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# CTCSENTINEL

OBJECTIVE · RELEVANT · RIGOROUS | MAY/JUNE 2019 · VOLUME 12, ISSUE 5



FEATURE ARTICLE

## Understanding the 2019 Easter Attacks in Sri Lanka

AMARNATH AMARASINGAM

FEATURE COMMENTARY

## Islamic State Foreign Fighters Detained in Syria: The Options

BRIAN MICHAEL JENKINS

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#### FROM THE EDITOR

The Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka took the terrorism studies community by surprise because there had been no known history of jihadi violence inside the country and very little to indicate that local groups had the wherewithal to carry out such a large-scale coordinated operation. There is much that remains unclear about the links between the Sri Lankan cell and the Islamic State, but nearly 18 years after 9/11, the suicide bombings were a reminder that clandestine terrorist groups can, at any moment, strike in unexpected places and ways. In our cover article, Amarnath Amarasingam, whose research has focused on both Sri Lanka and global terrorism, outlines what is known about the network that carried out the Easter attacks and situates the attacks in the broader context of evolving intercommunal tensions in the country.

Brian Michael Jenkins examines the options for dealing with the significant numbers of Islamic State foreign fighters currently detained in Syria, warning that “endless delay” risks creating a serious threat to international security. Our interview is with Vidhya Ramalingam, the co-founder of Moonshot CVE, a company using technology to disrupt and counter violent extremism globally. Mitchell Silber examines how the terrorist threat against Jews in the West has evolved by examining attacks between 2012 and the present day. He notes that “what may be the most striking findings from this case study analysis are that first, Europe has become the focal point of the jihadi terror threat to Jews in the West and second, the United States has become a new, emerging focal point of the extreme right-wing terror threat to Jews in the West.” Last month, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appeared for the first time on camera since the Islamic State heralded its ‘caliphate’ in Mosul’s al-Nuri mosque five years ago. Haroro Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter explain how the video underlined the group’s strategic transformation with the Islamic State’s leader now portraying himself as “the guerrilla ‘caliph’ of a global insurgency.”

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*Cover: Sri Lankan Navy personnel guard the area around St Anthony's Shrine on April 26, 2019, in Colombo, Sri Lanka. (Carl Court/Getty Images)*

# Terrorism on the Teardrop Island: Understanding the Easter 2019 Attacks in Sri Lanka

By Amarnath Amarasingam

**Over the course of Easter Sunday 2019, eight bombs went off in popular hotels and historical churches across Colombo, the capital city of Sri Lanka; other coastal cities in the west; and towns in the east of the country, killing hundreds. The Islamic State-claimed attack stunned terrorism analysts because there had been no known history of jihadi violence in the country. Several of the attackers were well educated, and two were the scions of a very wealthy family, providing the cell with advantages in its plotting. There were indications, however, from as early as January 2017 that individuals associated with the National Tawheed Jamaat were becoming increasingly supportive of the Islamic State and mobilizing to violence that was missed by local law enforcement. The Sri Lanka attacks may be early evidence that the Islamic State is taking an important and renewed interest in South Asia, following losses in Syria and Iraq.**

**I**n the space of 20 minutes from 8:45 AM local time on Easter Sunday April 21, 2019, in Sri Lanka, there were a series of seven coordinated suicide bomb attacks in popular hotels and historical churches across the capital city of Colombo, other coastal cities in the west, and towns in the east of the country, killing hundreds as they gathered for Easter. Hundreds more were injured.<sup>1</sup> The bombers' devices were packed with iron nails, ball bearings, and TATP, an explosive previously used in Islamic State terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels.<sup>2</sup>

Among the attackers, who were all Sri Lankan and who communicated via an encrypted messenger service,<sup>3</sup> was the cell's suspected leader, Zahran Hashim, a 34-year-old radical preacher who, according to Sri Lankan police, was one of two suicide bombers who blew themselves up at the Shangri-La hotel. (See Table 1.) The other bomber at the Shangri-La was identified by Sri Lankan officials as Ilham Ibrahim,<sup>4</sup> the 31-year-old son of one of Sri Lanka's richest spice traders.<sup>5</sup> He is believed to have been a driving force

behind the organization of the attacks.<sup>6</sup> Ilham's elder brother Inshaf Ibrahim, whose father had set him up with a copper pipe factory, blew himself up at the Cinnamon Grand hotel.<sup>7</sup> Some investigators believe their wealth possibly financed the entire plot.<sup>8</sup> In Negombo, 20 miles north of the capital, Achchi Muhammadu Mohamed Hasthun, who is suspected of being one of the bomb makers, detonated his suicide device at St. Sebastian's Church.<sup>9</sup>

Around five hours later, another bomb went off at a hotel in the Colombo suburb of Dehiwala, killing two. The bomber was named as Abdul Lathief Jameel Mohamed,<sup>9</sup> who studied for a time in Australia and the United Kingdom before returning to Sri Lanka.<sup>10</sup> His original target was apparently the five-star Taj Samudra hotel in Colombo, but it appears that after his bomb failed to detonate, he made his way 10 miles south of the center of Colombo to a guesthouse in Dehiwela.<sup>11</sup> He checked in around 9:30 AM, likely visited a nearby mosque, and then returned to the guesthouse several hours later. At 1:20 PM, the bomb went off, perhaps as he was trying to fix whatever had malfunctioned.<sup>12</sup>

At 2:25 PM, the eighth explosion occurred at a housing complex in the Colombo suburb of Dematagoda after the Special Task Force (STF) stormed the premises. According to Sri Lankan police, Fatima Ibrahim, the wife of Inshaf Ibrahim (the Cinnamon Grand bomber), blew herself up, killing three STF officers. The blast also killed her three young sons, as well as herself and her unborn child.<sup>13</sup>

More than 250 were killed in the Easter attacks, making it one of the deadliest terrorist atrocities ever anywhere.<sup>14</sup> There was a sense of shock in Sri Lanka and around the world compounded by the fact that the attacks had seemed to come out of the blue. While Sri Lanka had suffered acutely from terrorist incidents until the military

a According to *The New York Times*, "investigators said that they had found bomb-making manuals on [Hasthun's] computer and that he may have trained in Turkey." The newspaper reported that according to a senior Sri Lankan official, Hasthun "built 11 TATP bombs in a garage in a suburb south of the capital, Colombo, using ordinary household materials, including huge bottles of glue." According to sources quoted by *The Wall Street Journal*, Hasthun built the devices with Rilwan Hashim, the brother of the cell's ringleader Zahran Hashim. The newspaper reported that investigators believe Rilwan Hashim traveled to Turkey, "where he may have received training," and had previously been in contact with a Sri Lankan in Syria who died in 2017. The newspaper reported: "The [Hashim] brothers' preparations for a bomb attack began as long ago as early 2018, when Rilwan lost several fingers and injured his eye in an accident involving explosives, people familiar with the investigation said. He continued to experiment with explosives, using designs from Islamic State-related sites on the internet." Rilwan died in an explosion during a police raid on April 26, 2019, in eastern Sri Lanka. Jeffrey Gettleman, Dharisha Bastians, and Hannah Beech, "'We Knew What Was Coming': Sri Lanka Sees ISIS' Hand in Attacks," *New York Times*, May 3, 2019; Saeed Shah and Bill Spindle, "Sri Lanka Bombers Blew Up Motorcycles, Lost Fingers Honing Deadly Skills," *Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 2019; Alasdair Pal and Shri Navaratnam, "Father, two brothers of suspected Sri Lanka bombings mastermind killed in gun battle," Reuters, April 28, 2019.

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*The author thanks the many journalists and friends in Sri Lanka who graciously took the time to answer his questions as he pieced together this article.*

defeat of the Tamil Tigers in 2009, the country had had no history of deadly jihadi violence. The day after the attack, though, some Sri Lankan politicians admitted that there were precise warnings given by Indian intelligence several times in early April 2019, which were either ignored or failed to land on the desk of appropriate individuals in government. The warnings were precise enough to not only name Zahran Hashim but also noted that he was planning to attack “popular Catholic Churches and the Indian High Commission.”<sup>15</sup> This lapse in security is an ongoing point of debate and controversy as the country moves toward its presidential election in late 2019.

Two days later, the Islamic State claimed the attacks via its Amaq news agency, stating the attackers were “Islamic State fighters” and had “targeted citizens of coalition states and Christians in Sri Lanka.”<sup>16</sup> The group quickly followed up with a statement in which it provided the purported *kunya* (fighting name) of seven attackers and the locations of their attacks.<sup>17</sup> (See Table 1.) Then came a release of a picture of the attackers standing in a row<sup>18</sup> and a 59-second video release (see Figure 1) from the Islamic State purporting to show the attack cell pledging allegiance to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>19</sup> Eight individuals rather than seven were shown in the picture and video,<sup>b</sup> with the suspected ringleader Zahran Hashim identified by Sri Lankan investigators as standing at the center of the group because he was the only one not wearing a mask.<sup>20</sup> (See Figure 1.)

In its communiqués, the Islamic State named the Dematagoda bomber as “Abu Abdullah”<sup>21</sup>—an unknown male—and failed to mention the presence of Fatima Ibrahim.<sup>22</sup> Reuters reported that according to “a source close to the family,” it was Ilham Ibrahim who

b It is not clear why the Islamic State showed eight attackers but only named seven.

detonated the bomb that killed his wife and his children. This contradicted the official Sri Lankan version of events but meshed with the Islamic State version, as the group did not provide a *kunya* for a second bomber at the Shangri-La hotel.<sup>23</sup> (See Table 1.) Given *The New York Times* reported that “CCTV footage from the Shangri-La shows Ilham stepping into the elevator and later into the Table One restaurant with another man who has now been identified as Zaharan Hashim,”<sup>24</sup> it seems likely the Islamic State made a mistake in its official releases.<sup>c</sup>

One thing is clear. The Islamic State, after losing all its territory in Syria and Iraq, viewed the Sri Lanka attacks as a significant breakthrough in its attempts to reset the narrative about its decline. On April 29, 2019, the Islamic State released a video of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in which he presented the Easter attacks as vengeance for the Islamic State’s March 2019 defeat in Baghuz (the last territory the group held in Syria) and thanked the attackers for their pledge of allegiance.<sup>d</sup>

c But if the Islamic State information and the information provided to Reuters was accurate, then under this scenario Zahran Hashim (Abu Ubayda) was the sole bomber who somehow set off two explosions at the Shangri-La hotel, and Ilham Ibrahim was, in fact, Abu Abdullah from the Dematagoda clash with STF officers.

d Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s remarks regarding the Sri Lanka attacks were in an audio segment of the tape. “IS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Appears in Video, Acknowledges End of Baghuz Battle and Sri Lanka Attack,” SITE Intelligence Group, April 29, 2019.



Figure 1: Screen capture from April 23, 2019, video released by the Islamic State showing Zahran Hashim (center) and other individuals pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

*Table 1. Real names of attackers and location of attacks in comparison with the kunyas of the attackers at each location provided by the Islamic State. The details on timings are taken from a Criminal Investigation Department (CID) document dated May 7, 2019, obtained by the author.*

<i>Time</i>	<i>Place of attack</i>	<i>Real name of attacker(s) (according to authorities)</i>	<i>Kunyas corresponding to location of attacker(s) given in Islamic State releases</i>
8:45 AM	Shrine of St. Anthony Church (Colombo)	Alwudeen Ahamed Muaath	Abu Hamzah al-Ceyloni
8:47 AM	Kingsbury hotel (Colombo)	Mohamed Azaam Mohamed Mubarak	Abu Mukhtar al-Ceyloni
8:47 AM	St. Sebastian's Church (Negombo)	Achchi Moham-mdu Mohamadu Hasthun	Abu Khalil al-Ceyloni
8:54 AM	Shangri-La hotel (Colombo)	Zahran Hashim; Ilham Ibrahim	Abu Ubaydah al-Ceyloni (referring to Zahran Hashim)
9:00 AM	Cinnamon Grand hotel (Colombo)	Inshaf Ibrahim	Abu al-Bara
9:05 AM	Zion Church (Batticaloa)	Mohamad Nazar Mohamed Aazath	Abu Mohammed al-Ceyloni
1:20 PM	Tropical Inn Guesthouse (Dehiwala suburb of Colombo)	Abdul Lathief Jameel Mohamed	No mention by Islamic State
2:25 PM	Dematagoda Housing complex (Colombo suburb)	Fatima Ibrahim (wife of Ilham Ibrahim)	Abu Abdullah (no mention of a female suicide bomber)

With the investigation still in its early stages, much remains unknown about the genesis of the Sri Lanka attacks. According to an internal report on the attacks written by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), dated May 7, 2019, and given to the author by a local journalist, investigators have taken 56 people into custody. As the report states, “they are being currently grilled at the CID.” Interestingly, the CID report also states that an individual named Mohamed Ibrahim Mohamed Naufer is among those currently in custody and that he is thought “to have been appointed to succeed the leader of the group who perished during the suicide attack at Shangri-La hotel.”<sup>25</sup>

This article, based on a thorough mining of open-source and media reports on the attack as well as several interviews with religious leaders and activists in the affected areas, attempts to outline what is known so far about the terrorist network that carried out the attack and its links to the Islamic State, and what it might say about

the Islamic State's shifting strategies outside of Syria and Iraq after the fall of the so-called caliphate. Before delving into the terrorist network itself, though, it is important to briefly unpack the history of anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka and the broader context of ethno-religious relations that formed the backdrop to the attack and that will inevitably color what happens next on the island.<sup>26</sup>

### Anti-Muslim Violence and the Historical Context of the Easter Attacks

In order to fully grasp the Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka and the radicalization of individuals like Zahran Hashim—the purported mastermind of the attacks—it is necessary to briefly unpack the broader context of anti-Muslim violence in the country, going back as far as the riots of 1915.<sup>27</sup> Particularly since independence from the British in 1948, anti-Muslim sentiment in Sri Lanka has not been colored by some of the kind of animus seen in the Western world. It is not a discussion, for example, about how Muslims hate democracy or how Islam is antithetical to Western liberalism. Rather, in Sri Lanka, the place of the Muslim community has existed between competing nationalisms—Tamil and Sinhalese—and the purging of Muslim identity has been used to establish the “purity” of either the sought-after independent Tamil state or the majoritarian Sinhala state.<sup>28</sup>

Muslims, even dating back to the 19th century, have been seen by some in the Sinhalese community as having “entered the country as invaders” and lacking indigenous origin. The Tamil community, for its part, has sometimes sought to label the Muslims as ethnically, culturally, and linguistically Tamil, only to have Muslim leaders disagree and point to “their Arab origins as a means to gain separate Muslim representation in the political sphere.”<sup>29</sup> In a country where demographic positionality is intricately linked to political opportunity, ethnic and religious identities become deeply contentious.<sup>30</sup> The Muslim community in Sri Lanka itself is profoundly religiously diverse, existing across a wide spectrum of religious interpretation—from Sufi to salafi—and also divided across socio-economic and rural/urban divides.<sup>31</sup>

As the military conflict between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government heated up in the late 1980s, the Muslim community in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka—which constituted the separate state envisioned by the Tigers—came under suspicion. In the Northern Province, the LTTE argued that there were too many spies in the Muslim community and that they posed a security threat. In the Eastern Province, the LTTE and the Tamil community generally faced violence at the hands of Muslim “home guards,” a civil defense force mobilized by the Sri Lankan government to protect the “borders” between areas of LTTE and government control.<sup>32</sup> Based on both of these reasons, the LTTE launched a merciless campaign against the Muslim community, the effects of which are still being felt today.

On August 3, 1990, the LTTE massacred 140 Muslims praying at a mosque in Kattankudy and, nine days later, killed another 122 Muslims at a mosque in Eravur, both in the Eastern Province. The bullet holes remain in the walls of the mosques almost 30 years later, “left there, performing as markers of Muslim vulnerability.”<sup>33</sup> Then in October 1990, the LTTE, in the span of two weeks, forcibly expelled close to 75,000 Muslims from the Northern Province without any of their belongings.<sup>34</sup> As Sharika Thiranaagama writes, “Muslims are the absent but pregnant emptiness in the heart of Tamil nationalism. The north, easily assumed to be a mono-ethnic

Tamil space, was only created as such after ... the expulsion of Muslims.<sup>35</sup> As a former leader in the LTTE similarly told this author, “millionaires became paupers overnight. And these are people who had only known Jaffna. Born in Jaffna, lived in Jaffna. What the LTTE did was very wrong.”<sup>36</sup>

Over 20 years later, with the war in Sri Lanka between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government over, the Muslims would once again become victims to another nationalism. This time, Sinhala-Buddhist extremist groups, like the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and its supporters, aided by social media conspiratorialism, turned on the Muslim community and began to see them as demographic and economic threats to the Sinhalese community, resulting in several years of sporadic riots, destruction of mosques, and killings.

In September 2011, a 300-year-old Muslim shrine in Anuradhapura was destroyed by a mob of 100 people, led by Buddhist religious leaders, who argued that the shrine was “on land given to Sinhala Buddhists 2000 years ago.”<sup>37</sup> In April 2012, thousands of people forcibly entered a mosque in Dambulla and destroyed everything inside. The then Prime Minister, to the shock of many, ordered that the mosque be moved to another part of town since the area it was currently located was considered “sacred to Buddhists.”<sup>38</sup> These attacks against the Muslim community by the BBS escalated in subsequent years and peaked around two events in 2014 and 2018. These events, interviews conducted by the author suggest, were important in radicalizing some young men in the country.<sup>39</sup>

In June 2014, the towns of Aluthgama, Dharga Town, Valipanna, and Beruwela—cities on the southwestern coast of Sri Lanka—saw several days of communal violence.<sup>40</sup> The violence seems to have been sparked by a local altercation between three Muslim youth and a Buddhist monk. As the situation grew tense, meetings between the police and religious leaders were convened to try and establish calm. On June 15, 2014, the BBS held a meeting in Aluthgama laced with racism, hate speech, and suggestions of violence. Crowds streamed out of the meeting and started confronting Muslims they saw on the streets. Both sides started to throw stones. Violence began in surrounding villages as well, and several businesses and homes were attacked and burned. The result is that to this day the relationship between the Sinhalese and Muslim communities in Aluthgama remains strained.<sup>41</sup>

While the role of social media in spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories in Sri Lanka, which often spurred on this kind of communal violence, has been well documented,<sup>42</sup> platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp played a particularly destructive role in subsequent violent episodes in the country.<sup>43</sup> Bizarre rumors have long existed online and have played into Sinhala nationalist fears of losing their majority status on the island. The 2013 violence against Muslim-owned businesses like Fashion Bug, for instance, were spurred on by rumors that Muslims were selling Sinhalese women underwear laced with sterilization cream.<sup>44</sup> A similar rumor in late February 2018 would lead to another major episode of anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka, one that, some locals say, had a particularly strong impact on Zahran Hashim, the mastermind of the Easter attacks.<sup>45</sup>

In late February 2018, an altercation started in Ampara, a small town in the Eastern province, when a Sinhala patron began berating a Muslim restaurant owner about something he found in his meal.<sup>46</sup> Prior to this encounter, conspiracy theories had been circulating on Facebook that 23,000 sterilization pills had been seized from a Muslim pharmacist. The viral rumor seemed to con-

firm long-running fears among some in the Sinhalese community that Muslims were secretly plotting to demographically supplant them in the country. In a shaky cell phone video, the customer yells at the store owner in Sinhala, “You put in sterilization medicine, didn’t you?” The store owner, who does not understand Sinhala, just nods in agreement to the questions being shouted at him.<sup>47</sup> The crowd that had gathered then beat the store owner and set fire to a nearby mosque. As Amanda Taub and Max Fisher rightly point out, “in an earlier time, this might have ended in Ampara,” but as the cellphone video was posted to Facebook and spread, communal tensions started to simmer.<sup>48</sup>

The anger around the sterilization rumors would converge with the death of a Sinhalese man, who had been beaten by several Muslim youth after a traffic dispute, in Kandy on March 3, 2018. The violence began in Kandy and surrounding areas on March 4 and would finally cease on March 9, 2018. At the end of the violence, two people lay dead and around 20 mosques, 224 houses, and 119 businesses were either damaged or destroyed.<sup>49</sup> The government, like it would after the Easter bombings, temporarily blocked social media platforms in order to prevent further attack planning and spreading of disinformation.<sup>50</sup>

The Muslim community in Sri Lanka, which had been facing waves of anti-Muslim violence since the end of the war against the LTTE in 2009, rarely put up any coordinated resistance, but researchers who have conducted fieldwork in these communities note that Muslims were worried this was just going to continue indefinitely, whenever it was politically expedient to rile up the Sinhala nationalist base—and they would eventually need to stand up for themselves.<sup>51</sup> Given the level of anti-Muslim violence, though, it is perhaps surprising that the country did not witness some level of militant Islamist—let alone jihadi—mobilization in all these years. While reports suggest that around 32 individuals left Sri Lanka to join the Islamic State since 2013, there has been no evidence of local plots in Sri Lanka until 2019.<sup>52</sup>

### The Tawheed Movement in Sri Lanka

A few days after the Easter 2019 attacks, the author phoned a contact—who he will call Riyaz—in the Ceylon Tawheed Jamaat (CTJ) to get a sense of how the Muslim community was feeling and what was known locally about Zahran Hashim, the purported mastermind of the Easter attacks, and the organization he had started, the National Tawheed Jamaat (NTJ). “They have taken away the peace and freedom of the Muslims,” Riyaz told the author. “The trust others had in Muslims, the relationship of a 1,000 years has been taken away in a single day.”<sup>53</sup> Riyaz spoke eloquently in Tamil about the history of the Tawheed Jamaat movement in Sri Lanka and the way in which the various organizations under the *tawheed* (oneness, in Islam) label sought to unify Muslims in Sri Lanka and re-educate worshippers on the foundations of the faith.

The earliest Tawheed organizations in Sri Lanka—largely salafi in outlook—date back to the mid-1950s. They started to preach to communities, but also began to provide social services. The funding started to come in from the Saudi Arabian government and other donors locally and abroad.<sup>54</sup> As money started to roll in, divisions also started within these early organizations. As Riyaz says, “it’s because they didn’t focus on the religion that other organizations, with different names, started cropping up.” One of these was the All Ceylon Tawheed Jamaat (ACTJ), which was created in 1998.<sup>55</sup> More disagreements about funding sources and overall direction

led to the formation in 2005 of the Sri Lankan Tawheed Jamaat (SLTJ).<sup>56</sup> As Riyaz told the author, “the decision we made is that we will not take any funding from foreign organizations or foreign governments. We will only work with the financial support of the Sri Lankan people.” The SLTJ, though, formed a partnership with its counterpart in the Indian province of Tamil Nadu and worked closely with them.

It is around this time that Zahran Hashim was finishing his theological studies at Jamiathul Falah Arabic College in Kattankudy, a traditional madrassa in Sri Lanka established in 1955.<sup>57</sup> Upon leaving the madrassa, Zahran along with some people he knew in Kattankudy founded an organization called Darul Athar (the abode of tradition) in 2007.<sup>58</sup> This organization, according to locals, had nothing to do with the SLTJ, and they often disagreed with each other on various theological issues. In 2012, some members of Darul Athar called Zahran in for an “investigation” into his thinking and religious beliefs. After failing to assuage their doubts and concerns, Darul Athar decided to ban him from the organization. Zahran then, in 2012, created the National Tawheed Jamaat (NTJ).<sup>59</sup>

What is clear from the above, then, is that while there were some fears of extremist preachers and some sense that segments of the community were becoming conservative, the idea that some in the Muslim community would mobilize, or had mobilized, to the extent of carrying out attacks was simply not conceivable.<sup>60</sup>

### The Radicalization of Zahran Hashim

The National Tawheed Jamaat, according to Riyaz, began simply as an organization made up of Zahran Hashim and his close and extended family.<sup>61</sup> In the beginning, the NTJ also sought to preach and provide social services to the community. There was no immediate concern among those in Kattankudy that Zahran was radicalizing young people or was planning an attack locally.<sup>62</sup> Locals thought his beliefs were a bit unorthodox, and becoming extreme, but did not consider Zahran to be a security threat.<sup>63</sup> As Riyaz told the author, for reasons that remain unclear, Zahran’s beliefs started to become more extreme after 2016. His talks were increasingly supportive of global jihad and suicide bombings, and his online videos became more popular.

Around this time, Zahran also came into conflict with the SLTJ. The two organizations were planning to organize a public debate around religious ethics and theological disagreements that existed between them.<sup>64</sup> Zahran refused to take part unless he was given all the topics and questions beforehand.<sup>65</sup> Some members of the SLTJ, during this period, had tipped off Sri Lankan intelligence that Zahran was preaching extreme messages and that he was someone the government should watch closely.<sup>66</sup> What happened next shocked Riyaz: “I got a call soon after from Zahran’s followers asking me if I provided information about Zahran to intelligence. You see how they function? We pass on information for the good of the country, and it comes back to bite us. Zahran was furious with us after that.”<sup>67</sup>

Starting in late 2016, Zahran’s public speeches were more and more openly extreme and supportive of the Islamic State.<sup>68</sup> Sometime in January or February 2017, Zahran rented out a public space in Kattankudy and gave a controversial speech, for over 90 minutes, fully in support of the Islamic State and urging Sri Lankan Muslims to support the Islamic State in Syria. As one community activist told the author, “it was a full house. Everyone was there, including law enforcement and Sri Lankan government intelligence officials.



Figure 2: Flyer for an anti-Islamic State event organized by the community in Kattankudy on February 3, 2017.

Everyone came.”<sup>69</sup> The community in Kattankudy responded by staging its own event on February 3, 2017.<sup>70</sup> (See Figure 2.) The flyer for the event reads: “A conference to raise awareness about the terrorist group ISIS, that terrorizes the world.” In hindsight, and based on interviews by the author, it is astonishing just how early Zahran’s pro-Islamic State talks began, how swift and punishing the community response was, and how little law enforcement agencies had paid attention to what the community was telling them.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, a recent *New York Times* report quotes former Sri Lankan army chief Daya Ratnayake, stating that the Muslim community had sounded the alarm a few years ago and had been told to try to bring the radicals back in the mainstream and not “isolate them.”<sup>72</sup>

One of the pivotal events that precipitated Zahran Hashim’s radicalization to violence, happened on March 10, 2017, in direct response to the community backlash he began to receive after his public pro-Islamic State preaching.<sup>73</sup> There had at times been historical tensions between Sufi practice, particularly *dargah* (shrine) worship, and more conservative salafi beliefs in Sri Lanka, which occasionally resulted in violence and persecution of Sufi communities.<sup>74</sup> On March 10, 2017, Zahran organized another public meeting near the Badhriyyah Jummaah mosque of Sufi Moulavi (scholar) Abdul Rauf. According to Abdul Rauf’s supporters, Zahran and his entourage did not show up simply to debate, but had brought swords, rods, and petrol bombs.<sup>75</sup> A fight erupted, which became known as the Aliyar junction clash, and police arrived on the scene. Several NTJ members, including Zahran’s father and brother, were arrested.<sup>76</sup> Zahran and his other brother Rilwan, who would later be

seen in an Islamic State photo with an injury to his eye and missing several fingers, managed to escape.<sup>77</sup> Rumors began to circulate that they had fled to the Maldives, which the Maldivian government has rejected,<sup>78</sup> or to Tamil Nadu. Sri Lankan police put out a warrant for Zahran's immediate arrest.<sup>79</sup> It is also possible, some say, based on the videos he continued to release while in hiding that he was still in Sri Lanka for the most part.<sup>80</sup> One of the videos released by Zahran during his time in hiding argued that he would never surrender to police because he only recognizes the laws of Allah, not the Sri Lankan state.<sup>81</sup> A report in *The Wall Street Journal* suggested that during this period of hiding, Zahran may, in India, have made contact with veteran Islamic State fighters.<sup>82</sup>

Other members of the NTJ, who had become worried about Zahran's pro-Islamic State stance and the violence he was arousing, decided, upon his disappearance, to ban him from the organization.<sup>83</sup> This letter by the NTJ to Zahran, sent to the author by several local journalists, is dated December 29, 2017, and reads:

*Over many years, our (NTJ) Jamath's campaigner, a person who held many responsibilities in our organization, Moulavi MCM Zahran,<sup>e</sup> for some months has been conducting activities unrelated to our Jamath, and against our religious laws. Our organization has irrevocably decided to relieve Moulavi MCM Zahran of all responsibilities related to the Jamath. Therefore, we would like to state that the Jamath is not responsible for any of the actions and opinions of Moulavi MCM Zahran.<sup>f</sup>*

The Muslim community in Kattankudy carried on as normal, assuming Zahran and his associates had permanently gone into hiding. Then, the March 2018 Kandy riots took place. Zahran Hashim released a video that same month in which he called for the killing of non-Muslims in Sri Lanka, argued that police officers should be attacked, and that bombs should be set off all over the country.<sup>84</sup> Shocked, Riyaz and other members of Muslim organizations handed over the video to Sri Lankan police.<sup>85</sup>

### Early Warning Signs of a Terrorist Cell

In subsequent months in Kattankudy and nearby cities, a variety of seemingly disconnected events started to occur, which have been—only in hindsight and through law enforcement investigation, as illustrated below—linked to Zahran and his close associates. The first was a brutal killing of two police officers in Vavunathivu, a town near Batticaloa in the Eastern Province, on November 30, 2018. One of the officers was stabbed 25 times in the chest and head before being wrestled to the ground and shot dead.<sup>86</sup> The other officer was also stabbed numerous times before being shot to death at close range. The guns used in the killings belonged to the two police officers themselves and had gone missing after the brutal murders.<sup>87</sup> Law enforcement officials had initially blamed Tamil Tiger supporters for the murders and two former LTTE cadres were arrested.<sup>88</sup> The true perpetrators of the attack would remain a mystery until after the Easter attacks (see below).

On December 26, 2018, several youth on motorcycles damaged a few Buddha statues in and around Mawanella, a town just west of

Kandy.<sup>89</sup> Two of the alleged ring leaders, the brothers Mohammad Sadik Abdul-haq and Mohammad Shaheed Abdul-haq, managed to steer clear of the law enforcement dragnet for a time. They would eventually be arrested hiding in their uncle's shoe store a week after the Easter bombings.<sup>90</sup> Their father, Rasheed Mohamed Ibrahim (no apparent relation to two of the Easter Sunday attackers), had been arrested on January 22, 2019, on suspicion of involvement.<sup>91</sup> After the Easter bombings, locals in Mawanella suggested that the individuals who carried out the desecration of the Buddha statues were radicalized by Zahran Hashim and that Hashim had been living in Mawanella for some months in 2018 as well.<sup>92</sup>

The subsequent police investigation into the Mawanella incident led to the arrest and interrogation of at least 13 other youth.<sup>93</sup> One of these youth tipped off Sri Lankan law enforcement to a stash of weapons and explosives on a coconut estate in Wanathawilluwa in the northwest of the country.<sup>94</sup> On January 17, 2019, police arrested four suspects at this estate for possessing nearly 100 kilos of explosives, detonators, 20 liters of nitric acid, wire cords, firearms, and a stock of ammunition.<sup>95</sup> While many politicians and journalists wondered out loud, at the time, why someone would be stockpiling weapons at this scale, the connections were not made in time to prevent the Easter bombings.<sup>96</sup> After the Easter attacks, one of the individuals arrested was Zahran Hashim's driver, Muhammad Sharif Adam Lebbe. He would prove to be quite valuable. Lebbe admitted that he and members of the NTJ were responsible for the killings of the two police officers in Vavunathivu in November 2018, and his information led law enforcement officials back to the same coconut estate in Wanathawilluwa where they found a second stash of weapons along with the two missing revolvers that belonged to the murdered policemen. These finds further cemented the links between Zahran Hashim and all of these seemingly disconnected events.<sup>97</sup>

After the flurry of law enforcement activity following the killing of the two police officers, the Mawanella desecration of the Buddhist statues, and the recovery of a weapons cache in Wanathawilluwa, things were relatively calm until the Easter attacks.

### The Islamic State Connection

While the precise role of the Islamic State in either inspiring or directing the Easter attacks are still being pieced together, some evidence has emerged. For one, the sheer fact that the photos of the attackers and the oath of allegiance video were released through official Islamic State channels on Telegram suggests at the very least that one of the attackers was plugged in with the Islamic State media network. The question remains whether there was something more, whether some of the attackers had traveled to join the Islamic State in Syria or to its Khorasan Province (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and "nearby lands"<sup>98</sup>), whether they had received training or finances, and whether they had some outside help in making explosives.

At the time of writing, answers to most of these questions remain fuzzy. In the week after the attacks, for instance, both *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* wrote about the Islamic State connection and came to conflicting conclusions.<sup>99</sup> Investigators, journalists, and researchers, though, are zeroing in on particular individuals to try and unpack these potential connections with Islamic State central.

One of these potential connections seems to lie in a series of investigations by the Indian National Investigation Agency (NIA) into foreign fighters and Islamic State supporters in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.<sup>100</sup> In June 2016, Indian media reported that 16 Mus-

e The letter references his full name Mohamed Cassim Mohamed (MCM) Zahran.

f There was some suspicion that this letter was actually written after the attacks and backdated, but according to most of the author's sources on the ground in Sri Lanka, it seems to be legitimate.



lim youth from Kerala had “disappeared” and that family members feared they had left to join jihadi groups in Syria.<sup>101</sup> It was later reported that many of the individuals leaving from Kerala were not only heading to Iraq and Syria, but were also being encouraged to join the Islamic State’s Khorasan Province (ISKP). In the middle of 2018, three of these individuals returned to India and were arrested. One of those arrested, known only as “Basit,” revealed the presence of an Islamic State cell in Coimbatore to Indian officials.<sup>102</sup>

On September 2, 2018, the NIA raided several locations in Kerala and Tamil Nadu based on tips from Basit. Several individuals were arrested, and charged with plotting to assassinate Hindu leaders in Coimbatore.<sup>103</sup> Some links were discovered between the Coimbatore cell and Zahran Hashim. A “huge haul of data” was seized during these raids.<sup>104</sup> The Coimbatore cell had copies of Zahran’s speeches, and phone records showed that Zahran had been in contact with Islamic State fighters in Bangladesh and Afghanistan.<sup>105</sup> It is not clear at the time of writing (late May 2019) whether Zahran was influenced by these connections or whether, given the fact that they had copies of his speeches, Zahran was the influential voice.

CNN reporting, though, suggests that an Islamic State suspect, who is not named, revealed to Indian interrogators that he trained Zahran and played a role in his radicalization.<sup>106</sup> This dovetails with the *Wall Street Journal* reporting cited above suggesting Zahran may have made contact in India with veteran Islamic State fighters.<sup>107</sup>

In addition to the Indian angle, some initial reporting on the profiles of some of the attackers suggests that there may be an Islamic State connection. According to *The Australian*, Abdul Lathief Jameel Mohamed, the Taj Samudra attacker whose explosive device malfunctioned, was investigated during his postgraduate studies in Australia after “intelligence emerged” linking him to Islamic State fighter Neil Prakash (Abu Khalid al-Cambodi), currently in prison in Turkey.<sup>108</sup> Mohamed and Prakash likely did not know each other while the two were in Australia, but Prakash was very active online and encouraged plots all over the world.<sup>109</sup> Mohamed studied aerospace engineering at Kingston University in southwest London from 2006 to 2007, before arriving in Melbourne for a postgraduate degree. According to his sister, he was radicalized in Australia and came back to Sri Lanka in 2013 a completely changed man.<sup>110</sup> The question of whether Mohamed traveled to Syria and joined the Islamic State also seems unclear, with some reports suggesting that he only got as far as Turkey, and others stating that he entered Syria and may have engaged in training.<sup>111</sup>

Another intriguing connection has emerged. Reuters reported that “a Sri Lankan software engineer suspected by authorities in Sri Lanka of having provided technical and logistical support to the Easter Sunday suicide bombers was monitored by Indian intelligence agencies three years ago for links with Islamic State suspects.”<sup>112</sup> This individual, 24-year-old Aadhil Ameerz who is in police custody but who has not as of late May 2019 been charged, is also alleged to be the link between the National Tawheed Jamaat (NTJ) and the Jamathei Millathu Ibrahim (JMI), whose members included, according to Reuters reporting, Inshaf and Ilham Ibrahim, the Cinnamon Grand and Shangri-La hotel bombers.<sup>113</sup> It suggests an intriguing answer to the initial mystery of how two wealthy businessmen from the capital came into a trusted relationship with an extremist preacher from the east of the island. It is suspected that Aadhil Ameerz, Zahran Hashim, and Ilham and Inshaf Ibrahim are the ones who leased the Wanathawilluwa coconut estate discussed above, which was meant to be used as a training camp before it was

discovered by law enforcement officials in January 2019.<sup>114</sup> More details are still emerging about the precise nature of this network, and missing pieces are likely to be filled in as the investigation continues.

Emerging profiles of some of the attackers has once again brought to focus an old debate in terrorism studies: the role of socio-economic status and education in promoting violent extremism.<sup>115</sup> While the stereotypical profile of a terrorist is someone who is poor, aggrieved, and unemployed, decades of research has shown this to be far more nuanced.<sup>116</sup> A similar debate arose after the July 2016 attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka, Bangladesh,<sup>117</sup> as it became clear that several of the attackers were highly educated and middle class.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, at least with the Ibrahim brothers, it was likely that their wealth and business prominence<sup>119</sup> protected them from any kind of outside suspicion, while they slowly helped plot the attack.

### Aftermath of the Attacks

By the morning after the attack, over 20 suspects had been arrested,<sup>120</sup> and the number would only grow throughout the week. While some of these individuals may have been connected to the attacks in some way, others were likely vacuumed up to not only show the public that something was being done, but also to ensure that no stone was left unturned after it became apparent that the government had received several warnings in the weeks leading up to the bombings.<sup>121</sup>

Some in the Muslim community hoped<sup>122</sup> that the Islamic State claim on April 23, 2019, would make clear to the larger Sri Lankan population that this was a clear indication that their youth were recruited “from abroad,” that it had nothing to do with their mosques, their religious leaders, or their beliefs—that this was not entirely homegrown. They hoped that they would not experience another Aluthgama, another Kandy.

Three days later, in the evening of April 26, 2019, police raided a house in Sammanthurai in Ampara District in Sri Lanka’s Eastern Province.<sup>123</sup> The information reportedly again came from Muhammad Sharif Adam Lebbe, Zahran Hashim’s captured driver.<sup>124</sup> In the house, police recovered a drone, bomb-making materials, suicide vests, as well as the Islamic State flag and clothing worn by the bombers in the pledge of allegiance video.<sup>125</sup> Sri Lankan authorities videotaped the seizure and broadcast it on television.<sup>g</sup>

Meanwhile, a separate safe house in Kalmunai, around five kilometers north of Sammanthurai, began arousing the suspicion of neighbors.<sup>126</sup> They noticed that new people had moved in and rented a house in their town. They went to say hello and were rebuffed. They went a second time, this time accompanied by a local police officer. A youth met them at the door and fired several rounds at them. The police officer managed to escape and informed the military and the STF.<sup>127</sup> Then all hell broke loose. At the end of the

g At the site of the raid, police also found white dresses often worn by Buddhist women during prayers. As *The Hindu* noted, “This has sparked doubts of whether the attacks were planned for the Buddhist festival of Vesak - May 18-19 - or for the July Kandy Perahara, known for its procession of traditional dancers and parades of elephants.” Indeed, it is quite possible that the initial plot was against Sinhala-Buddhist sites or gatherings, and was later changed due to the urging of the Islamic State. The choice of target, one that does not make much sense within the local Sri Lankan context, is one of the ongoing mysteries of the attack. Meera Srinivasan, “The inside story of the 9 suicide bombers behind Sri Lanka’s savage Easter attacks,” *Hindu*, May 25, 2019.

raid, 15 people lay dead, including six children—all family members of Zahran Hashim.<sup>128</sup> Sometime before they died during the raid, Zahran's father and his two brothers, Rilwan and Zainee, recorded a shaky cell phone video, which later made the rounds on Telegram channels run by Islamic State supporters. In it, Rilwan, one eye damaged and missing several fingers, declares that they are currently “surrounded by dogs,” signaling that their hideout had been discovered, and says that they will teach the country a lesson for “oppressing the Muslims.”<sup>129</sup> The next day, the Islamic State claimed the Kalmunai raid and released a photo of Zahran Hashim standing beside his brother Rilwan. The claim, however, mistakenly noted that 17 Sri Lankan police officers were killed in an Islamic State ambush. In fact, there were no law enforcement casualties.<sup>130</sup>

## Conclusion

A month after the Easter bombings, two questions remain heavily debated in Sri Lanka and among terrorism analysts: first, with so many warnings from various intelligence agencies abroad, the many raids and arrests discussed above and the local community calling for the banning of the NTJ since early 2017, why was nothing done? And second, what can the attacks in Sri Lanka tell us about the Islamic State's strategy going forward, after its loss of territory in Syria and Iraq? Answers to both of these questions, which are fundamentally important for understanding what happened and the road ahead, remain wanting.

The day after the attacks, cabinet minister and government spokesman Rajitha Senaratne went public to confirm rumors that “information about possible suicide attacks at Christian places of worship and tourist areas had been shared prior to the attacks by foreign intelligence and local intelligence.”<sup>131</sup> The intelligence had been shared on three separate occasions—two weeks before the attacks, four days prior, and even 10 minutes before the bombs went off. The warnings went the extraordinary distance of identifying the NTJ, possible locations, as well as the names of some of the attack network.<sup>132</sup> Both the State Minister for Defence, Ruwan Wijewardena, and the Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremasinghe, stated that they had not been informed of the threat beforehand. In an interview with India's NDTV, Wickremasinghe stated that “India gave us the intelligence but there was a lapse on how we acted on that. Intelligence was not conveyed down the line.”<sup>133</sup> President Maithripala Sirisena similarly said that both the national police chief and the defense secretary had received warnings of imminent attacks, but had not informed him. They both resigned at his request.<sup>134</sup>

Part of the problem was that both Sirisena and Wickremasinghe had a turbulent personal relationship, and had allowed national

security to be politicized. In October 2018, President Sirisena fired Wickremasinghe and his cabinet and installed former President Mahinda Rajapaksa as the new Prime Minister. Wickremasinghe refused to leave, leading the country into a full-blown constitutional crisis, with two individuals claiming to be Prime Minister.<sup>135</sup> The Supreme Court overturned the move, and forced Sirisena to reinstate Wickremasinghe. At the time of writing (late May 2019), the precise details around who knew what, and when, and why nothing was done about it remains debated with all sides pointing fingers at one another. It will be some time before more precise details emerge with respect to what went wrong.

With respect to what the Sri Lanka attacks may reveal about the Islamic State's strategy going forward, two factors are important. First, the author has been asked many times since the attack why the Islamic State would go out of its way to target a small island like Sri Lanka. This is largely the wrong question. As has been seen in Dhaka, Quetta, and other places that have experienced recent attacks, it is not so much that the Islamic State is targeting these countries as it is accepting allegiances by local groups who want to bridge localized grievances with a more transnational brand. As such, it is not that the Islamic State targeted Sri Lanka, but that groups like the NTJ are aligning their cause with international terrorist groups. This goes a long way to explaining, for example, the targeting of Christians and tourists in Sri Lanka, which fits more the *modus operandi* of the Islamic State, rather than being in line with historical ethno-religious faultlines on the island.<sup>136</sup>

Second, over the last two months, the Islamic State has been, quite intriguingly, picking apart its Khorasan Province and declaring each subsection to be its own wilayah (province). On May 10, 2019, it declared Wilayah Hind (Indian province),<sup>137</sup> and on May 15, 2019, it declared Wilayah Pakistan (Pakistan Province)<sup>138</sup>—both of which were historically part of Khorasan Province (ISKP). This sort of trend affecting ISKP is interesting because last year saw the exact opposite phenomenon with respect to its provinces in Syria and Iraq. In July 2018, the Islamic State restructured its over 20 provinces in Syria and Iraq. As the researchers at BBC Monitoring noted, the Islamic State stopped referring to its provinces in Raqqa, Kirkuk, Northern Baghdad, and other places as separate entities, and instead grouped them under the Wilayah of Iraq and the Wilayah of Sham (Syria).<sup>139</sup> At least one reason for breaking apart larger conglomerates is, as Syria analyst Hassan Hassan noted, to insulate cells from each other in order to “minimize infiltration and maximize agility.”<sup>140</sup> Whether this trend means that the world will witness increased attacks in parts of South Asia remains to be seen. **CTC**

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# Options for Dealing with Islamic State Foreign Fighters Currently Detained in Syria

By Brian Michael Jenkins

**The destruction of the Islamic State has left the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces holding thousands of foreign fighters who joined the Islamic State's ranks from abroad as well as members of their families. What happens to these detainees will impact the continuing jihadi campaign in the Middle East and beyond, but legal constraints, fears of terrorism, already overburdened security forces, widespread public hostility toward Muslims in general, intensified by the barbaric behavior of the Islamic State, complicate discussions of what to do next. This essay, which reflects the author's personal views, examines eight options and is intended to move the discussion beyond political bickering and wishful thinking. Preferred solutions may not be achievable. Endless delay could prove dangerous.**

**A**s the last bastions of the Islamic State fell in Syria, thousands of the group's fighters surrendered to the advancing Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a U.S.-backed paramilitary force comprised mainly of Kurdish militias along with a number of smaller Arab formations. The numbers have grown rapidly, swelled by refugees who fled as the last towns held by the Islamic State fell and as more fighters surrendered or were captured.

The counts and categories remain slippery. According to United Nations officials, the main SDF camp at Al Hol, as of April 18, 2019, held an estimated 75,000 persons, 65,000 of whom had arrived in the previous 100 days.<sup>1</sup> Of these, 43 percent are Syrians, 42 percent are Iraqis, and 15 percent are foreigners. Ninety percent are women and children; children alone account for 66 percent of the total.<sup>2</sup>

According to one report in March 2019, the SDF held 8,000 Islamic State fighters, including 1,000 foreign fighters in its prisons.<sup>3</sup> (Syrians who were recruited or impressed into the ranks of the

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*The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the perspectives of the Combating Terrorism Center, the United States Military Academy, or RAND.*

Islamic State were allowed to change sides and fight in the ranks of the SDF or were sent home.<sup>4</sup>) The number of foreign fighters continues to change. On February 18, 2019, the SDF claimed that it held 800 foreign fighters.<sup>5</sup> Another source put the number at 1,000.<sup>6</sup> But other reports in March and April suggested that the number of suspected foreign fighters could be 2,000 or more.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the foreign fighters, there are thousands of their wives and children.<sup>8</sup>

The changing totals reflect a fluid situation as the refugees and detainees are sorted out. Children are being born in the Al Hol camp—and some die. Some of the foreign fighters try to conceal their identity. But the lack of clarity on the numbers also reflects the chaos of the region following the territorial demise of the Islamic State. The situation is still unstable, which poses risks.<sup>9</sup>

What the world does or does not do about these foreign fighters and their families could affect the future stability of the region and the countries from which the foreign volunteers came. Will policies be guided by the parables of recovery and return or by calculations of risk?

Are the foreign fighters and their families lost sheep to be recovered and returned to the fold? Are they turncoats who deserve to be cast out and forever banished beyond the nation's walls? Were they dragged along by fanatic fathers and husbands or lured into the jihadi maelstrom by adolescent illusions of romance and adventure? Are they torturers and murderers who must be punished for their crimes? Are they unrepentant fanatics bent upon avenging their defeat? Are they villains or victims? Future terrorists or reclaimable allies in dissuading others from following their path? Subjects for rehabilitation or beyond redemption?

The human debris of the Islamic State probably includes all of these scenarios. Sorting out their motives for traveling to Syria, their roles in the ranks of the Islamic State and experience living under Islamic State rule, and their current attitudes and apparent readiness to atone will assist in making judgments. But can their intentions ever be known with certainty?

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated on May 8, 2019, that "we have an expectation that every country will work to take back their foreign fighters and continue to hold those foreign fighters, we think that is essential,"<sup>10</sup> but Britain's home secretary Sajid Javid vowed that he "will not hesitate" to prevent the return of Britons who traveled to join the Islamic State.<sup>11</sup>

A former head of the British army, General Lord Dannett, has argued that Britain's foreign fighters in Syria must be brought back to the United Kingdom because they are the United Kingdom's responsibility. "They have got to be held while they are talked to and if there is sufficient evidence against any of them ... they have to be put through due process and imprisoned if that is the right thing to do. But I think it is also important that we treat them fairly with justice and tempered with a bit of mercy as well because ... the way we treat them may well have important significance for the way

other people view our society.”<sup>12</sup> Other security officials who agree that foreign fighters from their countries should be repatriated and investigated add that, personally, they do not want to see them come back.<sup>13</sup>

Public attitudes, partisan politics, domestic and international law, the probability of successful prosecution, the potential risk to public safety, and humanitarian concerns (though, for most, a secondary concern) all influence and complicate policy decisions. Some countries have already addressed this issue in an ad hoc manner, but there is still no overall strategy or plan.

The challenge is to create a comprehensive approach to deal with a large number of individuals according to individual circumstances and with a lot of unknowns. By resolving each case in a transparent process in accordance with the law, bringing terrorists to justice while assisting those who are the victims of Islamic State terror, the United States and its allies can portray the defeat of the Islamic State not as a military victory, but the outcome of successful counterterrorism policies.

This essay examines the pros and cons of various options that have been put forward for dealing with the foreign fighters and their families. It is intended to provoke comment and, hopefully, move the discussion toward pragmatic measures by providing a hard surface for concrete debate. The essay concludes that there is no obvious single solution, but there are some immediate actions that can improve the situation. As a first step, however, it is important to appreciate the complexity of the problem.<sup>14</sup>

## A Diverse Population

The inhabitants crowded into the SDF camps comprise a diverse population. Displaced townspeople and villagers who were able to flee from Islamic State-held towns as battlelines grew nearer appear to be the closest to genuine refugees. Many can be described as victims of the Islamic State’s cruel occupation, but as in previous wars, others among them may have been collaborators. Some of the latter, no doubt, acted under duress—the Islamic State viciously punished any resistance to its rule—but others may have shared the jihadis’ ideology or profited from its presence. Still others may fit somewhere in the middle, thus further complicating the situation.

Those judged to be genuine refugees can be dealt with through existing channels, but that still requires some vetting to sort out those who were combatants or willing supporters from those who were innocent bystanders, which is not so easily done. The numbers are slippery and the divisions murky.

Those who actively supported the Islamic State when it ruled the land will provide the support structure for a continuing underground fight, but trying to segregate Islamic State victims from Islamic State collaborators may not be possible and certainly will not be easy. One question of immediate concern is whether unidentified Islamic State supporters may be intimidating other residents in the camps. Is repudiating the Islamic State dangerous?

The attitudes of the fighters themselves also vary. Some presumably remain convinced jihadis, determined to continue the armed struggle if they can. Others, disillusioned by their experience, may desire only to return home and lead normal lives.

The families of the fighters themselves also represent a diverse group. In a number of respects, the wives and widows of Islamic State fighters represent a thornier problem than the fighters. Some of them were brought to Syria by their husbands; others traveled to Syria seeking jihadi husbands. Their experiences and their atti-

tudes vary greatly. Some suffered terrible ordeals. They married into continuing captivity although with different warders. They were exchanged as sex slaves or assigned to new partners as previous spouses were killed off.

In accord with salafi ideology, most women were confined to purely domestic roles. Others, however, became active participants in special units that enforced Islamic State rule and were involved in the abuse of other women, including the enslaved Yazidis.<sup>15</sup>

Their ideological commitment varies from traumatized victims to committed fanatics who will indoctrinate their children and others they come into contact with—a continuing source of radicalization and violence. In 2016, an all-female cell attempted to carry out a terrorist attack in France.<sup>16</sup> Another all-female cell was arrested for plotting a terrorist attack in the United Kingdom.<sup>17</sup> (None of them had traveled to Syria, although at least one had indicated a desire to go.) These incidents have hardened attitudes toward women.

The children pose an even greater challenge, perhaps the greatest challenge of all. Infants and toddlers have no appreciation of ideologies. They must be regarded as innocents, although the older ones may require counseling to address what they have witnessed and suffered and were taught in Islamic State schools and training camps. Traditionally, international law has regarded children as victims rather than perpetrators, but this view has begun to change precisely because of how the Islamic State and other irregular military formations have deliberately enlisted children in their violent campaigns.<sup>18</sup> Islamic State videos, for example, depicted children ostensibly executing prisoners or holding up the heads of decapitated victims. These were not just exceptional events staged for propaganda purposes, but were part of a systematic effort to inculcate brutality among succeeding generations. The Islamic State was widely reported to have forcibly sent children as young as 13 to training camps where, after showing pupils videos of actual beheadings, instructors distributed large knives and “infidel” dolls with blond hair and blue eyes dressed in orange jumpsuits (like the Western hostages beheaded by the Islamic State). The young students then were shown how to properly hold their knives to decapitate the dolls.<sup>19</sup> This experience will doubtlessly affect their mental and emotional well-being, especially their ability to adjust to very different norms.

## Action is Necessary

Despite the difficulties in doing so, it is imperative to separate and assist genuine victims while identifying those who remain committed jihadis—men and women—and preventing them from escaping to new jihadi fronts or bringing them home and turning them loose to commit terrorist attacks or recruit new generations of fighters. The April 2019 church and hotel bombings in Sri Lanka underscore the continuing resonance and spread of jihadi ideology. The territory held by the Islamic State has been recaptured, but the contest is not over and will not end until the jihadi chain has been broken.

In late April 2019, the Islamic State carried out a series of attacks that in two days killed more than 60 Syrian soldiers and militiamen, demonstrating the resilience of the group.<sup>20</sup> The ability to carry out large attacks raises the risk of mass jailbreaks. In 2013, the Islamic State’s predecessor group freed 500 inmates, including a number of its senior commanders, in simultaneous attacks on two prisons in Iraq,<sup>21</sup> and in 2015, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula attacked a jail in Yemen, freeing 300 prisoners.<sup>22</sup> Those now held by the SDF must be secured.

There is also the longer-term threat. Each new jihadi front has its origins in the previous conflict and, in turn, promotes the next jihad. Foreign fighters who joined the Afghan resistance against the Soviet invasion in the 1980s went on to participate in the wars in Bosnia, Chechnya, and Afghanistan in the 1990s. Veterans of al-Qa`ida's operations in Afghanistan in the 1990s scattered to launch jihadi terrorist campaigns from Indonesia to Morocco in the early 2000s while others joined the Iraqi insurgency following the 2003 U.S.-led occupation to form the core of what later became the Islamic State.

The Islamic State is different in having attracted tens of thousands of foreign fighters, including thousands of volunteers from Western countries. A study by The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College in London reported that by June 2018, 41,490 persons from 80 countries had joined the Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria.<sup>23</sup> (Thirteen percent of these were women and 12 percent were minors.) These are remarkably precise numbers, but should not imply knowledge is exact.

Middle Eastern and North African countries provided 45 percent of the volunteers with another 20 percent coming from Central, South, East, and Southeast Asia. More than 17 percent came from Eastern Europe, including many from the Russian Caucasus; another 14 percent came from Western Europe, mainly France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Belgium, which together accounted for more than 70 percent of those coming from Western European countries. Less than two percent came from the Ameri-

cas, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>a</sup>

According to the ICSR study, 272 travelers came from the United States. Public estimates run as high as 300, but this was an all-in figure that included those who tried to travel to Syria but who were intercepted before departure, were arrested before arriving in Syria, or failed to connect with a group or changed their mind and returned. Approximately 41 percent were intercepted before departing the United States. As many as 40 travelers may still be at large, including those who traveled to various jihadi fronts up to 10 years ago, but many of those unaccounted for are probably dead.<sup>24</sup>

Of the 41,490 foreign fighters in Syria, the ICSR study reports that 7,366 (or about 18 percent) have returned to their country of origin, including 1,765 (or 30 percent) of the 5,904 who originally departed from Western Europe.<sup>25</sup> According to an August 2018 United Nations report, "Member States noted that flows of returnees and relocators from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic had not materialized to the degree expected, but the vast majority of those who had successfully left the conflict zone had returned home rather than relocating elsewhere."<sup>26</sup> However, while countries might know or at least have a good idea of how many foreign fighters came home, it is not clear that they would necessarily have complete information about foreign fighters who managed to evade capture and relocate to other jihadi fronts. Also, the U.N. report was issued in August 2018 and based upon earlier reported numbers. Therefore, it would not reflect the final days of intense conflict that marked the end of the Islamic State.

a All of the totals in the ICSR study include women and minors, the principal focus of the report. However, between 2013 and 2018, an unknown number of minors were born to foreign travelers living in Islamic State-controlled territory. Ibid.



*A discarded Islamic State flag is pictured on the ground in the village of Baghouz in Syria's eastern Deir ez-Zor province near the Iraqi border on March 24, 2019, a day after the group's 'caliphate' was declared defeated by the U.S.-backed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). (Giuseppe Cacace/AFP/Getty Images)*

Only rough estimates are possible of how many foreign fighters remain at large. According to the most informed assessment, the attrition rate of foreign fighters in the Islamic State could be around a third, which would leave more than 25,000 still alive.<sup>27</sup> Whether they are still active is another matter. Assuming that approximately a third of the European fighters were killed, and approximately 30 percent have already returned, then more than 2,000 Western fighters could be presumed to be alive, a few more adding Americans and Australians, but these are extrapolations from estimates and not a reliable tally. There is considerable uncertainty what casualty rates were in the final defenses of the Islamic State or where the survivors may be.

The Islamic State suffered heavy casualties as it defended its last redoubts against air and ground assault. Although some foreign fighters rose to leadership positions, the Islamic State treated many of its foreign fighters as expendable, and those who played prominent roles and could be identified were a priority target for the U.S.-led coalition fighting the Islamic State—a number were killed in drone strikes. Some may have migrated to other rebel formations in Syria or other Islamic State fronts outside of Syria. Others were captured by Iraqi or Syrian forces or by the SDF. Some former foreign fighters may be in jail or hiding out in Turkey. It must be assumed that some may have successfully evaded the authorities and are lying low at home. Some are simply missing in action and will never be accounted for.

It is tempting to portray many of those who traveled to the Islamic State as yesterday's fools, deserving their own misfortune. But left on their own, the survivors could become tomorrow's fanatics.

One earlier study of Westerners who participated as fighters on jihadi fronts between 1990 and 2010 concluded that one in nine foreign fighters returned for an attack in the West.<sup>28</sup> A subsequent study showed that one in 11 jihadi terrorists in the West had previously fought in the ranks or received training from jihadi groups abroad.<sup>29</sup> This study, however, also showed that of 26 terrorist plots in Europe, five “contained at least one individual who can be categorized as a genuine foreign fighter (that is, having joined a jihadi group to fight in its ranks) whereas eight plots ... had a link to a Western individual who went to a terrorist training camp.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, as noted by the study, experience abroad figured in half of the plots,<sup>31</sup> although most of the plotters were not former foreign fighters but individuals who can best be categorized as foreign trainees—that is, individuals who specifically traveled abroad to obtain training and possible assistance to carry out terrorist plots at home.

According to the author's own research, of the 281 individuals who traveled abroad or attempted to travel abroad from the United States to join jihadi fronts or obtain training for terrorist plots at home between 9/11 and October 2018, only 28—one in 10—made it to their foreign destination, connected with a jihadi group, and returned to participate in a terrorist plot in the United States, and only one carried out a terrorist attack.<sup>32b</sup> This was Faisal Shahzad, who in 2010 attempted to detonate a car bomb in New York's Time Square. However, 18 percent of those who actually connected with a

jihadi group returned to participate in a terrorist plot. All but one of these plots occurred before 2010. Authorities are now more alert to intercepting foreign travelers on their way out or as they attempt to return. As will be detailed later in this article, only one of the post-2011 travelers has been involved in a terrorist plot in the United States after returning. Almost all of the Islamic State returnees to the United States are in jail.<sup>33</sup>

The bloody terrorist campaign in Belgium and France in 2015 and 2016—including the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, which left 130 persons dead, and in Brussels in March 2016, in which another 32 people died—appeared to underscore the increased threat posed by jihadis returning from Syria. This campaign was carried out by a network revolving around Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a Belgian national of Moroccan descent who traveled to Syria to join the Islamic State in 2013.<sup>34</sup> It appears that Abaaoud's primary purpose was not to fight in Syria, but to recruit arriving Belgian and French foreign fighters for operations back home. He was also able to draw upon the support of radicalized confederates who had remained at home. They provided the hideouts, logistical support, weapons, and reinforcements to Abaaoud's operatives sent back from Syria. Many of Abaaoud's confederates came from the criminal underworld and knew how to obtain and operate firearms. To this, they added bomb-making skills obtained in Syria. The returnees, compared to those who had remained at home, more willingly accepted death. They carried out almost all of the suicide bombings and when cornered, often fought to the death.<sup>35</sup>

Whether the Abaaoud network should be regarded as a unique one-off phenomenon or an indicator of a new dimension of the threat remains a matter of conjecture. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has continued to exhort his followers to carry out attacks in the West, however, the Islamic State no longer has an influx of foreign fighters who can be turned around to launch attacks in Europe or the United States. Islamic State-inspired terrorist attacks have continued in Europe and the United States although the pace has declined since the peak years of 2015-2016,<sup>36</sup> and many of these have been carried out by lone perpetrators and involve primitive—though still deadly—tactics such as car rammings and stabbings, for which no training is required.<sup>c</sup>

However, the April 2019 terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka, in which more than 250 persons died, again demonstrated at the very least that the Islamic State-inspired terrorist campaign continues on a global level. At least one of the bombers had reportedly traveled to Syria, and according to one senior Sri Lankan police official, the Sri Lankan bombers acquired their technical skills from the Islamic State.<sup>37</sup> If these reports are confirmed, it would underscore the threat posed by the returnees. It is terrorist spectacles, not statistics that drive public perceptions of the threat—and, in turn, influence the decisions of political leaders.

Bringing back captured jihadi volunteers is not a humanitarian obligation; it serves the long-term goal of defeating the jihadi enterprise and ensuring that it does not easily rise again. The for-

b The 281 comprise U.S. persons who were arrested between 9/11 and October 2018 for traveling or attempting to travel abroad to join any known jihadi organization. A few had traveled to Afghanistan as early as the 1980s to participate in the resistance against the Soviet invasion; they were arrested after 9/11 for participation in terrorist plots.

c The majority of terrorist plots and attacks in the United States involve a single perpetrator. Brian Michael Jenkins, “Middle East Turmoil and the Continuing Terrorist Threat—Still No Easy Solutions,” Testimony before the Committee on Armed Services of the United States House of Representatives, February 14, 2017. See also Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Origins of America's Jihadists* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2017).



eigners in Syria should be returned and cleared or prosecuted and incarcerated; if that is not possible in every case, they must at least be monitored. There should be no illusions that the task will be easy or straightforward.

Justice must be done. Those who are guilty of atrocities should be prosecuted for their crimes, which include mass murders and the kidnapping and beheading of hostages, including Americans. At the same time, the captives are a potential resource, able to provide information about the Islamic State—especially its recruiting—and evidence needed for other prosecutions.<sup>d</sup> If truly repentant, they can also be enlisted in efforts to dissuade young people from repeating their own mistakes. The degree of cooperation would affect their sentences. However, their full cooperation cannot realistically be expected until they are removed from their current circumstances in Syria. They are in camps, mixed in with hardened fanatics who could still threaten those who betray the cause.<sup>e</sup> So long as they fear being left behind in Syria, concerns about their survival may discourage cooperation.

Finally, this is a messaging opportunity not to be missed. In contrast to the mass executions, beheadings, and crucifixions that the Islamic State advertised as justice, the United States and other countries in the international coalition fighting the Islamic State could display their values.

If doing something is necessary, what then are the options?<sup>38</sup>

## The Options

### *Turn them loose.*

Under International Humanitarian Law, prisoners of war must be released and repatriated without delay after the end of hostilities. (This would not apply to those who may have committed war crimes.) However, for other types of detainees, international law only recommends—but does not impose—their release at the end of the conflict. The law requires the release of persons deprived of liberty as a consequence of hostilities only when the reasons which

d There were extensive interviewing efforts focusing on German fighters and civilians during and immediately after World War II. During the Vietnam War, the RAND Corporation conducted approximately 2,400 interviews with captured Viet Cong and North Vietnamese prisoners, defectors who voluntarily left the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese army, refugees from battle areas, and others familiar with the operations of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces. Putting aside the understandable and widespread opposition to the Vietnam War and the ultimate failure of American efforts in South Vietnam, the reports of those interviews offered an extraordinarily rich source of information about the political and military upheaval, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese army, and Vietnamese rural life. In the author's view, had closer attention been paid to this material, it would have altered U.S. political expectations and its military strategy. The point in mentioning the study here is certainly not to awaken old controversies or advertise the Vietnam War as an example to be emulated, but rather to indicate that large-scale, in-depth interviewing—not just interrogations to obtain operational intelligence or brief interviews to assess threat or prosecution potential—can lead to a deeper understanding of a still-formidable adversary and, in particular, of the process by which thousands of young men and women join an enterprise that not only exhorts violence, but advertises its atrocities. Projects aimed at interviewing terrorists have been few and modest in scope, but nonetheless produced valuable, policy-relevant insights.

e There have been reports that some women in the camps are “being threatened by more militant Russian and North African wives of ISIS fighters, who they said were trying to enforce ISIS rules within the camp.” Jane Arraf, “Misery Grows At Syrian Camp Holding ISIS Family Members,” NPR, May 23, 2019.

necessitated their internment no longer exist and then as soon as possible after the end of hostilities.<sup>39</sup>

But have hostilities ended? Although the broader rebellion in Syria and Iraq has been contained and the territory initially seized by the Islamic State has been recovered, its leaders and many of its fighters remain at large. Forced to operate underground, they have slipped back into villages where they reportedly have formed cells that will continue the armed struggle.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, the Islamic State continues to exercise a measure of coercive influence in areas it lost; Islamic State websites continue to promote its global armed struggle abroad; individuals continue to mount attacks in the name of the Islamic State; and organized Islamic State fronts continue to fight in a number of countries outside Syria.<sup>f</sup>

The Islamic State's foreign fighters have already demonstrated their willingness to leave their countries of residence and travel to a conflict zone to participate in armed jihad, which they regard as a global campaign. These foreign fighters—in particular, those from the West—will tend not to be able to blend into the local population and survive as underground fighters. They can, however, redeploy to another front. This has been a feature of the history of global jihad, with fighters migrating from battlefield to battlefield. The global conflict is not over and may not be over for many years.<sup>g</sup>

President Trump threatened to turn the Islamic State detainees loose.<sup>41</sup> Simply releasing the detainees would be dangerous and is not a realistic option. President Trump's threat appears to have been an expression of irritation calculated to persuade European countries to repatriate their own nationals.

Kurdish officials have warned that they have no capacity to hold the detainees indefinitely.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, President Trump announced the departure of U.S. troops from Syria. Although U.S. officials subsequently indicated that a residual force will remain, there is uncertainty about the continued U.S. commitment.<sup>43h</sup> Withdrawal may signal a decline in U.S. support for the SDF. While turning the detainees loose is not an option, it could be an unintended consequence of inattention.

### *Take away their citizenship and leave them in the ‘desert.’*

This idea has gained ground in Europe, which is already divided on

f The latest map of Iraq prepared by the Institute for the Study of War shows isolated pockets of continuing attacks by the Islamic State and significant zones of support in northern and western Iraq and in southern and eastern Syria. “ISIS Operating Areas: April 16, 2019,” Institute for the Study of War.

g However, according to article 132 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, “the Parties to the conflict shall, moreover, endeavour during the course of hostilities, to conclude agreements for the release, the repatriation, the return to places of residence or the accommodation in a neutral country of certain classes of internees, in particular children, pregnant women and mothers with infants and young children, wounded and sick, and internees who have been detained for a long time.”

h In December 2018, President Trump announced that all U.S. forces would be withdrawn from Syria, a decision that reportedly prompted Defense Secretary James Mattis to resign. However, in February 2019, the White House announced that 200 troops would remain. Dion Nissenbaum and Nancy A. Youssef, “U.S. Military Now Planning to Leave as Many as 1,000 Troops in Syria,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2019. On March 17, 2019, *The Wall Street Journal* quoted U.S. officials who said that up to 1,000 troops might stay in Syria. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford denied the report that the February planned drawdown had changed, but add that planning continued. “U.S. denies plans to leave 1,000 troops in Syria,” *Defense Post*, March 18, 2019.

the acceptance of large numbers of refugees and immigrants from the Middle East and Africa. The idea of bringing back those viewed as dedicated jihadis is unpopular, especially where there is uncertainty about the ability to prosecute or control them. If not put in prison, they will be able to travel freely throughout Europe's Schengen zone, creating potential security problems even for countries that did not send large numbers of volunteers to Syria. Currently, Europe has trouble monitoring those already under surveillance.

Stripping individuals of their citizenship and leaving them in Syria has political and emotional appeal. It sounds tough, although merely taking away citizenship of those who committed terrible atrocities hardly seems like justice. It also reduces the potential risk to political leaders that a returnee will escape justice—or serve a short sentence—and then carry out a terrorist attack. While most of the returnees can be adjudicated properly, if only one of them goes on to carry out a terrorist attack, it would be politically disastrous to anyone who supported repatriation. The inclination is to kick the can down the road.

Removing citizenship raises the risk that the Islamic State detainees will be released or escape, creating potential new threats. But it may be perceived there is less political risk in such an approach. If, in the future, some left-behind Islamic State veterans sneak back into their country and kill people, it can be presented by politicians as the failure of those charged with intelligence or border security, not those who banished the fighters to remain abroad. And as for their possible continued role in the global jihad, stripped of their citizenship, they are anonymous fighters, no longer nationals of the country and therefore no longer the responsibility of its government. (And if they migrate to other jihadi fronts, it is likely that more of them may be killed.)

It is a cynical calculation that contradicts the basic principle that nation states have committed to in their approach to terrorism: that terrorism constitutes a threat to international peace and security and there is no unilateral solution. Therefore, the international community has agreed to cooperate in its suppression. Stripping of citizenship assumes the terrorist will go away if he or she is no longer our problem, but is instead someone else's problem. Finally, removing nationality can go against international law.<sup>44</sup>

On a practical basis, the lack of a U.S. or European passport does not prevent but will make it more difficult for denaturalized individuals to sneak back into the country, especially as border controls have become more sophisticated. But it may also maroon once foolish, now repentant individuals, who are likely to be embittered and re-radicalized. Putting aside the principle of international cooperation against terrorism, from a purely national security perspective, the judgment is whether the danger posed by repatriated fighters is greater than that posed by a floating population of rootless jihadis.

Several recent cases of denaturalization have made headlines, provoking broad public debate. In February 2019, the British government removed the citizenship of Shamima Begum, a girl who traveled to Syria in 2015 when she was 15 and who wanted to return to the United Kingdom with her newborn infant.<sup>45</sup> (The newborn died three weeks after birth in the camp.) Her return was prevented by the Home Office, whose spokesman stated that the "priority is the safety and security of Britain and the people who live there." In order to protect the country, the Home Secretary "has the power to deprive someone of their citizenship where it would not render them stateless."<sup>46</sup> (According to the Home Office, Begum's parents are from Bangladesh so she could apply to that country for citizenship.) The decision has been challenged in court.

In a similarly controversial pronouncement, the United States in February 2019 declared that Hoda Muthana, another young woman who traveled to Syria in 2015 and now wishes to return home with her children, was never a U.S. citizen.<sup>47</sup> Although born in the United States to parents from Yemen, her father was in the country at the time on a diplomatic passport, which excludes her from automatic citizenship. It is a technicality that is currently before the court.<sup>i</sup> Unfortunately, Muthana has become the poster case for the issue in the United States, and her situation has become part of the domestic partisan debate. U.S. actions in the Muthana case also seem to undermine President Trump's call for other nations to repatriate their own nationals. Both the British and American cases are, however, exceptions, although the United Kingdom has stripped the citizenship of others. Revoking citizenship has limited applicability and limited effectiveness.

The majority of the United States' jihadis who have been identified since 9/11 for involvement in terrorist attacks or plots in the United States or for traveling to jihadi fronts abroad<sup>48</sup> (for whom citizenship information is available) are U.S.-born citizens whose citizenship is guaranteed by the Constitution and cannot be revoked. The same is true of those who traveled or attempted to travel from the United States to Syria.<sup>49</sup> However, naturalized U.S. citizens can be stripped of their citizenship, leaving them with the citizenship of their country of origin. This is rare, but it has happened in the case of Nazi war criminals<sup>50</sup> and some more recent terrorists.<sup>j</sup>

Stripping individuals of their citizenship works both ways. Countries that do so also abandon their ability to intervene if their former nationals end up being held under inhumane conditions, are being tortured, or face execution. It is easy to say that governments no longer have any responsibilities or concerns about the fate of its de-naturalized citizens, but it will require extraordinary sang-froid and impassivity to maintain resolve. One can easily envision future political scandals.

### ***Turn them over to the Syrian or Iraqi government.***

The Islamic State fought against the Syrian government and seized control of territory in Iraq. Therefore, either government may claim jurisdiction over the foreign volunteers who joined the Islamic State. They are guilty of crimes in both countries.

Iraq has offered to try the foreign Islamic State detainees, provided that members of the U.S.-led coalition reimburse it for the

i Lawyers representing Muthana have disputed her father's status at the time of her birth; she had been issued a U.S. passport twice. Jonathan Shaub, "Hoda Muthana and Shamima Begum: Citizenship and Expatriation in the U.S. and U.K.," *Lawfare*, February 25, 2019.

j In April 2019, a naturalized U.S. citizen was stripped of his citizenship for concealing his previous conviction in Israel for participation in a terrorist attack. "Man convicted of bombing Israeli bus loses U.S. citizenship," *Associated Press*, April 26, 2019. In 2017, the U.S. Department of Justice sought to revoke the citizenship of Iyman Faris, an al-Qa`ida operative convicted in 2003 of plotting to destroy the Brooklyn Bridge. The Justice Department claimed that Faris made false statements when he applied for citizenship. Robert Chesney, "DOJ Sues to Revoke the Citizenship of Convicted al Qaeda Operative Iyman Faris (A Naturalized Citizen)," *Lawfare*, March 20, 2017. In July 2018, a federal judge ruled against the government. "Judge rejects US efforts to strip citizenship from terrorist jailed in Illinois," *Associated Press*, July 21, 2018. The case continues while Faris completes his prison term. Since 9/11, there have been a number of bills introduced into Congress aimed at stripping terrorists of their citizenship. James H. Martin, "Terrorism-Related Loss of Citizenship--A Policy Review," master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, September 2016.

costs of the proceedings and detention. The estimated cost of the trials would be about \$2 billion.<sup>51</sup>

Iraq has already tried and sentenced several hundred foreign Islamic State fighters, including a small number of Europeans.<sup>52k</sup> France's foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, stated in January 2019 that Islamic State fighters and their wives were enemies of France and should face justice in Syria or Iraq.<sup>53</sup> Twelve nationals reportedly have been transferred from Syria to Iraq where they await trial.<sup>54</sup>

French policy, in fact, is more complex and has shifted over time. Since making his earlier statement, Le Drian has said that "we are exploring all options in order to prevent these potentially dangerous individuals from escaping or dispersing ... If the forces detaining these French fighters decide to deport them to France, they would be immediately handed over to the judicial authorities."<sup>55</sup> In other words, they may return, but will face prosecution. However, in late March 2019, Le Drian said that French women who had joined the Islamic State would not be allowed back: "These women are 'fighters' and 'should be treated as such' ... 'there is no possibility for these women to be accepted back.'"<sup>56</sup>

Apart from the costs, the Iraqi offer raises a number of legal issues. Iraq has the death penalty, which Europe opposes. In one reported case, a European Islamic State member was sentenced to death in Iraq, but this was commuted to life in prison on appeal.<sup>57</sup>

And while the Iraqi constitution guarantees the right of a fair trial and prohibits torture or degrading treatment, the Iraqi justice system is considered weak and may not be able to ensure the necessary safeguards. Countries cannot always protect their citizens who are arbitrarily arrested or mistreated abroad, but can they actively participate in an arrangement that places their citizens at a lesser standard of justice and treatment? Would continued monitoring be required? Alternatively, can countries that strip Islamic State fighters of their citizenship still set conditions for the treatment of their ex-nationals? Possibly they could, if they obtain written guarantees and offer financial support in return. However, the European Court of Human Rights could intervene to prevent European countries from being complicit in schemes involving even those who are dual nationals being consigned to prisons in countries with poor human rights records.

Syria is a worse case. The Assad government has already been accused of war crimes and has a dismal record of mistreating prisoners.<sup>58</sup> International humanitarian law prohibits repatriating detainees if they face torture, cruel, or degrading treatment. It seems that the same legal principle would apply to turning over prisoners to governments that are likely to mistreat them. One can also envision future domestic political scandals in countries whose nationals are held in Syrian dungeons.

### ***Pay the Kurds to hold them indefinitely.***

The SDF itself is an ad hoc paramilitary force. Its legal authority is not recognized internationally. Kurdish political authorities have expressed no interest in assuming responsibility for the captives. And in any case, there is no internationally recognized Kurdish state, and there is opposition to anything that might give them the trappings of sovereignty. Turkey would certainly oppose any

arrangement that formalized international arrangements with the Kurds. As with Iraq and Syria, there is also the question of whether the contributing countries would thereby incur some responsibility for the conditions of captivity and ultimate fate of those held.

At best, this would seem to be an interim measure to buy time for the international community to produce a coordinated approach. However, it is easy to envision what is initially viewed as an ad hoc temporary measure, given continued international inaction, becoming a permanent feature of the landscape.

### ***Individual countries agree to repatriate, investigate, and prosecute or monitor their own nationals.***

This is the preferred policy of the United States and several European countries. Owing to existing laws, however, not all European countries may be able to successfully prosecute those who left to join the Islamic State. Under the material support provision, U.S. law prohibits even attempting to join a designated foreign terrorist organization. The United Kingdom has adopted a similar law. France may prosecute returning foreign fighters for participating in a group formed for the purpose of preparing an act of terrorism. But other countries lack such laws and argue that even if changed now, such a law cannot be made retroactive. Some require a formal declaration that it is forbidden to join a specific group in order to prosecute those who do so. Others require proof of actual participation in specific terrorist crimes such as kidnapping or murder. Evidence of such participation may be hard to come by. Prohibitions on the use of evidence gained through intelligence operations such as electronic surveillance further hinder prosecution in a number of European countries. Ordinary courtroom requirements are difficult to meet in conflict zones.

Analysts have offered different assessments of the likelihood that the fighters returning to Europe will engage in terrorist attacks at home after their return. Earlier estimates tend to be higher owing to the fact that the smaller population of jihadi travelers included many who went abroad specifically to obtain training for terrorist attacks at home. In the early days of the civil war, some traveled to Syria to provide humanitarian assistance and returned early as the conflict escalated, while others were swept up in the fighting and ended up in rebel formations. The number of Europeans traveling abroad to join the Islamic State (and other jihadi organizations) after 2012 increased sharply, but the exodus also included many who simply wanted to live in the caliphate created by the Islamic State. It is a very mixed population.

Although more than 1,700 have returned to Europe,<sup>1</sup> it may be too early to make a judgment about their intentions to bring the armed jihad home. Some of these went to Syria early in the conflict and returned early. In the United Kingdom, a significant proportion of these early travelers were by early 2019 assessed as no longer being of national security concern.<sup>59m</sup> European intelligence service and law enforcement organizations have also intensified their activ-

l According to Europol, approximately 5,000 individuals from the European Union were believed to have traveled to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. By late 2017, it was thought that about 1,500 had returned home; 1,000 were believed to have been killed. "TESAT-2018: European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report," Europol, 2018.

m For example, approximately 400 UK citizens who traveled to Syria have returned. Approximately 10 percent have been prosecuted. "UK Nationals Returning from Syria," They Work for You, UK House of Commons, All Commons debates on 18 February 2019.

k Twelve French nationals and at least one German national were turned over to the Iraqi authorities, reportedly with the agreement of the home countries.

ities to head off such attacks. On the other hand, the conditions that radicalized thousands of European nationals and residents have not fundamentally changed. Those who have returned disillusioned, determined to leave the Islamic State behind, will be under pressure from other extremists to rejoin.

The situation in the United States is very different. Of the 281 individuals identified by the author as having gone abroad to obtain terrorist training or fight in the ranks of a jihadi group, as already noted only one (the 2010 Times Square attempted bomber Faisal Shahzad) carried out an attack after his return. Two deadly terrorist attacks were carried out by individuals who spent time abroad that may have contributed to their radicalization—2009 Little Rock shooter Carlos Bledsoe and 2013 Boston bomber Tamerlan Tsarnaev—but they are not known to have connected with any terrorist group or received any terrorist training while abroad.

Ten percent of the total travelers from the United States participated in terrorist plots after their return, but as already mentioned, only one returnee from Syria was involved in a subsequent terrorist plot in the United States. The individual in question—Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud—served as a foreign fighter with the Jabhat al-Nusra Front in 2014.<sup>60</sup> Almost all of the other returnees from Syria were arrested upon or shortly after their return.<sup>61</sup>

Even if convicted of terrorism-related crimes, jail sentences in Europe are short compared to the long sentences handed down in the United States, which many Europeans see as an appalling and undesirable form of oppression, and seldom do those convicted in Europe serve their full sentences. Jail time may only increase radicalization. Radicalization is a serious problem in European prisons.<sup>62</sup> Jailed returning foreign fighters may intensify their own commitment and may radicalize others. Monitoring those at large and those who served time will pose an added burden on already stretched resources. Given the uncertainties and risks, few nations have formally accepted the transfer of their nationals from SDF custody.<sup>63</sup> Most of the returnees have made their own way back.

#### ***Utilize the International Criminal Court (ICC) or create a new international tribunal.***

The Kurds have suggested the creation of an international tribunal under the auspices of the United Nations to sort out those currently held.<sup>63</sup> Belgium has backed the idea, although with reservations.<sup>64</sup> There are a number of complications. While there is ample international precedent for special tribunals—Nuremberg, Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and Iraq—these have dealt with those accused of war crimes—genocide, mass murder, ethnic cleansing, torture of prison-

n Abdirahman Mohamud traveled to Syria in 2014 where he trained with and briefly fought as a member of Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qa`ida's affiliate in Syria. He returned to the United States in June 2014, shortly after his brother, also a jihadi foreign fighter, was killed. He planned to obtain weapons to carry out attacks on military officers and other government officials, but was arrested by the FBI before he was able to develop his plans.

o Kosovo accepted the return of 110 fighters and family members transferred with U.S. assistance from Syria. Fatos Bytyci, "Kosovo brings back fighters, families of jihadists from Syria," Reuters, April 19, 2019. Reportedly, a few Dutch foreign fighters have returned with the government's help. Bruce Bawer, "Dealing with Europe's ISIS Returnees," FrontPage, February 20, 2019. France has recently announced that it will repatriate French jihadis currently detained in Syrian camps. James McAuley and Michael Birnbaum, "France to take back ISIS fighters, reversing policy in wake of U.S. withdrawal from Syria," *Washington Post*, February 1, 2019.

ers. Although both the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida are considered by the United Nations to be terrorist organizations, merely joining the Islamic State or providing some measure of support may not by itself rise to the level of a war crime. Individual guilt may be required. The Special Tribunal for Lebanon, set up in 2009 following the assassination of Lebanon's prime minister, addresses the crime of terrorism, which is significant because it is the only international tribunal established to deal expressly with acts of terrorism—the killing of the former prime minister of Lebanon.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, it could be seen as a precedent for a tribunal to try those who fought for or supported the Islamic State without necessarily having to prove war crimes or crimes against humanity.

The international community conceivably could declare all members of designated terrorist organizations to be *hostis generis humani*—enemies of humanity—a designation applied to pirates on the high seas and slavers centuries ago. They stood outside the normal protections of the law and could be dealt with by any nation. The closest thing in the modern era was the continued hunt for and prosecution of Nazi war criminals down to the level of ordinary guards at concentration camps. (This would require a new international convention, which probably could not be done in time to affect the detainees in Syria.)

Beyond the legal question are the practical matters. The ICC deals with individual high-profile cases involving those responsible for mass atrocities. The leaders of the Islamic State could be brought before the ICC, but the ICC's Prosecutor noted in 2015 that while it appeared that some foreign fighters had participated in crimes against humanity and war crimes, the Islamic State was led primarily by nationals of Iraq and Syria (neither of which is a party to the treaty creating the international court), and therefore the prospects of investigating and holding Islamic State foreign fighters accountable before the court were limited.<sup>66</sup> The ICC would normally focus responsibility for war crimes on leadership rather than foot soldiers. Additionally, ICC prosecutions often take years to conduct, and institutionally, the Court has not prosecuted large numbers of people.

Moreover, not all nations support the ICC. The United States is not a member and in April 2019 revoked the visa of the ICC's head prosecutor for even considering prosecuting American military personnel who served in Afghanistan for possible war crimes.<sup>67</sup>

The idea of an E.U. tribunal to deal with the European cases has come up for discussion. Sweden, for one, has broached the idea of an international or Europe-wide tribunal with the E.U. Council.<sup>68</sup> The lack of consensus on the issue poses a political challenge. Not all European countries are supportive of repatriating those who went to join the Islamic State or live in the so-called caliphate it created. Bringing them back where they may immediately or eventually move freely across borders represents a threat to all. The opponents of repatriation may not be able to prevent individual countries from repatriating their own nationals, but can refuse to support a Europe-wide repatriation effort.

No international tribunal solves the problem of where to hold those convicted unless each nation agrees in advance to take and maintain custody of its nationals. But is it legitimate for nationals to be held in prisons in a country when they have not been tried in its own courts and under its own laws?

### *The United States steps in as the detainer of last resort and accepts custody.*

The Islamic State remains a foreign terrorist organization under U.S. law. The United States led an international coalition to destroy the group. U.S. military forces are still deployed across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, assisting local governments in their fight against the group and conducting special operations. U.S. intelligence officials consider the Islamic State to be a continuing terrorist threat. The United States has ample motive to ensure that those captured do not escape. The means are also there.

U.S. officials have said that foreign fighters who cannot be repatriated to their own countries could be brought to the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba where other foreign jihadis have been held since 2002. During his 2018 State of the Union address, President Trump asked Congress “to ensure that, in the fight against ISIS and al-Qaida, we continue to have all the necessary power to detain terrorists...And in many cases for them it will now be Guantanamo Bay.”<sup>69</sup> More recently, four U.S. senators have urged President Trump to send Islamic State fighters currently detained in Syria to Guantánamo.<sup>70</sup> The Pentagon’s spokesperson for Detainee Policy said “Guantánamo detention remains an alternative to repatriation of captives now held by the Syrian Democratic Forces.”<sup>71</sup>

Such a step undoubtedly would provoke protest among those concerned about violations of human rights, which Guantánamo has come to symbolize for many Europeans. (Whether the protest would be greater than if the detainees were instead turned over to serve time in Iraqi or Syrian prisons is not clear.)

The military tribunals at Guantánamo have been very slow; indeed, a number of their verdicts have been overturned by U.S. federal courts.<sup>p</sup> Although the April 2019 reversal of some tribunal decisions<sup>q</sup> was based on the military judge’s undisclosed conflicts of interest, the prosecutions have been generally hampered by the fact that much of the evidence for prosecution has been obtained through what some call “enhanced interrogation techniques” and many regard as torture.<sup>72</sup> These defendants cannot get a fair trial, and they will not be released. There may be enough beds at Guantanamo, but adding even a small number of detainees to the 40 detainees<sup>73</sup> who remain at Guantanamo would be politically difficult domestically and unacceptable internationally. It is difficult to imagine the United States taking custody of hundreds of foreign

fighters. It would overwhelm the already sclerotic judicial process, increasing the likelihood of indefinite detention without prosecution and trial and destroying the image of justice served. And, as the United States has learned, once the United States accepts custody, it is extremely hard to persuade other countries to take back their nationals, some of whom may be stripped of their citizenship.<sup>74</sup>

U.S. law also allows the prosecution of foreign terrorists in regular U.S. courts, which would have greater international legitimacy. Presumably, this would involve only high-value detainees—leaders and those who participated in terrorist crimes against U.S. citizens abroad. Bringing to justice those who participated in the kidnapping and murder of U.S. citizens in Syria would be politically popular with some in the United States, but for a variety of reasons opposed by others who prefer they be sent to Guantánamo. The issue would undoubtedly be highly politicized.

Some U.S. legal experts have already advised against the United States assuming responsibility for prosecuting Islamic State detainees.<sup>75</sup> An expression of such a willingness could reduce pressure on the European governments to repatriate and prosecute their own fighters.

### *Bluster and muddle.*

This is not an option, but policy by default. It describes the current situation. Warnings and threats prompt concern, but international coordination remains too complicated. Each country does its own thing, with some stripping those who went to Syria of their citizenship while others promise prosecution, attempt rehabilitation, or ignore the problem.

The European Union has identified this as a priority issue and has introduced a package of legal measures to increase the capability of the European Union and individual members to deal with returning foreign fighters, but this is a slow process.<sup>76</sup> Doing business as usual fails to recognize that these are special and urgent circumstances and it should not be tolerated. Inertia will prevail unless there is a major incident that highlights the danger or a humanitarian disaster that commands international attention.

The United States faces far smaller numbers of potential returnees and has wider latitude in prosecuting them. There may also be some high-profile individuals, either leaders or those who committed crimes against Americans, who the United States would want to bring back and prosecute.

Of particular interest to the United States, for example, is the prosecution of the two remaining so-called “Beatles”—a cell of four British foreign fighters involved in the torture and beheadings of Western hostages held by the Islamic State, including two American and two British hostages. One of the four was killed in a U.S. airstrike. Another was arrested and is in prison in Turkey. Two are currently detained by the SDF. The British government, which did not want to see the two men returned to the United Kingdom and stripped them of their citizenship, agreed to assist their prosecution in the United States by sharing evidence that it had collected about their actions. It did so without obtaining the usual guarantees that the two would not face execution or be sent to Guantánamo. The mother of one of the two challenged this arrangement in court, but her challenge was rejected in January 2019.<sup>77</sup>

## **Conclusions**

No one obvious solution stands out and preferred solutions may not be feasible, but reviewing all the options does identify some

<sup>p</sup> In 2012, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the conviction of one detainee on the grounds that the crime for which he was convicted was not a crime at the time of his alleged conduct. See Josh Gerstein, “Court overturns conviction of bin Laden driver,” Politico, October 16, 2012. In April 2019, a federal appeals court overturned the conviction of the alleged mastermind of the USS Cole bombing in 2000 on the grounds that the judge in the case had disclosed that he was seeking a job in the federal government while presiding over the trial, thereby creating a “disqualifying impression of partiality.” Missy Ryan, “In a setback for Guantanamo, court throws out years of rulings in USS Cole case,” *Washington Post*, April 16, 2019.

<sup>q</sup> The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia overturned two years of decisions by the military tribunal judge presiding over the proceedings in the USS Cole bombing case. Charles Gallmaeter, “Federal appeals court vacates more than two years of decisions by military judge overseeing the USS Cole bombing case,” *Jurist*, April 17, 2019.

<sup>r</sup> Of the 780 detainees known to have been held at Guantanamo, 731 were released without charges, nine died while in custody, 41 remain in custody, including eight who were convicted by the military commissions. Three of these convictions have been overturned and three more partially invalidated, leaving a total of two convictions that have stood.

non-starters and points to some paths forward. Simply letting the foreign fighters go is not an option. Allowing them to escape must be prevented. Stripping of citizenship is an inadequate and counter-productive response and, in any case, can be done in only a limited number of cases. Paying the Kurds to hold the detainees is a possible short-term measure, not a long-term solution. Turning them over wholesale to Syria and Iraq will create other problems. The International Criminal Court is not the right venue. The creation of a new international tribunal is a possibility not to be dismissed, but may be too complicated and would likely take too long to establish. For the same reasons, any formal multinational tribunal—for example, a European tribunal—seems unlikely. Most likely, the issue will be handled at the national level, which means different approaches will co-exist. That leaves some combination of repatriation, uncoordinated muddling, and potentially unilateral U.S. action aimed at the American and a few of the other identified detainees.

While messy, as most things are, this combination of approaches can be made to work. The first order of business is to inventory and disaggregate the populations. Foreign fighters can be sorted according to their role in the Islamic State, their desire to return, and their willingness to face prosecution or even confess to their crimes and assist the authorities. The same criteria apply to the women. The children should be rescued. The difficulty here will be an unrepentant mother with a small child. Separation may be inevitable in some cases, as it is when a child's only parent is a convicted felon being sent to prison, but it cannot be a matter of policy. These decisions will have to be made on a case-by-case basis.

If international tribunals are too far a reach, putting together a multinational arrangement for screening should be possible. It can be done in the SDF-held territory under the auspices of the same governments that participated in the coalition's campaign against the Islamic State and should be seen as a necessary component of their mission.

### Sorting, Interviewing, Detention, and Prosecution

Sorting out the fighters and families for repatriation and prosecution and possible incarceration or rehabilitation and re-entry into society, and interviewing them for the purposes of intelligence collection or increasing our understanding of jihadi appeal, mindset, and networks are separate processes with different goals. The interviewing process should have several components, each with its own objectives.

The most difficult task will be to isolate the still dedicated jihadis. There will be no bright shining line here, but rather shades of commitment, which are fluid over time. In assessing the degree of ongoing commitment to the extremist cause, it may be necessary to discount some of the initial enthusiasm shown by the travelers when they were planning or first went to Syria. Some probably were disillusioned if not appalled by the harsh rule they saw compared to what they imagined when they first went. At the same time, those who simply accompanied spouses or other family members may have radicalized during their time in Syria or Iraq. Does a display of defiance on the part of some reflect continued jihadi sentiments or fear of possible Islamic State informers and enforcers still operating in the camps?

The willingness of the governments of the foreign fighters to accept risk will also be a variable. Recollections of past and recent terrorist attacks involving returnees will reinforce a natural tendency to err on the side of caution in repatriating nationals, which can

amount to a lack of appetite for making distinctions.

Another component of this inquiry will be to assess the ability of home governments to prosecute individuals on the basis of available evidence. A number of Islamic State recruits extensively used social media, which means that there is an extensive amount of potentially self-incriminating material in social media before and during the time the travelers spent in Syria. However, fighters often used *noms de guerre*, and it may be difficult to legally connect cyber identities and posts with specific individuals.<sup>78</sup> A parallel component will be intelligence collection, part of which will be aimed at gathering evidence that can be used in prosecution and at collecting intelligence about recruiting methods and routes that will facilitate shutting down future personnel pipelines.

In addition to this probative inquiry, the presence of hundreds of detainees and family members in one place will allow a broader interviewing process aimed at increasing understanding of the jihadi mindsets and subculture. This is voluntary and should not be seen as part of the legal investigation. An effort should be made to interview every single individual, not just those willing to talk, in order to prevent Islamic State spies and enforcers in the camps from easily identifying who might be cooperating simply by the length of time they spend with the interviewer. Other steps can be taken to create constructive ambiguity about this.

An initial assessment should be made to assess the resources required, number of trained interviewers, language skills, and physical infrastructure in a secure environment to process these individuals within a specified time period. These are interviews to sort out the population, not trials. Information collected during the screening process should be readily shared among the nations involved according to locally agreed upon rules, not elaborate intelligence-sharing protocols. At the same time, conditions should be improved in the camps. It will prevent unnecessary misery and potential humanitarian crises and improve the environment for interviewing. Security could be provided by the SDF, backed by coalition forces.

The objective of this screening would be to move people out of the camps and back to their countries of origin where they can be formally prosecuted or be reintegrated into society according to national plans in place. Getting the foreign fighters back and putting them in prison or placing them under some other type of controls will not remove them as a potential problem—terrorist threat or source of future radicalization.

De-radicalization and reintegration deserve more attention. Several European countries—Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom—have put in place prevention or de-radicalization programs, but the issues involved are more complicated than they had initially expected and they are still struggling to refine these efforts. Some approaches appear to have worked better than others. All are works in progress.<sup>79</sup>

Returnees from Syria are likely to be targets of societal rejection and potentially future revenge. Others may have suffered severe mental trauma that may hinder their ability to function normally in society.<sup>80</sup> It is a long-term effort.

Any efforts to reinstate rather than lock up Islamic State returnees face exceptional hostility, especially in the current political climate in Europe and the United States. Recollections of Islamic State atrocities, fear of terrorism underscored by continuing attacks, Islamophobia, and growing anti-immigration sentiments will color how Western governments approach this issue. De-radicalization

programs can easily become political footballs and entail political risks. That does not mean that Europe, North America, Australia, and others cannot develop programs that are suitable to their social and political environments.

With government commitment and community engagement, programs aimed at de-radicalization can help reduce—not eliminate—the risk of terrorist violence. The British have invested heavily in community-led preventive intervention and de-radicalization programs at the individual level and can claim a measure of success.<sup>81</sup> The United Kingdom is implementing a “managed return” of those coming back from Syria. This includes the potential use of “Temporary Exclusion Orders” (in-country controls), criminal investigations, and rehabilitation and reintegration into society. An estimated 400 individuals have already come back.<sup>82</sup>

Everyone can agree that if the environment cannot be changed and the paths to violence cannot be interrupted, the production of jihadi terrorists will continue. The return of hundreds of Islamic State veterans, with no further intervention other than possible jail time, will only exacerbate the problem. Some type of de-radicalization program or other efforts to rehabilitate the returnees beyond incarceration are essential. It would be useful to know more about the life trajectories that drew the travelers to Syria to begin with, which brings this article back to researchable issues and the utility of conducting interviews while there is a ‘captive’ population in the camps.

It also may be useful to explore what tactical opportunities the returnees might provide. The counterterrorism community tends to focus exclusively on those who might still pose a threat, but given the numbers, there must also be some who may be turned into assets that can help discourage individuals from following their course. The administration of justice is important, but the objective is also resolving an armed struggle, and that requires thinking strategically and creatively to exploit opportunities offered by the current circumstances.

The territory occupied by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has

been recovered, and as a consequence, a large number of Islamic State fighters, supporters, and family members have been detained. But the threat posed by the Islamic State continues. How can the current detainees be utilized as a resource in the continuing global struggle against the Islamic State, not just dealt with as a threat or burden? What are the risks of trying versus the risks of not trying?

Progress is being made. France and Belgium has done some interviewing of those seeking return.<sup>83</sup> Some screening is also being done. The United States is helping countries put into place the laws and procedures seen as necessary to improve the prospects of prosecution.<sup>84</sup> The biometrics of the detainees are being recorded,<sup>85</sup> which will help prevent them from traveling internationally as border-control technology is being enhanced. The Radicalization Awareness Network, a European organization that includes practitioners across Europe, has produced a manual to assist governments and civil society on the “re-socialization” of returnees.<sup>86</sup>

But the efforts are disjointed, and progress appears to be slow. The SDF, with U.S. backing, recaptured Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic State in Syria, in October 2017. President Trump proclaimed the defeat of the Islamic State in December 2018 and ordered the withdrawal of all U.S. troops. Baghouz, the last town held by the Islamic State in Syria, fell in March 2019.

Defeating the Islamic State and recovering the territory it seized in 2014 is clearly a victory. It has been a more-than-four-year campaign, hard fought, costly in blood and treasure, immensely destructive as all wars are, with heavy casualties among civilians as well as fighters. The military effort has significantly reduced the terrorist threat. But that military achievement can easily be undone by failing to address what it has brought. Thousands of jihadis have been killed. Including fighters and active supporters, thousands of Islamic State fighters and families now remain in custody. While the challenge is considerable and the risks cannot be dismissed, those now detained must not be allowed to become the next generation of terrorists by failing to reintegrate them or remove them from society. **CTC**

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: Vidhya Ramalingam, Co-Founder, Moonshot CVE

By Paul Cruickshank

*Vidhya Ramalingam is the co-founder of Moonshot CVE, a company using technology to disrupt and counter violent extremism globally. She directs overall strategy and oversees campaigns, software development, and digital projects in over 25 countries. Her work is underpinned by over a decade of experience engaging directly with extremists, building new partnerships with activists, and advancing policy design with international governments. She is an expert on white nationalist extremism, and has testified before the U.S. Congress on the global threat posed by white nationalist terrorism. She has held various roles, including Commissioning Panellist for the U.K. security and intelligence agencies and ESRC, Faculty Associate at University of Oxford, and Board Member of Life After Hate. Prior to founding Moonshot, Ramalingam was Senior Fellow on Far-Right Extremism and Intolerance at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD). She led the European Union's first cross-government initiative on white nationalist terrorism and extremism, initiated by the Norwegian and Swedish ministries of justice following the July 22, 2011, attacks by Anders Breivik in Norway, and launched by the E.U. Commissioner for Home Affairs. Heading this program from 2012-2014, she worked with over 300 practitioners across 10 European countries to design policy, initiate projects, and build capacity to respond to white nationalist terrorism.*

**CTC: What led you to start working in the countering violent extremism space, and what for you have been the lessons learned?**

**Ramalingam:** I got into this space just over 10 years ago. My earliest jobs were in the migration space. As someone who grew up as the kid of Indian immigrants in North America, I spent a lot of time thinking about race, identity, migration, and became increasingly fascinated with white supremacy movements, movements that had notions of pure race and pure identity. I started researching and looking into non-violent anti-immigration movements and violent anti-immigration movements.

And I became increasingly frustrated by the unwillingness of so many people that were working against those movements to actually interact with individuals involved in these movements. To my mind, if the ultimate end goal is to change people's minds, we have to be able to have a conversation with them. You have to be able to talk to them, understand why they're there.

So I embarked on a project where I essentially carried out field work with a white nationalist movement in Sweden. I spent years learning Swedish and really built up my expertise on Swedish white nationalist movements, far-right movements, and I just started attending rallies, attending demonstrations, starting conversations with people at those demonstrations. And it was a tough experience, especially being a woman of color attempting to interact with largely white male, white nationalist movements. But people opened up

to me, and I think people are often surprised at the willingness of people who are in white nationalist movements to talk to individuals that they believe to be the enemy.

I was able to really get to know people that were involved in the movement over the course of 2010 when I was in the field, and that experience for me was transformational. It really showed me that the individuals that get involved in these sorts of movements are human beings with, in many cases, very rational stories as to why they got there and very clear experiences in their lives that led them to believe the things they believed. I started to develop some strong perspectives around how counter-extremism work needed to be delivered and needed to be really focused on human interactions and engagements with individuals involved in these movements to try to get them out.

I concluded that work and entered into the counterterrorism space. It wasn't until Anders Breivik carried out his attack on Utøya island and Oslo in 2011, killing 77 people, that European governments woke up to the threat of the violent far-right and really started to bring the violent far-right to the table in national security discussions.

And so that was a real turning point for me, especially having worked in the Nordic countries on far-right extremism. I then worked with the Swedish government, the Norwegian government, and a couple of the other Nordic governments to set up the E.U.'s first cross-governmental initiative to build capacity to respond to far-right terrorism. I was working, at that stage, across 10 European countries, working directly with the ministries and the policymakers that were responsible for building up their portfolios on far-right terrorism but also working with local NGOs and with former extremists to build up programs to respond to far-right terrorism. That for me was my real entry point into CVE. I ran that program from 2012 to 2014.

We launched Moonshot CVE in September of 2015, and we launched at a time when there was a real opening for an organization that was going to try to test new things in the online space. And for me, having come from a background where I had facilitated direct conversations with people in white nationalist movements, where I firmly believed that a social-work approach is critical, I really felt that to deliver this work in an online setting, we can't limit ourselves to ideological counter-messaging online. We need to deliver programs online that recognize that in the 21st century, every single user that exists online is a human being. People's lives span the online and the offline. And so my co-founder and I wanted to build an organization that could test our theories around the delivery of social work-based approaches in an online setting.

**CTC: What goals have you set for Moonshot CVE?**

**Ramalingam:** Moonshot CVE has a very bold mission statement: to disrupt and ultimately end violent extremism. And it's deliber-

ately ambitious. My co-founder Ross Frenett and I set up the organization three and a half years ago, having worked in the CVE/counterterrorism space for many years, and we saw a gap in the sector for an organization that was institutionally capable of taking risks and innovating in the true sense of the word, trial-testing things that hadn't been tried before. So often organizations that are delivering CVE programs are incapable of innovating, they're incapable of testing things not already proven to be effective. We developed a business model that was essentially a social enterprise in nature. We reinvest our own profit into our own R&D programs, our own development of software, our own trial testing, and we manage that risk ourselves. And once we get proof of concept, we can then scale initiatives up with partners who would otherwise be unable to take those risks.

**CTC: How does Moonshot CVE work to identify people at risk of violent extremism?**

**Ramalingam:** We find that individuals that are at risk of violent extremism, whether it's violent white supremacy or jihadism, oftentimes leave behind a trail of clues in the online space, a kind of digital footprint that lets us know they're getting involved. What we wanted to do with Moonshot CVE was build tools that would help us to automate the process of identifying those sorts of individuals and these communities online. So, we developed software that helps to analyze publicly available clues and processes those clues in hard-to-reach spaces on encrypted platforms, to try to help us scale up the identification of those individuals. That's our starting point.

But then secondly, we deploy programs that attempt to interact with those communities online in different ways. One way that we interact with those communities online is to develop campaigns that try to ensure that, somewhere in the online journey of that individual, they get offered alternative content, safer content, content that tries to essentially debunk some of these ideologies.

Here I should point out that what we found most effective is content that basically offers them the possibility to change, offers them the possibility to talk to someone. That then leads to another area of programming for us, which is the delivery of social work in the online space, where we facilitate the meeting of social workers and at-risk individuals, starting with conversations online but then transitioning into offline casework with that individual.

**CTC: So you're looking at publicly available social media.**

**Ramalingam:** Exactly.

**CTC: What is the approach you take to try to get through to at-risk individuals?**

**Ramalingam:** We will never contact an individual at risk as Moonshot CVE. Our team includes social workers, mental health practitioners, and people with counterterrorism and policing backgrounds who have experience interacting with at-risk individuals, but for us, it is so important that the entity that is reaching out to the individuals be one that can work with this person in the long term. For that reason, we always partner with local organizations, whether they are mental health-based organizations on the ground or CVE-based organizations that have trained counselors. We will find those local organizations in any city or country that we're work-



*Vidhya Ramalingam, co-founder of Moonshot CVE*

ing in. And we will build the online infrastructure to help that off-line organization be connected with the audience that desperately needs them.

The messaging that we've found most effective with at-risk audiences are oftentimes messages—either advertisements or direct one-on-one messages—that offer help.

What we're now doing is building tools that can help scale up personalized messaging from an individual social worker. We are building the tools to get personalized messages from a small cohort of social workers out to tens of thousands of individuals who might be at risk of violent extremism. The technology allows us to scale up the messaging, but there is always a human there ready to respond when somebody at risk actually takes the leap and wants to speak to a social worker.

**CTC: And that messaging would presumably contain a way to contact the social workers in question, for potential follow-up.**

**Ramalingam:** Exactly. We've done that in different ways. Sometimes the opportunity to speak to a social worker is via a website that offers an anonymous chat function. Sometimes they will be sent to a website that offers a service that they can then choose to take up themselves, a hotline, a phone number they can call. And sometimes it's an individual conversation with a social worker who informs them personally that they are there to speak to them.

**CTC: How receptive have your target audiences been? One might expect those who have gone further down a path of radicalization to be more resistant to this kind of messaging. Is your approach more effective with individuals who have traveled less far down the path of extremism?**

**Ramalingam:** We're still building the evidence base on this. We're in the early stages of a lot of this pilot work, and it's entirely ex-

perimental. This work to bridge the online and offline hasn't been done before in the CVE space, to our knowledge. So we'll be in a good position in a year's time to really bring some evidence to the table on that.

But what I can say is there is long-standing evidence from across the sector that social work interventions, face-to-face, are effective. There is also evidence that individuals who ultimately leave these movements have oftentimes spent years questioning the movement themselves, feeling unhappy or unsatisfied, and thinking about leaving. These individuals can oftentimes feel trapped in the movement. So it's really important to us, as an organization, not to exclude individuals that are deeply imbedded in the movement from prevention and interventions programs. Because you just never know if any one individual has been looking for a way out but hasn't been able to find it. And we want to make sure that they get offered that opportunity.

**CTC: In what parts of the world are you operating?**

**Ramalingam:** We deliver programming globally. We focus on methodologies and technologies that can be deployed in any location. We've had programs that have been live, at this stage, in over 25 countries and across different forms of extremism, including in North America and Europe. We have a large program of work on global jihadism, but we also have a large program of work on global far-right and white nationalist extremism. We do work on Buddhist extremism in Myanmar, Hindu nationalist extremism in India, and ethno-nationalist violence in the Balkans. So we're not really bound by any geography. What that means is that when we set up these programs in any new country, we need to find the right local partners that can manage that risk on the ground and manage that casework on the ground. That's the critical prerequisite for us to deliver online intervention programs.

**CTC: With the appropriate cultural understanding and language skills.**

**Ramalingam:** Exactly.

**CTC: What type of approach has proved effective in your messaging efforts?**

**Ramalingam:** We've managed to build up some evidence around the efficacy of social support messaging with audiences that are at risk of violent extremism. Historically, the CVE sector has focused on the idea of ideology-based counter narratives, and promoting these online to deconstruct extremist narratives. In the last two years, we've been testing mental health-based messaging. This includes messaging that says "do you feel anxious?" or "do you feel hopeless" and offers support with dealing with mental and social health issues. We've tested that messaging with violent extremist audiences, and then we've also tested it with comparison groups to make sure that we have a baseline to compare against. Consistently in nearly every geography that we test in, both with neo-Nazis and jihadi audiences alike, we find that the extremist audience is disproportionately likely to engage with that mental health and social support messaging than a comparison group.

In 2017, we found this with neo-Nazis in the U.S. who were 48 percent more likely to engage with that sort of mental health mes-

saging than a comparison group. And then we found that globally with jihadist audiences, that they were 47 percent more likely to engage with that content than a control group. So for us, one of the great successes from our programs over the last few years has been building up the evidence base around the effective social service messaging with at-risk audiences.

**CTC: So what you are saying is that engaging on the mental health aspect rather than tackling the ideological aspect has proved a particularly effective way to begin a conversation with people who have gone down the extremism path.**

**Ramalingam:** Exactly. I'm always cautious when I explain this because I want to avoid misinterpretations of this data. What I'm not saying here is that violent extremists are disproportionately likely to have mental health issues. We don't have an evidence base around that. But what we have evidenced is that mental health-based messaging is an effective opening; it's a way for us to start a conversation, to start interacting with this audience, and perhaps more effective than ideology-based messaging, which can oftentimes make the individual feel cornered or on the defensive. And so we have been building up an evidence base around this for the last few years.

**CTC: What does success look like to you?**

**Ramalingam:** What success looks like depends on the aim and scale of every project. So there will be projects that we run where success will be measured with really small numbers; it's about intensive engagement with a small number of individuals who are truly at risk. And that's where the online intervention work that we run will really be focused. Now, we're a three-and-a-half-year-old organization. We're now in the midst of several multi-year pilot programs, online intervention pilot programs, but we're too early in the life cycle of those programs to be able to report on the efficacy. I'll be upfront about that because this is such experimental work. So we'll be building that evidence base over the course of this year and the next year. But it is very early days. We've only just kicked off those programs now.

**CTC: In the online space in the United States, how energized are violent far-right extremists and jihadi extremists?**

**Ramalingam:** The numbers we're dealing with are a lot larger depending on the form of extremism. For the past few years, we have been tracking violent far-right searches on Google, and we found over 200,000 searches across the U.S. in the year 2017 aligned with the violent far-right, and then if you look at 2018, that number skyrocketed. Now, that is not even comparable to the scale of the jihadist audience. We saw less than 40,000 searches by the jihadist audience that same year in the United States. Violent far-right audience have been far more brazen and more open online, broadcasting their beliefs and intent, as compared to the jihadist audience.

**CTC: And when you're saying search for violent far-right content, the nature of the searches suggests that people want to actually find that content because they're sympathetic toward it, right?**

**Ramalingam:** Exactly. So these are individuals that are searching for information on how to join the KKK or information related to killing ethnic minorities.

**CTC: How do you obtain this data?**

**Ramalingam:** To do this, we needed to find creative ways to gather this data at the scale we require for CVE work. One of the reasons why we set up this company was that so many of the off-the-shelf tools—social media analytics tools that have been available, big data analytics tools—aren't necessarily suitable when you're doing CVE work. We are looking for small audiences, engaging in niche destructive behaviors. So we've had to build these tools ourselves. We've been tracking data on searches related to violent far-right and jihadist content across America since 2017. What it's allowed us to do is actually measure some real shifts and changes in behaviors because we're building longitudinal datasets. So, an example is post-Charlottesville, we saw a 400-percent increase in Google searches by individuals in the United States indicating a desire to get involved with these sorts of violent far-right movements.

**CTC: And this is the aggregate data you're talking about.**

**Ramalingam:** Exactly. It is important to say that we're not looking at IP addresses. We're not looking at any user's search histories. But what we are looking at is what types of searches are taking place and where are those searches taking place broadly speaking. And this just lets us paint a better picture of risk across the country. We've released some of that analysis publicly.<sup>1</sup>

**CTC: When it comes to identifying individual at-risk people, you're dealing with what they're posting socially on their Facebook and Twitter accounts and other similar publicly facing social media, right?**

**Ramalingam:** Exactly. And we actually hold ourselves to very high standards when it comes to data privacy. We're a European company, and we're bound by GDPR,<sup>a</sup> so all of our tools and analysis are entirely GDPR-compliant. When we are looking at search data, we are accessing any information which would allow us to identify individuals. We use search data to be able to inform our campaign work. We have a partnership with Google on a methodology called the Redirect Method where we run campaigns to reach individuals that are searching for violent extremist content on their platform and try to offer them advertisements that give them alternatives. And so the data around what types of things people are searching for related to the violent far-right or jihadist propaganda is really important to inform those campaigns.

**CTC: Can you speak to the kind of software you've managed to develop that allows you to identify at-risk individuals at scale?**

a Editor's Note: GDPR refers to General Data Protection Regulation, which according to the European Commission created "one set of data protection rules for all companies operating in the EU, wherever they are based" and gave people more control over their personal data. "2018 reform of EU data protection rules," European Commission website (accessed May 2019).

**Ramalingam:** I mentioned earlier that individuals at risk of violent extremism oftentimes leave behind these kind of digital footprints, these kind of trails of clues letting us know that they're involved. And that's often in the form of comments, information that they're posting, photos that they're posting, etc. What we've done at Moonshot CVE is we've built up some really robust databases of risk indicators online. That includes everything from links that are being shared to specific pieces of propaganda, jihadist *anasheed*, white power music that advocates violence. We've built up, at this stage, databases into the millions of those indicators.

And our databases are coded in a risk-sensitive way. We ensure that we are differentiating between individuals that are engaging with an indicator that is very low risk versus those that are engaging with an indicator that indicates intent to carry out violence. That database of indicators is really what drives any of the tools that we've created. It helps us find individuals that are engaging with any of those indicators on any social media platform, whether it's the widely known ones—Facebook, Twitter, etc.—or more niche platforms, and enables us to assess risk.

**CTC: So, you're looking at combinations of words and phrases that suggest that people are sympathetic to one of these extremist ideologies.**

**Ramalingam:** Exactly.

**CTC: Can you also assess risk based on the type of pictures being posted on a particular account?**

**Ramalingam:** We do have images in some of our databases, but images are notoriously more challenging to work with than text when you're building these tools. We often bring on human analysts to support this work and review image-based content.

**CTC: When you're looking out for danger signs of people online, if through those searches you see something that you assess to be a danger to public safety, that is something you would presumably alert to the security services of the relevant country, right?**

**Ramalingam:** Where it is safe and humane to do so, yes, absolutely. Most of our work is governed by the same principles that would apply to social workers. We handle and manage data securely, and we don't share personally identifiable data with governments or intelligence agencies and do not carry out surveillance on their behalf. While that's very much the case, if we are operating in a context where we believe it is safe and humane to do so, if we do come across an individual that we believe poses an immediate threat, if there's intent or an indication that they're planning an imminent attack, we will immediately reach out to law enforcement to ensure they can respond.

**CTC: When it comes to the right-wing extremism/terrorism space, what are the trends that you're seeing in terms of the size and nature of this threat since the Breivik attack in 2011?**

**Ramalingam:** One message that I would want to get across is that these movements have always existed. They've persisted over the past many decades. The change that I've seen in recent years is that

these movements have become more brazen. They're starting to feel like their ideologies are more acceptable in the mainstream. They're more willing to put their beliefs into the public domain without fear of retribution or attack. And so that brings us into dangerous context, where individuals that are on that cusp of carrying out an act of violence feel that they have a real community behind them. The online communities where these sorts of pieces of propaganda and comments are shared, spaces like 8chan or 4chan or some corners of Reddit, they are not geographically bound. They offer these kinds of borderless communities for like-minded individuals, and those sorts of communities are particularly dangerous because individuals that may just be keyboard warriors, not necessarily planning to carry out an attack, might inadvertently be fueling that one individual in the group who has been considering taking action.

**CTC: What lessons can the counterterrorism community draw from the terrorist attack on mosques this past March in Christchurch, New Zealand?**

**Ramalingam:** It's a terrible tragedy. I think in many ways, it reinforces what many of us have been pushing for in the counterterrorism community for years now: that this is not just a domestic terror threat; this is a global terrorism threat. The perpetrator in this attack clearly drew inspiration from an international cast of far-right extremist characters, a set of so-called heroes that he worshipped. He referenced a lot of cultural icons that he believed were his inspiration. And it wasn't just Anders Breivik that he mentioned and sought to mirror; there were also mentions of a number of other right-wing terrorists from across the globe that he indicated had been an inspiration for him.

I think it's important to remind ourselves that this is not the first time that a white nationalist has migrated across borders to carry out an attack. There was a key example of that in 2013 when a Ukrainian-born terrorist Pavlo Lapshyn arrived in the U.K. and within five days, had murdered an 82-year-old Muslim man. He went on then to plan three attempted bombings against mosques in the weeks that followed.<sup>b</sup> The attacker in Christchurch actually wrote that Ukrainian terrorist's name on his weapon,<sup>2</sup> reminding us that there's some symmetry between these actions and the actions that have been taken by other international far-right extremists, terrorists. So I think this is a real reminder and a wake-up call for the counterterrorism community that we are not just dealing with a domestic, homegrown terror threat when it comes to far-right extremism. We need to see this as a global movement that constitutes a global threat, and that really needs to drive our response moving forward.

And it requires a different kind of response. The threat from right-wing terrorism has often been downplayed. One reason is it's oftentimes not been seen as a terrorism issue but as an issue of community violence and hate crime. So it has often fallen between the gaps, between different policy instruments.

What incidences like this have taught us is that while global networks of violent far-right extremists are oftentimes disorganized and lack capacity, we are nevertheless dealing with a global network of individuals that are increasingly sharing and disseminating vio-

lent extremist content, and encouraging and inspiring one another. These networks are decentralized and often leaderless, but that can make perpetrators all the more difficult to track.

**CTC: And given that Breivik appears to have inspired to some degree the Christchurch attacker,<sup>3</sup> there must be a concern that there could be a rolling snowball effect with these attacks, that one inspires another, and a mythology starts to be built around these violent acts and the perpetrators.**

**Ramalingam:** There is absolutely a danger of that. Many of the perpetrators in the more recent far-right terrorism incidents that have taken place have left behind manifestos, which are intended to inspire others, other likeminded individuals. It is not just Brenton Tarrant, the perpetrator of the Christchurch attack, but also Breivik's manifesto and Dylann Roof's manifesto. This has now become a common means through which individuals are able to share their kind of motivating message to other likeminded individuals. And we do need to be concerned about, in the immediate aftermath of these attacks, how that information travels and who's interacting with that information and glorifying the acts that have just taken place. So there is a need for some real rapid response work in the aftermath of these events to mitigate the possibility for immediate copycat attacks to take place.

**CTC: Are you detecting that more of the violent far-right focus is now directed against Muslims? Has an Islamophobic element come to the fore, as a unifying issue for far-right violent extremists?**

**Ramalingam:** I think Muslims are a very convenient target for white nationalist extremist movements that deem a number of different communities enemies. Generally in white nationalist ideology, it's not just Muslims that are the enemy, but also Jewish communities, black American communities, and even particular white communities they believe to be 'traitors.' Given the scale of Islamophobia and just how mainstreamed Islamophobia has become in Western societies, Muslims are a very convenient target for these movements because they believe that they will have wider support for their actions. Now that obviously isn't matched by reality, but that is certainly a belief within some white nationalist communities.

**CTC: What is your concern about the potential for a vicious cycle of violence to gather force, in which jihadis and far-right violent extremists feed off each other's attacks?**

**Ramalingam:** While I do think there is a risk of a kind of cyclical reciprocal radicalization, I don't want to overstate the relevance of jihadist attacks as a motivation for far-right terror attacks. This has been a pervasive problem in the United States and Europe long before ISIS. We need to see the attack in Christchurch in the context of, for example, the attack that took place in Pittsburgh last year on a synagogue, the attack that took place in Charleston in 2015, which was an attack against the black American community. While there is certainly a risk of reciprocal acts of violence, we need to ensure we see white nationalist violence not simply as a response to jihadist extremism.

**CTC: You advise the U.K. government on countering violent extremism. What is your assessment of the evolving challenge**

<sup>b</sup> Editor's note: For more on the Lapshyn case, see Graham Macklin, "The Evolution of Extreme-Right Terrorism and Efforts to Counter It in the United Kingdom," *CTC Sentinel* 12:1 (2019).

## posed by violent right-wing extremism in the U.K.?

**Ramalingam:** I think the evolution of the far-right in the U.K. has mirrored other countries like the United States where these groups have become more brazen and more open and more willing to put their beliefs into the public domain. And we've certainly seen that in the U.K., a key example is the terrorist organization called National Action, who were leafletting across U.K. university campuses and posting documents which named individual targets on their website. Groups like this have become far more open and far more brazen than they would have been in the years prior. They feel emboldened by what they perceive to be wider acceptance of their ideology, and that has certainly served as an inspiration. The U.K. government has taken proportionate action to respond. The banning of National Action [in December 2016] was an unprecedented move when it comes to violent far-right extremism in the U.K., and that was an important step. But there's still a huge amount more that needs to be done.

**CTC:** How, in your view, can the international community and different communities make progress when it comes to the right-wing extremism threat? What needs to happen for this to no longer be a rising concern but something that is losing momentum?

**Ramalingam:** In order to solve this problem, we need to recognize far-right terrorism as a global threat and need to adequately adjust our policy mechanisms and the investment that's placed in tackling this issue. But we also need to stop seeing the internet as a barrier. The problem of right-wing extremism will not be solved by removing individual pieces of content from the internet, piece by piece.

We need to take some responsibility and start delivering proactive methods in the online space because if you take down a piece of content, the user who posted it still exists. And so it's not enough for us to turn our blame to technology companies.

We need to start creating opportunities for us to actually use their platforms to reach communities that are engaging with this sort of activity online. We will need support from those technology companies to do that effectively. The need to recognize far-right terrorism as a global threat does not just apply to governments; it also applies to the global technology companies, Google, Facebook, Twitter, etc. We need to be actively investing in long-term solutions online rather than simply seeing the internet as a barrier.

**CTC:** Is there anything else that you feel is important to get across?

**Ramalingam:** Despite the tragedy that took place in New Zealand, I remain overwhelming optimistic about what is possible, especially in the new digital era. I firmly believe that while the internet is certainly littered with comments made by internet users that are supporting the actions of an individual like the perpetrator in the Christchurch attacks, every individual that has posted that content has just put information into the public domain that tells us they're at risk. And that means it's an opportunity for us to find them, to interact with them, to offer them alternatives, to challenge them, and try and engage them in social work. So I see the online space as fundamentally creating an opportunity for us to prevent terrorism and to interact with people who might be at risk. So, if there's one message to end the interview on, it's one of optimism that there's a lot we can do here. And there's a lot still to be done. We just need to get working. **CTC**

## Citations

- 1 See "Testimony of Vidhya Ramalingam, Founder & Director, Moonshot CVE, Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Hearing on 'Examining the Global Terrorism Landscape,'" U.S. House of Representatives Document Repository, April 30, 2019.
- 2 Mike Eckel, "Christchurch Attacks: Why Are The Names Of A Georgian

King And A Ukrainian Extremist Written On The Guns?" Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, March 15, 2019.

- 3 Pierre-Henry Deshayes, "Breivik's shadow hangs heavy over Christchurch attack," Agence France-Presse, March 15, 2019.

# Terrorist Attacks Against Jewish Targets in the West (2012-2019): The Atlantic Divide Between European and American Attackers

By Mitchell D. Silber

**The time period of 2012-2019 has seen a number of deadly terrorist attacks and plots against Jews and Jewish targets in both in Europe and the United States. However, in spite of the parallel rise in this deadly anti-Semitic violence on both sides of the Atlantic (compared to the decade 2001-2011), the sources of much of the violence have been from jihadis in Europe and individuals motivated by extreme right-wing (XRW) ideologies in the United States. While determining causality of terrorist violence is never simple, through the analysis and comparison of key jihadi and extreme-right cases, some common threads have emerged that provide insight that may help explain the two phenomena, on both sides of the Atlantic. What may be the most striking findings from this case study analysis are that first, Europe has become the focal point of the jihadi terror threat to Jews in the West and second, the United States has become a new, emerging focal point of the extreme right-wing terror threat to Jews in the West.**

**W**hile Jews and Israel have been fixtures as enemies in the cosmology of both Sunni jihadi ideology and extreme right<sup>a</sup> groups that lean heavily on white supremacist/neo-Nazi ideology, during the last seven years in Europe and the same period (but particularly the last seven months) in the

a The Anti-Defamation League defines "extreme right" as "right-wing political, social and religious movements that exist outside of and are more radical than mainstream conservatism. In the United States, the extreme right consists primarily of two large, slightly overlapping spheres. In one sphere is the white supremacist movement, including its various sub-movements, such as neo-Nazis, racist skinheads, and the alt right, among others. In the other sphere are anti-government extremist movements such as the militia movement and sovereign citizens (collectively, this sphere is often referred to as the "Patriot" movement). Also in the extreme right are several "single-issue" movements, which each tend to be the extreme wing of a more mainstream conservative movement; these include anti-abortion extremists, anti-immigrant extremists, anti-Muslim extremists, and anti-public lands extremists, among others." "Extreme Right/Radical Right/Far Right," adl.org.

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United States, these doctrinal tenets have been acted upon to deadly effect with a frequency of success that is a sharp break from the previous decade, 2001 to 2011.<sup>b</sup> Although during the first decade following the attacks of September 11, 2001, al-Qa`ida and other transnational Sunni jihadi groups reiterated their long-standing antipathy toward Jews and Israel, there were no successful attacks launched by jihadis against these targets in Europe between 2001 and 2011.<sup>1</sup> Now, that has changed, coincident with the rise of the Islamic State and a new wave of jihadi violence.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the ideological spectrum and across the Atlantic, at a much broader level, the United States has seen a decade-long phenomenon of extreme-right violence directed at immigrants and ethnic/religious minorities between 2008 and 2018.<sup>c</sup> However, it was only in October 2018 with the deadly attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh that Jews became casualties of this recent, broader trend in the United States.<sup>d</sup> It is worth noting that in May 2019 a senior FBI official said the bureau was observing a significant rise in the number of white supremacist domestic terrorism cases and that the current year's numbers were on track to match or exceed levels of 2017 and 2018.<sup>e</sup>

This article will seek to explore the doctrinal drivers behind the targeting of Jews both in Europe and the United States and seek to determine the specific justifications for anti-Semitic violence that have mobilized the attackers. These include historic religious anti-Jewish polemics,<sup>3</sup> Nazi race war ideology,<sup>e</sup> direction from past and current al-Qa`ida leadership,<sup>4</sup> recommendations from the Is-

- b However, between 2001 and 2011, there were at least 10, if not 12 jihadi plots with Jewish targets in Europe that failed or were foiled. Author email correspondence, Michael Whine, Director, Government & International Affairs, Community Security Trust (CST), May 2019.
- c According to the ADL Center on Extremism, "over the last decade, a total of 73.3 percent of all extremist-related fatalities can be linked to domestic right-wing extremists, while 23.4 percent can be attributed to Islamic extremists. The remaining 3.2 percent were carried out by extremists who did not fall into either category." "Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2018," ADL Center on Extremism, January 2019.
- d At least 50 people were killed at the hands of domestic extremists in 2018 in the United States, an increase of 35 percent from the previous year, according to the Anti-Defamation League. Out of the 50, 11 were Jews killed in Pittsburgh in October 2018. "Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2018."
- e "Hitler radicalized traditional antisemitism by underpinning it with the race doctrine and giving it a biological basis. The Jew was conceived of as an unnatural outgrowth. His disappearance from this world should be a blessing for humankind. Hitler portrayed the Jew as the carrier of the concepts of internationalism, democracy, and pacifism, which were the 'three plagues of humanity... that had killed the nations' race value.'" From Walter Zwi Bacharach, "Antisemitism and Racism in Nazi Ideology," in Michael Berenbaum and Abraham Peck eds., *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 72.



lamic Global Resistance Call<sup>f</sup> and a current manifestation of Middle East (Palestinian-Israeli conflict) politics playing out on a different battlefield.<sup>8</sup> Underpinning this analysis will be the detailed examination of relevant case studies from Europe (jihadi) and the United States (white supremacist/extreme right).

While determining causality of terrorist violence is never simple and there are differences between the factors that sustain terrorist plotting against Jewish targets on both sides of the Atlantic, there are also similarities. Some common threads that are worth considering and which repeat among the case studies separate into the categories of message, medium, and motivation. For example, under message, while the core philosophies of white supremacists and jihadis differ, both ideologies derive from doctrinal manifestos that direct followers to target Jews.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, both philosophies argue that their constituents are in a “cosmic war”<sup>h</sup> with Jews that requires action from their adherents.<sup>6</sup> In terms of medium, to promote their worldviews, both jihadis and right-wing extremists use remarkably similar social media strategies to recruit and radicalize.<sup>7</sup> And lastly, though far from exclusive to attacks against Jewish targets, there is the “copycat” effect where extensive media coverage of one attack can inspire other alienated individuals to copy these actions and commit similar crimes.

Part one of this article focuses on jihadi terrorism against Jews. It starts by providing an overview of jihadi doctrine related to targeting Jews, before presenting case studies on the deadly terrorist attacks carried out against Jews in the West<sup>i</sup> between 2012 and 2019, which all occurred in Europe. Part two of this article focuses on extreme right-wing terrorism against Jews. It starts by examining the doctrines behind such attacks, focusing on the violent extremist far-right scene in the United States, the location for all the deadly far-right terrorist attacks on Jews in the West between 2012 and 2019. Case studies are then presented for each of these attacks.

### Part One: Jihadi Terror Threat To Jews in the West

Four deadly terrorist attacks launched specifically against Jewish targets have taken place during the 2012 to 2019 time period in

Europe.<sup>j</sup> Each was launched by an individual or individuals with either an aspirational or actual association with a jihadi terrorist group. Underpinning the motivation for these different attacks has been a mix of al-Qa`ida/Islamic State ideological doctrines, ancient Islamic anti-Semitic tropes, and current Palestinian-Israeli political tensions.

#### *Jihadi Doctrine in Relation to Jews*

Both in Usama bin Ladin’s original declaration of war against the United States in 1996 and his subsequent statement in 1998,<sup>8</sup> Israel and Jews figured very high on the organization’s list of priorities as al-Qa`ida’s enemies. From these important statements, it is clear that bin Ladin was not focusing on Jews as a religious minority, but rather in the political incarnation—the Jewish State of Israel and that the United States is seen as doing its bidding in the Middle East, whether related to the plight of Palestinians, Lebanese, or Iraqis. But most importantly, al-Qa`ida’s founder was establishing the doctrinal legitimacy of “Jews” as a target.

Similarly, the current leader of al-Qa`ida, Ayman al-Zawahiri, argued in his December 2001 book *Knights under the Prophet’s Banner* that “tracking down the Americans and the Jews is not impossible. Killing them with a single bullet, a stab, or a device made up of a popular mix of explosives or hitting them with an iron rod is not impossible. Burning down their property with Molotov cocktails is not difficult. With the available means, small groups could prove to be a frightening horror for the Americans and the Jews.”<sup>9</sup>

In 2008, al-Zawahiri similarly endorsed “every operation against Jewish interests” and promised to “strive as much as we can to deal blows to the Jews inside Israel and outside it.”<sup>10</sup> He also called specifically for attacks on Jews outside Israel, reinforcing bin Ladin’s doctrine and noting, “today there is no room for he who says that we should only fight the Jews in Palestine ... Let us strike their interests everywhere, just like they gathered against us from everywhere.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet, with few exceptions, while Jews and Israel have been a target of fierce rhetorical attack by Usama bin Ladin and his acolytes, words were infrequently matched by deeds between 2001 and 2011. The exceptions of al-Qa`ida-directed attacks against Jewish and Israeli interests occurred in 2002 and 2003, outside of Europe. In April 2002, an al-Qa`ida attack was launched against the ancient El Ghriba synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba.<sup>12</sup> A natural-gas truck, fitted with explosives, detonated at the front of the synagogue, killing 14 German tourists, three Tunisians, and two French nationals.<sup>13</sup> Later that year, in Kenya in November 2002 there was a two-pronged al-Qa`ida attack involving the suicide bombing of an Israeli hotel at almost the same time as two Russian SAM-7 surface-to-air missiles were fired at an Israeli civilian airliner taking off from the city’s airport.<sup>14</sup> The third attack came in Turkey on November 15, 2003, when the Bet Israel and Neve Shalom synagogues in Istanbul were each struck by a truck carrying explosives that crashed into the locations, killing 23 and injuring more than 300.<sup>15</sup>

f The Global Islamic Resistance Call was written by Abu Musab al-Suri—the *nom de guerre* of the Syrian jihadi Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Setmariam Nasar, a far-sighted independent military strategist aligned with al-Qa`ida— and published in December 2004. The references to al-Suri’s text in this article are drawn from Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al-Qaida Strategist Abu Musab al-Suri* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2007).

g French scholar Gilles Kepel asserts that the targeting of French Jews by French jihadis could be seen as a proxy for striking Israel, “with the local Jews, seen as the very incarnation of the despised Zionist ideology.” Gilles Kepel, *Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West* (Princeton, NH: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 149.

h “Cosmic war” is a term that social scientist Mark Juergensmeyer defines as “the great battle between good and evil, right and wrong, religion and irreligion.” Nathan Schneider, “Cosmic war on a global scale: An interview with Mark Juergensmeyer,” *Imminent Frame*, July 23, 2010.

i “The West” is defined for this article as North America, Europe (excluding Russia), Australia, and New Zealand.

j Two murders in France of elderly Jewish women, Sarah Halimi (2017) and Mireille Knoll (2018), each by Muslim neighbors were clearly an anti-Semitic hate crime and occurred during this time period, but to date, no political motivation has come to light for their actions and thus they were excluded from this study of ‘terrorist attacks.’ James McAuley, “How the Murders of Two Elderly Jewish Women Shook France,” *Guardian*, November 27, 2018.

Despite the lack of successful attacks against Israeli or Jewish targets by al-Qa`ida in Europe between 2001 and 2011, it was not for a lack of effort.<sup>k</sup> Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM), al-Qa`ida's chief of operations before and immediately after 9/11, asserted that he was responsible for efforts to try to hit Israeli targets in Australia, Azerbaijan, India, Kenya, and the Philippines as well as Israeli flights into and out of Bangkok and Mombasa. Moreover, he claimed that he provided financial support for operations against Jewish targets in the United States, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

While successful attacks against Jews in the European diaspora by al-Qa`ida remained rare, in 2004, in the wake of al-Qa`ida's loss of its sanctuary in Afghanistan, *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, published by Abu Musab al-Suri, suggested nine most important types of targets in the United States and in Western countries.<sup>17</sup> Number 6 was "places where Jews are gathered, their leading personalities and institutions in Europe, avoiding places of worship and synagogues."<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, number 3 was "media personalities and media centers that are leading the war against the Muslims and justifying the attacks on them, coming from the Zionist and Zionist friendly Crusader media institutions."<sup>19</sup>

Though not explicitly cited by any jihadi terrorists who carried out attacks, this strategic document and its target recommendation yet again reinforced the doctrinal legitimacy of attacks against Jews and at a minimum provided ideological reinforcement of al-Qa`ida's previous justification for jihadi attacks against Jewish targets.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, one must observe with significant concern Hamza bin Ladin's May 2017 call to attack Jewish targets, placing them at even a higher priority than attacking the United States.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Case Studies on All Deadly Jihadi Terrorist Attacks on Jews in the West (2012-2019)***

Every single fatal jihadi terrorist attack on Jews in the West between 2012 and 2019 took place in Europe, suggesting the continent is now at the focal point of the jihadi terror threat against Jews in the West.

Four deadly terrorist attacks occurred in Europe between 2012 and 2019, which were carried out by individuals motivated to attack

k According to Michael Whine, some of these plots included: September 2003—two members of the Islamic State precursor group Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad convicted of firearms attack against Berlin Jewish Museum; March 2004—seven al-Qa`ida-linked men convicted of Fertilizer Plot (thwarted by Operation Crevice) to bomb an out-of-town shopping center and two London synagogues; March 2004—Spanish al-Qa`ida cell's plans to attack Madrid Jewish schools, discovered following the Atocha railway station attack; December 2005—Libyan and Algerian nationals planned rocket attack against El Al plane at Geneva airport, foiled by Swiss security service; June 2006—seven men of North African origin planned to attack El Al plane at Zurich airport, foiled by Swiss security service; September 2006—Czech security service foiled al-Qa`ida in Iraq-linked plot to attack Jerusalem synagogue in Prague; December 2008—group of al-Qa`ida-linked men convicted of plotting various attacks in Manchester and London (among their targets was U.K. Jewish community leader Sir Trevor Chinn); November 2010—Belgian police foiled plot to attack NATO vehicles and the Jewish community. See Michael Whine, "Terrorist Incidents against Jewish Communities and Israeli Citizens Abroad, 1968-2010," Jewish Center for Public Affairs, July 1, 2011.

l Kepel argues that the killing of French Jews on January 7, 2015, at the Hyper Cacher supermarket was "in accord with the recommendations of the *Islamic Global Resistance Call*." *Terror in France*, p. 95.

explicitly Jewish targets by violent Islamist ideology.<sup>m</sup> There were no deadly attacks in Europe by extreme-right violent extremists against Jews during this period.

### ***The 2012 Toulouse Terrorist Shootings***

On March 11, 2012, a series of terrorist attacks began in and around Toulouse, France, that were the first jihadi attacks on French soil in a decade and a half and ended in one of the worst targeted attacks on Jews in France since the Second World War. The attacks began with the killing of a French-Muslim paratrooper in Toulouse. Four days later, two more French soldiers of North African origin were killed in Montauban, and then before being killed by security forces after a 32-hour siege, the assailant brutally murdered a rabbi and three children at a Jewish school in Toulouse.<sup>21</sup>

This wave of violent acts that shocked France were carried out by Mohamed Merah, a 23-year-old Frenchman of Algerian descent with a criminal history.<sup>22</sup> Without spending too much time on Merah's biography, it is important to note that firstly, "Merah emerged from prison in 2009 almost fully radicalized, and openly proclaimed his fascination for violent jihad"<sup>23</sup> and secondly, that following his release from prison he traveled to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and Egypt in 2010 and returned to spend two months in Waziristan in Pakistan in 2011. According to Bernard Squarini, the head of France's domestic security service (DRCI) until 2012, during this period Merah claimed to have been trained by an instructor from al-Qa`ida.<sup>24</sup>

Merah maintained his links to the global jihad upon his return to France and was in contact with Moez Garsallaoui, emir of the Central Asian terrorist group Jund al Khilafah (JaK).<sup>25</sup> In fact, he stated that the "brothers in Pakistan" supplied him with approximately 20,000 Euros for his attacks.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, he and his brother were also linked to the "Toulouse group" and in at least Merah's mind, Forsane Alizza, given that his last tweets were signed "Mohamed Merah-Forsane Alizza."<sup>27</sup> In 2012, Forsane Alizza, an al-Qa`ida-aligned French group, was proscribed for "encouraging French citizens to travel to Afghanistan to fight jihad."<sup>28</sup>

But what led to the specific targeting in Merah's killing spree? "During the siege negotiations, he reportedly told police that he was acting in revenge for the death of children in Palestine, out of hatred for the French army's international missions, and to punish France for banning the Islamic veil," suggesting that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was a primary driver for him targeting Jews.<sup>29</sup> In a similar vein, Merah's sister, Souad, a fellow extremist, is reported to have provided money and mobile phones to Mohamed in the months leading up to the attacks<sup>30</sup> (but was never prosecuted) and referenced the conflict when she noted afterward, "Mohamed had the courage to act. I am proud, proud, proud ... *Jews, and all those who massacre Muslims, I detest them.*"<sup>31</sup>

It is known from Mohammed Merah's own brother's account

m While the focus of this analysis is on 'deadly attacks,' it does not capture the volume of violent, physical hate crime attacks against Jews in Europe that did not result in death. According to German government statistics, there were 62 violent offences against Jews in 2018 that left 43 people injured, up from 37 physical attacks the previous year. In France, there was a year-over-year increase by 270 percent in violent assaults against Jews in 2018. From "Anti-Semitic Attacks Rose Sharply in Germany, in 2018," France24, February 13, 2019, and author conversation, chief executive of French Jewish security organization SPCJ, January 2019.

of their upbringing that anti-Semitism was normalized in Merah's family and that "Merah's familial milieu was a crucial channel for the transmission of a radical ideology that was built on the historical Islamic anti-Jewish polemics"<sup>32</sup> that are in line with Jurgensmeyer's cosmic war concept. According to his brother, as children, all the Merah kids were taught that "Arabs are born to hate the Jews." For example, when the Merah children requested a Christmas tree, "the father forbade it, noting the concept to be 'contrary to Islam.' Merah's father went on to explain that his decision was based on his belief that a Jew wanting to kill the Prophet hid himself behind a pine tree."<sup>33</sup>

It is worth noting that despite Mohamed Merah's clear antipathy to Jews, there is some information that suggests that Merah's choice of the Jewish school was a secondary target. French President Sarkozy's intelligence adviser claimed at the time on French TV that Merah told negotiators during the siege that he had wanted to kill more soldiers in Toulouse but had arrived too late and instead besieged the nearby school.<sup>34</sup>

#### *The 2014 Brussels Jewish Museum Shooting*

Ironically, as the 32-hour siege involving Merah was playing out, in the Toulon-La Farlede, a penitentiary in southeast France, Mehdi Nemmouche, a 27-year-old repeat offender who was serving his fifth sentence, "asked for a television set to follow – 'with jubilation' the saga of the killer on a scooter."<sup>35</sup>

Upon his release from prison, this fellow Frenchman of Algerian descent with a criminal history moved first to Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, a section of Brussels known to be a "seedbed of jihadism" before departing on New Year's Eve 2012 from Brussels, taking a circuitous route via flights to the United Kingdom, Lebanon, and Turkey before joining the Islamic State in Syria.<sup>36</sup> In Syria, Nemmouche was known for his sadism and torture, working as a prison guard in Aleppo for captured French journalists.<sup>37</sup> During his trial, which began in January 2019, some of the French journalists who claim Nemmouche was their prison guard have testified that Nemmouche was "filled with hate and especially towards Jews and Shia Muslims" and that Nemmouche told them "like Merah, he dreamed of grabbing a Jewish girl by the hair and shooting her dead."<sup>38</sup>

When Nemmouche departed Syria, he embarked on a circuitous trip back to Europe, possibly trying to obscure his point of origin, by traveling to Istanbul, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong before returning to Europe via Frankfurt.<sup>39</sup> Then, on May 24, 2014, armed with a pistol and Kalashnikov assault rifle, Nemmouche attacked the Jewish Museum in central Brussels, killing two Israeli tourists, a French volunteer, and a Belgian museum receptionist. It was the first attack in Europe by an Islamist fighter returning from the war in Syria. Six days later, Nemmouche was arrested in the southern French port city of Marseille as he got off a Eurolines bus when border control officers looking for drugs carried out an unannounced check and found his Kalashnikov assault rifle in a bag on the seat next to him, his pistol in his jacket, and a laptop containing videos in which a voice, believed to be his, claimed responsibility for the murders.<sup>40</sup>

Though originally thought to be a 'lone actor,' Belgian prosecutors demonstrated evidence of the connections between Nemmouche and the Islamic State, based on his time in Syria as a prison guard. Nemmouche was also linked to Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a Belgian citizen who rose through the ranks to become a key player

in the Islamic State's external operations efforts, a leading figure in the French-Belgian Islamic State network, directly supervising deployments from Syria, and the ringleader of the 2015 attacks in Paris that killed 130 in the deadliest terrorist attack in modern French history.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, in the months before the Jewish Museum attack, Nemmouche "made a 24-minute call to Mr. Abaaoud, according to a 55-page report by the French National Police's anti-terrorism unit."<sup>42</sup>

While it is certainly possible, given his connectivity with Abaaoud, that Islamic State external operations had some role in choosing the target, it is this analyst's assessment that targeting of the Jewish Museum was Nemmouche's attempt to copycat Merah's actions in 2012 with the goal of achieving the same notoriety and attention that Merah had received. After all, it was not until a few months later, in September 2014, that the Islamic State's spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, first called for "members to kill – without question and by any means necessary – civilians and soldiers in Western countries including Australia, France, Canada and the U.S."<sup>43</sup>

During the trial, Nemmouche argued that he was not to blame for the murders and that instead, he had been caught up in some kind of plot targeting the Israeli intelligence agency, the Mossad.<sup>44</sup> However, the prosecution argued that Nemmouche had provided his rationale for the attack in the voice recording that he is believed to have made and was found on his laptop that said, "We are firmly determined to put this city [Brussels] under fire and blood."<sup>45</sup> Nemmouche was convicted for the attack in a trial that concluded in March 2019.<sup>46</sup>

Nemmouche's choice of the Jewish Museum nevertheless was consistent with al-Suri's *Global Islamic Resistance Call* doctrine for the prioritization of secular places like museums or schools—not synagogues—as targets.<sup>47</sup>

#### *The 2015 Kosher Supermarket Attack in Paris*

On January 9, 2015, a 32-year-old Frenchman of Malian origin who converted to Islam and had radicalized while in prison in France took over a kosher grocery store, the Hyper Cacher, in Paris, killing four Jewish customers immediately and then taking the remaining shoppers hostage. Amedy Coulibaly coordinated his attack with Cherif and Souad Kouachi, who days earlier had killed 12 people in an assault on the satirical French weekly Charlie Hebdo.<sup>48</sup> His attack against Hyper Cacher occurred the day after he had shot and killed a French policewoman of Caribbean descent. The three gunmen, collectively responsible for the Charlie Hebdo and Hyper Cacher attacks, ultimately died during two separate sieges.<sup>49</sup>

Like Merah and Nemmouche, Coulibaly spent formative years in a French prison—in his case, Fleury-Mérogis prison for armed bank robbery.<sup>50</sup> During his five years there (2004-2009), he met Cherif Kouachi and is believed to have radicalized to a violent interpretation of Islam at the same time as Kouachi.<sup>51</sup> According to

Coulibaly, his discovery of Islam in prison changed him.<sup>n</sup>

Prison was also where he made his connections to the jihadi scene in France as he met the veteran al-Qa`ida operative Djamel Beghal, who was in 'isolation' in the cell above him but with whom he was nevertheless able to communicate.<sup>52</sup> After his release a few years later, Coulibaly was arrested again and in December 2013 was sentenced to five years in prison for stockpiling ammunition for a plot with the Kouachi brothers to break out of prison a radical French-Algerian Islamist, Smain Ait Ali Belkacem, who had planned the 1995 Paris Métro and RER bombings.<sup>53</sup> Coulibaly was released early, in March 2014.<sup>54</sup>

Though he had not traveled overseas, Coulibaly proclaimed his allegiance to the Islamic State during the siege at the Hyper Cacher grocery. There are some indications that he was in contact with the Islamic State in Syria,<sup>55</sup> hinting that there may have been some coordination with the Islamic State's external operations wing. Meanwhile, the Kouachi brothers were linked to al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>56</sup>

This again raises the question: why the Jewish target? There is some evidence the choice of target was premeditated. In August 2014, five months before his attack, Coulibaly and his wife, Hayat Boumeddiene, cased a Paris-area Jewish school before security guards turned them away.<sup>57</sup>

Once inside the Hyper Cacher grocery store and at the height of the siege, Coulibaly told a French journalist over the phone that he had deliberately chosen to target Jews.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, from his GoPro footage, which Coulibaly recorded and was subsequently retrieved by the French police, the Islamist gunman can be seen shooting three of the four victims and delivering an anti-Semitic rant. According to a report on the contents of the GoPro video, "the footage shows Coulibaly first grabbing hold of a customer, requesting his name, and then shooting him dead ... the gunman goes on to ask another man for his origin, then kills him after the man replies 'Jewish' ... 'So you know why I am here then, Allahu Akbar,' Coulibaly proceeds to shout."<sup>59</sup>

However, for Coulibaly, targeting Jews was not his only aim. He had already killed a French policewoman, who, for him, served as a representative target for 'France' and its role in the coalition against the Islamic State. In fact, when a journalist asked Coulibaly during the siege why he and the Kouachi brothers attacked France, *Charlie Hebdo*, and a Jewish grocery, Coulibaly replied, "For what you have done to the Caliphate, for what you have done to the Islamic State, we are attacking you."<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, according to one of the hostages, "he [Coulibaly] told us he was doing this in the name of the Islamic State, [talked about] the caliphate and all that. He even told us he had nothing against Jews, but that we paid taxes to the French state and so we condoned [its actions]."<sup>61</sup>

By targeting both "media personalities and media centers that are leading the war against the Muslims" and "places where Jews are gathered ... avoiding places of worship and synagogues," the Kouachis and Coulibaly were knowingly or unknowingly following

a course of action recommended by al-Suri in the doctrines of the *Global Islamic Resistance Call*.<sup>62</sup>

### *The 2015 Copenhagen Shootings*

Just a month after the Paris attacks, on February 14, 2015, Omar El-Hussein, 22, launched targeted attacks against a free-speech event in Copenhagen, killing one, and then that night, shooting and killing a Jewish volunteer guard outside the city's main synagogue while a bat mitzvah was being celebrated. Several hours later, he was killed in gunfire after injuring five police officers in a shoot-out.<sup>63</sup> Although it is possible that this was a copycat attack to mirror what had very recently occurred in Paris, it is important to note Hussein never referenced the January 2015 Paris attacks.

Omar Abdel Hamid El-Hussein was born in Denmark to Palestinian parents and lived in the Mjølner Park in Nørrebro together with his parents and little brother. When his parents divorced, he moved with his mother to Jordan for three years, where he went to school. After the 8th grade, he returned to Denmark and became known to the police as a troubled teen for theft, possession of knives, and participation in a gang.<sup>64</sup>

Like the French attackers, El-Hussein had a criminal record and had spent time in prison. According to Danish police, he had been flagged for violence and weapons charges in the past and was in custody during 2014-2015 for a violent knife-stabbing attack, which he committed on an S-train on November 22, 2013. Not surprisingly, there was strong reason to believe that he may have become radicalized behind bars.<sup>65</sup>

In fact, the Prison and Probation Service from Arresthuset, Denmark, received three reports from prison officers in 2014 that noted El-Hussein was continuing to radicalize while in prison, and there was significant concern that he might try to go to Syria to fight when he was released.<sup>66</sup> Although the last report was passed on to the Danish Intelligence Service (PET), El-Hussein's two-year sentence was judged to be "disproportionate" by a Danish court, and it ordered him released from prison in January 2015, two weeks before the attacks.<sup>67</sup>

Nine minutes before his first attack, El-Hussein pledged his loyalty to the Islamic State. "I swear allegiance to Abu Bakr" [the head of the Islamic State], he wrote on Facebook and posted a video called the "Sword of Jihad," which featured an Arabic song, the lyrics of which state, "Our purpose is to destroy you ... we will come to you with slaughter and death."<sup>68</sup>

During the day of the attacks, El-Hussein first targeted an afternoon talk being given on freedom of speech and censorship featuring the Swedish artist Lars Vilks, infamous for his cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad. Though he failed to enter the building, El-Hussein shot at the officers and other people standing in the cafe area outside the lecture hall behind a glass pane to the street, using a rifle and killing 55-year-old film director Finn Nørgaard before fleeing.<sup>69</sup>

He subsequently went to ground and with the assistance of four associates, obtained additional ammunition for his two pistols, changed clothes, and used an internet café to research his next target, which he approached just after midnight. El-Hussein had determined from his research that a bat mitzvah would be occurring at the city's main synagogue that evening and that information informed his attack plans. Outside the synagogue, he confronted 37-year-old Dan Uzan, a member of the Jewish community who was serving as a community security volunteer, who was guarding the building and prevented his entrance. El-Hussein shot and

n *The Wall Street Journal* reported the following: "'Prison changed me,' Coulibaly would later tell French journalist Warda Mohamed after his release in 2008. Ms. Mohamed, a French journalist who interviewed Coulibaly as part of a documentary on prison life, said she didn't publish the comments at the time. 'I learnt about Islam in prison. Before that I wasn't interested, now I pray,' Coulibaly told Ms. Mohamed, she said." Noemie Bisserbe, "European Prisons Fueling Spread of Islamic Radicalism," *Wall Street Journal*, July 31, 2016.

killed Uzan before fleeing after a subsequent shoot-out with police in and around the synagogue.<sup>70</sup> El-Hussein was eventually located shortly before 5:00 AM, and he engaged with the police in another shoot-out in which the police shot and killed him, one block west of Nørrebro station in north Copenhagen.<sup>71</sup>

His target set was familiar: a political satirist, police officers, and Jews. Chosen without any direct contact with the Islamic State, they echoed those of the Kouachi brothers and Coulibaly the previous month. Aiming for a provocative media target and a Jewish target was somewhat in sync with al-Suri's doctrine, although his guidance was to avoid targeting synagogues. However, the young Danish-Palestinian's personal sense of connection to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may have played a role in his choice of target. A former classmate of El-Hussein described him as often discussing "the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. [And] he was not afraid to say openly that he hated Jews."<sup>72</sup>

The phenomenon of self-directed, internet-inflamed terrorists has not been unique to Europe, and it has not been unique to jihadis. In fact, extreme right-wing (XRW) recruitment strategies and propaganda efforts in furtherance of violent extremism in the United States are quite similar to the efforts of jihadis and similarly are made possible through the internet. Moreover, like the jihadis in Europe, XRW terrorists have followed a philosophical doctrine that clearly identifies Jews as enemies in this "cosmic war." And not unlike the case studies of jihadis in Europe, there have been situations where violent extremists in the United States sought to emulate previous violent actors.

## Part Two: The Extreme Right-Wing Terror Threat To Jews in the West

*"The Jews are our main and most formidable enemies, brothers and sisters. They are truly the children of Satan, as Christ tells us in St. John 8:44 ... we promise death to those who attack us or who attempt to place us in ZOG [Zionist Occupied Government]'s dungeons."<sup>73</sup>*

*-- Glen F. Miller Jr., member of "The Order"*

The past seven months have seen the death of 12 Jews in the United States by the way of two politically motivated attacks against non-combatants, or terrorism.<sup>74</sup> Accounted for by the October 27, 2018, attack in Pittsburgh in which 11 congregants of the Tree of Life Synagogue were killed and the April 27, 2019, Chabad of Poway, California, synagogue shooting in which one parishioner died,<sup>75</sup> these attacks as well as the deadly 2014 attack at the Kansas City Jewish Community Center were carried out by white supremacist, neo-Nazi-affiliated individuals.

While these three attacks comprise the only deadly attacks against Jewish targets in the United States during the 2012-2019 time period, there have been a series of plots and conspiracies

aimed at Jewish targets that were thwarted during this time period.<sup>o</sup>

With only one exception,<sup>p</sup> all of the thwarted plots as well as the attacks that were carried out have been motivated by extreme right-wing ideology and more specifically, the white supremacist/neo-Nazi subset of that ideological movement.<sup>q</sup>

According to a report by The Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism, between 1993-2017, a total of 150 "right-wing" incidents of terrorist acts, attempted acts, and plots and conspiracies occurred in the United States.<sup>76</sup> They were stratified into 11 categories, defined by the nature of the target, and the top-four most frequent (in descending order) were "government/law enforcement," "racial," "religious minorities," and "anti-abortion." Out of these 150 incidents, 43 percent were motivated by white supremacist ideas, including the five that specifically sought out Jewish targets,<sup>77</sup> just like the three attacks discussed below.<sup>78</sup>

Notably, the white supremacist terrorist attacks against Jewish targets in 2018 and 2019 are a departure from the experience between 2001 and 2011 in the United States when the only deadly<sup>r</sup> attacks against Jews were Islamist in nature and related to Israel. They included the July 2002 attack by an Islamist terrorist, Hisham Muhammad Ali Hedayet, who opened fire at the El Al counter at Los Angeles Airport, killing two, and the July 2006 attack by Naveed Haq at the Jewish Federation in Seattle, where he killed one person. Before opening fire, Haq specifically declared he was angry about Israel and the recent Hezbollah-Israel war.<sup>79</sup>

### *Extreme Right-Wing Doctrine in Relation to Jews*

Almost 75 years after the defeat of Nazi Germany and its racist,

- o For example, in 2015, two unconnected conspiracies were thwarted by the FBI in Virginia and in Upstate New York. In Virginia, the conspirators sought to trigger a race war by targeting "Jewish synagogues and black churches" and in New York, to target Jews and African-Americans for assassination. Matt Zapotosky, "Feds: White supremacists plotted to attack synagogues, black churches," *Washington Post*, November 10, 2015, and "Whitehall Man Pleads Guilty to Machinegun Charge," Department of Justice U.S. Attorney's Office Northern District of New York, April 15, 2016. In 2017, FBI agents arrested a white supremacist in South Carolina based on a possible attack on a local synagogue. Matt Zapotosky, "Man with white supremacist ties accused of plotting attack 'in the spirit of Dylann Roof,'" *Washington Post*, February 16, 2017. And in December 2018, FBI agents and Snohomish County deputies arrested a Washington state white supremacist with a cache of firearms for allegedly making threats to kill 30 Jews as well as other minorities. Caleb Hutton, "Monroe man charged in killing plot: 'I'm shooting for 30 Jews,'" *HeraldNet*, April 8, 2019.
- p In April 2016, there was a foiled attempt to bomb the Aventura Turnberry Jewish Center in Florida during services on the seventh day of Passover by a convert to Islam who noted he wanted to "strike back to the Jews [sic], by going to a synagogue and just spraying everybody . . . 'cause we're Muslims, you know what I mean? It's a war, man, and it's like it's time to strike back here in America." From "US v. James Gonzalo Medina, US District Court for the Southern District of Florida, Criminal Complaint," April 29, 2016, p. 4.
- q Under the broad umbrella of XRW groups are white supremacists, anti-government extremists, anti-abortion extremists, and other types of right-wing extremists. For more, see "A Dark & Constant Rage: 25 Years of Right Wing Terrorism in the U.S.," Anti-Defamation League and "Extremist Files," Southern Poverty Law Center, which details different XRW groups active in the United States.
- r With the caveat that one attack stopped by security guards resulted in the death of a security guard. "On June 10, 2009, an 88-year-old white supremacist, James W. von Brunn, entered the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.," intending to kill Jews. He "fatally shot a security guard before being wounded by other guards." Isabel Fattal, "A Brief History of Anti-Semitic Violence in America," *Atlantic*, October 28, 2018.



Police tape and memorial flowers are seen on October 28, 2018, outside the Tree of Life Synagogue after a shooting there left 11 people dead in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh on October 27, 2018. (Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images)

ethno-nationalist policies, extreme right groups focused on ethnic purity have risen to prominence in a variety of different European countries. Those that have adopted identitarian doctrines are fixated on Frenchman Renaud Camus's 2012 Great Replacement theory, which, though focused on the white Christian population of France, describes "the process by which the indigenous European population is replaced by non-European migrants."<sup>80</sup> However, unlike the American variant of this 'white genocide' ideology, in the Great Replacement theory, Muslims are the threat and Jews, like Christians, are victims.<sup>81</sup> This doctrinal difference of the European variant of "white genocide" theory as it relates to Jews may have moderated its violent influence against Jews in Europe.

What has mobilized white supremacists against Jews as targets in the United States over the past seven years, and are there any similarities with the factors that have mobilized jihadis during this same time in Europe?<sup>82</sup>

It is worth considering some of the foundational doctrinal tenets of extreme right-wing ideology as it manifests itself in the United States:

*"The inevitable result of racial integration is genocide for the White race through miscegenation [interbreeding of different races]."*

*"...all Western nations are ruled by a Zionist conspiracy to mix, overrun and exterminate the White race."*

*"We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children"*

*---The White Genocide Manifesto<sup>83</sup>*

The concept of 'white genocide' was first popularized by Da-

vid Lane, a member of the terrorist group The Order, which was responsible for the 1984 assassination of Jewish radio host Alan Berg. According to extremism researcher J.M. Berger, Lane's White Genocide Manifesto "has become the overwhelmingly dominant meme of modern white nationalism."<sup>84</sup>

The Southern Poverty Law Center notes, "white genocide holds that forces—principally Jewish, often coded as 'globalist'—are pursuing policies seeking to destroy the 'white race' in their 'traditional homelands' like Europe and the United States through the deliberate importation of non-white people. This is what the torch-bearing white supremacists who marched on the campus of the University of Virginia meant when they chanted 'Jews will not replace us.'<sup>85</sup> This drives the conspiratorial worldview that Jews are the most urgent, mortal threat to the white race and justifies violence against Jews to prevent the "white genocide."<sup>86</sup>

Often, this white supremacist worldview is coupled with a religious theology of the pre-Christian religion more commonly known as Odinism which "incorporates worship of Thor, Odin and other Norse-Germanic gods into a puritanical ideology promoting the survival of the Germanic culture and the Aryan race" serving to legitimize contemporary terrorist acts.<sup>8</sup> David Lane played a key

s Many white supremacists claim to follow the Norse pagan religion of Odinism/Wotanism. As a religious sect, they try to revive the ancient Norse religious beliefs and practices of pre-Christian Europe. The true and originally non-racist/white supremacist version of this religion is usually called Asatruism (Asatru). And the more explicit forms of Asatruism are Odinism (aka Wotanism). It appeals to many white supremacists because it is seen as a warrior religion, which happens to be the antithesis of the pacificism of Christianity. It is also considered a tribal religion for those of European descent, the antithesis of the Middle Eastern origins of Judeo Christianity. Author conversation, Oren Segal, Director, Center on Extremism, Anti-Defamation League, January 2019.

role in establishing Odinism as a tenet of white supremacy when he abandoned Christian Identity theology in favor of a “pure” racist version of Odinism.<sup>87</sup>

### ***Case Studies on All Deadly Extreme Right-Wing Terrorist Attacks on Jews in the West (2012-2019)***

Every single fatal extreme right-wing terrorist attack on Jews in the West between 2012 and 2019 took place in the United States, suggesting the country is a new, emerging focal point of the extreme right-wing threat against Jews. The three deadly terrorist attacks (and at least four thwarted plots) against Jews in the United States in this period were carried out by individuals motivated to attack explicitly Jewish targets by violent extreme right-wing ideology. There were no deadly terror attacks on Jews in the United States that were perpetrated by jihadi extremists in this period.

#### *The 2014 Kansas Jewish Community Center Attack*

Born and raised in North Carolina, Frazier Glenn Miller, Jr. was a high school drop-out and 20-year U.S. Army veteran who rose to the rank of master sergeant and served two tours of duty in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War.<sup>88</sup> Discharged from the U.S. Army as a sergeant in 1979 for distributing racist propaganda, which he had been introduced to by his father, in 1980, he founded, led, and served as the chief spokesperson for the Carolina Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, a local chapter that later developed into the White Patriot Party (WPP).<sup>89</sup>

Miller used his position in the WPP to further a political career and sought the Democratic Party’s nomination for governor of North Carolina in 1984 and the Republican Party’s nomination for a seat in the North Carolina Senate in 1986.<sup>90</sup> When his political career failed, he mailed a letter in 1987 to 5,000 recipients that said, “In the name of our Aryan God, thru His beloved Son, I Glenn Miller now this 6th day of April, 1987 do hereby declare total war. I ask for no quarter. I will give none. I declare war against [plural of the N-word], Jews, Queers, assorted Mongrels, White Race traitors, and despicable informants.”<sup>91</sup> He was subsequently arrested two weeks later when authorities raided a mobile home he and other men had rented in Ozark, Missouri, where a cache of weapons was found inside, which included “C-4 plastic explosives, dynamite, pipe bombs, hand grenades, fully automatic M-16, AR-15 semi-automatic rifles, sawed off shotguns, pistols, cross-bows, and around a half-ton of ammunition.”<sup>92</sup>

After Miller cooperated with law enforcement and served three years in prison, he was released with a new identity and worked as a trucker for 12 years before retiring in 2002 and settling in Aurora, Missouri.<sup>93</sup> In the following years, he continued to write essays expressing his white supremacist views and then in 2006, ran unsuccessfully for U.S. Congress from Missouri and then for the U.S. Senate, also from Missouri, in 2010.<sup>94</sup>

And then, on April 13, 2014, Miller launched an attack in suburban Kansas City targeting the Jewish Community Center and the Jewish retirement home Village Shalom in Overland Park, Kansas, seeking to kill as many Jews as possible. Using a shotgun, he killed three people, though none were Jewish.<sup>95</sup> Witnesses say Miller had shouted “Heil Hitler” numerous times during the shooting and during his arrest.<sup>96</sup>

In terms of understanding the ideological basis for Miller targeting Jews, his own writings are decisive and suggest that racial politics around immigration and his belief that Jews were contributing to the demise of the “white race” seem to be most relevant. Mill-

er wrote an essay in 2004 calling on Americans to rise up against Jews, people of color, immigrants, LGBTs, abortion, and church-state separation, noting, “our race is dying out rapidly right before your very eyes. ZOG [Zionist Occupied Government] is flooding our nation with tens-of-millions of colored aliens.”<sup>97</sup> Clearly, Miller had concluded that there was a war going on—a battle in his mind between good and evil and right and wrong—and he responded to the perceived threat.

#### *The 2018 Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting*

On the morning of October 27, 2018, it is alleged that Robert Bowers, armed with a semiautomatic assault-style AR-15 rifle and three pistols, stormed the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh and shot worshipers during Saturday morning sabbath services, killing 11 and wounding six in the deadliest attack on Jews in the history of the United States. Only after an exchange of gunfire, during which Robert Bowers suffered multiple gunshot wounds, was he arrested and taken to a hospital. Witnesses told police that Bowers shouted anti-Semitic statements when he began firing. The attack was immediately labeled a hate crime as Bower’s history of anti-Semitic online screeds came to light.<sup>98</sup> It was also clearly a political act of domestic terrorism.

Bowers, 46, was a Pittsburgh resident who the FBI said was not previously known to law enforcement. Bowers grew up in the greater Pittsburgh area and was raised by his mother after his father committed suicide. After her death, his grandparents raised him, and he lived with his maternal grandfather until the latter’s death a few years ago.<sup>99</sup> Bowers cut short his time in high school, leaving before graduation, and worked for a small trucking firm where, according to a Pittsburgh resident who knew Bowers his whole life, Bowers seemed stable.<sup>100</sup>

However, Bowers was immersed in an entirely different world online. His chief fixations were a “white genocide” and “theories that Jews and minorities were, in combination, threatening whites with ‘extinction.’”<sup>101</sup> And in the weeks before he allegedly launched his deadly attack, his social media activity reflected the source of his anger. On October 10, 2018, he wrote on the social media site Gab.com,<sup>t</sup> “Why hello there HIAS! You like to bring in hostile invaders to dwell among us? We appreciate the list of friends you have provided,” and he included a link to the website for HIAS National Refugee Shabbat, formerly the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society. Bower’s reference to HIAS (an organization founded in 1881 to help Jewish refugees fleeing Eastern Europe to the United States, but since the 2000s, working with non-Jewish refugees) demonstrated that he viewed HIAS as responsible for facilitating his feared “white extinction” by providing assistance to refugees.<sup>102 u</sup>

Clearly, Bower’s online world was “a virtual ‘echo chamber’—acting as a radicalization accelerant while creating the path for the

t Gab is an English-language social media website known for its mainly far-right user base. The site has been described as “extremist friendly” or a “safe haven” for neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and the alt-right. Kevin Roose, “On Gab, an Extremist-Friendly Site, Pittsburgh Shooting Suspect Aired His Hatred in Full,” *New York Times*, October 28, 2018.

u According to *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, “HIAS was founded in 1881 to help Jews fleeing Eastern Europe. In the 2000s, it expanded its work to include non-Jewish refugees, including those fleeing Afghanistan, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Ethiopia, Haiti, Hungary, Iran, Morocco, Poland, Romania, Tunisia and Vietnam.” Rich Lord, Paula Reed Ward, and Liz Navratil, “Suspect identified as Robert Bowers, 46, in Pittsburgh synagogue shooting,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, October 27, 2018.

ultimate stage.<sup>v</sup> According to The Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks the activities of extremists, “in the 19 days before Bowers carried out his act of mass murder, he posted or reposted memes and comments at least 68 times.” Many of them reflected “anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that have long been in circulation among neo-Nazis and white nationalists,” the center found.<sup>103</sup>

Most importantly, Bowers’ rage was fueled by white nationalist preoccupation on the caravan of Central Americans moving through Mexico, and he expressed anger that a nonprofit Jewish organization was helping refugees settle in the United States. A week before the attack, Bowers highlighted a demonizing term for asylum seekers, posting on Gab that he “noticed a change in people saying ‘illegals’ that now say ‘invaders’—I like this.”<sup>104</sup> And then, “in what appeared to be his final social media post hours before the attack, [Bowers] wrote, ‘I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I’m going in.’”<sup>105</sup> It appears Bowers viewed his role as a defender of his people in this “cosmic war” and that the extinction of the white race was at stake.

According to the criminal complaint, even after being arrested, Bowers expressed to the police “that he wanted all Jews to die” and that “[Jews] were committing genocide to his people.” It seems Bowers saw Jews as the most urgent threat to the white race because as viewed from his echo chamber on Gab, they were responsible for the deliberate importation of non-white people. Bowers’ alleged targeting of the Tree of Life was likely driven by his belief that his race was facing an immediate and mortal threat, which he could only fend off with violence.<sup>106</sup>

### *The 2019 Chabad of Poway Synagogue Shooting*

On the morning of April 27, 2019, it is alleged that John Timothy Earnest, armed with a semiautomatic assault-style AR-15 rifle and 60 rounds of ammunition, entered the Chabad of Poway synagogue in Poway, California, near San Diego and shot worshipers during Saturday morning Sabbath services, killing one and wounding three. According to court documents, when Earnest sought to reload the weapon, after having fired the 10-round magazine, he had difficulty reloading and fled when several members of the congregation moved to confront him. An off-duty Border Patrol Agent chased him and fired multiple rounds at Earnest before he fled the scene in his car.<sup>107</sup>

According to court documents, Earnest subsequently called 9-1-1 from his car and identified himself as the shooter at the synagogue and surrendered to authorities, leaving his AR-15, Smith and Wesson, M&P 15 rifle in the car along with the ammunition. He also stated on the call, “I just shot up a synagogue. I’m just trying to defend my nation from the Jewish people ... They’re destroying our people.” He added that he shot people in the synagogue “because the Jewish people are destroying the white race.”<sup>108</sup>

Following Earnest’s surrender to law enforcement, investigators, according to court documents, found a manifesto bearing Earnest’s name, which had been uploaded to two websites.<sup>109</sup> The most lucid

sections of the manifesto, which is a rambling screed of grievances, clarifies that this was an act of domestic terrorism, inspired by a white supremacist worldview, carried out in order to preserve the “white race” and that Earnest viewed himself as a necessary sacrifice in this genocidal, cosmic war for survival.

Like Miller and Bowers, Earnest believed he needed to kill members of a community he perceived as the oppressive enemy. Earnest also delved into historical Christian anti-Jewish tropes to justify his actions, going as far as to cite Jewish responsibility for the death of Christ.<sup>110</sup>

The copycat phenomenon seems to have played a direct role in inspiring Earnest to act, as he noted he was inspired by the attacks on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, allegedly carried out by Bretton Tarrant.<sup>111</sup>

## Conclusion

There is no unified theory to explain the deadly and simultaneously new, transatlantic phenomenon of violent terrorist attacks against Jewish targets in Europe and the United States during 2012-2019, when so few deadly attacks had occurred in the previous decade (2001-2011). There is much that is not known and maybe even more questions than answers.

Nevertheless, there are some common threads that emerge from a comparison of recent case studies. First, the actions of these violent actors are either consciously or unconsciously in line with key philosophical doctrines put forward by movement leaders. Secondly, both jihadis and the extreme right believe they are engaged in a cosmic war for survival and Jews are their enemies, which in their eyes makes killing Jews legitimate. Thirdly, social media has been the medium that has amplified the strikingly similar techniques put forth by both jihadis and right-wing extremists to spread their worldviews, trigger radicalization, and recruit to the cause. Fourthly, for the most part, the attacks have not been directed by formal terrorist organizations, but rather carried out by self-directed, internet-inflamed terrorists who claim to be acting on behalf of causes greater than themselves—both jihadi and right-wing extremist. Finally, in more than a few of the cases, the ‘fame’ that violent extremists gain from their actions can inspire others to copy these actions or commit similar crimes.

However, what may be the most striking findings from this case study analysis are that, first, Europe has become the focal point of the jihadi terror threat to Jews in the West and second, the United States has become a new, emerging focal point of the extreme right-wing terror threat to Jews in the West. To be clear, these findings do not mean there is not a jihadi threat to Jews in the United States. Yet, it is plausible that since the U.S. intelligence community and law enforcement have been so seized by the jihadi threat since 9/11, it has been more effectively suppressed than the extreme-right threat, which has not received similar resources. In terms of Europe, the volume of the jihadi threat, evidenced by the close to 5,000 Islamic State-linked European foreign fighters,<sup>112</sup> has made it more difficult to suppress, resulting in more successful jihadi attacks in Europe and more deadly attacks on Jews. Similarly, in Europe, it would be incorrect to conclude that there is no threat from the extreme-right to Jews. But, it is possible that the European variant of “white genocide” theory, the Great Replacement, which views Jews as fellow victims, rather than enablers of white extinction, has moderated it. **CTC**

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# The Guerrilla ‘Caliph’: Speeches that Bookend the Islamic State’s ‘Caliphate’ Era

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

**Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s appearance for only the second time on camera in almost five years invites retrospection on how his 2019 portrayal, in which he acknowledges a reversion back to insurgency, compares with his 2014 appearance heralding the new ‘caliphate’ from Mosul’s Nuri Mosque. These milestone media releases bookending the Islamic State’s ‘caliphate’ era are a metaphor for the movement’s strategic transformations. Al-Baghdadi has now shifted to portraying himself as the guerrilla ‘caliph’ of a global insurgency to reassure supporters he remains *amir al-mu’minin* and to confront criticisms from within the Islamic State and across the global jihadi milieu.**

**O**n April 29, 2019, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State, made his second-ever appearance on film. Seated in a bare room alongside three others, he was filmed taking stock of his ‘caliphate’s’ last few years and setting it on a new strategic course (if a well-worn one in its history) back to an insurgency. German intelligence and security agencies concluded that it was indeed al-Baghdadi, and thanks to a few carefully placed references to political developments in Algeria, Sudan, and Israel, his appearance was date-stamped to sometime in mid-April.<sup>1</sup> In the days that followed the release of this video, journalists and security services pored over it, seeking to glean clues as to al-Baghdadi’s health and location.<sup>2</sup> Disappointingly, his handlers did not leave anything to chance, the security of the ‘caliph’ being too important to risk with sloppy film-making. This did not detract from the video’s importance, however. Indeed, it offered a treasure trove of strategic insights, especially when considered from broader historical and strategic perspectives.

In this article, the authors explore those insights through a comparative lens, arguing that the image of al-Baghdadi is a metaphor for the ‘caliphate’ itself. The authors compare the embattled guerrilla ‘caliph’ of 2019 with the triumphalist ‘imam caliph’ of 2014 in his first video appearance from Mosul’s Nuri Mosque. Al-Baghdadi’s performances in these videos shed light on how the Islamic State intends to transform perceptions around the role of its ‘caliph’ to

complement his movement’s strategic trajectory.

To this end, the discussion proceeds as follows. First, drawing on a tranche of internal Islamic State media documents, the authors explain why it is not just *what* these videos deliver that matters, but *how* they deliver it as well. Having done this, they consider the 2014 release in which al-Baghdadi first appeared, analyzing both the nature of his speech and how it was framed. Then they turn to his more recent 2019 appearance, subjecting it to the same analysis. They conclude by comparing these two versions of al-Baghdadi the ‘caliph,’ observing how projections of his authority changed with time to reflect the shifting operational essence of the Islamic State and his supposed status as *amir al-mu’minin*.

## Framing, Propaganda, and the Islamic State

In 2018, a new collection of documents was added to the Department of Defense’s Harmony Archive.<sup>3</sup> Captured in 2016 and 2017 during “operations targeting senior Islamic State Khurasan personnel in Afghanistan,” they were comprehensively analysed in Daniel Milton’s 2018 CTC report, *Pulling Back the Curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State’s Media Organization*.<sup>4</sup>

One document that did not bear much scrutiny in that report but that stands out as particularly relevant for the discussion at hand was entitled “A short summary for the media *mujahid* on the topic of photography.”<sup>5</sup> Stipulating how Islamic State media operatives should work through the pre-, mid- and post-production process, it explains that videography is at the “core of jihadi media work,” and for that reason, it should be done well. During any filming, it states, three components—framing, the rule of thirds, and the exposure triangle—should be considered as things upon which the success and meaning of the video “depends.” The latter two refer to technical compositional matters like perspective, lighting, and focus. While they are important, it is the first component—framing—that matters most here.

The principal aim of framing, the document explains, is to aid the transmission of the “intended message.”<sup>6</sup> Any project that does not take it into account risks failure “from all perspectives,” and for that reason, media operatives should “absolutely never” attempt to make propaganda without it in mind. Instead, they need to take “everything” into account, starting with the intended “message and idea” and “ending with the angles of the shots.”

The document goes on to describe what effective framing looks like, using the example of a hypothetical video geared toward “promot[ing] the faith of the soldiers of the Islamic State.” First, it suggests that these soldiers, whoever and wherever they are, should be filmed while sitting in a study circle around a sheikh. This setting is presumably being suggested because it would imply they are obedient and devoted Muslims. The soldiers should also be “wearing the same uniform except for the sheikh who is wearing different clothes.” This would cement their position as students and the sheikh’s as their teacher. Moreover, they should be sat on the

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*Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is pictured in the group's July 2014 video release.*

ground with the sheikh above them “on a chair [with] a table in front of him and on the table books and a half-filled water bottle.” The sheikh’s elevated position would signify his importance, the books on his desk his intellect, and the half-empty bottle the fact that he has been lecturing for some time already. As well as this, the document suggests a few recommended “angles of filming”—among other things, eye-level shots of “the brothers sitting in circles” and footage captured from behind one of them to “show the sheikh” sitting above—and notes that the various contents of the scene (in this case, books, clothes, bottles, chairs, and desks) should all be “related to the intended message” of the final product.

If this is anything to go by—and it should be, considering it was produced by the Central Media Directorate and disseminated internally as instructional advice for distant production offices<sup>7</sup>—the Islamic State thinks through the framing of its propaganda very carefully, leaving nothing to chance and investing everything with meaning. Applying this knowledge to the present context, it is not enough to simply consider what al-Baghdadi says and does in these videos. How he says it and the theater of the presentation matter just as much.

### Video I: The Spiritual Savant

On July 5, 2014, Twitter accounts linked to the Islamic State’s official media dissemination network circulated links to a video entitled “Exclusive coverage of the Friday *khutbah* and prayer in the Grand Masjid of Mosul.”<sup>8</sup> Produced by the Furqan Media Foundation, the Islamic State’s oldest and most important propaganda office, it was some 20 minutes long and released the day after al-Baghdadi made his first physical appearance as ‘caliph.’ Pared back, containing none of the usual graphics or audio overlays associated with the Islamic State’s media output, the video showed al-Baghdadi, its newly declared ‘caliph,’ giving his first sermon to the ‘people’ of Mosul. Aside from a short sequence showing the outside of the mosque, there

was little else to it.

Speaking generally about the idea of the Islamic State and only referring to its enemies in abstract terms, al-Baghdadi called on his supporters to “perform *jihad fi sabilillah* (incite the believers and be patient upon this hardship),” noting that the rewards for doing so were multiplied during the month of Ramadan, which was then ongoing. There were only a few times at which he went beyond generalities like these.

Al-Baghdadi also provided an account of the significance of Ramadan, establishing some of the rudiments of the Islamic State’s take on it specifically and Islam generally. Dressed in black, channeling the image of the ‘Abbasid caliphs (for whom black was the official state color), it was only after pausing for a moment to whisper a few supplications to himself that he embarked on the speech. Without stumbling, he made his way through the 13-minute-long sermon, quoting the Qur’an and Prophetic tradition throughout and expertly intoning his speech. Al-Baghdadi’s surroundings crystallized his presumed status as spiritual leader of the Islamic State. It was no coincidence that he was appearing in public in Mosul’s landmark Grand Nuri mosque—with the city’s trademark adjoining and decidedly leaning minaret (Al-Hadba’a, or Hunchback)—and named for the 12th Century Seljuk ruler Nuridin al-Zengi.<sup>a</sup> The founder of the Islamic State movement, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was obsessed with al-Zengi’s ruthlessness against the crusaders in battle, and his quest to unite Islam against the foreign invaders was something the Jordanian militant aspired to replicate when he gave his first public speech in Iraq in early 2004 called “Join

<sup>a</sup> Rasha al-Aqeedi notes that this appearance would doom the mosque, which was destroyed by retreating Islamic State fighters in 2017. See Rasha al-Aqeedi, “Mosul Mourns its Minaret, Sort of,” *American Interest*, July 12, 2017.

the Caravan.”<sup>9</sup> By tying into this heritage, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced himself the successor to the city’s historic legacy. Nor was it an accident that he was appearing there on the first Friday of Ramadan. This was an implicit expression of his confidence as ‘caliph.’ It showed that he, as one of the world’s most wanted men, believed it worth the risk to appear before ‘his people’ at that place and time. The obvious subtext to this was that the new ‘caliph’ of the Islamic State was willing to sacrifice his life for his duties. Given the extraordinary risks associated with producing propaganda featuring al-Baghdadi and the potential for lethal security breaches in the aftermath of these media releases, the Islamic State’s strategists must consider the benefits to outweigh considerably these tremendous negatives.

In this video, al-Baghdadi was not just being framed to look the part. He was being framed to make his ‘caliphate’ look the part, too. Dressed in clothes that signified his religious authenticity, speaking in a manner that drove home his apparent grasp of ‘true’ Islam, and situated amidst his civilian masses, he was cast as a revolutionary spiritual leader, a man of the people who was simultaneously removed from them, set apart by his appearance, actions, and position. He bore no arms, and his religiosity was foregrounded throughout. More than all this, al-Baghdadi’s appearance was a powerful symbolic fulfillment of a task traditionally assigned to the caliph as the *ummah’s* spiritual leader. Despite his authority and all the theater designed to express it, al-Baghdadi was quick to emphasize a humility inherent to true piety. At one point paraphrasing, according to William McCants,<sup>10</sup> his namesake Abu Bakr, the first caliph after the Prophet Mohammad, he declared:

*“I was appointed as a leader for you, although I am not the best of you, nor am I better than you. Therefore, if you see me upon truth, then aid me. And if you see me upon falsehood, then advise me. Obey me as long as I obey Allah in your regards.”*

This reflected how the Islamic State wanted itself to be understood at the time that the video was released. It was positioning itself, through al-Baghdadi, as a revolutionary theocratic movement that sought to expand itself by empowering the Sunni Muslim masses. The spiritual savant was reinforcing the divinity of the project and the jurisprudential credibility of its leader.

### Video II: The Guerrilla ‘Caliph’

Four years and 10 months on, al-Baghdadi made his second-ever appearance on film. Entitled “In the hospitality of *amir al-mu’minin*,” the video was again produced by the Furqan Media Foundation and, as before, significantly pared back compared to the Islamic State’s typical video releases.<sup>11</sup> At the most rudimentary level, it was firm proof-of-life of the ‘caliph’ who had been silent for eight months and long rumored to have been badly maimed or killed. In it, al-Baghdadi and/or his important advisors clearly intended to evolve the image of the ‘caliph’ to complement his movement. This time, rather than playing the role of spiritual leader, he was cast as a wizened guerrilla commander playing a direct, day-to-day role in the Islamic State’s war.

Structurally speaking, this video was worlds apart from his 2014 appearance in Mosul. His speech was framed as a briefing to his inner circle, not a sermon to the masses. He began by reeling off a list of prominent members of the Islamic State who had been ‘martyred’ during the battle for Baghuz earlier in the year—among them many foreign fighters. Al-Baghdadi then took the time to name and praise commanders from across the media, sharia, and military departments, demonstrating that he was an engaged leader well aware of what the techno-structure and middle management of his organization were doing. He later commended those that had been involved in “the raid to avenge *wilayat al-sham* [Levant province],” in which the Islamic State purportedly carried out 92 attacks in eight countries in response to its defeat in eastern Syria.



Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is pictured in the group’s April 2019 video release.

Then, after accepting a string of new pledges of allegiance from groups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Afghanistan, he spoke about recent political developments in Algeria, Israel, and Sudan, noting that they showed the true colors of the ‘enemies of Islam.’ Appending all this was an audio statement by al-Baghdadi addressing the attacks in Sri Lanka and the attempted bombing in Saudi Arabia, both of which took place on April 21, 2019.<sup>12</sup> While Sri Lanka was framed as revenge for Baghuz, the attempted bombings in the Saudi town of Zulfi were framed as revenge against the “tyrant” rulers of Saudi Arabia.

The theater in the video is that of a spontaneously recorded insight into the inner workings of the highest level of the Islamic State’s command. Showing al-Baghdadi addressing what appears to be a group of his staff or commanders, staged to project normalcy in the leadership functions, is likely very different from daily realities of an organization required to operate in a completely clandestine fashion.<sup>b</sup> Nevertheless, the Islamic State’s media officials assumedly did this to present al-Baghdadi looking just as comfortable playing the role of guerrilla ‘caliph’ as he did the spiritual savant in 2014. Al-Baghdadi’s head was covered by a black *ghutra* and the rest of his costume was quasi-military. Sporting a khaki-colored waistcoat and charcoal grey *thawb*, he was seated alongside a camouflage ammunition belt and an AKS-74U assault rifle—a variant of the Russian-made assault weapon that has made countless appearances in leadership photos and statements from the likes of Ahmed Massoud, Usama bin Ladin, Ibn al-Khattab, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi.<sup>c</sup> The way al-Baghdadi was shown to be directly participating in the affairs of his organization, scanning through apparent reports from various Islamic State wilayat, including a folder referencing a previously unknown wilayat for Turkey,<sup>13</sup> and issuing directives, seems to have been designed to portray him as the archetypal warrior-scholar leader.

- b The actual security practices of the Islamic State do not support the setting here of a ‘caliph’ who regularly meets with advisors and instead uses the standard and careful courier system, limiting exposure. The Islamic State structure is carefully air-gapped to prevent catastrophic exposure. For details on the Islamic State’s dispersed leadership, see Paul Cruickshank, “A View from the CT Foxhole: Edmund Fitton-Brown, Coordinator, ISIL (Daesh)/Al-Qaida/Taliban Monitoring Team, United Nations,” *CTC Sentinel* 12:4 (2019) and “Twenty-Third Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team ... concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities,” United Nations, December 27, 2018. The courier system is mentioned in Ben Hubbard, “ISIS’ Mysterious Leader Is Not Dead, New Video Shows,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2019. An excellent analysis of al-Baghdadi’s likely security practices is in the Twitter thread of *Il Foglio* reporter Daniele Raineri: “Now that the territory under the control of the Islamic State is nominally zero, let’s talk about how Abu Bakr al Baghdadi eludes the impressive security apparatus looking for him everywhere – comments most welcome as usual,” Twitter, March 28, 2019.
- c The AKS-74U is a lighter, shorter version of the AK-74 and has a mystique of being a “leader” weapon, as noted in C. J. Chivers’ research. Chivers noted the weapon is nicknamed “the Osama.” C. J. Chivers, *The Gun* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), pp. 382–383. This is a subtle imitation of a widely seen version of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s captured video from al-Yusufiyah, Iraq, which shows the al-Qa’ida in Iraq founder in a very similar scene with an AKS-74U propped behind him. See U.S. Department of Defense, “Musab al-Zarqawi, Yusufiyah (April 2006),” DVIDS, released May 4, 2006. An excellent thread with the actual pictures can be found at Calibre Obscura, “So this is the 1st time we have seen the fugitive leader of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghadi in 3+ years. For his appearance, a very familiar gun was chosen- a post-1986 AKS-74U. Importantly, it has a very large RPK-74 45 rnd mag This is \_very\_ on brand. 1/,” Twitter, April 29, 2019.

## Discussion

On the surface at least, the ‘caliph’ of 2019 bore little resemblance to the ‘caliph’ of 2014. However, when these versions of al-Baghdadi are considered in context, the continuities are just as important as the contrasts. It is no coincidence that the two times al-Baghdadi has ever appeared on film were arguably the two most pivotal moments in the Islamic State’s recent history—the point at which it formally inaugurated its proto-state chapter and the point at which it seems to have formally settled back into the battle rhythms of a global terror campaign and a uniform insurgency quite different from its previous hybrid form.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the pomp and circumstance that typically characterizes the Islamic State’s media output, these significantly scaled-back videos seem to have been designed to focus their audiences’ attention completely and singularly on al-Baghdadi, his words and the theater of his performance.

Both sets of videographers embedded as many symbolic references as possible, geared toward establishing and reiterating Abu Bakr’s appropriateness as the group’s leader at these historical moments and for a specific strategic purpose. In that sense, the way they framed al-Baghdadi reflected the organization’s politico-military situation. Perhaps most importantly, the two videos revealed an underlying, but certainly not subtle, effort to project al-Baghdadi’s claims of authority to a variety of audiences: from factions within the Islamic State and potential supporters around the world to the Islamic State’s opponents within the global jihadi milieu. Contrasting the 2014 and 2019 appearances of al-Baghdadi reveals much about how the Islamic State intends to evolve the image of caliph to suit its strategic transitions.

The political, military, and spiritual roles historically associated with a caliph offer Islamic State propagandists some flexibility in how they portray al-Baghdadi’s authority to audiences. Over the years, the Islamic State’s propagandists have emphasized certain aspects of the caliph’s role dependent on the strategic and historical requirements of the time. View the 2014 and 2019 videos in isolation and it would seem clear that in the former, al-Baghdadi was positioned as a spiritual leader guiding his flock, whereas in the latter, he was framed as the ideal fighting commander, pulling the politico-military strings of his global insurgency. Stepping back allows the analyst to see how these performances were augmented by messaging designed to highlight the other dimensions of his authority. For instance, several days prior to al-Baghdadi’s 2014 appearance in Mosul’s Nuri Mosque, he delivered a speech titled “A Message to the Mujahidin and the Muslim *Ummah* in the month of Ramadan”<sup>15</sup> to highlight his acumen as a political and military leader. Within only a few days of the ‘caliphate’ being declared, al-Baghdadi thus used two public statements<sup>16</sup> to showcase the political, military, and spiritual dimensions of the ‘caliph’s’ authority.

Fast-forward to 2019 and the Islamic State’s propagandists are still keen to project the multidimensionality of the ‘caliph’s’ leadership despite the absence of a ‘caliphate’ embedded in territory. In the month prior to al-Baghdadi emerging as the guerrilla ‘caliph,’ a statement by the Islamic State’s spokesman Abul Hasan al-Muhajir in March 2019<sup>17</sup> referred to al-Baghdadi as *amir al-mu’minin*, an implicit acknowledgment of his spiritual as well as political and military authority. While the content of the video featuring al-Baghdadi focused largely on his political and military acumen, it is no mere coincidence that it was titled ‘In the hospitality of *amir al-mu’minin*’ to again reinforce his status. These nuances are important considerations for understanding how the Islamic State is

seeking to present its leader.

Al-Baghdadi's 'performance' as 'caliph' in 2014 versus 2019 says much about the primary audiences of these videos and the strategic considerations that may be informing that targeting. In 2014, al-Baghdadi was seemingly trying to speak to the masses seeking to reinforce his credentials as the spiritual leader of the global *um-mah*. This was projected in the intonations of his voice, his choice of clothing, his use of a *miswak*,<sup>d</sup> and his mannerisms throughout the Friday *khutbah*. All of this was designed to express his piety and, more specifically, mimic practices of the Prophet Muhammad, reinforcing al-Baghdadi's purported lineage. In contrast, his latest video seems to be primarily addressing audiences within the Islamic State organization and broader global jihadi milieu.

As analyzed by Cole Bunzel<sup>18</sup> and Aymenn al-Tamimi,<sup>19</sup> the pressures of decline have exposed deep fractures within the Islamic State. This has seen some dissenting factions publicly air concerns that al-Baghdadi is 'caliph' *in absentia* while a former Islamic State jurisprudence official authored a book arguing for withdrawing allegiance to the 'caliph.'<sup>e</sup> Al-Baghdadi sought to present himself as an engaged and caring leader, for example, by eulogizing past commanders of the 'caliphate's' last stand in Syria as well as "the knights of media ... Abu Abdullah al-Australi, and Khalid al-Qahtani" and "members of the Shariah Committee, headed by Abu Raghad al-Da'jani" in the opening minutes of his 2019 speech. It seems al-Baghdadi was sending a message that he is well aware of the key leaders in his organization's management and techno-structure during crucial periods, countering accusations that others are making these decisions without his knowledge.

The guerrilla 'caliph' was also likely addressing another important audience: the global jihadi milieu. After all, the challenge facing the Islamic State now regarding how to maintain and project al-Baghdadi's authority during a period of devastating decline is, in many respects, similar to that once faced by the Taliban and its own supposed *amir al-mu'minin*, Mullah Mohammad Omar. Indeed, it is hard to detach al-Baghdadi's efforts to project his 'authority' from the historical precedence set by the Mullah Omar case. Al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State's biggest rival in the global jihadi milieu, had countered al-Baghdadi's early claims of authority through 2014-2015 by continuing to allude to its own subservience to Mullah Omar's authority, apparently not knowing that he was dead.<sup>f</sup> Al-Baghdadi's recent video appearance is arguably an effort to demonstrate that, unlike its major rival al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State's supporters can rest assured that their 'caliph' remains very much alive and at the helm. In this regard al-Baghdadi's message may prove important

d The *miswak* is a stick used to clean the teeth, which al-Baghdadi used prior to delivering the sermon. It was undoubtedly an action purposely captured by the cameraman to show the Islamic State leader emulating the Prophet Muhammad.

e This attack on al-Baghdadi's legitimacy as 'caliph' cleverly mirrors the original appeal by Turki al-Binali to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi after the declaration of the 'caliphate' in 2014. For an analysis of the recent counterargument by Abu Mohammad al-Husseini al-Hashimi, a disgruntled Islamic State movement member and critic of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, see Hesham al-Hashimi, "Criticism and analysis of the book 'Enough extending hands to pledge bay'ah to al-Baghdadi,'" European Center for Counterterrorism and Intelligence Studies, Mar 29, 2019.

f This error provided endless fodder for Islamic State propagandists like al-Adnani who ridiculed al-Qa`ida for pledging allegiance to a dead emir. See Olivier Roy and Tore Hamming, "Al-Zawahiri's Bay`a to Mullah Mansoor: A Bitter Pill but a Bountiful Harvest," *CTC Sentinel* 9:5 (2016).

for boosting the morale of the 'true believers' operating covertly within populations formerly under the Islamic State's control.<sup>20</sup>

The Islamic State's efforts to project its leader as *amir al-mu'minin* are not occurring in a vacuum. Its jihadi opponents will seek to challenge such claims. In the weeks after al-Baghdadi's statement, al-Qa`ida released the latest iteration of Ayman al-Zawahiri's "Days with the Imam" series in which he reflects on his time with Usama bin Ladin.<sup>21</sup> As Hassan Hassan highlights, it is probably also no coincidence that Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) released a video of its leader on May 13, 2019, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, walking openly in Syria with enemy aircraft flying overhead in stark contrast to al-Baghdadi sitting comfortably on cushions indoors from an undisclosed location.<sup>22</sup> The Islamic State understands that its competing claims of authority within the global jihadi milieu are tied to a combination of strategic *manhaj* (methodology), in-field results, and the authority of its leader. This competition is likely to increase over time, especially as the Islamic State seek to project its guerrilla 'caliph' as *amir al-mu'minin*, even if one without a caliphate.

## Conclusion

The Islamic State's media department has been preparing its supporter base for a period of decline for many years.<sup>5</sup> Al-Baghdadi's appearance in the 2019 video must be understood as a single act in a much longer drama that has been playing out for some time, orchestrated by a media department that (as evidenced by the video) still functions and works in close synchronization with its leadership.<sup>23</sup> Beginning when the 'caliphate' was still controlling swathes of territory, then-spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's speech in May of 2016 defiantly looked back to the years following the collapse of the "state" project after 2007 and the years in "the desert" with the Islamic State of Iraq, and intimated that a return to a uniform insurgency looked likely.<sup>h</sup> This milestone speech was followed by Islamic State newsletter *Al Naba* editorials, a speech by al-Adnani's replacement Abul Hasan al-Muhajir in April 2018<sup>24</sup> about the coming tribulations,<sup>25</sup> and a recent series in *Al Naba* (#179-181, April-May 2019) explaining the Islamic State's adaption of Mao's three phases of guerrilla warfare.<sup>26</sup> Al-Baghdadi's April 2019 video

g A long-term analysis of patterns in Islamic State's media output reveals a thematic 'hedging' strategy in which certain themes associated with periods of success (e.g., statehood, conventional politico-military activities, and rational-choice appeals) versus periods of decline (e.g., struggle and purification, unconventional politico-military activities, and identity-choice appeals) tend to dominate dependent on strategic conditions. While so-called 'boom themes' dominate propaganda output during periods of success and 'bust themes' tend to dominate during periods of decline, the counter themes do not completely disappear. This 'hedging' helps to facilitate strategic pivots in both the information and ground theaters while helping to maintain the movement's credibility as a politico-military actor. For more on the Islamic State's use of 'hedging' and its implications, see Craig Whiteside and Haroro Ingram, "In search of the virtual caliphate: convenient fallacy, dangerous distraction," *War on the Rocks*, September 27, 2017.

h Al-Adnani took over the spokesman role for the Islamic State of Iraq in late 2009 following his parole from Camp Bucca, and his speech references the experiences of the group as it struggled for relevance again, one it found after 2012 with the acceleration of its campaign to return. See Craig Whiteside, "Lighting the Path: The Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise (2003-2016)," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7:11 (2016). A translation of the speech can be found via Paul Kamolnick, "Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's May 21, 2016 Speech," *Small Wars Journal*, 2016.

release, as rare as it was, was a necessary and important marker for the movement as it tries to convince its followers to hang on for another extended down period—the type it successfully navigated a decade or so before.<sup>27</sup> Along the way, its ‘caliph’ and his top media

managers will likely continue to adapt his image and narrative to project a sense of authority, stability, and continuity through these hard times until he and his group can launch yet another resurgence. **CTC**

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