength. Published five years later, the al-Himmah field guide closely echoes this idea, stating that Islamic State media activism is a way “to buoy the morale of soldiers, spread news of their victories and good deeds, encourage the people to support them by clarifying their creed, methodology and intentions.”⁹¹ When Al Naba returned to this doctrine another five years later in 2019, it made no obvious substantive changes: jihadi media, it held, was about “attracting more of the Muslims to mobilize and wage jihad, thereby strengthening the

q As al-Zarqawi acknowledged as early as 2004, propaganda is an essential element in his group's strategy. For excerpts and analysis of al-Zarqawi's letter to al-Qa`ida leadership, see Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter, “Chapter 2: Zarqawi's Strategy,” *The ISIS Reader*, pp. 37-54.

r These objectives align closely with those proposed in 2008. See Carsten Bockstette, “Jihadist Terrorist Use of Strategic Communication Management Techniques,” George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, December 2008.

p A Google search of the terms “ISIS”+“propaganda” returns approximately 13,000,000 unique results. By way of contrast, a Google search of the terms “al-Qaeda”+“propaganda” returns just over 5,000,010 unique results. Search carried out on January 6, 2020, using www.google.com.

rank of the people of faith.”⁹²

The second pole, *ideological legitimization*, describes a distinctly more defensive form of communication. In any case, each document establishes it as a priority of Islamic State media operatives. For his part, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir states that one of the most important tasks of the “media mujahid” in 2010 was “defaming the image of the infidels, exposing their immorality, and describing every defect they have” such that their efforts to slander the Islamic State movement—whether they are “crusaders” or “apostates”—are undermined at the very outset.⁹³ The al-Himmah authors are more specific than this. Besides describing what they alleged was the anti-Islamic parameters of “the [coalition’s] intellectual invasion” in 2015, they contend that Islamic State media activists must act as a bulwark against their enemies’ “daily lies and professionalized falsification.”⁹⁴ The 2019 Al Naba editorial takes this even further, boasting of the way in which the Islamic State responded to the “great campaigns of [anti-Islamic State] distortion that have transcended the world” in recent years.⁹⁵ Noting that they were all resounding failures, the editorial explains that this has all been down to the successful deployment of defensive media operations.⁹⁶

The third and final pole, *adversarial intimidation*, encapsulates the line of outreach effort for which the Islamic State has been most notorious in recent years. Manifesting in graphic videos of executions to which are usually appended bellicose tracts aimed at adversaries, the intimidation-focused propaganda of the Islamic State movement has long been inextricably linked with its overarching outreach strategy. On this topic, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir waxed especially lyrical in 2010. Indeed, it was the very first thing he mentioned in his speech on media jihad. Calling on listeners to “sow terror in the hearts of our enemy using everything permitted by sharia,” he explained that intimidation outreach campaigns were a way to compound the perception of the Islamic State movement’s “strength” and “determination.”⁹⁷ This theme is similarly prominent in the al-Himmah field guide, in which is devoted an entire chapter about media that “infuriates the enemy.”⁹⁸ Based on the premise that “everything that angers the enemies of Allah” is a legitimate “form of jihad,” it holds that offensive, intimidation-focused psychological operations can augment and sometimes substitute conventional military campaigns.⁹⁹ While this logic is only mentioned fleetingly in the Al Naba editorial, the reference could not be more explicit. Propaganda, it reads, is central to “outraging the idolaters and giving glad tidings to the Muslims.”¹⁰⁰

To be sure, the above three poles refer to non-discrete categories of action that are both broad and overlapping. However, that does not detract from their importance as the essential building blocks of the Islamic State’s media jihad. As the above three texts (among others) so clearly attest, they have withstood the tests of time—and, indeed, the ebbs and flows of the Islamic State’s strategic potential—for more than a decade now and, rightly or wrongly, the Islamic State movement continues to see them as fundamental to its recent successes. Consider, for example, the following extract from the 2019 Al Naba editorial, which implies that propaganda was a principal driver of its ability to weather the storm of twin leadership decapitation strikes and tribal resistance while simultaneously making the most of opportunities afforded to it by chaos in Syria and corruption in Iraq.

“When the jihad arose in [Syria] and [the now-dead] Shaykh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Qurashi—may Allah the Almighty accept him—sent his soldiers to support the Muslims there, those pioneers

did not find much hardship in calling people to join them and help them. This was because the Muslims knew of the Islamic State, having already been able to consider its methodology and the appeal of its soldiers. Thus the group was able to quickly grow and spread in all the areas.”¹⁰¹

It is important to recognize that, strategically speaking at least, there is nothing especially revolutionary about the Islamic State’s approach to influencing friend and foe. However, the extent to which its outreach logic, first publicly institutionalized at the turn of the last decade, has endured is quite remarkable, something that speaks to its broader attitude toward the cultivation and perpetuation of institutional knowledge, human capital, and innovative thinking. In that sense, it is a prime case study in the broader strategic culture of the movement.

Conclusion

Non-state actors that fight to overthrow the status quo have to be patient and resilient to survive. By definition, they have chosen a difficult path, one that ends with defeat more often than success.¹⁰² Having failed spectacularly twice but simultaneously demonstrated its ability to learn and evolve from these failures, the Islamic State movement seems to understand that it does not have to be perfect to succeed; rather, it just needs to outcompete its adversaries (and rivals) in securing the support of a suffering Sunni polity beset by poor and corrupt governance, sectarian security force predation, and increasing foreign intervention by regional and global powers.¹⁰³ It is a dynamic that played out well beyond the Middle East and can now be seen in the successes of Islamic State affiliates in west, central, and east Africa, not to mention Southeast Asia (if only fleetingly) and other areas.¹⁰⁴ While it remains a subdued but persistent menace in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State movement continues to move ahead with its archipelagic insurgency, demonstrating its ability to globally deploy its doctrine of strategic opportunism and adapt through critical reflection, but also trial and error, to ensure that it stays true to its *manhaj*. With this in mind, there is little doubt that the Islamic State group will survive in the months and years to come.¹⁰⁵

At the same time, it is tempting to discount the group’s strategic approach based on its crushing defeat, an inevitable outcome once the group inspired the unified effort of 81 states.⁵ Indeed, some will disagree with many of the assessments featured here and point instead to those long stretches of the Islamic State movement’s history that are characterized by crushing failure, interrupted rarely and fleetingly by moments of success, as evidence of a group that is more blindly fanatical than strategically prudent.⁶ At times, this has been the case, and the well-documented tensions between factions within the Islamic State are indicative of persistent internal struggles to balance ideological puritanism with real-world pragmatism.¹⁰⁶ The Islamic State movement will always be susceptible to strategic and operational errors borne of its ideological zeal,¹⁰⁷ yet even a fleeting look at its history and primary source materials confirms

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t For example, Max Abrahms, commenting on President Obama’s labeling of the Islamic State in 2014 as a “JV team,” states: “Actually he [President Obama] was right—at least about their cluelessness about devising a winning long-term strategy.” See Max Abrahms, *Rules for Rebels: The Science of Victory for Militant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 8.

that a surprisingly reflective, critical, and lasting strategic culture exists. This point is especially important for policymakers, strategists, and operators. To assume that the success of one's enemy is due to luck and that its failures are due to an irredeemable glitch in its makeup (or even worse, one's own brilliance) inspires precisely the intellectual complacency and strategic shortsightedness that sees errors repeated, blood and treasure squandered, and societies plunged cyclically into bloody crises.

The coalition's tribulations in the aftermath of Soleimani's killing should be a reminder both that war is unpredictable and that rarely is its result final. In view of that, the Islamic State's successes over the last two decades should not just be measured from its ability to survive as an underground guerrilla group only capable of midnight assassinations. A more profound measure of its resilience is how it has generally maintained strategic and organizational coherence

both over time and against the odds. This is, in no small part, due to the dynamics that the authors have described here: the skillful management of expertise, territory, and populations as an end state of strategy; the development of a leadership succession practice and organizational resilience; and the systematic deployment of propaganda in both on- and offline theaters in support of the former two.

By all accounts, the Islamic State movement should not exist anymore. It has faced resounding defeat twice in the recent past and suffered through dozens of successful strikes against its leadership. Yet still, it persists. *The ISIS Reader* is the authors' attempt to present why this is. By giving a history of the movement in its own words, inviting critical debate, and drawing out lessons for scholars and practitioners alike, they hope that it may contribute to scholarly, strategic, and policy discourses that will one day lead to its enduring, permanent defeat. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Rob Saale, Former Director, U.S. Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell

By Seth Loertscher

Rob Saale was the director of the U.S. Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, an interagency group housed at the FBI, between 2017 and 2019. In that capacity, he oversaw the coordination of government efforts and policies to facilitate the recovery of American hostages held abroad. He managed multiple incident aspects, including intelligence coordination, operational response, family engagement, oversight of the media and legislative affairs, as well as strategy development.

During his 23-year career with the FBI, Saale was involved in or had responsibility for international criminal and national security investigations of public corruption and violent criminal, white collar, and counterterrorism violations.

Saale is currently the president of STAR Consulting and Investigations, an international security consulting firm he founded.

CTC: This past June marked the fourth anniversary of the creation of the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell at the FBI, an organization you led before you retired from the FBI. Can you tell us about what that organization is and why it was created?

Saale: So, the Cell was created after the debacle with the families of the ISIS hostages—Jim Foley, Steven Sotloff, Peter Kassig, and Kayla Mueller. There was a combination of factors that led to the issues between their families and the government. There was stove-piping of information on the intelligence side and fights between different [U.S. government] agencies on how to handle the issue. Families were treated poorly by the U.S. government across the board. They were told if they paid a ransom, they'd be prosecuted. They did not have information shared with them and were held at arm's length. There was a big outrage about the treatment of the families. Diane Foley [Jim Foley's mother] really led that charge. And the [Obama] administration realized that they had handled the whole affair poorly, and so, to their credit, they conducted a hostage review. That review was only supposed to last 90 days but ended up lasting close to a year, and [it] assessed the state of the hostage enterprise at the time and how to make it better. The result was Presidential Policy Directive-30 (PPD-30), which established the current hostage recovery enterprise.¹

The three pieces of that enterprise currently are the Hostage Response Group (HRG), the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell (HRFC), and the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs (SPEHA) at the Department of State. The HRG is the sub-deputies' group at the National Security Council led by the Senior Advisor to the President for Counterterrorism. The HRG is the arbitrator of disputes between the interagency [for handling hostage cases] and approves policies and recovery strategies that are brought to it by the Fusion Cell. The Fusion Cell is responsible for coordinating both

recovery efforts and efforts to support the families. Additionally, the Fusion Cell is responsible for making sure that intelligence is being shared among the interagency. The Special Presidential Envoy is the diplomatic arm for this. So that enterprise is really three pieces working together. The Cell is developing recovery strategies and ensuring that the operational nuts and bolts are all coming together; the HRG is a vehicle to quickly make time-sensitive decisions about hostage recoveries; and the SPEHA is the diplomatic arm.

The Fusion Cell has five main components. It has (1) an intelligence component with representation from across the intelligence community; (2) an operational component with representation from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), State Department Diplomatic Security Service, Department of Treasury, the Department of Defense (DoD) broadly, as well as specific representation from the Joint Personnel Recovery Agency (JPRA) and Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC); (3) a family engagement team with FBI Victim's Specialists and State Department Consular Affairs, operational psychologists, and a FBI crisis negotiator; (4) the external engagement team, which has an external engagement coordinator, a media coordinator, a legislative coordinator; and then finally (5) a legal team, the DoJ [Department of Justice] attorney. All these groups are under the leadership team, which consists of the Fusion Cell's director and two deputies, which could come from one of three organizations—State, FBI, or DoD.

CTC: As the HRFC was being stood up, it was also given an operational role in managing hostage cases. I can only imagine that there were a lot of challenges in creating new processes and interagency collaboration while still managing active cases. By the time you took over, the HRFC was just under two years old. What were some of the priorities you focused on and some of the organizational challenges you had to overcome?

Saale: By the time I got there, the Cell's processes for responding to cases and how they engaged with families were pretty well developed. What I found was that a lot of that institutional knowledge was just in people's heads; it hadn't been codified anywhere. So that was my first priority, making sure those standard operating procedures and processes were codified and developed into a resource for the next generation to use. My next priority was dealing with some of the less urgent yet still important parts of PPD-30. Prevention, for instance, is important, but not much had been done on that front because of the need to get the Fusion Cell up and running. Prevention is more than just regurgitating State Department travel warnings and telling people not to travel. Prevention could be identifying, dismantling, disrupting—through law enforcement means or kinetic means—some of these captor networks and facilitators to cut back on the number of hostage-takings. Part of that as well is the prosecution aspect. We tried to address those areas outside of the day-to-day process of running cases and outreach to the ex-

ternal partners.

CTC: The hostages taken by the Islamic State weren't the first U.S. citizens to be taken hostage by terrorist groups. The United States had to deal with a rash of kidnappings and hostage-takings during operations in Iraq in the period after the 2003 U.S. invasion. Do you think the fact that many people involved with those events were no longer working in government—the lack of institutional knowledge that you mentioned—contributed to the challenges that the government had in responding in the Islamic State cases?

Saale: Absolutely. In late 2011 through 2013, I was up at FBI headquarters running the violent gang unit that managed all the [FBI's] gang cases at the programmatic level, but then I moved to the Violent Crime Unit. Part of their program management responsibilities were extraterritorial criminal kidnappings. At that time, it was really just being given lip service. All the Bureau was doing was tracking cases, for the most part. They weren't trying to actively manage those cases at the headquarters level. At individual field offices, it would vary, but at the headquarters level, it wasn't being done. When we had Jessica Buchanan taken hostage by Somali pirates in October 2011, we began pulling together an ad hoc group that met on a weekly basis and focused on that one case. I like to call it the grandfather of the Fusion Cell because it had many of the same components that the Fusion Cell had. It was very personality-driven and involved developing a lot of relationships, and at the end of the day, we were successful in getting her rescued.^a What PPD-30 did was take the personality aspect and the individual relationship component out and codified those processes and institutionalized those relationships so that when people left their positions, the relationships remained.

CTC: What were some of your experiences in the FBI that helped you respond to Jessica Buchanan's kidnapping?

Saale: One of the places that I focused on early in my career was working gang cases. I really felt that gave me a good basis for counterterrorism work because, in the long run, CT is just a big gang case. You need to know how to identify what a network is, its organization, and break it down. I did that for the first part of my career. After 9/11 happened, I did a couple years on the Director's detail and then got into CT work. I think a turning point in my career was [when] I volunteered to go over to Iraq in 2005 as part of the Bureau deployment program and got embedded with [then] Major General McChrystal's task force as an interrogator. I really got to see first-hand the whole concept of "it takes a network to defeat a network." At that time, late 2005-2006, that task force was operating on all eight cylinders, going 150 miles per hour. It was really an impressive organization to be a part of, and I observed and soaked in a lot of those lessons about the interagency working together. I tried to implement those ideas when I was a task force supervisor, and they really culminated when I had the opportunity to lead the



Robert Saale

Fusion Cell.

I think the biggest thing that I took away was the transparency of information sharing. [McChrystal's] task force had intelligence briefs where everyone would talk freely about what was going on with each of their targets and what everybody else was doing to support those missions. It really created a shared consciousness with everybody understanding what everybody else was doing. Some of that stuff I had from prior experiences. I had been a SWAT guy and a tactical guy, so when I'd interrogate somebody and they'd tell me about a target and I'd show them some pictures of a house, I'd naturally know that the operators are going to want to know: what kind of locks were on the doors, how many fighting-age males were there, and what kind of weapons they had. I also saw at the same time they [the operators] were cognizant of what the analysts needed to find new targets, so they were very diligent about collecting phones and pocket litter. They knew not to just discard that stuff. While it might not have meant anything to them, the analysts might be able to glean something from some bit of paper with a few numbers on it.

CTC: Is that cross training, that shared consciousness of knowing what the other side is doing something you tried to inculcate in the HRFC?

Saale: Absolutely. To give you an example, there was very rarely a piece of intelligence that was not shared with everybody in the Cell, unless it was extremely compartmentalized and sensitive. For the most part, everybody from the victim specialists to the State Department consular officers saw the same intel as the operational folks and the analysts. We had a number of cases where the intel folks would identify a gap in intelligence about a victim—for instance, their location or who was holding them. The victim specialists, who are spending time with the families, might know—in the case of a

^a Editor's note: Jessica Buchanan and Poul Thisted were rescued by U.S. Navy Seals on January 25, 2012. See Jeffrey Gettleman, Eric Schmitt, and Thom Shanker, "U.S. Swoops In to Free 2 From Pirates in Somali Raid," *New York Times*, January 25, 2012.

dual citizen—that the family had extended family members on the ground [wherever the victim was being held] that might have their own network of information. So, the victim specialists were able to ask the family questions or would pick up on something important when the family said something, knowing that analysts or the operational folks were looking for it. Conversely, when the family team would brief a particular issue the family was concerned about, if the intel analysts came across that information, they would know the family was interested in it and could work to get that declassified without having to be told. We eliminated a lot of the back and forth. It was just like people knew what everyone else needed, so they took their own initiative.

CTC: How do you do that? Was it just having a morning stand-up type meeting where everyone goes around the room and briefs what they're working on, or did you have to really force those relationships?

Saale: So, it's both. The first piece is having that stand-up meeting, but then you really have to force those relationships and connectivity. As a leader in the Cell, someone would get a piece of information and bring it straight to me, and I'd have to ask if they'd spoken with the victim specialist about the issue. If they said no, I'd have to direct them to ensure they looped in the victim specialist because it was important to the families. Initially, we had to force those relationships. But when people saw it was successful, they'd develop that back-and-forth trust, and it would just become a natural muscle movement for people in the Cell.

CTC: Since the Islamic State hostage crisis, kidnappings have somewhat receded from the news, although the recent rescue of an American in a French hostage rescue in Burkina Faso highlights that the issue hasn't completely gone away.^b What is your assessment of the current hostage threat today? Who is most at risk, and where are the greatest threats? As hostage-taking recedes from the forefront of public attention, are there risks that HRFC will face decreased interagency collaboration?

Saale: If you look at hostage-taking, it's really cyclical. From 2010-2012, we had all sorts of hostages being taken in East Africa in acts of piracy. The E.U. and U.S. stepped in; there was an increased military presence; the shipping industry changed their best practices and put armed security details on ships; and the problem went away. Two years later, ISIS went into Syria and realized that a good model to generate revenue quickly was to kidnap Westerners. A significant portion of their early revenue stream came from those ransoms. The same thing applies to JNIM [Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin]^c and the terrorist groups in West Africa where much of their revenue comes from hostage-taking. As groups emerge, they

tend to see hostage-taking as a very lucrative means to generate revenue for their cause.

We're now seeing ISIS going away in Syria, but the remnants of ISIS are going to disband and spread. As those start to take hold in other places, I think you're going to see those veterans of the ISIS fight think back on how they really got their movement going in 2011-2012, and they may start to consider taking hostages to generate some revenue.

I fear we may be on the cusp of another surge in hostage-taking. Where will that be? Wherever Westerners are expanding and coming into contact with militant groups. It's not just Westerners, of course. If you look at Afghanistan, there are Chinese and Indian engineers who are being taken hostage and all sorts of other people who we don't really have visibility on. Hostage-takers like to get Westerners, but I think they are also somewhat indiscriminate. They are really looking at any potential victim who has someone behind them that will pay.

When I was at the Cell, my biggest worry was Southeast Asia [and specifically] the area around Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines where the Abu Sayyaf Group operates. Almost all of their revenue is generated through hostage-taking. West Africa still is an area of concern. I think the Tri-Border Area down in South America is another potential concern.^d As Western companies go down there to increase mining and oil and natural gas development, they'll start to put more Westerners down there, increasing that potential contact with militant groups.

CTC: One of the most rigorous debates in hostage policy is whether the U.S. government's no-concessions policy deters the kidnapping of American citizens. One of the underlying assumptions of this policy is that terrorist groups deliberately target Americans. We've seen public statements from al-Qa`ida leadership and some of Usama bin Ladin's letters that indicate this desire at the leadership level.² From your experience broadly, is this deliberate targeting something that is happening at the tactical level, or are the abductions of Americans more ad hoc?

Saale: I think it's really based upon individual groups. With a group like AQ [al-Qa`ida], whose organizational structure is more hierarchical, if AQ's central leadership wanted something done, it generally got pushed down to all the levels. Other groups that have a more decentralized leadership structure might look at hostage-taking as a way to generate revenue. Maybe some local commander, in the back of his mind, might see kidnapping an American or a Westerner as a propaganda tool, too. There is some evidence that groups will take American or British hostages if they can get them with other Westerners, and they [the Americans or British] would be the hostages that the group might execute in order to put pressure on other [Western] governments that don't have as strong [of] a no-concessions policy.

^b On May 11, 2019, French special operations forces conducted a hostage rescue to recover two French tourists in Burkina Faso and ended up also rescuing an American woman and a South Korean woman. See Btisssem Guenfoud, Ben Gittleson, and Edith Honan, "French forces rescue American during raid to free tourists in Burkina Faso," ABC News, May 11, 2019.

^c Editor's note: Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, al-Qa`ida's affiliate in Mali and West Africa, was formed in March 2017 by the merger of Ansar al-Din, al-Murabitoon, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) Sahara branch, and the Macina Liberation Front.

^d Editor's note: The Tri-Border Area (TBA) straddles the national boundaries between Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil and has historically been associated with a variety of illegal activities to include money-laundering, counterfeiting, drug trafficking and arms smuggling.

CTC: The United States' no-concessions policy isn't just about deterring kidnapping. An important part of the rationale is to prevent terrorist groups from financially benefiting from ransom payment. Is kidnapping for ransom still a major funding mechanism for terrorist groups?

Saale: Yes. From 2004 to 2012, the U.S. government estimated that that terrorist groups had raised at least \$120 million from kidnapping for ransom, with AQIM [al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb] and AQAP [al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula] playing a big role in that.³ In 2014, ISIS raised up to \$45 million from ransoms alone.⁴ Abu Sayyaf is another group whose funding comes almost entirely from kidnapping.

This is part of the discussion that I've had with advocates and think-tanks. I do not doubt that if Americans are taken hostage and that the U.S. government was willing to pay ransom, the likelihood of Americans being released increases dramatically; that's what ransom payments are for. I also think that the U.S. government has to think on broader terms, not just for individuals who are being held right now, but the other Americans overseas in at-risk areas. If the U.S. government was willing to pay ransoms and these groups knew it, their targeting of Americans would certainly increase.

I also believe that there is some gray area. PPD-30 said that no concessions does not mean no negotiation; you're allowed to negotiate. I think there needs to be a bit of a gray area on a case-by-case basis where, at the National Security Council level, there are options for showing good faith if we're talking to a group. Giving them something, be it a battery for a cell phone, medical supplies, whatever it might be—something that won't enhance their ability to strike at the U.S. or its interests—may be helpful to establish good faith. Those things would need to be weighed carefully, but they might be opportunities to open a dialogue, much like in hostage situations with bank robberies. The police won't be getting a plane and \$6 million for the robbers, but they will get them some food and a phone call so they can slow down and start thinking about what they've done.

CTC: In those types of negotiations, it's often helpful to have both that carrot that you've described and a stick. Brian Michael Jenkins has stated that "the apprehension of kidnappers and the destruction of kidnapping gangs appear to be the most powerful factors in reducing kidnappings."⁵ Do you think the United States places enough emphasis on going after terrorist kidnapping networks? What tools does the United States have to do that? What are the legal challenges of prosecuting terrorist kidnappers in the United States?

Saale: I think the intelligence community, the FBI, and DoD do everything they can. I think DoJ has been woefully inadequate with their prosecution of kidnappers because of a reluctance to bring individuals back to U.S. soil and roll the dice on taking them to trial. I think that's shameful.

In every hostage-taking, especially a criminal kidnapping or a terrorist hostage-taking, the FBI is going to open up a case, especially in a criminal kidnapping or a terrorist-related hostage case. That case will be assigned to one of four field offices, depending on the region of the world where the case occurs. At that field office, a squad will be assigned to work the case. You would think that if someone is taken hostage in Syria, we'd never be able to catch the perpetrators, but these agents do incredible work on putting the cases together. In 2011, a crew of pirates hijacked the yacht S/V Quest, taking four American citizens hostage. Unfortunately, the pirates murdered all four Americans, but the FBI went to incredible lengths to create a case against the hostage-takers. An FBI agent was imbedded in the SEAL task force that responded to the event and was able to immediately begin collecting forensic evidence. The yacht was towed to Djibouti, and a larger FBI team processed it as a crime scene. The evidence gathered was critical in the securing the convictions of the hostage-takers.^f There are a number of stories like that where the FBI has been able to get prosecutions—the Achille Lauro hijackers^g and some of the FARC kidnappings, for instance. Conversely, there are a number of folks that have been members of ISIS or AQ in places where the U.S. might not have had the prosecutorial reach, but where the [U.S.] military has been able to use kinetic means to bring kidnappers to justice.^h

CTC: Does the United States highlight that enough? Does the United States link those successes to the kidnappings in a way that helps with any deterrent effect they might have?

Saale: No, we don't do a good enough job of that. Part of the fear of highlighting these successes is because we don't want to highlight the methods and sources that law enforcement, intelligence, and military use to bring the perpetrators to justice. There's a fear that once we start highlighting the fact that we are involved in bring-

f Editor's note: A total of 15 individuals were sentenced to life in prison in the S/V Quest case after being arrested and charged with piracy. Eleven of the hijackers pleaded guilty, while three hijackers and one negotiator, arrested after the hijacking in Somalia, were tried in separate cases in federal court. See "US Court Convicts Somalis of Piracy and Murder," VOA News, July 9, 2013; "Somali Hostage Negotiator in S/V Quest and M/V Miranda Marguerite Piracies Sentenced to Multiple Life Sentences," U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of Virginia, August 13, 2012; "Hostage Rescue Team: Mission in the Gulf of Aden," Federal Bureau of Investigation, March 27, 2013.

g Editor's note: In 1985, four members of the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF) seized the Italian cruise liner M.S. Achille Lauro, attempting to secure the release of 50 Palestinians in Israeli prisons. While holding the ship, the PLF hijackers executed Leon Klinghoffer, an American citizen. After holding the ship for two days, the hijackers disembarked in Egypt, releasing the remaining hostages in exchange for safe passage and a flight out of Egypt. A U.S. Special Operations task force forced the plane with the hijackers to land in Italy, transferring the hijackers into Italian custody. Eventually, with U.S. assistance, the hijackers were tried and convicted in Italian courts. See William E. Smith, "Terrorism: The Voyage of The Achille Lauro," *Time*, October 21, 1985; Tom Clancy, Carl Stiner, and Tony Koltz, *Shadow Warriors: Inside the Special Forces* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2002), pp. 265-296.

h Editor's note: An example of such kinetic action was the death of Abu al-Umarayn, a senior Islamic State leader "involved" in the execution of Peter Kassig, a U.S. citizen kidnapped by the Islamic State in October 2013. See Hannah Preston, "Who Is Abu Al Umarayn? ISIS Leader Held Responsible for 2014 Death of Former U.S. Army Ranger, Killed in Drone Strike," *Newsweek*, December 2, 2018.

e See Brian Michael Jenkins, *Does the U.S. No-Concessions Policy Deter the Kidnapping of Americans?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), p. 22. Other research has found that hostage rescue attempts, both successful and unsuccessful, may have a deterrent effect, reducing the likelihood of future kidnapping by the group targeted in that area. Peter Dyruud, "Think Twice: Deterring Transnational Kidnapping," forthcoming.

ing kidnappers back to justice, questions will be raised about *how* they are brought back, which may prevent those techniques from working in the future. Instead of crafting a response that answers the question indirectly, we just decide that we're not going to talk about it at all. It doesn't help when even people inside the government don't know we build cases and try to prosecute kidnappers. I've been in interagency meetings and had a representative from the DoD tell me that there's no need for hostage debriefings to be unclassified because the FBI doesn't prosecute hostage-takers. These were debriefings with civilian hostages that, if unclassified, could be used in affidavits and criminal complaints, or used as evidence in court. From their perspective, that was unnecessary because they'd never seen or heard of a hostage-taking-related prosecution. When I started ticking off cases where the FBI had built criminal complaints, they were surprised. It wasn't their fault for not knowing; it was our fault for not highlighting those successes.

CTC: What are the legal challenges of prosecuting terrorist kidnappers in the United States?

Saale: Often when we're developing evidence for a hostage case, we rely on the hostage's unsubstantiated account to place their kidnappers at the scene. In criminal proceedings, of course, the hostage-taker would deny being present, and their attorney would try to provide alibi witnesses. It's definitely a challenge to develop the amount of evidence to prove to a jury beyond a reasonable doubt that someone is guilty of a kidnapping. When you do have evidence, oftentimes it's not as clean as it might be back in the United States when it's been handled by law enforcement officers. A lot of the evidence in support of hostage-taking cases comes second- or third-hand; some of it comes without much providence or verifiable chain of custody. So, yes, these cases are challenging, but I think they're worth it. We need to take the risk.

I would definitely like to see Alexandra Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh brought back to the United States and tried.ⁱ I've spoken to the prosecutor and the agents for the case; I'm familiar with the district it would be prosecuted in; and I'm confident the government could get a conviction. I know that some people within DoJ have had bad experiences in the past, where they've brought someone to the U.S., but the individual wasn't convicted and then ended

up claiming asylum in the U.S. [the CEC Future case].^j I think this case is different. In the [CEC Future] case, the defendant was relatively sympathetic and was able to paint himself as a businessman, a go-between for the pirates who conducted the kidnapping, who was simply helping to free hostages.

These guys [Kotey and Elsheikh] are different. They were captured on the battlefield acting on behalf of a foreign terrorist organization, part of whose strategy involved the kidnapping and captivity of Western hostages and ultimately their execution for propaganda value. They've admitted being part of the group responsible for holding Western hostages.⁵ They would be categorically different defendants.

I think it's incredibly important that we bring them [Kotey and Elsheikh] back and try them in a U.S. court. Their prosecution would provide justice to the families; it would treat them like the criminals they are and show the resolve of the U.S. to bring the killers of American citizens to justice. We can't bring hostage-takers to justice all the time, but when we have the opportunity to do it, we should.

CTC: One of the mandates behind the PPD-30 and the creation of the HRFC was to help "secure the safe recovery of U.S. nationals held hostage abroad." Has the HRFC's creation increased the number of Americans recovered in terrorist kidnapping cases? Can you talk about any of the successes you and your team had in the time you led the HRFC?

Saale: I would say that by formalizing relationships and processes, U.S. victims of kidnapping and hostage-taking are being recovered more often and more quickly. One of the successes we had involved a Colombian case in which five kayakers, among them several Americans, were taken hostage by the FARC in 2017.⁷ Because of the Fusion Cell and the HRG, we were very quickly able to get [the State Department] post in Bogotá, SOUTHCOM [U.S. Southern Command], and JSOC up to speed and on the same page. The hostages were taken on a Thursday during the day, and by Saturday afternoon, due to the rapid coordination, there was so much ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] overhead, we were able to locate them. Through back channel messages from the Colombian government to the FARC, they were released within 72 hours. When I look back at this case, and some others that are still too sensitive to talk about, I do think that the Cell's role in facilitating recoveries has had a positive impact in helping to bring Americans home.

I will say, however, that some cases the HRFC is involved in are exceptionally hard to resolve and recovery options are limited. Robert Levison, for instance, has been held for more than 12 years and

ⁱ Editor's note: Alexandra Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh, alleged to be two of James Foley's kidnappers, were captured by the U.S.-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were held in SDF-controlled prisons prior to the United States taking them into custody earlier this year. Both were British citizens who emigrated to fight for the Islamic State and whose citizenship reportedly has been revoked. See David Millward, "Trial of Jihadist 'Beatles' faces delay as US prosecutors gather evidence," *Telegraph*, July 7, 2019; Dominic Casciani, "Islamic State 'Beatles' El Shafee Elsheikh and Alexandra Kotey could be tried in UK," *BBC*, July 30, 2019; and Bethan McKernan, Julian Borger, and Dan Sabbagh, "US takes custody of British Isis pair," *Guardian*, October 10, 2019.

^j Editor's note: See, for example, the trial of Ali Mohamed Ali, the negotiator in the November 2008 hijacking of the Danish cargo ship CEC Future. Ali was arrested 2011 after traveling to the United States and charged with conspiracy to commit piracy, aiding and abetting piracy, conspiracy to commit hostage-taking, and aiding and abetting hostage-taking. In November 2013, he was acquitted by a jury of the charge of piracy, and although the jury deadlocked on the charge of hostage-taking, the charges were dropped. After this, Ali reportedly applied for political asylum in the United States, though the resolution of that case is unclear. See "Somali man found not guilty of piracy in 2008 ship hijack," *Guardian*, November 26, 2013; Josh Gerstein, "Failed pirate trial a bad omen?" *Politico*, February 10, 2014; and Josh Gerstein, "Senators troubled by accused pirate's acquittal," *Politico*, February 25, 2014.

Austin Tice's captivity is going on eight years.^k In cases like these, when the U.S. is falling short of recovering its citizens, the HRF's role in family engagement becomes incredibly important to support their families as much as possible.

CTC: You previously mentioned relationships with the families of U.S. hostages as being a big part of the creation of the HRF. Do you think the Fusion Cell has been successful in improving the relationships with the families of Americans held abroad?

Saale: I think the support that has developed over the past four years by the Fusion Cell has been very successful. If you look at the outstanding report done by the James W. Foley Legacy Foundation, you'll see comments from the families that believe they're getting more support than before the Fusion Cell's creation.⁸ I never really had challenges with family engagement. I'd go meet with families that were described as difficult to deal with, but I never had problems with them. Were they frustrated? Sure. I'd be frustrated too if my son or daughter had been held for years on end. I'd be frustrated if in sitting in meetings with U.S. government officials, I knew more than the regional expert giving me the brief. I understand,

^k Editor's note: Robert Levinson, a former FBI agent, disappeared in Iran in 2007 while on a CIA operation and is suspected of being held by the Iranian government. Austin Tice, a freelance journalist, was detained in 2012 in Syria after being stopped at a checkpoint south of Damascus. The identity of his captors remains unclear. See "For First Time, Iran Says Case Is Open on Missing C.I.A. Consultant," Associated Press, November 9, 2019, and Nisan Ahmado, "Parents of US Reporter Missing for 7 Years in Syria Still Await His Return," VOA News, November 14, 2019.

though, why that happens. Oftentimes, the longer their loved one is being held, these families develop more regional expertise than the regional experts at State, the FBI, or DoD. But it's because they're laser-focused on this one issue and one area, whereas other government officials have a variety of concerns. That's just one example, but I completely understood their frustrations.

The problem with family engagement I would have was encouraging the interagency to work with the families. Most of the time, the intelligence community [IC] was very good about getting intelligence reporting to a place where part of it was declassified for sharing with families. At other times, there was an unwillingness within the IC to share with the families. Often this was because of some sensitive operational matter or the sensitivity of the information in general. I would try to convey to the intelligence collectors and the operators that the family had more to lose than any of us; they have more stake in this game than any of us, so we should trust that they wouldn't share information if we cleared it for them. I'd reinforce that with the families. "We're telling you something, but this is very sensitive, this can't get out, you can't tell this to your cousin or share with extended family. This can't get out." I never had a family violate that trust.

It was a challenge with people in the IC, especially those who work in regions with less familiarity with hostage-taking cases. There are some regions of the world where hostage-takings are more regular. People who work in those regions in the IC, DoD, State Department, and FBI are all familiar with responding to hostage-taking events and engaging with families. If you have a one-off somewhere that's out of the ordinary, you have to start from scratch and explain to everybody why we do this and why it's important.

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After Soleimani: What's Next for Iran's Quds Force?

By Ariane M. Tabatabai

With Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF) commander Qassem Soleimani dead, a key question before U.S. policymakers and analysts lies in the future of this unit, most closely associated with Iran's troubling regional activities ranging from interventions in various conflicts and support for terrorist groups and insurgents. This article considers Soleimani's legacy for the IRGC-QF, analyzes his successor's characteristics, and assesses what the transition may mean for the organization. It argues that the IRGC-QF is unlikely to change its modus operandi significantly and that the new Quds Force commander, Esmail Qaani, is likely to ensure a smooth transition.

Qassem Soleimani is dead. The 62-year-old commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) elite unit known as the Quds Force (IRGC-QF) had long been one of the United States' most effective foes. Often described as the "shadow commander," Soleimani had played a key role in designing and executing Iran's policies in Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. But his reach was not simply limited to those theaters and countries, though they were the most challenging for the United States. The network of non-state allies and partners Soleimani helped cultivate is now composed of thousands of forces in the region and its influence extends beyond the Middle East and South Asia. When President Trump made the decision to target Soleimani, the administration stated that it was acting to disrupt what it has described as an "imminent" attack and to reestablish deterrence—although this claim has been disputed.¹ But it also likely hoped that the move would at least help to undermine the IRGC-QF and thwart its operations. To be sure, Soleimani occupied a unique place in Iran's security architecture and in some ways, was perhaps unparalleled in his ability to advance Iranian national interests as viewed by the regime. But the degree to which Soleimani's death will change the course of the Quds Force's activities in the region and beyond is up for debate. To make sense of what that might mean going forward,

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it is critical to understand what the IRGC-QF could look like with Soleimani out of the equation.

The question of the implications of Soleimani's death and the potential disruption or continuity in IRGC-QF activities is significant for a number of reasons. Today, Iran is directly and indirectly involved in half a dozen countries in its region from Afghanistan to Lebanon and Yemen. The IRGC-QF plays a central role in many of these theaters, and the network of non-state allies and partners the unit has helped cultivate counts thousands of forces across several different groups and organizations to include Lebanese Hezbollah, the Shia militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and Fatemiyoun (Afghan Shi'a militia) and Zeinabiyoun (Pakistani Shi'a militia) in Syria. It remains to be seen if and how Soleimani's death will change Iran's footprint, the breadth, depth, and scope of Tehran's relations with its proxies, and how the country intervenes abroad—primarily through 'train and advise' missions rather than direct and large deployments of troops. Under Soleimani, the IRGC-QF was instrumental in allowing Iran to compete with an otherwise conventionally superior and nuclear-armed adversary, the United States, and its partners and allies. With Soleimani gone, Washington must understand how Iran is likely to compete and how the IRGC-QF will fit in the Iranian national security and defense toolbox.

There are several reasons to believe that the IRGC-QF's operations will not fundamentally shift following Soleimani's death. These are divided into two broad categories: organizational and personal. First, on the organizational side, the force today is institutionalized and bureaucratic. It is far from the one-man show that one may assume existed based on Soleimani's stature (an image that had been cultivated both top-down by the Islamic Republic in general and the IRGC in particular and bottom-up by a populace looking for a protector and eager to find solace amidst regional crises and threats). Second, currently very little is known about Soleimani's successor, as he has largely operated under the radar. But what is known of him indicates that he is likely to replace Soleimani with ease and continue his work.

This article begins with a brief overview of the IRGC-QF and how it came into being. It discusses how the unit helped formalize a policy pre-dating it and, indeed, even the Islamic Republic itself. Next, this paper will discuss Soleimani's leadership style and his legacy, before describing what is known of his successor, Esmail Qaani. Finally, the article will examine what is next for the IRGC-QF and what to expect in terms of Iranian policy going forward.

The Shadow Commander and the Quds Force

Iran established the IRGC-QF in 1990 to replace the Office of Liberation Movements (OLM) under direct order from Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei,² who was then in the early stages of his tenure, having assumed the supreme leadership a year prior.

The OLM helped build the infrastructure for the IRGC-QF in the early 1980s. Its first major mission abroad was the deployment

of a number of its forces to Lebanon in 1982 to help organize and support the Shi'a militias fighting against Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon. Shortly thereafter, the OLM would play an important role in helping unite these militias under the banner of Lebanese Hezbollah.³ But it did not have to start its work from scratch. Indeed, already prior to the revolution, under the U.S.-aligned Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (known as the Shah), Iran was working to cultivate ties with various non-state partners in the region, including in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan—in other words, countries where the Islamic Republic would intervene and/or support non-state actors.⁴ At the time, the main motivation for Tehran seeking such relationships resided in its Cold War fear of a communist takeover. Under the Shah, the main intelligence organization in the country—better known by its Persian acronym, SAVAK—was in charge of these relationships.⁵

The IRGC-QF was established to succeed the OLM, which had, in turn, taken over parts of the SAVAK's mandate with the 1979 Islamic Revolution transforming the Imperial State of Iran into the Islamic Republic of Iran. The new elite force was designed to tackle the country's regional interventions and proxy relations. In 1998, Soleimani became the IRGC-QF's second commander, succeeding General Ahmad Vahidi. Far from a disruption in the nascent organization's activities, Soleimani's arrival helped it thrive and expand its efforts. Soleimani's privileged relationship with Khamenei and the leader's trust in the commander were instrumental in providing him with the leeway and resources needed to accomplish this.⁶ During Soleimani's tenure, the Quds Force evolved into a fully fledged bureaucratic organization, with different departments, each overseeing various portfolios. The transition from Vahidi to Soleimani and the evolution of the IRGC-QF under the latter took place against the backdrop of growing concerns in Iran about the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan in the 1990s. By the end of the decade, the two governments would come to the brink of war. Soleimani would seek to prevent such a conflict from materializing as he understood what warfare in a terrain such as that of Afghanistan and with tribes would entail.⁷ He would be instrumental to preventing Iran and Afghanistan engaging in a direct military exchange, choosing instead to undertake an 'advise and assist' mission whereby Tehran would support friendly entities, chiefly the Northern Alliance, as part of an effort that would continue until the collapse of the Taliban following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.⁸

Soleimani took over the Quds Force once the unit had been established and had already been operating, but he vastly expanded and institutionalized it. Due to the paramount importance of its portfolio, the force reported directly to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei who also appoints the unit's commander.⁹ Soleimani was often seen sitting next to Khamenei during key events and by all indications shared an intimate and trusting relationship with him. In turn, this privileged access to the highest authority in the land helped propel Soleimani to a position very few had occupied in Iranian politics, often described as the second most powerful man in Iran. Demonstrating Soleimani's importance to Iran in general and Khamenei personally, Khamenei attended and chaired the emergency meeting of the Supreme National Security Council held the day after Soleimani's January 3, 2020, death where the Iranian response to the killing was likely discussed.¹⁰

Although the IRGC-QF's mandate was primarily military in nature, its leadership often served as a second diplomatic corps for Iran. This was due to two main reasons. First, from a strategic and

operational standpoint, given the primary role played by proxy forces in the Iranian defense doctrine and these forces' presence in key regional states, it made sense for the IRGC-QF to also operate on a political track as well as its military one. Second, Soleimani was an incredibly effective operator, known for his charisma and ability to build, mature, and sustain relationships.¹¹ Hence, Iran was able to use his ties to key individuals to advance its agenda. At home like abroad, Soleimani maintained good working relationships with key players, ranging from Iran's foreign minister, Javad Zarif (mostly known for his pro-engagement stance and willingness to work with his American counterparts), to the heads of various terrorist groups and militias that his team trained, advised, and assisted.¹²

In neighboring Iraq, Soleimani played the role of power broker. Although he is best known in the United States for his work with the Shi'a militias, he also had relationships with the central authority and the Kurds.¹³ On some occasions, he had even been able to coordinate with Sunnis—albeit much less successfully given that he was largely associated in Iraq with Iranian sectarianism.¹⁴

Within his own force, Soleimani was known as a warm leader whose leadership style was distinct.¹⁴ For Americans who know Soleimani as the architect of so many nefarious activities and who had the blood of thousands of people, including many Americans, on his hands, this may sound strange. However, Soleimani cultivated the image of a down-to-earth leader who sat on the floor with his men and cried with them when a brother-in-arms died. To his men, Soleimani was not "general" or "commander," despite being one of the most important figures in Iran. To them, he was simply, "Qassem" or "brother Qassem."¹⁵ In fact, in describing what he characterized as Iran's "ghostly puppet master," U.S. General Stanley McChrystal used such unlikely words "humble," "soft-spoken," and a "calculating and practical strategist."¹⁶

Soleimani clearly believed this style of leadership to be advantageous for his force. In his own words, Soleimani saw being personable as a key strength of Iranian military commanders during the Iran-Iraq War and strove to be such a leader himself.

One of our war's specificities, which removed inequalities, laid in the initiatives that took place on the front of the Sacred Defense.^b The difference between us and the world's classic militaries was one word. If we want to know the difference between [Guard commanders] Hajj Ahmad Motevaselian, Hajj Hemmat [...] and a classic military commander, in addition to spiritual and behavioral matters, it [boils down to] 'come and go.' This means that our commander would stand on the battlefield and go in the front and say 'come,' but the classic commander would stand in the back and say, 'go.' This [...] had a great impact and brought about many sacrifices.¹⁷

In publicly available footage and images, Soleimani is seen embodying this thinking. In a number of IRGC-published material, including footage of his presence on the battlefield, Soleimani was

a For example, in its counter-Islamic State efforts, Iran attempted to recruit Sunnis to fight alongside Iranian-backed Shi'a militias in an effort to undermine the narrative of Iran as a sectarian player—which parts of the regime saw as counterproductive. By its own estimates, however, Tehran was not able to mobilize more than a few hundred Sunnis to join its campaign. Author interviews, senior Iranian officials, Tehran, Berlin, and Vienna, 2013-2016.

b This is the term used by Iranian officials and military leaders to refer to the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988).



This undated photo, released by the official website of the office of the Iranian supreme leader, shows the new commander of the Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani. (Office of the Iranian Supreme Leader/AP Photo)

approachable.¹⁸ He visited the battlefields of Syria and greeted every man on the frontline, exchanging pleasantries with them. This helped him build a cult following that was instrumental to maintaining morale.

Another strength of Soleimani's approach was found in his careful navigation of the Iranian domestic political landscape. Soleimani took efforts to avoid being seen as too openly engaged in politics and mostly stayed above factional disputes. There were rare exceptions when he intervened—often privately, though at least on a few occasions also publicly to advocate for his preferred course of action, virtually always to ensure elite cohesion and national unity.¹⁹ For instance, in the summer of 1999, Soleimani co-signed a letter of warning to then President Mohammad Khatami, a reformist who had sought to moderate the regime at home and abroad.²⁰ In the letter, Soleimani and his fellow IRGC leaders threatened to crack down on student protests if he refused to do so.²¹ In a perhaps more unexpected example of Soleimani's stance toward domestic politics, Soleimani publicly advocated against alienating large swaths of the populace on ideological grounds in 2017 (albeit in the same paternalistic manner as the very individuals he was likely criticizing):

If we always use such titles as [women] without the hijab and hijabi, or reformist and conservative, then who is left? These are all our people. Are your children religious? Are they all the same to you? No. But a father will absorb all of them and society is your family. [...] If we say it is just me and my own Hizballahi buddies, this will not be protecting the revolution. The prayer leader must be able to absorb the hijabis and those

*who do not wear the veil together.*²²

That Soleimani often chose to preserve an apolitical image meant that when he did take a stance, his voice mattered. This willingness and ability to largely operate outside domestic politics was key to Soleimani's success. He was able to develop effective working relationships with individuals belonging to different factions regardless of who occupied the helms of the executive branch. Similarly, at least until the rise of the Islamic State in 2014, Soleimani preferred to remain behind the scenes.²³ And despite acquiescing to some publicity to reassure domestic audiences and deterring foreign adversaries, leading to a significant boost in his public profile, Soleimani often chose to operate in the shadows. He gave very few public interviews.

As has been outlined, Soleimani helped transform the IRGC-QF from a nascent and small unit into one of the main tools of power projection at Iran's disposal. Soleimani achieved this in no small part due to his leadership style, which the Revolutionary Guards in general and Soleimani in particular hoped would stand in contrast to that prevalent in modern militaries. In contrast to the Shah's military, the IRGC-QF sought to display the image of a fairly flat organization whose leaders were of the people and not above them. Soleimani left behind a well-established and bureaucratic organization, deeply ingrained in the Iranian security structure. It remains to be seen how the IRGC-QF will evolve after Soleimani. To understand this, the following sections will briefly describe what we know about his successor and what that can tell us about the future of the Quds Force.

In the Shadow of the Shadow Commander: Soleimani's Successor

Just hours after Soleimani's death, Khamenei appointed his successor.²⁴ Brigadier General Esmail Qaani is unknown to most Iranians, let alone Americans. This is because he often operated in the shadow of the Shadow Commander.²⁵ Like Soleimani, Qaani joined the IRGC as a young man.²⁶ He was 20 when the Islamic Revolution toppled the Shah, leading to the institutionalization of a guerilla force that had been created during the events culminating in the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979: the IRGC. Shortly after, Iraq attacked Iran, starting the eight-year Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988).²⁷ Qaani joined the war effort, and like Soleimani and many other important figures in the Iranian military landscape today, his experience as a veteran of the conflict shaped his worldview.

Among Qaani's many duties during the war, he had responsibility overseeing two units that were partly composed of Afghan fighters.²⁸ This is significant because some of the Afghan veterans of the Iran-Iraq War and/or their sons today belong to the Fatemiyoun forces, an Afghan Shi'a militia fighting in Syria to prop up the Assad regime.²⁹ At the time of the Iran-Iraq War, these forces were embedded with Iranian forces.³⁰ Some 2,000 Afghans reportedly died in that war.³¹ Following the Iran-Iraq War, Iran's relationship with Afghan forces continued. At home, Iran was hosting millions of Afghan refugees. In Afghanistan, the Taliban overthrew the government of President Burhanuddin Rabbani in 1996, increasing Iranian concerns about an adversarial force. Tehran supported the Northern Alliance as a "counterforce" to the Taliban while avoiding direct military conflict with Kabul. Qaani oversaw Iran's operations in Afghanistan and support for the Northern Alliance.³² Later, an Afghan veteran of the war who had lived in Iran, Ali Reza Tavasoli (better known by his *nom de guerre*, Abu Hamed), established the Fatemiyoun in 2012.³³ The force reportedly started with some 22 fighters whose stated objective was to "defend the holy sites" in Syria.³⁴ In practice, the force was created to support the Assad regime during the Syrian civil war (and to do so at a low cost for Iran). The fighters would be paid a few hundred dollars per month and promised residency rights to essentially serve as cannon fodder for Iran's efforts in Syria.³⁵ These Afghan forces deploying to Syria would fall under the purview of the IRGC-QF.³⁶ Thanks to his decades-long experience with these fighters—in some cases, over two generations—as well as the Northern Alliance, Qaani may help further develop this aspect of Iran's proxy relationship.

After the Iran-Iraq war, Qaani was tasked with carrying a number of different operations, ranging from suppression of dissent at home and counternarcotic and train-and-advise missions abroad.³⁷ Later, he worked in intelligence and counterintelligence.³⁸

Although he lacks the charisma, interpersonal skills, and accolades of his predecessor, Qaani bears striking resemblance to Soleimani in many respects.³⁹ He was likely chosen in part due to the fact that he was well-positioned to oversee this period of transition and limit departure from Soleimani's *modus operandi*. Qaani's friendship and collaboration with Soleimani goes back to the early days of the Iran-Iraq War, as does his relationship with Khamenei.⁴⁰ In fact, Soleimani had reportedly requested Qaani to join the IRGC-QF.⁴¹ Later, Qaani served as Soleimani's deputy and worked alongside him for decades (likely having taken the position in the mid- to late 1990s).⁴² He, too, prefers to operate in the shadows (and was perhaps also instructed by Soleimani and even Khamenei to do so as part of his grooming to serve as a credible successor to

Soleimani). Indeed, according to IRGC sources, Soleimani himself had nominated his successor and prepared the groundwork for the succession as he had anticipated that he would be killed at some point.⁴³ Qaani has only given a handful of interviews to the press. In that sense, he appears eager to continue remaining largely out of domestic politics and focusing his efforts on the force's operations in the region as his predecessor had done. Tellingly, after Qaani was appointed, Zarif stated that he had a good working relationship with Qaani (as he had with Soleimani), noting they had spoken several times since Qaani's appointment as the new commander of the Quds Force.⁴⁴ Qaani is regarded as an effective leader and one whose depth and breadth of experience is likely to help the IRGC-QF continue its operations abroad during this period of transition marked by U.S.-Iran tensions. Qaani has both supervised intelligence and operational portfolios and has a long track record of complementing Soleimani's efforts in nearly all theaters of operation.^{45 c}

Soleimani's reliance on personal relationships was both a source of strength and a potential source of weakness for the Islamic Republic going forward. To be clear, there is no doubt that the IRGC-QF will continue its advise and assist missions to all the groups Soleimani had cultivated and potentially create and support new ones going forward. However, personal relations matter, and that is especially the case in a region where informal channels and personal relationships are often critical to the success of any player's initiatives. Hence, Soleimani's death and Qaani's relative lack of charisma and interpersonal skills will no doubt have an impact on Iran-proxy leader-to-leader relations and Iran's operations abroad—though a likely much less significant one than the United States may have hoped for when President Trump decided to target Soleimani.

Looking Ahead: What's Next for the IRGC-QF?

Soleimani's death may rob the Islamic Republic of a fairly (and unlikely) popular figure whose name recognition extended beyond the regime's immediate base in Iran and proxies in the region.⁴⁶ And, at least in the short-term, with Soleimani out of the picture, his forces (both the IRGC-QF and the proxies he helped cultivate and support) may see a drop in morale—which they may very well compensate for with an increased will to fight. That said, although the regime in general and the IRGC-QF in particular may be driven by revenge, the unit has demonstrated that it is pragmatic, and while Soleimani's death certainly stokes emotions within the force (and the regime), his men are likely to continue to keep their strategic objectives in mind as they continue to formulate their response to the U.S. targeting of their leader. For example, while in Afghanistan the Quds Force may still largely refrain from taking destabilizing actions with security implications for its own country (given that the United States and Iran still share many overlapping objectives and interests there), the unit is likely to see Iraq and the Persian

c Qaani's successor as the IRGC-QF deputy commander is General Mohammad Hejazi. Hejazi was appointed by IRGC commander-in-chief, Major General Hossein Salami. Hejazi complements Qaani's experience and skills, having served in the IRGC since its founding. Also a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War, Hejazi was involved with the Basij militias, the crackdown on the 2009 Green Movement, and in operations in Lebanon. His profile stands in contrast to that of Soleimani in some ways, having earned graduate degrees (including a doctorate). "Gozaresh | Ba Savabeq-e Janeshin-e Jadid-e Niru-ye Quds-e Sepah Ashna Shavid," Tasnim News, January 20, 2020.

Gulf region as its primary areas of competition with and opportunity for revenge against the United States.

But there are other reasons to believe that the IRGC-QF will continue its most nefarious activities in the region and beyond. Soleimani helped build an adaptable institution that would outlast him. During his tenure, the organization grew and became more effective. The IRGC-QF is now able to train, advise, assist, mobilize, and deploy forces in different theaters (sending Pakistani fighters to go fight in Syria, for example), not just support local militias as it once did (supporting Lebanese militias in Lebanon).⁴⁷ Qaani's leadership style may differ in some ways from Soleimani's, but it is nonetheless likely to be generally aligned with the approach of his predecessor. The likely impact of the targeted killing is akin to a well-established sports team losing a reputable and effective coach. The team's performance may take a hit, but it will continue to exist and play the game. If the 'new coach' is of a comparable caliber and has a similar style, the team may be able to minimize the potential hurdles of a transition. In this case, a less charismatic Qaani may be unable to fully fill his predecessor's shoes and rise to his status, but he is likely to guarantee a certain level of continuity. And in this, he is supported by an entire bureaucracy, which is likely to minimize any disturbance caused by leadership decapitation.

In some areas, Qaani's past experience may even help the IRGC-QF further develop certain core competencies and relationships. For example, given his experience commanding units with significant Afghan populations during the Iran-Iraq War, his understanding of Taliban rule in the 1990s, and his relationships with the Afghan militias established since the Iran-Iraq War to support Iran's efforts

in Syria, Qaani may be well-positioned to help the Fatemiyoun develop further and adjust to whatever may come next. With the Syrian civil war winding down, the Fatemiyoun (Afghan Shi'a militia) fighters could turn their attention to a different battlefield. After all, the forces were not local to Syria and they were mobilized to be deployed in a foreign country (Syria).⁴⁸ Now, they are organized and combat experienced. Iran could send them to Afghanistan to advance its objectives there (especially in the event that U.S.-Iran competition and tensions in the region spill over into that country) or even redirect them to a third theater. For example, the Fatemiyoun could be redirected to Iraq if the situation continues to degrade there or to Yemen if the ongoing war in that country does not end. After all, having promised residency rights for the fighters and their families that could entail access to healthcare and free education at a time when Iran's economy is crumbling, the regime would have an incentive not just to leverage these forces' experience and know-how but also to avoid paying them what it has promised if and when these fighters return from war.

More broadly, given that the IRGC-QF's tactics and operations have borrowed elements from preceding organizations (from the SAVAK to OLM) to advance its interests, it is unlikely to depart from them fundamentally. Instead, it can be expected that there will be tweaks and an evolution in the IRGC-QF's modus operandi but not an entirely new playbook. After all, if the past four decades of the Iranian experience—which have included war, sanctions, isolation, and domestic unrest—demonstrate anything, it is that the IRGC in general and the IRGC-QF in particular are resilient and adaptive. **CTC**

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Piety Is in the Eye of the Bureaucrat: The Islamic State's Strategy of Civilian Control

By Gina Vale

A collection of 24 internal Islamic State documents—many of which are released for analysis here for the first time—highlights the group's preoccupation and presentation of its 'caliphate' as an ideologically superior and pious society. In its own records, the Islamic State consistently framed its commitment to an extreme and 'pure' interpretation of Islamic doctrine in opposition to the malign influence of its 'apostate' or 'infidel' rivals. The documents indicate that through the imposition of policies including strict behavioral codes, educational reform, or forced 'conversion' of captive populations, the Islamic State sought to translate citizens' compliance with pious ideals into long-term acceptance of the group's ideological legitimacy and governing authority.

The establishment and governance of the Islamic State's so-called caliphate from June 2014 marked a multifaceted victory for the group. It demonstrated supremacy over its rivals in military prowess, administrative and bureaucratic capabilities, and fulfillment of ideological commitments. In recent years, scholars and analysts have furthered understanding of the Islamic State's myriad governance activities—from the functioning of its treasury and finances¹ to the foundations of its judicial system² and even its provision of goods, aid, and services.³ While the Islamic State governed through unrelenting authoritarianism, conformity of civilians was vital for the functioning and legitimacy of its proto-state project.⁴ As the Islamic State now seeks to recover from its territorial collapse, it is important to understand how the group sought to engender a—practically and ideologically—compliant population.

This article seeks to highlight an area of Islamic State policy that underpinned many of its governance practices: piety promotion. For the Islamic State, piety and devotion to its sharia translated into commitment to the group's ideals and authority. The promotion of piety through behavioral strictures served to encourage the populace's internalization of its ideology and rejection of rivals—whether local 'apostate' or foreign 'crusader' governments, or 'infidel' traditions and customs. Much of the Islamic State's propaganda has focused on a 'clash of civilizations' or a 'war against

Islam.⁵ The group's battle for local hearts and minds came in the form of regulations to 'correct' and ensure uniformity of behavior. Most importantly, this was not limited to one sector of its society. Though afforded varying degrees of freedom within the 'caliphate,' the Islamic State's focus on (its interpretation of) 'Islamic' piety ran across its policies for its members, governed civilians, and even captive 'infidel' populations. Close examination of such directives can shed new light on the Islamic State's strategy of civilian control and the ideological legacy left in its wake.

Data for this study is drawn from 24 internal Islamic State documents dated between December 2014 and October 2016. These documents were obtained by U.S. military forces operating in Iraq and Syria and declassified through the Combating Terrorism Center's Harmony Program, and many are released here for analysis for the first time. The full collection, including English translation, is now available on the CTC's website. The documents include a number of previously unseen fatwas, marriage contracts, official letters, public notices and memoranda, and administrative forms. Documents included in the collection reveal four key tenets of the Islamic State's vision of ideological piety: shari'i attire, travel restrictions, sex segregation, and religious 'education.' Though interdependent within the caliphate society, these will be examined in turn for analytical clarity. The examination of these primary sources provides rare insight into the Islamic State's efforts to convert, coerce, and control individuals under its rule and discredit the practices of its enemies.

Shari'i Attire

The introduction of conservative dress regulations, which preceded its caliphate declaration, was among the first signs of the Islamic State's governance activities. The group's aim was explicitly to end "debauchery resulting from grooming and overdressing" and manifested as a series of public information billboards as early as 2013.⁶ As the group continued to develop its bureaucratic infrastructure, a series of fatwas and policy notices were issued on official Islamic State stationery to formalize its parameters for what it considered pious behavior. Importantly, these regulations had an overt and disproportionate focus on women's bodies and through them, from the group's point of view, the protection of collective honor.

On December 18, 2014, four fatwas specifically concerning women's shari'i attire were released among a series of edicts from the Islamic State's Research and Fatwa Issuing Committee.^a These documents reflect the group's imposition of an increasingly strict and conservative female dress code, evolving from a niqab and abaya to include long gloves, socks, and a burqa with a thick, twin-layered

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a Shari'i is the adjectival form of sharia, meaning 'legal.' As the Islamic State sought to justify its rulings on sharia law, documents that stipulate its dress code often refer to women's full coverage as the "shari'i hijab."

veil covering the entire face and eyes.^b Even exposure of women's eyes, particularly if eyeliner or make-up on the cheeks is used, was completely forbidden, and according to Fatwa 40 (Item D), it was necessary "to cover her eyes with even a light fabric to avoid temptation."⁷ The seven required "characteristics of the legal hijab" were outlined in Fatwa 44 (Item H, see Figure 1).^c These include full body coverage of the face and hands; thick and loose-fitting material without adornment or colors to avoid attracting attention; and the prohibition of perfumes when women "go out and pass by men."⁸ Most importantly, it stipulated that the attire "should not look like [clothing] that the infidel females wear."⁹ Thus, through the introduction of 'correct' shari'i attire, the Islamic State sought to distinguish itself from communities deemed indecent or impious, and avoid shameful 'temptation' by obscuring women's bodies.

The accompanying three fatwas issued in December 2014 provide further justification for some of the most important characteristics of the shari'i hijab. Fatwa 39 (Item C) stipulates that "colored abayas, especially those of tempting colors, shiny, velvet, or stretchy [fabric], are prohibited."¹⁰ Interestingly, the document refers to hadiths that observe female companions of the Prophet

wearing black headscarves.¹¹ Rather than solely doctrinal citation, this newly released edict is the only Islamic State document (known to the author) that provides the group's independent justification for its black dress code: avoidance of shame. Black is viewed as the color of least adornment and therefore the one that attracts the least attention from onlookers.¹² Once again, the responsibility of avoiding 'forbidden things' and 'tempting others' is transferred to women through the imposition of full and unappealing coverage, eventually resulting in their visual erasure from the public sphere.

It is important to note that men were not exempt from the Islamic State's dress code. Edicts issued in January 2015 point to the group's wider concern with societal decency and rejection of impious customs. Fatwa 56 (Item M) prohibits "Western clothing" that is viewed as revealing and "mimics the ways of the infidels."¹³ Similarly, Fatwa 55 (Item L) forbids "outfits that are low-hanging and drag below the heels."¹⁴ This edict reinforces multiple Islamic State pamphlets and propaganda videos that emphasize the necessary short length of men's trousers and dishdashas.⁶ However, though the group directly controlled men's attire, it did not place emphasis

- b A niqab is a veil over the face that leaves only the eyes clear, as distinguished from a hijab (barrier or partition), which is a headscarf used to cover only the head (hair) and neck with the face fully visible. A burqa is the most concealing Islamic garment, which covers the full face and body, often to the ankles. Gina Vale, "Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, October 2019, p. 3.
- c Islamic State departments and provincial offices kept rigorous records of their documentation. Here, Fatwa 44 refers to the 44th edict released by the group's central Research and Fatwa Issuing Committee. Numbering on other documents, such as marriage and birth certificates, can indicate the scale of the group's management and bureaucratic control of its residents' lives. Each of the numbered fatwas referred to in this article were released by this Islamic State committee using this numbering system.

- d A hadith is a record of the words or actions of the Prophet Muhammad. Hadiths are considered a critical source for religious law and moral guidance. However, some scholars have questioned the reliability of some hadiths.
- e A dishdasha is a men's ankle-length garment, usually with long sleeves, similar to a robe or tunic. The Islamic state strictly monitored men's clothing to ensure the length of dishdashas or trousers did not pass the ankle. See "[Raid of the Villages to Spread Guidance]," Islamic State, May 4, 2016.

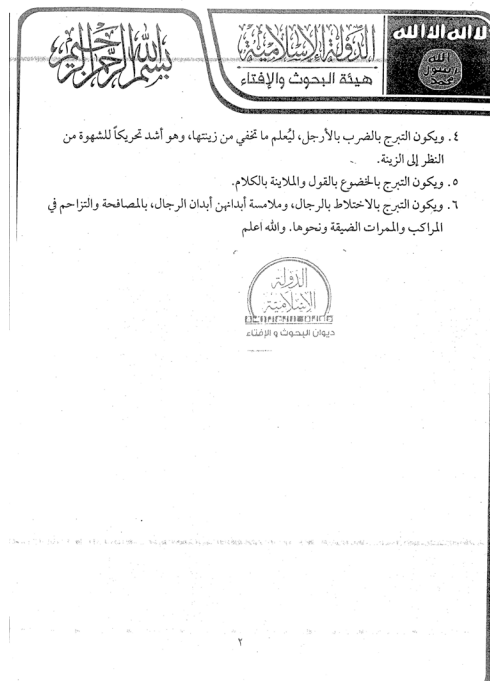
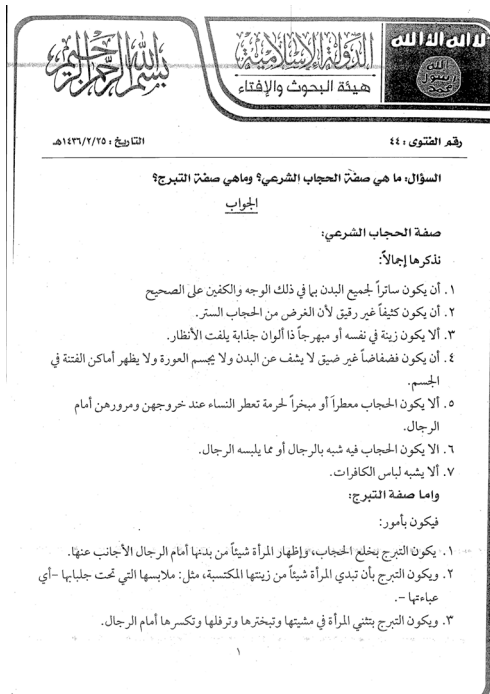


Figure 1 – Item H: Islamic State, "Fatwa 44," December 18, 2014

on regulating male sexual desire.^f Instead, the Islamic State sought to eradicate illicit sexual interaction through control of women's bodies and behavior. As such, Fatwa 44 (Item H) also specifies six “characteristics of immodesty.” These include a woman showing a part of her body or undergarments to a male stranger; flirting and associating with men; swaying, strutting, and walking seductively; and “making sounds with her high heels in order to show off what is hidden, which enflames passions more than looking at the ornaments worn.”¹⁵ In this way, women's dress becomes a physical barrier to intermixing and *zina* (fornication or adultery), which are offenses under Islamic State rule punishable by lashing or even stoning.¹⁶ The minor details of women's dress thus become a matter of public decency and societal morality, which are stipulated and controlled by men.

The violent punishment of women who contravene the group's strictures has garnered significant scholarly and media attention on the issue of female members' commitment to Islamic State's ideals.¹⁷ The extreme interpretation and implementation of sharia law has also been documented as a key source of appeal to foreign—particularly Western—female recruits, who experienced Islamophobia or discrimination in their countries of origin.¹⁸ While this may have appealed to some who joined the group, Islamic State records also reveal a significant number of defiant women punished and imprisoned (see Item N).¹⁹ To meet its need for female-focused security, the Islamic State created a women's branch of the *hisba* (morality police) in February 2014.²⁰ A 2015 memorandum (Item O) announces the “reactivation”^g of the female *hisba* brigade and requests nominations for candidates to operate in Manbij, al-Raqqa, al-Mayadin, and al-Bukamal.²¹

Women enrolled in the *hisba* brigades were entitled to exclusive privileges, such as the ability to earn a wage, own and carry weapons, and patrol the streets without a *mahram* (male guardian or chaperone).²² However, even women acting within the Islamic State organization were not immune from scrutiny. Fatwa 41 (Item E) forbids a woman from wearing a gun holster or explosive vest over the abaya that would reveal her body shape below. However, it also supports the need for women to carry an AK-47; they are “permitted to do so because it is viewed as in the case of women carrying handbags.”²³ Furthermore, a signed “written pledge” form (Item P) assigns protective responsibility to drivers who transport female workers in Raqqa province. The contractor is required to promise that all female passengers will wear the full shari'i dress including covering their eyes during the journey and that they sit inside the car and do not stop en route. The signatory is obliged to accept the appropriate punishment for breach of these conditions.²⁴ Thus, the Islamic State demonstrated that its own operatives were not above the law,²⁵ reinforcing its aversion to corruption and dedication to caliphate-wide piety and compliance with authority.

The stated purpose of the female *hisba* brigades is “to deal with female violators” of the Islamic State's behavioral codes, and their

duties largely concerned meting out physical punishments. However, it is important to consider their strategic aim and impact. While violence provided the immediate impetus for conformity, in the long term it was presumably hoped that civilians' attitudes would gradually change to embrace conservative dress, pious living, and the legitimacy of Islamic State's sharia law.

Travel Restrictions

Throughout the Islamic State's caliphate era, movement within and beyond the group's territory was highly restricted. Solid external borders served to control and contain civilians within the ‘caliphate.’ First, they provided security to prevent infiltration from enemy forces or spies. Second, the Islamic State needed a substantial population to govern in order to legitimize its proto-state project; therefore, prevention of escape was necessary to justify the caliphate proclamation. In light of this, it is important to consider the framing of travel bans within the group's documentation. Although security is noted as a significant concern, it is once again presented within a wider ideological struggle of a (physical and figurative) in- versus out-group. The Islamic State purported to offer the only ‘true’ interpretation and implementation of sharia law within the protective confines of its caliphate. Conversely, in *dar al-kufr* (lands of infidelity), all other governing actors are presented as impious, corrupt, and a threat to Muslims.

From as early as December 2014, the Islamic State's Research and Fatwa Issuance Committee released an edict (Item K) that states “it is not permissible for the people of the Islamic State to travel to the territories of the infidels, and they should be prevented from doing so.”²⁶ While temporary travel for commerce was deemed a necessary evil, it was accompanied with the caveat that “it is required to show the ability to reject the infidels, to hate polytheism, disbelief and its people, and to avoid having them as allies.”²⁷ The wording of this edict echoes that of Fatwa 37 (Item A), which relates specifically to travel to Syrian regime territory. Importantly, Fatwa 37 highlights the responsibility upon exiting the caliphate of protecting the faith and justifies its travel ban due to “religiously prohibitive conditions.”²⁸ The Islamic State thus exerted control over its citizens through its concern with the malign influence of other actors beyond its borders.

Similar to its dress and behavioral codes, travel restrictions disproportionately impacted the freedoms of women living under Islamic State rule. Even within the group's territory, the preoccupation with illicit intermixing required women to be accompanied at all times by a *mahram* (see Item I).²⁹ The woman's *mahram*—ideally her husband—was granted complete control, even to the point of forbidding her to leave the house.³⁰ The authority transferred to a male guardian was documented in a letter written by ‘Abu Fahd al-Tunisi’ (Item Q), presumably a male Tunisian Islamic State clerk or administrative officer. Here, ‘Abu Fahd’ grants permission for a man to approve his wife's travel to Tunisia to visit her mother. The justifications for the travel permit reveal the group's priorities. The letter emphasizes that the husband has “exhausted all kinds of harsh and soft techniques to make her change her mind” about traveling and that “if his wife doesn't visit her family, she will ask for divorce and still find another way to go to her mother.”³¹ However, “the man has no concerns over the devoutness and piety of his wife,” and therefore it is ruled that allowing her to travel would be “choosing the lesser evil.”³² A woman's temporary independence is thus, at least in this example, seen as a necessary concession to safeguard

f The author's examination of Islamic State internal policy documents and external propaganda—as well as fieldwork interviews with civilians who lived under the group's rule—demonstrates that it did not focus on controlling men's sexual desire, but instead used its imposition of the shari'i hijab (burqa) to guard against illicit contact and intermixing between the sexes.

g The author is not aware of any announcement of its dissolution before this reactivation.

her marriage and religious piety.

The Islamic State demonstrated particular concern for women without a living *mahram*, or protection, outside of its ‘caliphate.’ In October 2015, the *wali* (governor) of Raqqa province issued a memorandum requesting all emirs and soldiers report details of any female relatives held prisoner by the Assad regime to the Islamic State’s Office of Prisoner Affairs (Item R).³³ This was not the first time that the group had publicly condemned arrest of affiliated women by ‘apostates.’ In a video released in December 2014, Islamic State Commander Abu Ali al-Shishani threatened to kidnap Shi’a women and children and relatives of Lebanese soldiers in response to the arrest of his wife and two young children in Tripoli.³⁴ Later that month, Fatwa 46 (Item J) explicitly prohibited widows and children of Islamic State “martyrs” to migrate to “infidel lands.” Concerned with ideological posterity and the group’s lineage, it warns against “the son of a righteous soldier living in the land ruled by tyrannical idolaters who may one day become a soldier in the devil’s army.”³⁵ Again, the Islamic State framed its travel restrictions within a wider ideological struggle and clash between its ‘righteous’ soldiers and ‘apostate’ enemies.

Sex Segregation

To preserve public morality and avoid inappropriate contact between the sexes, the Islamic State instituted a full caliphate-wide sex segregation policy across its public spaces. Schools, hospitals, police patrols, and public-facing administrative departments all required women employees to manage the needs of its otherwise inaccessible female civilians. In some cases, this recruitment drive and opportunity to contribute to the functioning and prosperity of the caliphate appealed to willing recruits. One such example is ‘Shams,’ a Malaysian medic then in her mid-20s, who documented her journey to the Islamic State and work therein as a neonatal doctor in al-Tabqa. Her ability to run her own all-female wing of the city’s hospital resonated with supporters worldwide, making her an influential recruiter for women seeking active roles in the proto-state.³⁶

The ability for women to adopt professional roles within Islamic State’s public institutions certainly provided a source of physical and financial independence from their proscribed domestic roles as wife and mother. However, the group’s emphasis on religious piety and morality manifested in a series of directives affecting women’s operational capacity. For example, though female nurses were required to support male doctors, the sex segregation and *mahram* policies prevented ‘temptation’ by forbidding them to work alone without the supervision of a chaperone (see Item F).³⁷ These edicts also directly impacted the treatment received by patients. Fatwa 43 (Item G) states the limitations for obstetrician-gynecologists to treat female patients within the Islamic State. It dictates that male doctors are only permitted to treat female patients if there are no female doctors available. However, it interestingly suggests that “a man can treat a woman and vice versa.” Importantly, it adds the caveat that “the doctor should not remain alone with the woman during the physical check-up or treatment and he has to look only at the required spot for treatment.”³⁸ This is reinforced by an administrative order issued by al-Tabqa hospital (Item S, see Figure 2), which states that all female-section “nurses are completely prohibited from leaving an operation theater while there is a [female] patient in the room.”³⁹ While on the one hand these documents reveal a shortage of female medics, on the other, they demonstrate

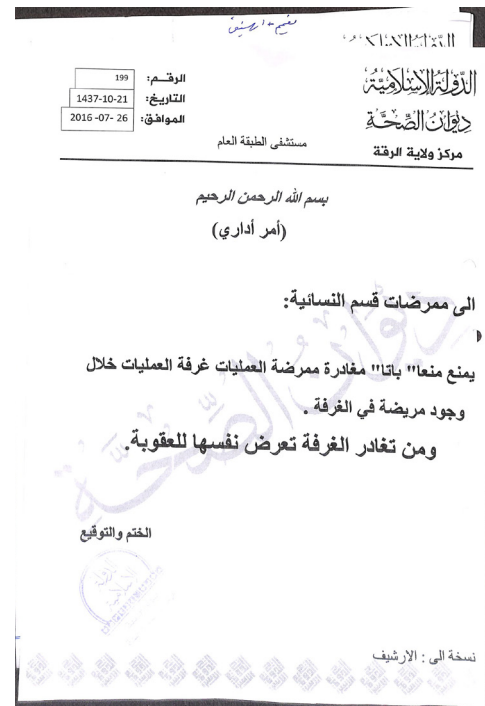


Figure 2 – Item S: Islamic State, Administrative Order from al-Tabqa Hospital to Female Section Nurses, July 26, 2016

prioritization of nurses’ duty of chaperoning female patients. It is not possible here to comment on the standard of care provided. However, it is clear that these policies sought to demonstrate the Islamic State’s unwavering commitment to morality, public decency, and piety—perhaps at the expense of service efficiency.

Concern for women’s guardianship is most acutely reflected in the Islamic State’s management of marital and family relations. Matrimony under the group’s rule was less concerned with finding true love than a transfer of responsibility from a woman’s father to a husband. A number of Islamic State marriage contracts are already published,⁴⁰ and this article adds a further two to this collection for analysis. Both are stamped and authorized by the Islamic Court as part of the Department of Judiciary and Complaints, which is responsible for the conduct of shari’i marriages. While the blank form issued by Raqqa province is entitled ‘Marriage Confirmation Document’ (Item T),⁴¹ the completed contract from Euphrates province bears the name ‘Contract of *Nikah*’ (licit sexual intercourse) (Item U).⁴² Some researchers and reporters consider such documents as evidence of the Islamic State recruiting women for “sexual jihad” to offer comfort and boost the morale of its fighters.⁴³ While the term ‘*nikah*’ can imply temporary or unofficial marriage, it is critical to consider this in the context of the Islamic State’s issuance of a formal contract for lawful wedlock. Indeed, official birth certificates issued by the group require proof of marriage to confirm legitimacy of children.⁴⁴ With a high mortality or ‘martyrdom’ rate of fighters, marriage in Islamic State was temporary by design. A *nikah* contract thus facilitated licit sexual intercourse in sometimes short-term partnerships and legitimized resulting offspring as descendants of the ‘caliphate.’

Both marriage documents emphasize the custodial responsibility of men over women. This concerns demonstration of financial provision as well as the guarantee of her ‘sexual purity’ prior to marriage. In line with the traditional custom of bride price, the contract

from the Euphrates province (Item U) details the condition of marriage upon the groom's immediate payment of five mithqals of 21ct gold (approximately 18 grams) followed by a delayed installment of 19 mithqals (approximately 70 grams).⁴⁵ Furthermore, each contract requires confirmation of the bride's virginity status, and that her guardian be present and provide a fingerprint to authorize the nuptials. In fact, the blank marriage confirmation document from al-Raqqa (Item T) omits space for the bride's fingerprints, leaving headings for only her groom, guardian, and two (male) witnesses.⁴⁶ The details of these documents indicate Islamic State's concern with the legitimacy of the legal and religious institution of marriage. While the bride may financially benefit from the union, it is only through guarantee of her sexual purity and transfer of guardianship from father to husband. In this way, the Islamic State ensures that responsibility for women's piety and morality is delegated to accountable male relatives.

Religious 'Education'

A prominent focus of the Islamic State's external propaganda has been its commitment to religious education. Beyond the traditional bounds of the classroom, the group's *dawa* (proselytization) program also included the indoctrination of adults and teenagers through sharia courses and institutes, Qur'anic recitation competitions, and the religious conversion of captive populations.⁴⁷ The group sought to transform public spaces into amphitheatres of ideological learning. The most common occurrences were public punishments—amputations, floggings, and executions—to educate on criminality and immorality, as well as *dawa* caravan events with members giving sermons and distributing pamphlets.⁴⁸ These activities served to foster a more religiously devout and doctrinally fluent population. Most importantly, the Islamic State explicitly permitted the “cursing of those who promote heresy, debauchery, and infidelity or any of the forbidden acts” (see Item B).⁴⁹ In a three-page fatwa (the longest in this collection) issued in 2015, the group's Research and Fatwa Issuing Committee conclude that apostate collaborators and heretics should be cursed.⁵⁰ Thus, citizens of the caliphate were educated and actively encouraged to monitor others' behavior and identify those who strayed from or violated the group's ideological tenets.

Education—as both an intellectual and social activity—was also an effective recruitment tool for the Islamic State. The reopening of schools, provision of teaching materials, and encouragement of participation in activities filled a significant void in public services in Iraq and Syria prior to the group's occupation.⁵¹ In May 2017, the 'Department for Education' published an infographic in *Al Naba*—the Islamic State's Arabic-language newsletter—that claimed that over 100,000 male and female students had been taught in its 1,350 schools during the 2015-2016 academic year.⁵² However, the Islamic State's curriculum was not a continuation of the prior state models. Contentious or 'impious' topics such as literature, history, philosophy, and music were removed and replaced with obligatory classes in Qur'anic memorization, *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and

aqida (creed). As such, the requirements for teachers focused more on doctrinal knowledge than pedagogical qualifications. An undated background-check form for teachers (Item V) demonstrates this shift in required expertise. It asks which parts of the Qur'an have been memorized, which doctrinal text(s) the applicant deems most important, and their grades achieved in a sharia course. Interestingly, the candidate based in al-Waqf village in Aleppo province answers that he has neither teaching qualifications nor experience; yet, he has memorized three parts of the Qur'an and achieved marks in the 50-70 percentiles in his sharia courses.⁵³ This teacher profile reinforces the group's purpose of education: the transformation of well-rounded classrooms into amphitheatres for ideological indoctrination.

Religious education and outreach under the group's control did not stop at its Muslim citizens. As the Islamic State swept through northern Iraq during the summer of 2014, it directed its attention to Sinjar—home to the Yazidis, an ethno-religious minority population. Upon capture, residents were given the choice to convert to Islam or face enslavement or death. The Islamic State outlined and justified its strategy of genocide through a series of multilingual pamphlets and articles.⁵⁴ Yazidis were considered devil-worshippers, and the Islamic State undertook their eradication as its ideological duty.⁵⁵ The purpose of enslavement for thousands of captive women and children is outlined in a newly declassified directive issued in 2016 by the 'Delegated Committee' (Item W). Contrary to the outward propagandistic focus on sexual gratification, the document instead reinforces the purpose of slavery to “restore piety in slaves, teach them the correct doctrine, shari'i rulings, prayer, and fasting.”⁵⁶ The directive goes on to outline expected behavior of slaves and 'owners,' stating the accommodation requirements: “It is especially not allowed to place her in a house where brothers congregate, and never in a headquarters or similar.”⁵⁷ The exclusive rights afforded to slave owners echoes the Islamic State's *mahram* policy, whereby it is forbidden for women to be viewed by or be in the company of unrelated males. This ruling is explicitly outlined in a letter from the *wali* of Ninawa (Item X), which forbids the photography and circulation of images of captives among the brothers. It concludes with a recommendation that members “commit to obey God and avoid causes of suspicion and sedition.”⁵⁸ Thus, the Islamic State justified its campaign of genocide and slavery through its ideological 'duty' to proselytization. While conducted through violence, the above documents demonstrate its preoccupation with 'correct' treatment, modesty, and 'decency' of its members and captives.

Conclusion

Through the imposition of 'caliphate'-wide regulations and restrictions, the Islamic State created the necessary conditions for its inhabitants to adhere to its extreme interpretation of sharia law and embrace its authoritative implementation. Whether through educational reform, imposition of behavioral strictures, or punishment of violations, the group sought to foster an ideologically pious society, with a disproportionate and explicit focus on women. The framing of these directives is critical to their interpretation and impact. By extolling its virtues, morals, and devotion to scriptural integrity, the Islamic State positioned itself as standing in direct contrast to the perceived corruption and indecency of its rivals. It repeatedly warned against “infidel” and “apostate” influence and celebrated its territorial gains and strategy of enslavement as the enactment of its

h This figure is echoed in recent analysis of an Islamic State registry document that identified 101,850 minors linked to an adult male affiliated with the group. See Daniel Milton and Don Rassler, *Minor Misery: What an Islamic State Registry Says About the Challenges of Minors in the Conflict Zone* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2019).

perceived 'duty' of proselytization.

It remains too early to assess the long-term impacts and influence of the group's piety campaign. Certainly, some female supporters continue to embrace and internalize the group's ideals of conservative dress, with reports of active policing of others' attire.⁵⁹ A significant concern is the possible connection to be made between Islamic State affiliation and religious conservatism post-liberation. For example, while some women shed the shari'i dress at the earliest opportunity, others, in cities such as Mosul, have been forced to remove the attire on account of security concerns.⁶⁰ Security actors

must avoid interpretation of symbols and acts of religious expression as necessarily signifying ongoing ideological commitment to the terrorist organization. Such forceful imposition or denial of rights risks fueling the same grievances that initially resonated with Islamic State supporters. Going forward, stabilization and reconciliation efforts need to acknowledge a possible shift in liberated communities toward religious piety and conservatism. Breaking away from the 'us' and 'them' rhetoric and instead fostering inclusivity is a critical first step toward ending ideological outbidding. **CTC**

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