



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

CTCSENTINEL

OBJECTIVE · RELEVANT · RIGOROUS | OCTOBER 2019 · VOLUME 12, ISSUE 9



FEATURE ARTICLE

Russia's Success in Syria: A Pyrrhic Victory?

SETH JONES

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Kevin McAleenan

ACTING U.S. SECRETARY OF
HOMELAND SECURITY

Contents

FEATURE ARTICLE

1 Russia's Battlefield Success in Syria: Will It Be a Pyrrhic Victory?

SETH JONES

INTERVIEW

10 A View from the CT Foxhole: Kevin McAleenan, Acting Secretary of Homeland Security

PAUL CRUICKSHANK AND BRIAN DODWELL

ANALYSIS

15 Newly Released ISIS Files: Learning from the Islamic State's Long-Version Personnel Form

DANIEL MILTON, JULIA LODOEN, RYAN O'FARRELL, AND SETH LOERTSCHER

21 Operation Marksburg: Frontline Field Investigation and the Prosecution of Terrorism

DAMIEN SPLEETERS

28 Hezbollah's "Virtual Entrepreneurs:" How Hezbollah is Using the Internet to Incite Violence in Israel

MICHAEL SHKOLNIK AND ALEXANDER CORBEIL

FROM THE EDITOR

In our cover article, Seth Jones examines the Russian military campaign in Syria. He writes: "Russia has done what many thought was impossible in Syria. It has helped Syrian President Bashar al-Assad reconquer most of the country's major cities and nearly two-thirds of its population. Moscow adopted a military approach that combined well-directed fires and ground maneuver to overwhelm a divided enemy. But it also used extraordinary violence against civilians and provided diplomatic cover when Syrian forces used chemical weapons. Moving forward, Russia faces considerable challenges ahead. Syria is a fractured country with an unpopular regime and massive economic problems; terrorist groups like the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida persist; and Israel and Iran remain locked in a proxy war in Syria."

Our interview is with Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Kevin McAleenan. He discusses DHS' recently published new Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence and how DHS is intensifying efforts to counter the threat of far-right terror.

Daniel Milton, Julia Lodoen, Ryan O'Farrell, and Seth Loertscher examine a recently declassified collection of 27 personnel records for Islamic State fighters, both local and foreign. The forms were acquired by the Department of Defence in Syria in 2016 and are now available to view on the Combating Terrorism Center's website. According to Milton and his co-authors, the forms "demonstrate how extensive the breadth of information collected was in some cases ... [and] show that the Islamic State acquired information useful for understanding the radicalization process, encouraging accountability among its fighters, managing the talent in the organization, and vetting members for potential security concerns."

Damien Spleeters outlines how his organization Conflict Armament Research helped prosecutors secure a guilty plea in the prosecution of Haisem Zahab, an Australian extremist with contacts into the Islamic State and whose research in Australia into rockets "indicates [according to the prosecution] significant commonality" with the Islamic State's weapon production program in Iraq and Syria.

Michael Shkolnik and Alexander Corbeil examine how Hezbollah "virtual entrepreneurs" have in recent years used social media to recruit Israeli Arabs and West Bank-based Palestinians to attack Israelis.

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

CTC SENTINEL

Editor in Chief

Paul Cruickshank

Managing Editor

Kristina Hummel

EDITORIAL BOARD

Colonel Suzanne Nielsen, Ph.D.

Department Head

Dept. of Social Sciences (West Point)

Brian Dodwell

Director, CTC

Don Rassler

Director of Strategic Initiatives, CTC

CONTACT

Combating Terrorism Center

U.S. Military Academy

607 Culum Road, Lincoln Hall

West Point, NY 10996

Phone: (845) 938-8495

Email: sentinel@westpoint.edu

Web: www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/

SUBMISSIONS

The CTC Sentinel welcomes submissions.

Contact us at sentinel@westpoint.edu.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

Cover: A Sukhoi Su-25 jet aircraft (left) and a Russian Sukhoi Su-34 fighter bomber at the Hmeimim airbase in Latakia, Syria, on January 20, 2016. (Vadim Savitsky/TASS via Getty Images)

Russia's Battlefield Success in Syria: Will It Be a Pyrrhic Victory?

By Seth G. Jones

Russia has done what many thought was impossible in Syria. It has helped Syrian President Bashar al-Assad reconquer most of the country's major cities and nearly two-thirds of its population. Moscow adopted a military approach that combined well-directed fires and ground maneuver to overwhelm a divided enemy. But it also used extraordinary violence against civilians and provided diplomatic cover when Syrian forces used chemical weapons. Moving forward, Russia faces considerable challenges ahead. Syria is a fractured country with an unpopular regime and massive economic problems; terrorist groups like the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida persist; and Israel and Iran remain locked in a proxy war in Syria.

Just four years after directly entering the Syrian war, Russia has done the unthinkable. It has helped Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's retake much of the country from rebel control.¹ Moscow's air campaign in Syria was its largest outside of Russian territory since the end of the Cold War.^a To be sure, there are still areas of resistance like Idlib, and Turkish and Kurdish forces control terrain in northern and eastern Syria. But the battlefield victories in Syria have been undeniable. With Russian assistance, Syrian- and Iranian-supported ground forces retook Deir ez-Zor in the east and Aleppo, Homs, Damascus, and other cities across the country. None of this looked possible in late 2015, when Russian policymakers assessed that the Syrian regime might collapse without rapid and decisive assistance. As Russian leader Vladimir Putin remarked in October 2015, "The collapse of Syria's official authorities will only mobilize terrorists. Right now, instead of undermining them, we must revive them, strengthening state institutions in the conflict zone."²

To retake territory, Moscow adopted a military approach that combined well-directed fires and ground maneuver to overwhelm a divided enemy. Instead of deploying large numbers of Russian Army forces to engage in ground combat in Syria—as the Soviet Union did in Afghanistan in the 1980s—Moscow relied on Syrian Army forces, Lebanese Hezbollah, other militias, and private military companies as the main ground maneuver elements. The Russian Air Force and Navy supported these forces by conducting strikes from fixed-wing aircraft and ships in the Mediterranean and Caspian Seas.

Moscow has used its battlefield successes in Syria to resurrect its great power status in the Middle East. Russia now has power projection capabilities in the region with access to air bases like Hmeimim and ports like Tartus. Russian diplomats are leading negotiations on regional issues like a Syrian peace deal and refugee returns, and every major country in the region—such as Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran—works with Moscow on foreign policy issues. As one Middle East leader recently told the author: "The Russians are now a dominant—perhaps the dominant—power in the Middle East."³ Russia's resurgence in the Middle East has been facilitated by the confused picture over the drawdown of U.S. military forces inside Syria.

The Syrian war has also provided Russia's military with an unparalleled opportunity to improve its strike, intelligence, and combined arms capabilities. After a period of military reforms from 2008 to 2012 and a large modernization program, Moscow has been able to test its forces in combat. Over the course of the war, thousands of officers rotated through the campaign to gain combat experience and secure promotions.⁴ Russia also hopes to expand its arms sales with weapons and systems tested in the Syrian war.⁵ The experience will shape Russian military thinking, drive procurement decisions, increase arms sales, and influence personnel decisions for years to come.

Despite these battlefield successes, however, Russia used extraordinary violence against civilians, targeted hospitals, and provided diplomatic cover when Syrian forces used chemical weapons against their own population.⁶ In addition, Moscow and its partners face significant challenges ahead in Syria. The Islamic State and al-Qa`ida-linked groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Tanzim Hurras al-Din still have a presence in Syria and neighboring countries like Iraq and Turkey. Syrian government reconstruction has been slow and inefficient, adding to the litany of political and economic grievances with the Assad regime. And Israel and Iran are engaged in a proxy war in Syria.

Fears of a Libya Redux

Moscow's decision to become directly involved in the Syrian war in 2015 was motivated by several issues. First, Russian leaders were concerned that Washington would overthrow the Assad regime and replace it with a friendly government. Syria had long been an

a Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has also conducted air operations in Georgia, Ukraine, and Chechnya. During the Cold War, one of the largest air campaigns was in Afghanistan in the late 1970s and 1980s. See, for example, Lester W. Grau, ed., *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1996), and Edward B. Westermann, "The Limits of Soviet Airpower: The Failure of Military Coercion in Afghanistan, 1979-89," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 19:2 (1999): pp. 39-71.

Seth G. Jones is the Harold Brown Chair and Director of the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, as well as the author of *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Viet Cong to the Islamic State* (Oxford University Press).

important ally of Russia. In 1946, the Soviet Union supported Syrian independence and agreed to provide military help to the newly formed Syrian Arab Army. This cooperation continued throughout the Cold War and under Russian President Vladimir Putin.⁷ Russian military leaders also wanted to maintain access to the warm water port at Tartus, used by the Russian navy for power projection into the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean.

Russian leaders like General Valery Gerasimov, the chief of the General Staff of Russian Armed Forces, worried about U.S. regime change in Syria based, in part, on the United States' role in overthrowing regimes in Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003, and Libya in 2011.⁸ Gerasimov viewed the Libyan war as a textbook example of the United States' new way of warfare, combining precision-strike operations using special forces and intelligence support to non-state groups—what Gerasimov referred to as the “concealed use of force.”⁹ As Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also remarked, Moscow was alarmed “that foreign players [like the United States] will get imbued with this problem and will not only condemn the violence [in Syria], but subsequently repeat the Libyan scenario, including the use of force.”¹⁰

Losing Syria—or, at the very least, watching Syria further deteriorate into a bloody civil war—was particularly worrisome because Moscow had just lost its ally in Ukraine. The 2014 revolution there had ushered in a pro-Western government in Kiev, further fueling Russian fears of U.S. activism. As General Gerasimov remarked, “The experience of military conflicts—including those connected with the so-called color revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East—confirms that a perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war.”¹¹ According to Russian officials like Gerasimov, the primary culprit in most of these campaigns was the United States.¹²

Moscow’s fears of a U.S. military intervention were seemingly confirmed when U.S. President Barack Obama called for Assad to step down in February 2015 and vowed to aid rebel groups. “We’ll continue to support the moderate opposition there and continue to believe that it will not be possible to fully stabilize that country until Mr. Assad, who has lost legitimacy in the country, is transitioned out,” Obama remarked.¹³ Throughout 2015, U.S. policymakers debated greater involvement in Syria by aiding rebel groups. In early 2015, for example, a delegation of U.S. senators led by John McCain visited Saudi Arabia and Qatar to discuss increasing support to Syrian rebels.¹⁴ McCain had also secretly visited rebel leaders inside Syria about the possibility of providing heavy weapons to them and establishing a no-fly zone in Syria to help topple Assad.¹⁵ Near the end of 2015, McCain and U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham publicly supported the deployment of 10,000 troops to Syria.¹⁶

Second, Russian leaders were concerned that the Islamic State, al-Qa`ida, and other terrorists could use territory in Syria and Iraq to attract more fighters, improve their capabilities, and spread terrorism in and around Russia. After all, an estimated 9,000 fighters from Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia had traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight with groups like the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida.¹⁷ Russia had also suffered several terrorist attacks from Islamist extremists linked to—or inspired by—the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida, which put its security agencies on high alert. In 2011, a suicide bomber detonated at Domodedovo International Airport in Moscow, killing 37 people. In 2013, there were two suicide bomb-

ings in the city of Volgograd perpetrated by jihadis from the Caucasus Emirate. In 2015, Islamic State operatives in Egypt exploded a bomb on Russian Metrojet Flight 9268, killing all 217 passengers and seven crew members.¹⁸ In late 2015, Alexander Bortnikov, the head of Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB), expressed grave concern about the evolving threat and warned that terrorists in Syria were plotting to conduct attacks in Russia.¹⁹

Russian leaders were understandably concerned about the situation in Syria. Al-Qa`ida’s affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, had driven back Syrian government forces in the northwest and threatened major population centers in southern Syria in 2015. Islamic State forces also controlled significant amounts of territory in eastern and northern Syria, and they were conducting attacks in central and western parts of the country.²⁰ For Moscow, the stakes in Syria were high.

Russia’s Grand Entrance

In late 2015, Putin finally put his foot down. In a speech at the United Nations in September 2015, Putin vowed to support the Assad regime. “We think it is an enormous mistake to refuse to cooperate with the Syrian government and its Armed Forces who are valiantly fighting terrorism face-to-face,” he said.²¹ Over the summer of 2015, Russian, Iranian, and Syrian leaders discussed ramping up military operations. Syrian officials and the head of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), Qassem Soleimani, flew to Moscow to coordinate direct military engagement in Syria.²² To facilitate operations, Russia and Syria also signed a treaty stipulating the terms and conditions for Russia’s use of Hmeimim Air Base, southeast of the city of Latakia.²³ Russia then began to pre-position air, naval, and ground forces in and near Syria in preparation for military operations.²⁴

At the end of September 2015, Russia conducted its first airstrikes in support of Syrian forces around the cities of Homs and Hama. While Russia had conducted some air operations during the First and Second Chechen Wars in the 1990s and 2000s, as well as in Georgia in 2008, Russian pilots had flown few combat sorties since then.²⁵ Despite limited recent activity, Moscow conducted 1,292 combat missions against 1,623 targets in October 2015 alone from its fleet of 32 combat aircraft.²⁶ Many of these strikes were of low accuracy, and Russian aircraft used unguided weapons to hit targets in urban areas, causing substantial collateral damage. Russian aircraft lacked targeting pods and high-precision weapons to conduct accurate strikes early in the conflict, though Russian capabilities and precision-strike improved over the course of the war.²⁷ Russia also benefited from forward air controllers deployed with Syrian and other ground units, who helped call in airstrikes.²⁸

Over the next three years, Syrian Army and allied forces retook successive Syrian cities. As Figure 1 highlights, examples included Aleppo, Homs, Palmyra, and Deir ez-Zor. By the end of 2018, the Syrian government had reconquered most of the east, south, and west up to the Euphrates River. In northern Syria, the Russians remained in close cooperation with Turkey, which controlled territory north of Aleppo. By 2019, the Syrian government—with Russian and Iranian support—controlled most of Syria’s major cities.

Russia’s battlefield campaign was successful for three main reasons. First, Moscow adopted a light footprint approach, which combined fire and maneuver elements. Second, Syrian Army forces and their partners were effective at clearing and holding territory. Third, the Syrian insurgency was decentralized and fractured, se-

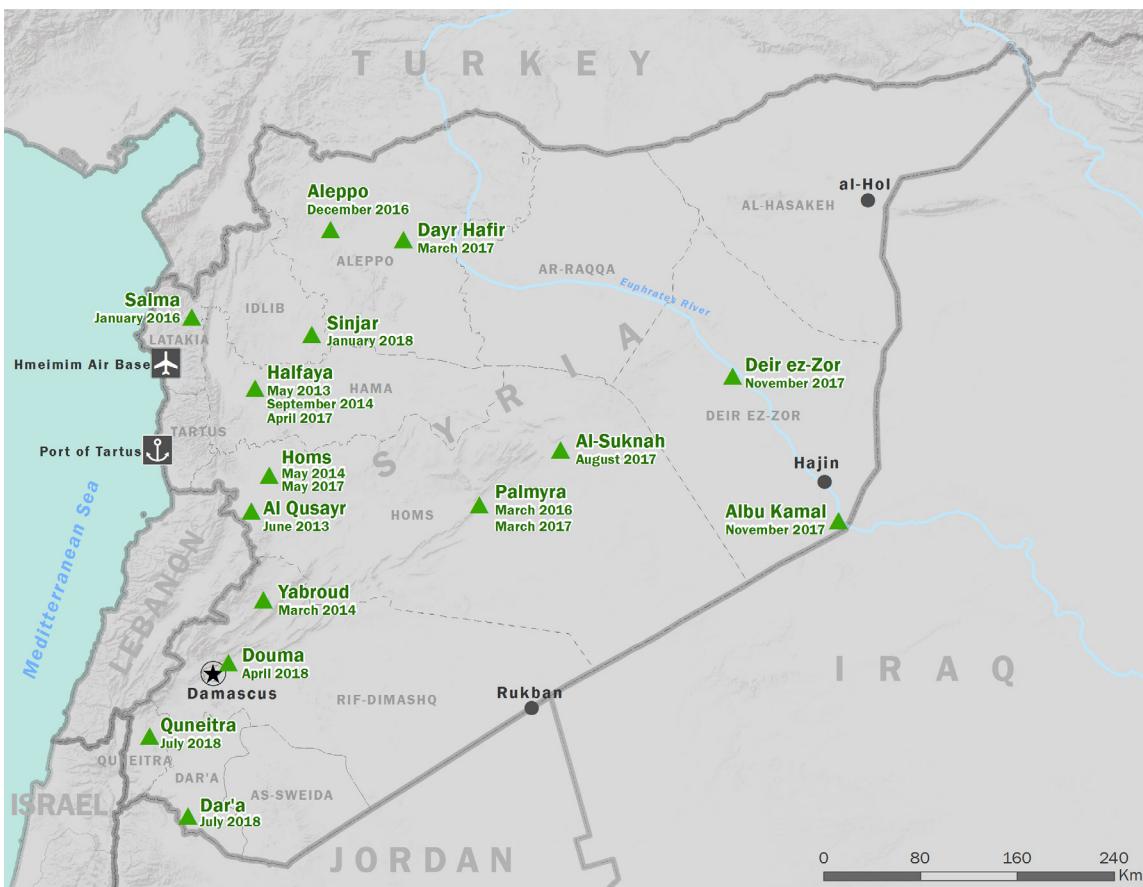


Figure 1: Map of the Syrian Campaign. Places in green include the date that cities and towns fell to Syrian and partner forces. In a few cases, like Palmyra, pro-Assad forces captured a town more than once. Data comes from the Transnational Threats Project at CSIS. (Brandon Mohr)

verely weakening its combat effectiveness.

Light Footprint Strategy

Russian leaders adopted a light footprint strategy that included a mix of fire and maneuver elements. Unlike Moscow's approach in Afghanistan in the 1980s, which involved a heavy footprint of 115,000 Soviet forces to fight the Afghan mujahideen, Russian political and military leaders adopted a vastly different approach in Syria beginning in 2015.²⁹ Syrian Army forces served as the main maneuver element to take back territory, not the Russian Army. Syrian forces were supported by militia forces like Lebanese Hezbollah (which received support from Iran's IRGC-QF), and private military contractors like the Wagner Group (which received training and other aid from the Russian military).³⁰ These forces did most of the fighting and held territory once it was cleared, with help from Russian special operations forces on the ground.³¹

Russia used well-directed fires to aid these ground forces and overwhelm rebel positions. Beginning in September 2015, Russian ships and submarines fired Kalibr land-attack cruise missiles from the Caspian and Mediterranean Seas at rebel positions. Russia's inventory of aircraft included Su-24M2 bombers, Su-25SM/UB attack aircraft, Su-35S fighters, Su-34 fighter-bombers, Su-30SM heavy multirole fighters, and Mi-24P and Mi-35M attack helicopters. Tu-95MS and Tu-160 strategic bombers deployed Kh-555 and newer Kh-101 air-launched cruise missiles against targets in Syria. Moscow also fielded Iskander-M short-range ballistic missile sys-

tems, Bastion-P anti-ship missiles, and other advanced weapons. Effective close air support was critical to the Syrian Army's offensives in Aleppo, Homs, Deir ez-Zor, Daraa, Damascus, Palmyra, and other locations.³²

To coordinate its air-ground campaign, Russia integrated military operations with the Syrian and Iranian governments, including setting up a Coordination Center for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides (CCROS) headquartered at Hmeimim Air Base.³³ Russia also helped establish a coordination center in Baghdad, which included liaisons from Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Israel. The center facilitated intelligence sharing and deconflicted air operations.³⁴

While Russia's mix of fire and maneuver was similar in some ways to the U.S. model in Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, and Libya in 2011, it was different in one critical respect.³⁵ Russia adopted a punishment strategy, not a population-centric one characterized by winning local hearts and minds.³⁶ Russian and allied military forces inflicted civilian harm on opposition-controlled areas using artillery and indiscriminate area weapons, such as thermobaric, incendiary, and cluster munitions.³⁷ As the Russians demonstrated in Grozny during the Second Chechen War, a punishment strategy is designed to raise the societal costs of continued resistance and coerce rebels to give up.³⁸ The Russian and Syrian militaries used extraordinary violence against civilians. Russia committed human rights abuses, triggered the displacement of millions of refugees and internally displaced persons, caused large-scale destruction of infrastructure, and conducted wanton killings of civil-

ians. As one Human Rights Watch report concluded:

Russia continued to play a key military role alongside the Syrian government in offensives on anti-government-held areas, indiscriminately attacking schools, hospitals, and civilian infrastructure. The Syrian-Russian military campaign to retake Eastern Ghouta in February [2018] involved the use of internationally banned cluster munitions as well as incendiary weapons, whose use in populated areas is restricted by international law.³⁹

Moscow also provided diplomatic cover when Syrian forces used chemical weapons against its own population. In August 2013, the Syrian government used sarin against rebel positions around Ghouta, killing more than 1,400 people.⁴⁰ In April 2017, Syrian aircraft operating in rebel-held Idlib province conducted several airstrikes using sarin. The strikes, which occurred in the town of Khan Sheikoun, killed an estimated 80 to 100 people.⁴¹ In April 2018, Syrian government forces launched a chlorine attack in the southwestern city of Douma. As a declassified French intelligence report concluded, “Reliable intelligence indicates that Syrian military officials have coordinated what appears to be the use of chemical weapons containing chlorine on Douma, on April 7.” The report also blamed Russia for creating a conducive environment for these types of attacks: “Russian military forces active in Syria enable the regime to enjoy unquestionable air superiority, giving it the total freedom of action it needs for its indiscriminate offensives on urban areas.”⁴²

While Russia’s light footprint strategy was ultimately successful in retaking territory, its punishment campaign caused significant civilian casualties and human rights abuses.

Better Than Expected Maneuver Forces

As Russian leaders realized, air power alone does not win wars since ground forces are generally needed to retake territory.⁴³ Russia’s light footprint strategy hinged on an effective ground component. As the U.S. military discovered in Afghanistan and Iraq, local forces can be organizationally inept, deeply corrupt, politically divided, and poorly educated.⁴⁴ An ineffective partner can undermine even the most well-intentioned counterinsurgency or counterterrorism campaign, regardless of how much money, equipment, and training is provided.⁴⁵

The Syrian Army was better than some analysts predicted, especially when aided by air and naval strikes.^b The Russian military deployed forward air controllers, embedded with ground units, to call in strikes and coordinate air-ground operations.⁴⁶ One example of the integration of air power and maneuver forces was in Syria’s industrial capital, Aleppo, which Syrian government and allied forces recaptured in December 2016 after a bloody struggle. Dubbed “Operation Dawn of Victory,” Russia conducted intelligence collection from human sources, signals intelligence, and satellite imagery throughout 2016. Moscow then used intelligence derived from those assets and platforms to identify targets and orchestrate an extensive bombing campaign in and around the city to weaken rebel positions.⁴⁷ In August 2016 alone, Russian aircraft flew an average of 70 sorties per day against targets in Aleppo, using aircraft like Tu-22M3s and Su-34s.⁴⁸ Russia also leveraged a naval task force in

^b There was significant criticism of the Syrian army for a range of issues, from poor training and significant corruption to low morale. See, for example, Tobias Schneider, “The Decay of the Syrian Regime Is Much Worse Than You Think,” War on the Rocks, August 31, 2016.



Smoke rises from buildings after airstrikes believed to have been mounted by Russian warplanes on residential areas in the city center of Idlib, Syria, on March 13, 2019. (Anas Alkharboutli/picture alliance via Getty Images)

the eastern Mediterranean, which included the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov*.⁴⁹ In addition, Syrian Air Force fighters conducted hundreds of strikes against fixed rebel positions.⁵⁰

To complement air and naval attacks, ground forces from Syria's 15th Special Forces Division, 800th Republican Guard Regiment, 102nd and 106th Republic Guard Brigades, elite Tiger Forces (or Qawat Al-Nimr) and Desert Hawks, and Iranian-backed militia forces conducted ground operations to retake Aleppo from September through December 2016. They focused on encircling rebel positions in eastern parts of the city.⁵¹ In addition to air and naval strikes, the Russians supported ground forces with Orlan unmanned aerial vehicles, electronic warfare capabilities, forward air controllers, and soldiers from the 120th Russian Guards Artillery Regiment. By December 2016, ground forces had effectively encircled and crushed rebel groups operating in the city.⁵² The International Committee of the Red Cross helped oversee the evacuation of civilians and fighters by bus and car out of eastern Aleppo to areas in western Aleppo and in neighboring Idlib.⁵³

There were other battles that highlighted the combination of directed fires and ground maneuver. In May 2017, for example, Syrian Army and allied ground forces retook the city of Homs, once dubbed the capital of the rebellion, with extensive Russian and Syrian air support. In addition, during the 2017 offensive against Islamic State forces in southeastern parts of the country, Syrian Army forces were again effective in retaking territory. Russian Tu-23M3 aircraft made more than 30 sorties on large targets around Deir ez-Zor, and Russian helicopters targeted Islamic State positions.⁵⁴ Mobile groups of well-trained Syrian Army forces, aided by Russian advisers, took Palmyra by March 2017. In November 2017, the Syrian Army and local militias retook control of Deir ez-Zor city from the Islamic State, which the insurgent group had held since 2014. In July 2018 during Operation Basalt, Syrian Army forces and local allies recaptured the southern city of Daraa, completing the Syrian government's conquest of the south.⁵⁵

Among the most effective Syrian Army units was the Qawat Al-Nimr, an elite special forces unit established in 2013. With help from Russian airstrikes and militias like the Al-Ba'ath Battalion, Qawat Al-Nimr units launched an offensive operation in September 2015 to lift the Islamic State siege of Kuweires Airbase in Aleppo province. By mid-November, Syrian Army forces retook the base. In April 2018, Qawat Al-Nimr units and militias conducted successful operations in southern Damascus to clear out Islamic State fighters. The Russian Air Force—including MiG-31 attack aircraft, Su-25 fighters, and Tu-22 long-range bombers—provided heavy support to the offensive.⁵⁶

Other units were also involved in ground operations. Iran provided substantial assistance to the Assad regime by helping organize, train, and fund over 100,000 Shi'a fighters.⁵⁷ Up to 3,000 IRGC-QF helped plan and execute campaigns such as the 2016 Operation Dawn of Victory in Aleppo.⁵⁸ Lebanese Hezbollah deployed up to 8,000 fighters to Syria and amassed a substantial arsenal of rockets and missiles.⁵⁹ Hezbollah also trained, advised, and assisted Shi'a militias in areas like southwestern Syria.⁶⁰

Fractured Insurgency

Finally, Russian, Syrian, and allied air-ground operations benefited from a highly fragmented and disorganized insurgency. The United States provided limited assistance to some Syrian rebel groups through the CIA and Department of Defense. But Washington

failed to effectively coordinate with Jordan, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Turkey, European countries, and other outside powers. The U.S. military's train-and-equip program was particularly problematic. Obama Administration officials never agreed on a desired end state in Syria, and U.S. soldiers trained Syrian rebels to counter the Islamic State rather than to do what many rebels wanted: to fight the Assad regime. The Obama administration also prohibited U.S. advisors from deploying into Syria with rebels.⁶¹ U.S. military efforts from 2015 were more successful in training, advising, and assisting Syrian Democratic Forces to help retake territory in eastern Syria from the Islamic State.⁶²

To be successful, insurgent groups generally need to establish a centralized organizational structure. Centralized groups are more effective than decentralized ones in identifying and punishing members that defect from the organization or engage in "shirking."^c Shirking occurs when members take actions that fail to contribute to the maximum efficiency of the organization, like taking a nap instead of setting up a roadside bomb to attack a government convoy. Centralized structures are also more effective in helping insurgent leaders govern territory once they control it.⁶³

In Syria, the absence of a cohesive umbrella structure was a major problem for rebel groups—though a blessing for the Russians, Syrians, and Iranians. Instead of an organized insurgency, Syria became a hodgepodge of groups who fought each other rather than consolidating power and territorial gains. The lack of coordination among these groups meant that Russian, Syrian, Iranian, and allied militias were able to exploit their divisions and vulnerabilities, and ultimately wear them down during offensives in Deir ez-Zor, Aleppo, Homs, Damascus, and other locations.

Syria's Lingering Problems

As the United States discovered in Afghanistan and Iraq, winning a war is not the same as winning the peace afterward. Russian long-term success in Syria may be challenging for several reasons.⁶⁴

First, Syria is a fractured country with an unpopular regime, herculean economic problems, large-scale infrastructure destruction, lingering animosities, and little or no control of territory in parts of the north, east, and south. Electricity and running water are sparse in many places; infrastructure has been decimated. Medication is often unaffordable, and unemployment is rampant. There is little reconstruction aid coming from international donors, and the Assad regime's limited reconstruction efforts are focused on consolidating power and rewarding loyalty to the government.⁶⁵ Three *New York Times* journalists conducted an eight-day visit through Syria in the summer of 2019 and painted a grim picture of the destruction. "What does victory look like? At least half a million dead, more than 11 million severed from their homes. Rubble for cities, ghosts for neighbors." Traveling northeast from Damascus to the town of Douma, they provided a chilling account of a country still in ruins: "It seemed to go on for miles, the cigarette ash of the war: apartment buildings that resembled open-air parking garages, doorways spewing gray dust, minarets sticking askew out of the wreckage like

^c An organization's success depends on its ability to motivate members and encourage them to behave in ways consistent with its broader goals and objectives. A lack of discipline among lower-ranking members can waste resources, alienate potential supporters, and undermine military and political efforts. See, for example, Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

half-melted candles in a cake.”⁶⁶ The United Nations estimates that 83 percent of Syrians live below the poverty line.⁶⁷

These challenges will continue to plague the Assad regime and its Russian backers. World Bank data places Syria in the bottom one percent of countries worldwide in political stability, bottom two percent in government effectiveness, bottom three percent in regulatory quality, and bottom two percent in control of corruption.⁶⁸ These numbers should not be reassuring to Russian leaders if they want to establish a modicum of stability in the country.

Second, al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State still have a significant presence in Syria and neighboring countries. The Islamic State lost control of virtually all of the territory it once held in Syria and suffered significant casualties during the final months of its defense along the Hajin-Baghuz corridor. But it is attempting to rebuild its networks east and west of the Euphrates River as part of its desert (or *sahraa*) strategy.⁶⁹ Islamic State fighters have taken refuge in areas like the Badiya desert and the Jazira region in Syria, stockpiled weapons and material, kept a low profile (including wearing Bedouin-style clothes), and conducted limited attacks against Syrian government and Syrian Democratic Force targets.⁷⁰ The Islamic State is particularly strong in Deir ez-Zor province, parts of Raqqah province, and Homs province nearly Palmyra.⁷¹

Islamic State strategy and tactics in Syria appear to mirror the guidelines laid out in the four-part series titled “The Temporary Fall of Cities as a Working Method for the Mujahideen,” published in the Islamic State newsletter Al Naba.⁷² The guidance urged Islamic State fighters to avoid pitched battles and face-to-face clashes, conduct hit-and-run attacks, and seize weapons from victims to build up their arsenal. The instructions were similar to the classic guerrilla warfare campaign promulgated by Mao Tse-Tung and Ernesto “Che” Guevara against stronger adversaries.⁷³ The Islamic State has also attempted to rebuild its intelligence networks across Syria. As one United Nations assessment concluded, “The ISIL covert net-

work in the Syria Arab Republic is spreading, and cells are being established at the provincial level, mirroring that which has been happening since 2017 in Iraq.”⁷⁴

There are still between 15,000 and 30,000 Islamic State fighters in Syria and Iraq, including up to 3,000 foreigners (from outside Iraq and Syria).⁷⁵ The Iraqi-Syrian border is porous, allowing Islamic State fighters to move across it with relative ease. In addition, the Islamic State is recruiting individuals at locations like al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria (which has approximately 70,000 internally displaced persons, or IDPs), and Rukban camp in southern Syria near the Jordanian border (which has approximately 30,000 IDPs).⁷⁶ Though there are approximately 10,000 Islamic State fighters housed at al-Hol—including roughly 2,000 foreign fighters (not from Iraq or Syria)—there has been little progress on what to do with them, since many of their home countries do not want them back.⁷⁷ Nearly 50,000 of the IDPs at al-Hol are under the age of 18, which has raised concerns about youth radicalization.⁷⁸ In addition, the Islamic State still boasts financial reserves of roughly \$50 million to \$300 million, sufficient for long-term operations.⁷⁹

Al-Qa`ida also presents a significant threat and has relations with jihadi networks in areas like Idlib. There are between 12,000 and 15,000 fighters from Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib, as well as another 1,500 to 2,000 fighters from Tanzim Hurras al-Din.⁸⁰ While HTS members like Abu Muhammad al-Julani have experienced testy relations with Ayman al-Zawahiri and other al-Qa`ida leaders, HTS maintains strong connections with jihadi networks.⁸¹ Tanzim Hurras al-Din has strong connections with al-Qa`ida and is led by Mustafa al-Aruri (also known as Abu al-Qassam), an al-Qa`ida veteran. The organization also boasts a number of other al-Qa`ida veterans, such as Iyad Nazmi Salih Khalil, Sami al-Aridi, Bilal Khrisat, and Faraj Ahmad Nana'a.⁸²

The presence of up to 40,000 to 50,000 jihadi fighters suggests that terrorism will remain a serious problem in Syria for the

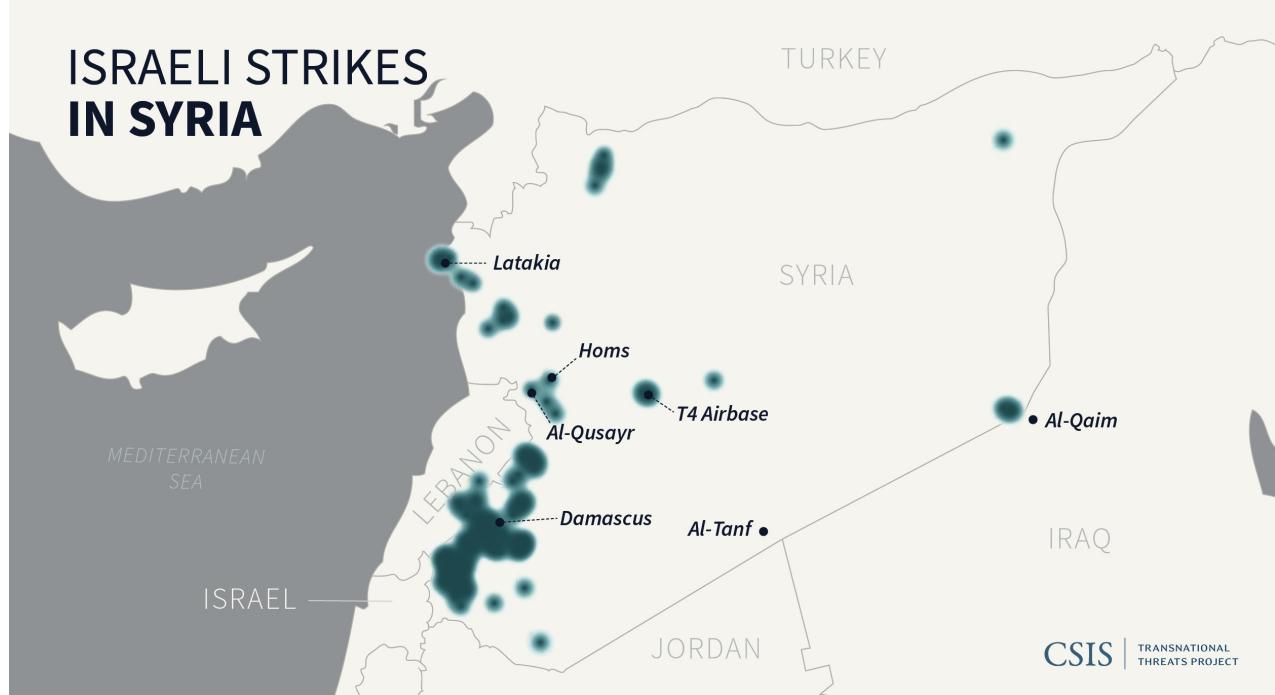


Figure 2: Israeli Strikes in Syria from January 2013 to September 2019. Each strike is marked with a blue ink blot. The larger areas of blue in the heat map indicate a higher concentration of Israeli strikes.⁸³ (Nicholas Harrington/CSIS)

foreseeable future. In addition, Moscow's brutality against civilian populations in Syria and close relationship with the Assad regime could make Russia a more significant target of terrorist attacks in the future.

Third, Syria is a proxy battlefield between Iran and Israel, which could trigger further war and put growing pressure on Russia to manage escalation. Israel has conducted hundreds of strikes in Syria against Iranian-linked targets since the beginning of the war, as highlighted in Figure 2. These strikes primarily came from Israeli combat aircraft. Many of these strikes have hit missile-related targets, such as storage warehouses, transportation convoys, and missile batteries.⁸⁴ As a senior Israeli Air Force officer remarked, "We are continuing with our operational mission against the arming of Hezbollah and Iranian moves to establish themselves in Syria. As far as we are concerned, anywhere we identify consolidation [of Iranian or Hezbollah forces] or the introduction of weapons, we act."⁸⁵ Most of Israel's attacks have been in southwestern Syria, near

the Israeli border. The Israelis have hit other targets, such as T-4 Tiyas Airbase in Homs, the airbase north of al-Qusayr, Damascus International Airport, and even Iraq and Lebanon.⁸⁶

These issues—poor governance, continuing terrorism, and persistent Israeli-Iranian conflict—suggest that Russia faces significant challenges in turning battlefield victories into domestic stability. Before the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Secretary of State Colin Powell warned President George W. Bush about the downsides of military action. "Once you break it," Powell said, "you are going to own it."⁸⁷ *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman referred to this as the "Pottery Barn rule" after the policy put in place by the U.S.-based retail store.⁸⁸ Russia now has the unenviable task of trying to pick up the pieces in Syria. Despite Russian battlefield successes thus far, ensuring that Syria is a Russian "victory" in five or 10 years will be a major challenge. And if Moscow fails, war and terrorism may continue to ravage Syria. **CTC**

Citations

- 1 On control of territory, see, for example, Jonathan Spyer, "Syria's Civil War Is Now 3 Civil Wars," *Foreign Policy*, March 18, 2019, and Charles Lister, "Assad Hasn't Won Anything," *Foreign Policy*, July 11, 2019.
- 2 Vladimir Putin, "Remarks at the Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club," October 22, 2015.
- 3 Author interview, senior Middle East leader, July 2019.
- 4 Valery Gerasimov, "We Broke the Back of Terrorists," interview by Victor Baranets, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, December 26, 2017.
- 5 Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?" *Military Review* 98:2 (2018): p. 19.
- 6 See, for example, Louisa Brooke-Holland and Ben Smith, *Chemical Weapons and Syria—In Brief* (London: House of Commons, August 2018); Robert J. Bunker, *The Assad Regime and Chemical Weapons* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, May 18, 2018); Yasmin Naqvi, "Crossing the Red Line: The Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria and What Should Happen Now," *International Review of the Red Cross* 99:3 (2017): pp. 959–993; Zakaria Zakaria and Tamer El-Ghobashy, "Escalating Syrian and Russian Airstrikes in Rebel-Held Idlib Stoke Fears of a Final Showdown," *Washington Post*, May 6, 2019.
- 7 Rami Ginat, "The Soviet Union and the Syrian Ba'th Regime: From Hesitation to Rapprochement," *Middle Eastern Studies* 36:2 (April 2000): pp. 150–171.
- 8 See, for example, Gerasimov's speech: ["The Value of Science Is In the Foresight"], *Military Industrial Courier*, February 26, 2013. The speech was translated into English by Robert Coalson and published in Valery Gerasimov, "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying Out Combat Operations," *Military Review*, January–February 2016, pp. 23–29. Also see later statements, such as Valery Gerasimov, "Speech at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Military Sciences," March 2, 2019. The speech was published in English at "Russian First Deputy Defense Minister Gerasimov," MEMRI, Special Dispatch No. 7943, March 14, 2019.
- 9 Valery Gerasimov, PowerPoint slides, Moscow Conference on International Security, May 23, 2014. The slides were published in Anthony H. Cordesman, *Russia and the 'Color Revolution': A Russian Military View of a World Destabilized by the U.S. and the West* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 28, 2014).
- 10 Sergei Lavrov, "On Syria and Libya," *Monthly Review*, May 17, 2011. The text is an excerpt from "Transcript of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Interview to Russian Media Following Attendance at Arctic Council Meeting, Nuuk, May 12, 2011," published on the Russian Foreign Ministry website, May 13, 2011.
- 11 Gerasimov.
- 12 See, for example, Gerasimov, PowerPoint slides, May 23, 2014.
- 13 Byron Tau, "Obama Renews Call for Assad to Step Down," *Wall Street Journal*, February 24, 2015.
- 14 "John McCain Leads U.S. Delegation of Senators on Tour to Train Syrian Rebels," *Guardian*, January 18, 2015.
- 15 See, for example, John McCain, "Important visit with brave fighters in #Syria who are risking their lives for freedom and need our help," Twitter, May 28, 2013.
- 16 "John McCain and Lindsey Graham Call for 20,000 Troops in Syria and Iraq," *Guardian*, November 29, 2015.
- 17 Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees* (New York: The Soufan Center, October 2017). Also see Thomas Sanderson et al., *Russian-Speaking Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria: Assessing the Threat from (and to) Russia and Central Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2017), p. 2.
- 18 On terrorist attacks in Russia leading up to the Russian intervention, see the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland (<https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>).
- 19 Arsen Mollayev and Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia Is Feeding Hundreds of Fighters to ISIS — and Some Are Starting to Return," Associated Press, October 28, 2015. Also see GRU head Igor Korobov's later comments in A.A. Bartosh, "Trenie' i 'iznos' gibridnoj vojny" ["Friction" and "wear" of hybrid war], *Voennaia Mysl* 1 (2018).
- 20 See, for example, the U.S. government map of "Areas of Influence, August 2014–2015," published in *Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations*, Operation Inherent Resolve, U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of State, and U.S. Agency for International Development, September 30, 2015, p. 26.
- 21 "Statement by H.E. Mr. Vladimir V. Putin, President of the Russian Federation, at the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly," September 28, 2015.
- 22 Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, "How Iranian General Plotted Out Syrian Assault in Moscow," *Reuters*, October 6, 2015.
- 23 ["Agreement Between the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic on the Deployment of an Aviation Group of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation on the Territory of the Syrian Arab Republic," August 26, 2015]. The text of the agreement can be found at <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201601140019>
- 24 On Russian military preparations in Syria, see Valery Polovkin ed., *Rossikoe Oruzhiye v Siriskom Konflikte* (Moscow: STATUS, 2016).

- 25 Kofman and Rojansky, pp. 6-23.
- 26 Anton Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria: A Preliminary Analysis* (Arlington, VA: Center for Naval Analysis, June 2018), p. 3.
- 27 See, for example, Ralph Shield, "Russian Airpower's Success in Syria: Assessing Evolution in Kinetic Counterinsurgency," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31:2 (2018): pp. 214-239; Kofman and Rojansky, Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*.
- 28 On Russian forward air controllers, see, for example, Shield. See also Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*.
- 29 Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2002), p. 266.
- 30 On Russian support to organizations like the Wagner Group, see James Bingham and Konrad Muzyka, "Private Companies Engage in Russia's Non-Linear Warfare," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, January 29, 2018. On Lebanese Hezbollah and IRGC-QF activity, see Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), pp. 77-96.
- 31 On Russian special operations in Syria, see Michael Kofman, "Russian Spetsnaz: Learning from Experience," *Cipher Brief*, March 15, 2017; Christopher Marsh, *Developments in Russian Special Operations: Russia's Spetsnaz, SOF and Special Operations Forces Command* (Ottawa: Canadian Special Operations Forces Command, 2017).
- 32 See, for example, Polovkin; Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*; Kofman and Rojansky; Sanu Kainikara, *In the Bear's Shadow: Russian Intervention in Syria* (Canberra, Australia: Air Power Development Centre, Australian Department of Defence, 2018); Shield.
- 33 "Russia Learns Military Lessons in Syria," *Jane's IHS*, 2017.
- 34 Kofman and Rojansky, p. 14.
- 35 Stephen Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, November 2002).
- 36 On punishment campaigns, see Seth G. Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 47-52; Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 31-32; Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Classic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Persia to the Present* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), pp. 108; Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf, Jr., *Rebellion and Authority: An Analytic Essay on Insurgent Conflicts* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, February 1970), pp. 90-131.
- 37 "World Report 2019," Human Rights Watch, 2019; "Indiscriminate Bombing of Syria's Idlib Could Be War Crime, Says France," Reuters, September 12, 2018; Kainikara, p. 90; Brian Glyn Williams and Robert Souza, "Operation 'Retribution': Putin's Military Campaign in Syria, 2015-2016," *Middle East Policy* 23:4 (2016): pp. 42-60.
- 38 Jason Lyall, "Does Indiscriminate Violence Incite Insurgent Attacks? Evidence from Chechnya," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53:3 (2009): pp. 331-362.
- 39 "World Report 2019," p. 487.
- 40 "Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013," U.S. Intelligence Community, released by the White House, Office of the Press Secretary, August 30, 2013; "Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria," Human Rights Watch, September 10, 2013; Joby Warrick, "More Than 1,400 Killed in Syrian Chemical Weapons Attack, U.S. Says," *Washington Post*, August 30, 2013.
- 41 "Seventh Report of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism," United Nations Security Council, October 26, 2017; "Both ISIL and Syrian Government Responsible for Use of Chemical Weapons, UN Security Council Told," UN News, November 7, 2017; Rodrigo Campos, "Syrian Government to Blame for April Sarin Attack: UN Report," Reuters, October 26, 2017; Stephanie Nebehay, "Syrian Government Was Behind April Sarin Gas Attack, UN Says," *Independent*, September 6, 2017.
- 42 "French Declassified Intelligence Report on Syria Gas Attacks," Reuters, April 14, 2018.
- 43 On the limits of air power alone, see, for example, Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996); Daniel L. Byman and Matthew C. Waxman, "Kosovo and the Great Air Power Debate," *International Security* 24:4 (2000): pp. 5-38.
- 44 See the various inspector general reports, such as Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, July 30, 2019), pp. 73-99.
- 45 Daniel L. Byman, "Friends Like These: Counterinsurgency and the War on Terrorism," *International Security* 31:2 (2006): pp. 79-115; Daniel L. Byman, *Going to War with the Allies You Have: Allies, Counterinsurgency, and the War on Terrorism* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, November 2005).
- 46 On Russian forward air controllers, see, for example, Shield. See also Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*.
- 47 On overall Russian intelligence collection and the bombing campaign, see Roger N. McDermott and Tor Bukkvoll, "Tools of Future Warfare—Russia Is Entering the Precision-Strike Regime," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31:2 (2018): pp. 191-213; Shield; Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*.
- 48 Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*, p. 13.
- 49 On the role of the Russian navy in Syria, see the naval chapter in Polovkin.
- 50 Kainikara, pp. 90-94.
- 51 John W. Parker, *Putin's Syrian Gambit: Sharper Elbows, Bigger Footprint, Sticker Wicket* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, July 2017), pp. 44-45.
- 52 See, for example, Tim Ripley, *Operation Aleppo: Russia's War in Syria* (Lancaster, UK: Telic-Herrick Publications, 2018).
- 53 "Syria Conflict: Aleppo Evacuation Operation Nears End," BBC, December 22, 2016.
- 54 Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*, p. 15.
- 55 Lukas Andriukaitis et al., *Breaking Ghouta: To the East and South* (Washington D.C.: Atlantic Council, 2018).
- 56 On the Tiger Forces, see, for example, Gregory Waters, *The Tiger Forces: Pro-Assad Fighters Backed by Russia* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, October 2018).
- 57 "Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East," International Crisis Group, April 13, 2018.
- 58 On the number of IRGC-QF in Syria, see, for example, the data from Gadi Eisenkot, former chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, in Bret Stephens, "The Man Who Humbled Qassim Suleimani," *New York Times*, January 11, 2019. On IRGC-QF support to combat operations in Syria, see Uskowi, pp. 77-96; Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 204-229.
- 59 Uskowi, p. 82.
- 60 Author interview, senior Jordanian and U.S. officials, July 2019. See also Phillip Smyth, *Lebanese Hezbollah's Islamic Resistance in Syria* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 26, 2018).
- 61 On some of the challenges with the train-and-equip program, see "Foreign Fighter Fallout: A Conversation with Lt. Gen. Michael K. Nagata," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, April 5, 2017; Paul McLeary, "The Pentagon Wasted \$500 Million Training Syrian Rebels," *Foreign Policy*, March 18, 2016; and Seth G. Jones, *Historical Lessons for the Wars in Iraq and Syria* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, April 2015).
- 62 On U.S. partnering efforts in Syria with the SDF, see the various U.S. inspector general reports, such as *Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress*, Operation Inherent Resolve and Other Overseas Contingency Operations, U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Defense, and U.S. Agency for International Development, October 1, 2018-December 31, 2018; John Walcott, "Trump ends CIA arms support for anti-Assad Syria rebels: U.S. officials," Reuters, July 19, 2017.
- 63 Jeremy Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 1-25; Weinstein.
- 64 On the challenges in Syria, see, for example, Lister, "Assad Hasn't Won Anything."
- 65 Joseph Daher, *The Paradox of Syria's Reconstruction* (Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, September 4, 2019).
- 66 Vivian Yee, "What 'Victory' Looks Like: A Journey Through Shattered Syria," *New York Times*, August 21, 2019.
- 67 "United Nations Calls for Sustained Support to Syrians and the Region Ahead of Brussels Conference," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, March 13, 2019.
- 68 World Bank Governance Indicators data set, 2019. Available at: <https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/#reports>. On the definitions of these categories, see Daniel Kaufman, Aart Kraay, and Massimo Mastruzzi, *The Worldwide Governance Indicators: Methodology and Analytical Issues* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, September 2010).
- 69 On the Islamic State's desert strategy, see Michael Knights, "The Islamic State Inside Iraq: Losing Power or Preserving Strength?" *CTC Sentinel*

- 11:11 (2018): pp. 1-10; Hassan Hassan, "Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond," *CTC Sentinel* 10:11 (2017): pp. 1-8.
- 70 Author interview, senior Jordanian and U.S. officials, July 2019.
- 71 Author interview, senior Jordanian and U.S. officials, July 2019; *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2019-June 30, 2019*, U.S. Department of Defense, 2019, p. 20; Hassan Hassan, "A Hollow Victory over the Islamic State in Syria? The High Risk of Jihadi Revival in Deir ez-Zor's Euphrates River Valley," *CTC Sentinel* 12:2 (2019): pp. 1-6.
- 72 "The Temporary Fall of Cities as a Working Method for the Mujahideen," Al Naba, April 2019. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi translated the articles into English and published them. See, for example, Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Islamic State Insurgent Tactics: Translation and Analysis," aymennjawad.org, April 26, 2019.
- 73 Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Ernesto "Che" Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).
- 74 "Twenty-Fourth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities, S/2019/570," United Nations Security Council, July 15, 2019, p. 5.
- 75 *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2019-June 30, 2019*, p. 15; "Twenty-Fourth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," p. 20.
- 76 Author interview, senior U.S. and Jordanian officials, July 2019; "UNHCR Update on Syria," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, April 30-May 6, 2019; *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2019-June 30, 2019*, p. 8.
- 77 *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2019-June 30, 2019*, p. 5.
- 78 Ibid., p. 8.
- 79 "Twenty-Fourth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," p. 17.
- 80 Ibid., p. 7.
- 81 Author interview, senior U.S. and Jordanian officials, July 2019. On HTS relations with al-Qa`ida, see Seth G. Jones, "Al-Qaeda's Quagmire in Syria," *Survival* 60:5 (2018): pp. 181-198; Charles Lister, "How al-Qa`ida Lost Control of its Syrian Affiliate: The Inside Story," *CTC Sentinel* 11:2 (2018): pp. 1-9.
- 82 "Twenty-Fourth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," p. 8.
- 83 Data is from the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. An earlier iteration of this map was previously published in Seth G. Jones, Nicholas Harrington, and Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr., *Dangerous Liaisons: Russian Cooperation with Iran in Syria* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2019); Seth G. Jones, *War By Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2019); Seth G. Jones and Maxwell B. Markusen, *The Escalating Conflict with Hezbollah in Syria* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2018).
- 84 On Israeli strikes in Syria, see the analysis using satellite imagery and other data in Jones, Harrington, and Bermudez, Jr.; Jones, *War By Proxy*; and Jones and Markusen.
- 85 Yaniv Kubovich, "Israel Launched World's First Air Strike Using F-35 Stealth Fighters, Air Force Chief Says," *Haaretz*, May 24, 2018.
- 86 "Iraq Accuses Israel of String of Attacks on Paramilitary Bases," *Times of Israel*, August 29, 2019; Amos Yadlin and Ari Heistein, "Is Iraq the New Front Line in Israel's Conflict with Iran?" *Foreign Policy*, August 27, 2019.
- 87 See Colin Powell's comments at the Aspen Institute's "Aspen Ideas Festival" in 2007 at "Colin Powell on the Decision to Go to War," *Atlantic*, October 2007.
- 88 See the discussion in William Safire, "If You Break It...," *New York Times*, October 17, 2004.

A View from the CT Foxhole: Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Kevin McAleenan

By Paul Cruickshank and Brian Dodwell

Kevin K. McAleenan was designated as the Acting Secretary of Homeland Security by President Trump on April 8, 2019. Before this appointment, he served as Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), having been confirmed by the U.S. Senate in March 2018. From January 2017 until then he had served as CBP Acting Commissioner. He served as Deputy Commissioner from November 2, 2014, until his appointment to Acting Commissioner.

Prior to that, McAleenan held several leadership positions at CBP and one of its legacy agencies, the U.S. Customs Service. From 2006 to 2008, Mr. McAleenan served as the Area Port Director of Los Angeles International Airport, directing CBP's border security operations at one of CBP's largest field commands. In December 2011, Mr. McAleenan was named acting Assistant Commissioner of CBP's Office of Field Operations. In 2015, McAleenan received a Presidential Rank Award, the nation's highest civil service award.

CTC: Last time we spoke to you, you were the head of Customs and Border Protection.¹ Obviously the scope of your counterterrorism responsibilities has widened immensely in your current position. What is the most significant CT-related challenge you have faced in your new position?

McAleenan: Responding to the emerging threat landscape. Not only have the domestic terrorism/targeted violence threats become more frequent, more prevalent, more impactful on the American conscience, but we've also faced the other types of issues we called out in our recently released "Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence."² One of the challenges is that technology is empowering terrorists to coordinate better and those motivated to violence to get validation more quickly. The FBI have talked about how the velocity of their domestic terrorism cases is increasing dramatically. We're very worried about certain emerging technologies, whether it's unmanned aerial systems or even cyber tools that could be in the hands of terrorist groups or individuals. We see technology as an opportunity that can be leveraged against those threats. Those have been the main focus areas of the past five and a half months.

Of course, we're still monitoring very closely the international threat environment, the dispersal of ISIS, how we're managing the remaining elements on the battlefield, looking at their travel out and also ensuring that we're monitoring older terrorist organizations like our original adversary al-Qa`ida and their potential plotting and continued designs of attacks against the West.

CTC: DHS is a fairly unique organization that was founded with the prevention of terrorist attacks in the United States as its primary mission, yet the vast majority of the Department's day-

to-day activities, while related to CT, are not directly focused on countering terrorism. So how do you remain focused on that original core mission while simultaneously handling all those other complex, non-CT-related challenges the Department faces? How does that impact your ability to communicate and speak with authority on CT given that diversity of focus areas?

McAleenan: That's an interesting question. I think I would look at it in two ways. First of all, our origin story and the motivation for our creation was a major terrorist attack and the design of the Department was to protect the entire homeland, whether the borders, transportation, the waterways; this was the main focus in the initial months and years after 9/11. All these were counterterrorism efforts. Every program that we worked on, whether it was identifying risk in international travel to the U.S. or targeting high-risk cargo coming toward the U.S., the first objective from a threat perspective was to identify whether there was a terrorism or security risk with that person or thing. Then you filled out your other missions—the counter-narcotics mission, the customs compliance mission. I think if you look at TSA, they are a counterterrorism agency first and foremost. They are providing security for those aircraft taking off or landing within the United States every single day by ensuring that no individual or thing is boarding that aircraft can threaten it. That's a very explicit day-to-day mission. But we do have a broader responsibility to protect the homeland, and I think the definition by [former DHS] Secretary [Jeh] Johnson of securing the American people, our homeland, and our values is exactly the right framework for DHS. That starts and is animated and is motivated by a counterterrorism purpose, first and foremost.

CTC: The DHS Strategic Framework that was released in September received a lot of attention due to emphasis on the evolving security environment and increased emphasis on domestic terrorism and racially motivated violent extremism. Could you speak a little bit about how this framework will change the approach to this specific threat of racially motivated violent extremism but also to the more diverse threat landscape in general?

McAleenan: What this strategic framework does for us is it recognizes and highlights our core commitments on preventing international terrorist actions to the homeland. Obviously preventing another major terrorist attack on the U.S. is our operational requirement. That's why we were created. That's where our authorities are derived for the most part. But we did want to very clearly balance this against the emerging threat environment and the fact that most recent mass-casualty attacks have been domestic terrorism in origin and a concerning number have been ideologically motivated by racially motivated extremism or white supremacist extremism in particular. And given the FBI's caseload and as the

[FBI's] director has testified,³ as the [FBI's] assistant director [for Counterterrorism]⁴ has testified, the increasing prevalence for that type of motivation for attacks, we wanted to be very clear that that's an emerging threat that we need to address.

CTC: You were developing this Strategic Framework before the August 2019 El Paso terrorist attack, which resulted in the deaths of six family members of DHS employees and many others.⁵ You've spoken about how it was "an attack on all of us, on our family."⁶ Clearly with this new Strategic Framework, there's a significant focus on the white supremacist threat. What is your message for the American people?

McAleenan: We wanted to be very clear in this Strategy that we recognize emerging threats from racially motivated violent extremism, and in particular white supremacist extremists in the United States. As I already noted, that's borne out by the FBI's caseload and current percentages, and it's been the driving ideological factor in a number of high-casualty attacks, both in the U.S. and abroad in the last two years. So stating that with clarity, that was very important as a strategic direction to the Department of Homeland Security agencies and professionals. But also to show the American people we get it, and we're addressing emerging threats as aggressively as we can.

CTC: As with a lot of these types of strategic-level documents, some questions are always going to be raised about funding and political support for the Priority Actions proposed in the Framework. How will the Department ensure that those actions receive the support they need? And what metrics do you use to determine the right balance of resources that need to be dedicated to tackling both the emerging threats you cite in the document and the remaining Islamist terrorism threat?

McAleenan: Very good questions. First and foremost, we took a step and I personally engaged with the chairman of both appropriations and our authorizing committees on an out-of-cycle request to bolster our new Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Office [TVTP] as well as to provide some advanced funding for new grants for prevention, especially on the domestic terrorism side. So, we did see the Senate Appropriations Markup included significant investment as we requested, but more broadly, as the President directed, we are looking at all resources necessary to address the emerging threat environment. We'll be working through the Office of Management and Budget, and we'll be presenting additional resource requirements to really advance the strategy in the coming budget year.

But in the meantime, we think we can do a lot with our existing resources and with the renewed strategy. First and foremost, the Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Office does have a coordination mandate to bring together the diverse capabilities of the Department—in CISA [Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency], in the U.S. Secret Service, in the Federal Protective Service, in intelligence and analysis as well as even FEMA on the ongoing security grant side to ensure that we're applying those resources in a way that's important to communities across the country and preparing for and being able to respond effectively to these types of targeted violence and mass attacks—the goal being to hopefully enable communities to identify potential threat actors that are on



Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Kevin McAleenan

the path to violence and that they'll create off-ramps as often as possible, understanding that we can't prevent every attack.

We are coordinating and hopefully galvanizing and wielding a level of effort across multiple DHS components that already exist in a more effective way by deconflicting it, by coordinating it, and by prioritizing it on risk.

Output metrics can help us keep track of our efforts: how many types of threat assessments are we doing through our CISA Protective Security Advisors? How many exercises at the state and local level? How many active shooter trainings are being conducted? How many people are we reaching through U.S. Secret Service's national threat assessment centers' training and threat advisory efforts?

In the prevention space, what gets counted is more difficult, right? Because you're not going to know that that individual that you trained at the local level—police, school resource officer, mental health professional—now has a better sense of what the threat indicators look like, who's engaged and hopefully redirected a young, disaffected person who was on a path to violence. We're not necessarily going to know how or if that worked. But we do believe that with the analysis of the 17 grants that we're completing, the process we're going to be undertaking, hopefully with some new grant funding, we'll be able to target those efforts on programs that work.

CTC: In your remarks at the Brookings Institution launching the Strategic Framework, you said that there needs to be a whole-of-society conversation about "how we can intervene as a community in advance" in response to content "helping accelerate a pathway to violence." Would you be able to elaborate a little bit about that and talk about what additional authorities or capabilities may be required?

McAleenan: I think, first and foremost, a principle for us in the law enforcement context in the United States is we're operating within a constitutional regime that is committed to First Amendment protections. We do not police ideology. Our goal is to prevent violence. That's a different conversation in Europe and elsewhere where government authorities have more capability and authority to intervene on ideology. But that's not the U.S. context. So how do we participate with the private sector, with non-governmental organizations, and again with communities to help make sure that regardless of the ideology, when there are indicators that suggest someone is on the pathway to violence, how do we find ways to address that especially when they're talking about their intent before it becomes actualized? That's a conversation we need to have, including on the role and responsibility of and opportunity available to key private sector players or academics or NGOs or community entities to intervene or to have a positive impact on someone who's on a path to violence.

Let me just make a big picture point here. The new Strategy commits to a lot more transparency and to addressing these threats in accordance with our commitment to civil rights and civil liberties. And again, our DHS commitment is to protect our values as we work to protect the American people. That comes into play in some of the challenges on the domestic landscape where you're addressing violence and not ideology. We want to be very clear about that in that the new efforts we develop are going to have to sit within our commitment to privacy and civil rights and civil liberties.

CTC: One of the most significant inclusions in the framework is the addition of targeted violence as a Homeland Security threat that needs to be countered.^a You've noted more work is needed in nailing down the definition of this term,⁷ but it will regardless likely raise a number of questions about the DHS role in a new category of activities. How are you going to define DHS' role in these types of domestic incidents, especially those in which the terrorism nexus or lack thereof is not initially clear?

McAleenan: I think we've taken pains in the strategy that draw a distinction between those areas where we have a direct operational role—again on the international side, preventing access to the U.S., on the cross-border movement of materials or funding or individuals that are supporting a terrorist agenda—and those areas where we can, with our information sharing, with our training, with our threat assessments and preparation, empower communities to protect themselves and to identify and intervene against threat actors on a path to violence. So targeted violence is another area where we wanted to recognize that not all of these attacks that we're seeing

have a clear ideological motivation. Or in some cases, we're seeing shifting ideological motivations and it's affected [an] individual who's already desiring to commit an act of violence. We want to empower communities to address that regardless of ideology and regardless of a connection to something that the Department has a direct operational authority to intervene on.

CTC: One of the four Goals in the Framework is the Prevention of Terrorism and Targeted Violence. The pre-incident space is a particularly challenging environment for DHS, given the already-established roles of other federal, state, and local law enforcement, as well as local government and community groups. As DHS increases its activities in this area, how will it prevent possible redundancies and ensure proper coordination with other entities that are operating in that space?

McAleenan: Good question. First, and just note at the federal level, I've met with both [FBI] Director Wray and the Attorney General to talk about the emerging threat of domestic terrorism and DHS' support to the FBI that we provide on the investigative side. We're very clear on our lane in the road there as well as how the Department of Homeland Security's intelligence and analysis directorate supports the open-source intelligence fusion products and pushing domestic terrorism information out through our fusion centers around the country. And that's pretty well aligned. One of the specific directions of the Office of Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention is to look across all of DHS and identify opportunities with other federal government programs, but examine how we can best integrate with state and locals and NGOs. And they've already built significant bridges with, for instance, faith-based and religious organizations that are protecting houses of worship and schools across the country. And we are looking at how we support those efforts without taking actions that would complicate them.

At the community level, what we try to do is enhance our engagement. If you look at the Protective Service Advisors' role from CISA in a community, they're working with the county, the city, the police, mental health professionals, school districts, they're trying to reach out to everyone involved, and they serve almost a personal deconfliction role in ensuring that everyone knows what resources DHS has to support them, what training and education materials there are, how threat analysis can be advanced—our school security recommendations, for instance, recommend that there's a threat assessment capability at every school district and that it's applied throughout the schools—those are the kind of expectations we have to look at the whole effort and empower the community as opposed to complicate it or overlap. There's not enough focus on community engagement nationally already. That's pretty clear by the last several years. We're trying to increase that level of awareness and effort at every level.

CTC: The former director of the NCTC [National Counterterrorism Center] Nicholas Rasmussen and others have pointed out that far-right terror around the world increasingly has international dimensions.⁸ One aspect of this is contact between extremists across different countries and one aspect is inspiration. How is this shaping the U.S. government's response?

McAleenan: The first area is an area where we expect our operational energies to play a more direct role. We'll prioritize support to

^a For the purposes of the DHS Strategic Framework, "targeted violence refers to any incident of violence that implicates homeland security and/or U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) activities, and in which a known or knowable attacker selects a particular target prior to the violent attack. Unlike terrorism, targeted violence includes attacks otherwise lacking a clearly discernible political, ideological, or religious motivation, but that are of such severity and magnitude as to suggest an intent to inflict a degree of mass injury, destruction, or death commensurate with known terrorist tactics. In the Homeland, targeted violence has a significant impact on the safety and security of our communities, schools, places of worship, and other public gatherings." "Department of Homeland Security Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, September 2019, p. 4.

investigations, especially on the movement of money. National Targeting Center and its efforts on the counter-network side identify organizational connections between the extremist groups or those that are trying to motivate extremist violence internationally. So if it moves across borders and we can work with partners to address it, that's an operational role that we'd like to provide alongside the FBI. In terms of the inspiration or the validation that we're seeing happen in many cases very quickly on an individual who's on a path to violence, that's where that whole-of-community and private sector conversation from the U.S. perspective is critical. It's also where we can draw from the perspective of some of our foreign partners, especially Five Eyes,^b who have built up capabilities to address that kind of motivation to violence online.

CTC: Given this discussion of international dimensions, are we at the point where some of this terminology used by the U.S. government regarding domestic versus international terrorism has outlived its usefulness?

McAleenan: Well, maybe. You see us grappling kind of overtly with terminology in the Strategic Framework, and we're calling for a new definition for targeted violence on the domestic side as well as an annual assessment of threats to the homeland. We are trying to work at these definitions. It's also something the Department has asked the Department of Justice to look at in response to the El Paso [attack] and [the attack in August 2019 in] Dayton, whether there are any legislative updates that need to be considered as well.

CTC: You've referenced the key role the Office of Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention [TVTP] will play in implementing the goals of the new Strategic Framework. You established this in April¹⁰ "with an explicit focus and balance on domestic terrorism, including racially motivated violent extremism."¹⁰ Could you give us a progress report on that and the resources allocated to this office?

McAleenan: The TVTP is led by an Assistant Secretary in our Office of Policy, Elizabeth Neumann. Right away, they got to work building on the foundations of prior efforts of the countering violent extremism side of the department, establishing an interagency role at the national level—with the FBI, with the Director of National Intelligence, with NCTC—and then working on building the connections to all of the various programs that I've been outlining among the DHS components that are already engaged in helping communities prepare for and prevent this type of violence. So, they were off and running already, since April, and what the attacks in El Paso did is really accelerate our efforts. I directed that we move forward our Strategic Framework development and issuance and rely on the TVTP to help coordinate and ensure we develop an implementation plan and pursue it aggressively.

CTC: In terms of the implementation, you've stated that you've wanted to move beyond a whole-of-government effort to a whole-of-society approach that gives prominence to the needs and leadership of states and local communities.¹¹ How do you

see that happening?

McAleenan: In a variety of ways. First of all, these trainings that I'm talking about, whether they're an active shooter training that is led by Federal Protective Service at a mixed-use building in a mid-size city or specifically requested training that comes to our Protective Service Advisor at CISA, they already have a lot of touchpoints out there. So, what I'd like to do is have that be more structured, have that be more risk-based, and have it be expanded so that we have greater reach in the communities. And so, by pulling together, and we've done this already with our various briefings on DHS resources that are available and on our targeted violence and threat briefings, we've updated them based on what we've seen over the last two years. We're surging that information out there right now, and what we expect to come back from that is a lot of interest, a lot of organizations, whether we're talking to state and local governments, whether we're talking to a school district, an NGO, or an entity that's out in the community working with youth. We want them to know what we have to offer and ask for it. So that'll be the kind of thing we're measuring. Again, how many additional Protective Service Advisors have we been able to bring onboard? How many touchpoints have they made? How many trainings are we delivering? And what does that look like against our risk map for that community and against the types of structured engagements we want to have from the school district to the local first responders and police.

CTC: Big picture, there are growing calls for cost cutting in counterterrorism. How do you strike a balance between ensuring there remains enough focus on the terrorism problem to prevent complacency and to ensure continued success while also preventing unnecessary overhyping of threat?

McAleenan: I think we've got to be pretty clear in how we talk about it, having a balance in our public dialogue and making sure, for instance, while we're worried about the security of our southwest border and addressing a regional migration crisis, that we're also aware that there are security threats that could be embedded in that crisis and headed toward our border, making sure people understand the dual nature of the challenge operationally. The other thing, you create bureaucratically organizational units that are dedicated to certain aspects of the threat. You look at an entity like the National Targeting Center or an Intelligence and Analysis Directorate, and they will have specific counterterrorism experts, even specific organizational experts informing and supporting the broader risk assessment done by those units or the products provided by the analysts. So there's both structural efforts as well as rhetorical efforts you can undertake to make sure you keep your focus, you prevent the type of worst-case scenario and high-casualty attacks that you were created to prevent, but also make sure you're animating and driving across your entire mission set, including facilitating lawful trade and travel, which is a critical responsibility element as well.

CTC: From your personal perspective, of all the different threats we just talked about what's the one thing at the top of your list, what's the one thing that keeps you up at night given the variety of different threat actors out there?

^b Editor's note: The Five Eyes (FVEY) is an intelligence alliance of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

McAleenan: So, we took pains in the Strategic Framework not to rank or prioritize the threats, but to describe the emerging threat landscape as we see it. From a DHS perspective and from a leadership perspective, the thing that you always want, and I think I answered you similarly a year ago, is you want to effectively address known threats that are within your operational authorities and ca-

pabilities. So, what keeps me up at night is thinking about whether there's another ounce of management time, another resource that we could apply to the problem, another intelligence product we could push out to our field so that we might be able to stop something. This is what keeps me motivated to push our organization to stay on their toes. **CTC**

Citations

- 1 See Paul Cruickshank and Brian Dodwell, "A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Kevin McAleenan, Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection," *CTC Sentinel* 11:8 (2018).
- 2 "Department of Homeland Security Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, September 2019.
- 3 Matt Zapotosky, "Wray says FBI has recorded about 100 domestic terrorism arrests in fiscal 2019 and many investigations involve white supremacy," *Washington Post*, July 23, 2019.
- 4 David Shortell, "FBI is investigating 850 domestic terrorism cases," CNN, May 8, 2019.
- 5 "A strategic framework for countering terrorism and targeted violence: A conversation with Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Kevin K. McAleenan," Brookings Institution, September 20, 2019.
- 6 Kathy Gilsinan, "DHS Is Finally Going After White Supremacists. It's Not Going to Be Simple," *Atlantic*, September 20, 2019.
- 7 "Department of Homeland Security Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence," p. 14.
- 8 Joshua A. Geltzer, Mary B. McCord, and Nicholas Rasmussen, "The Christchurch Shooting: Domestic Terrorism Goes International," Lawfare, March 19, 2019.
- 9 "Acting Secretary McAleenan Announces Establishment of DHS Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, April 19, 2019.
- 10 Allan Smith, "Trump downplays background checks push after Odessa mass shooting," NBC News, September 1, 2019.
- 11 "Acting Secretary McAleenan Announces Establishment of DHS Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention."

Newly Released ISIS Files: Learning from the Islamic State's Long-Version Personnel Form

By Daniel Milton, Julia Lodoen, Ryan O'Farrell, and Seth Loertscher

The Islamic State has shown a penchant for obtaining and recording information about the members of its organization, although the scale of this effort is not entirely clear. This article relies on 27 captured personnel documents that demonstrate how extensive the breadth of information collected was in some cases. These forms also show that the Islamic State acquired information useful for understanding the radicalization process, encouraging accountability among its fighters, managing the talent in the organization, and vetting members for potential security concerns. Not only can this type of information uncover interesting insights regarding the composition of the Islamic State's workforce, but it can also provide researchers and practitioners with a clearer view of the likely organizational practices the group will rely on moving forward.

In November 2007, Richard Oppel, Jr., a reporter for *The New York Times*, described a set of documents that had been recovered in a U.S. military raid in Sinjar, Iraq, as providing significant information regarding the individuals who were traveling into Iraq to fight against the Iraqi government and coalition forces.¹ Shortly thereafter, the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point released the first detailed look at those documents, which provided in-depth analysis of the demographics

Daniel Milton, Ph.D., is Director of Research at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. His research focuses on the Islamic State, propaganda, foreign fighters, security policy, and primary source data produced by terrorist organizations. Follow @Dr_DMilton

Julia Lodoen is a M.A. student in international relations at the University of Chicago. Follow @JuliaLodoen

Ryan O'Farrell is a Master's student concentrating in Conflict Management at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Follow @ryanmofarrell

Seth Loertscher is a Research Associate at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. A former active duty Army officer, he served in a variety of operational and support roles while on active duty, deploying to both Iraq and Afghanistan. His research focuses on assessing the effectiveness of CT policy tools and trends in terrorist kidnapping and hostage-taking.

and origins of al-Qa`ida in Iraq's (AQI) foreign fighter population.²

Although the level of detail about the number and composition of fighters was valuable information, the actual breadth of information contained in these forms was relatively limited. Indeed, the documents themselves contained slightly more than a dozen possible entries about each fighter, to include the incoming fighter's name, date of birth, previous occupation, and preferred duty. These forms told relatively little about how the organization viewed the opportunities and risks associated with these incoming fighters. Perhaps, however, this lack of information speaks somewhat to the reason for the group's struggles in appropriately managing the talent of its members. Later examinations of internal Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) documents revealed critiques about wasted opportunities to fully leverage foreign fighters.³

As ISI continued to evolve and learn the lessons of its previous mistakes, one of the areas it improved in was the amount of information it solicited from incoming fighters. When the CTC obtained over 4,000 Islamic State personnel records (the successor organization to AQI and ISI), one major difference between those records and the earlier Sinjar records was the amount of detail contained in the forms.⁴ There were now 23 questions that included the same information sought by the Sinjar records, but probed further regarding each fighter's travel history, knowledge of sharia, education level, and even blood type. As noted in the CTC's report on those documents, the expanded form demonstrated organizational learning in an effort to vet and manage its incoming cadre of fighters.⁵

These first two examples of the Islamic State's efforts to manage its fighters conveyed a certain level of bureaucracy and structure that clearly signaled the group's desire to establish itself as a lasting organization and, ultimately, a state. That said, a fair critique of this perspective could be that these forms were simple efforts that did not go far beyond what one might expect of any organization. Such a criticism, however, ignores the organizational and security challenges that a terrorist group must overcome to implement such systems.⁶ Beyond managing and tracking individuals, a terrorist organization must guard against potential internal security risks that threaten to destroy the group, from spies to dissatisfied members looking to change the direction of the organization.^a By collecting a large amount of information regarding an individual's background, references, and interactions with the organization, these forms provide the group with a detailed look at who each individual was and, potentially, what risks they might pose.

Such a critique also assumes that the Islamic State did not collect more information beyond what was contained in these initial forms.

a Interestingly, the more than 4,000 records used in the CTC's *Global Caliphate* report had been reportedly stolen by an Islamic State defector and leaked to the press. This highlights the security risks being discussed here.

Given all that is now known about the sprawling bureaucracy of the Islamic State, it seems likely that the group acquired more than what was contained in those forms.⁷ This article examines a recently declassified collection of 27 personnel records for Islamic State fighters, both local and foreign.^b These records were acquired by the U.S. Department of Defense in Syria in 2016. Although they are a few years old, the authors believe that they provide important insight into how the Islamic State thought about managing its fighters and indicate that the group has a much wider organizational scope than previously assumed.^c

The Documents

The original documents appear to have as their base a standard template printed on letter-sized paper. (See Figure 1.) The upper right-hand corner contains a printed image of the Islamic State's flag, and other markings across the top of the page suggest that the document either covers or pertains to an office called "Personnel Affairs and Human Resources." The information in the forms is written in ink. It is not entirely clear whether each fighter himself filled out the forms or whether it was someone else on his behalf. Nor is it clear whether the handwritten information was later entered into a database, although previous caches of captured documents suggest

Figure 1: One page of the long-form personnel record

- b The 27 declassified documents are available on the CTC's website. See this article's online page, available at ctc.usma.edu/october-2019
- c Ascertaining the exact time in which these forms were completed is difficult. However, the authors know that they came into possession of the Department of Defense in 2016, and there is indication on at least one of the forms that they were last updated early in 2015.

this as a strong possibility.

One important caveat is that all 27 forms acquired by the CTC indicate that they are from the Islamic State's Aleppo province. There are at least two possible reasons for this. One is that Aleppo was the only province to develop their own detailed personnel tracking forms. The other is that these forms (or at the very least the collection of such detailed information) were standard across the Islamic State's provinces, but that this particular batch of material obtained by the Department of Defense only contained information from the Aleppo province. Based on previous examinations of internal Islamic State documents that have displayed the group's increasing bureaucratic sophistication, the authors believe the latter explanation is more likely.^d

Although they share similarities with the foreign fighter intake forms discussed earlier, it is clear from the information they contain that these forms were not just filled out on one occasion. Instead, they seem to track an individual's timeline and progress within the organization. For example, these forms contain information about the training and equipment the individual received from the Islamic State. These training fields, combined with the provincial markings discussed above, indicate that these forms were functionally different from the previously released Islamic State documents, which served mainly as initial intake questionnaires to be used when individuals either entered Islamic State territory or joined the organization locally.^d These 27 forms likely served as the basis for provincial-level personnel files that tracked, to a certain extent, an individual fighter's time in the organization. Some also included notations about unit transfers within the province or leave documents authorizing travel into or out of the Islamic State's territory.

While there are some minor variations among them, the fighter forms analyzed in this article have slightly over 100 fields that track information across a range of categories—from the fighter's early life to their realization of the necessity of jihad, and on to their current assignment within the Islamic State. The forms also include the usual demographic information related to age, marital status, previous and current place of residence, and educational achievements. It is important to note that each of the fields is filled out to varying degrees, such that some fields have nearly complete coverage while others have significantly less. In what follows, the authors explore these documents in two ways. First, they examine the summary statistics of various fields within the spreadsheets to give a sense of what the documents show. Second, the authors discuss how some fields illustrate the ways in which the Islamic State sought to manage its fighters, in terms of both risk and opportunity.

Selected Descriptive Statistics

It is difficult to construct an 'average' Islamic State fighter from the 27 profiles. As noted, there is a split population in terms of origin, as checkboxes indicated that 19 of the fighters were local (from Syria) and seven were foreigners. Of the foreigners, Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia (3), and Tunisia were represented. One of the *kunyas* employed by another fighter suggested he might be from the Ara-

d The more than 4,000 intake forms did include questions that indicated the creator of the form may have intended for them to be updated over time and function as a personnel file to some extent. These questions included references to a recruit's level of obedience, work assignment, and date of death. However, only a very small number of the 4,000 forms contained any information in those fields.

bian Peninsula, but did not offer specifics beyond that. Using 2016 as the base year, the fighters ranged in age from 17 to 41, with 28 being the average. The foreigners tended to be about four years older than the locals, although the small sample of foreigners may skew that estimate.

When it comes to the family status of these fighters, just over 50 percent were married (with one fighter listed as having two wives) and 46 percent have at least one child. Several fighters are listed as supporting others as dependents. Although there is a column in which female slaves can be listed, none of the forms in this batch had any information in that field. It is interesting to note that the form contained fields for fighters to indicate whether and how many individuals they supported outside of the Islamic State's territory. This demonstrates the organization's awareness about the potential needs and challenges facing its fighters who have responsibilities outside of the caliphate.

The documents also capture two different types of training or education: that which an individual obtained before joining the organization and that which was obtained after joining it. On the former, the form contained information about formal schooling as well as vocational training. At least eight of the fighters (about 30 percent) have some university experience or graduated from college, while at least 10 (about 37 percent) appear to have not completed their secondary education (i.e., 12th grade in the United States).

The other type of training discussed in these forms is training provided by the Islamic State after the individual joined the organization, which was separated into three categories: sharia, military, and other. For the first two types of training, the duration and name of the person in charge of the training was included. The sharia training lasted 29 days on average, while the military training averaged only 25 days in length. There was an interesting notation for the four individuals who had to repeat their sharia training.^e The reason for the repetition was also indicated, with two of the individuals attending as a "repentance" course and one because of "discord with Emir."

Analytic Insights from the Forms

Having described some of the basic demographic statistics that the authors compiled by tabulating the data in the forms, and in lieu of presenting detailed breakdowns for all 100 fields, the article now transitions into a discussion of four key analytic insights that emerge from these forms.

1. The Islamic State cared about radicalization.

The components, duration, and mechanics of the radicalization process have been widely debated in academic and policy circles for many years.⁹ Just as is the case for the definition of terrorism itself, this debate has yielded very little consensus. What has been absent, on some level, from these discussions is the extent to which terrorist groups themselves think about the radicalization process.

It is important to recognize that although we refer to the "radicalization" process here, the Islamic State (or any terrorist organization) probably would not recognize or employ such terminology to describe the process whereby one becomes more committed to

the group's violent ideology, especially given the negative connotation associated with the "radicalization" phraseology. Regardless of which semantics one adapts, the general idea of either approach is that it is important to acquire information and understanding about the timing of an individual's commitment to a way of life and to an ideology. Such information is merely one way to get at the question of radicalization or commitment. In these forms, the inclusion of questions regarding the timeline of an individual's commitment to both Islam and jihad speaks directly to that purpose.

This is not to say that these groups have not thought about recruitment or propaganda. They have clearly invested significant organizational energy into such enterprises. However, in these forms, there was a fair amount of energy dedicated to the actual collection of information that could inform various aspects of the radicalization process.

For example, one key question that is continually debated in the policy community has to do with the timing of the various stages of an individual's journey from mainstream to extreme. Two questions in the form seem to be trying to get at the very same issue. The first asks the individual to list the date that they became "religiously committed."^f Immediately following, the second question asks the individual to identify when they became committed to the jihadi methodology or ideology. It does not specify if this is viewed as the date of commitment to the Islamic State.

Of the 27 forms in the dataset, only 18 filled these two questions in with sufficient detail to assess a general timeframe between religious commitment and commitment to the jihadi methodology. The results were a bit surprising. On average, the time between religious commitment and jihadi commitment was about six years.^g Although breaking the sample down even further can only offer tentative insight, the distinction of this timeline for the 11 locals and four foreigners for whom there is data is interesting. For the locals, the time between religious and jihadi commitment averaged 7.5 years, whereas for the foreigners it was 3.25 years. It is hard to say, however, what the cause of the commitment to jihad was. While the forms of some of the individuals indicated that they were committed to jihad long before the Syrian civil war broke out, the majority of them only became committed after 2011. While there is not enough information in the forms to suggest why this is the case, one simple possibility could be the age of the individual. Perhaps those who committed to jihad after 2011 were too young to do so beforehand. While it does generally appear that younger individuals were likely to have a shorter timeline between their self-professed religious commitment and their ultimate commitment to the jihadi cause, there were still examples in the data of both young and old individuals who radicalized after 2011, suggesting that more complex factors are at play.

^f There is no guide in the forms regarding what is meant by the phrase "religiously committed." However, it is listed as a distinct question from an individual's commitment to the jihadi methodology, suggesting that it refers to an increased level of piety and practice regarding the generally accepted tenants of Islam.

^g In order to calculate the average time, it was necessary to assign a specific value to some individuals for whom a precise number of years was not available. For example, if the time between religious and jihadi commitment was less than a year, the individual's time was given a value of 0.5. Additionally, the one fighter for whom the time value was "several years" was not included in this calculation.

^e Only three individuals had this specific column marked, although it seems clear from the information in the other fields that at least one other individual should have been marked in this column as well.

Of course, with such a small sample, any results need to be taken with extreme caution. To be clear, the authors are certainly not suggesting that these individuals are broadly representative of a larger population. Furthermore, whether or not the Islamic State entity that collected this information made any policy decisions with it is unknown, but the fact remains that these types of questions were being asked. The fact that these questions exist presumes that the Islamic State was willing to learn about the radicalization process in order to better their recruitment process.

2. The Islamic State placed an emphasis on accountability.

These documents also provide another insight into the group: its meticulous record-keeping not only applied to its personnel, but also to its equipment. In one section of the form, the group created a series of questions to keep track of the weapons and vehicles assigned to its fighters. There were separate categories for different types of weapons. One category seemed designed to capture information on assault rifles and heavier weapons such as grenade launchers, while the other was specifically for pistols. In some cases, the forms also include the serial numbers of the weapons; in some cases, the number of magazines in each fighter's possession was recorded for the larger weapons.

There was also a field next to the entry of each weapon, magazine, and vehicle to indicate ownership of the item. Two responses were listed across the various forms: state (referring to the Islamic State) or personal. Although this detail may seem trivial, the fact that the group did not simply confiscate all weapons and consider them property of the organization reveals at least an attempt by the group to respect some level of ownership on the part of its fighters.

The group's penchant for accountability has a potential counterterrorism application. All of this data collection creates opportunities for analysis that shows, using the group's own documentation, the existence of trends within the organization that could be exploited to undermine the group. For example, it has long been noted by scholars that there is a very large divide between foreigners and locals within militant organizations.¹⁰ Many of these claims are based on interviews with a variety of participants, where the interviewee may have incentives to misrepresent the group's internal dynamics. However, captured material such as this can provide another window into the world of foreigners versus locals in militant movements. Specifically, it is interesting to note that of the six vehicles listed across all of the forms, the four that belonged to foreigners were marked as "personal," while of the two seemingly in the possession of locals, one was marked "State" and the other was inexplicably marked "Yes." While the amount of data here is far too small to make any firm conclusions, information such as this on a larger scale that reveals a difference in a group's treatment of foreign fighters, or simply in the overall status and conduct of foreign fighters, could potentially be used in a strategic messaging campaign to create friction between foreigners and locals in said group.

3. The Islamic State's capacity for talent management was extensive.

One of the initial conclusions of the CTC's report on the initial batch of Islamic State foreign fighter records was that those forms, which contained 23 fields, demonstrated the group's attempt to learn from past mistakes and collect information that would allow them to fully exploit the talents of those within its organization.¹¹ Thus, while finding that the group had information useful for the purpose of

talent management is not novel, these forms demonstrate the detailed and dedicated manner in which they could have engaged in this practice using the information they collected on each fighter.

Not only is standard demographic background information collected, but so too is information about specific proficiencies that individuals brought to the organization. For example, in the portion of the form that contains information on weapons ownership, there is a question to collect details on the types of weapons on which each individual is proficient. The list contains a far greater number of weapons systems than those the individuals actually own. This information would allow the group to create special weapons groups or identify the best individuals to serve as instructors in training camps.

Also collected was information pertaining to an individual's completion of compulsory military service in their country of origin. While this may be an added security precaution to make note of previous military affiliations and relationships, it may also be used as a mechanism to manage talent. Those with previous military experience have pre-existing knowledge regarding war fighting, which may provide an advantage on the battlefield, especially compared to younger individuals with limited experience. Though the Islamic State provided military training (as has been widely documented and as was indicated in the forms), identifying individuals with prior military experience would be advantageous for the creation of an organized fighting force.

The forms also go well beyond capturing individual fighting proficiencies. There were also efforts to take note of other skills that might prove useful to the organization. The ability to speak languages was documented, with Arabic being the leading language recorded, but with other forms indicating proficiency in English, Turkish, French, Somali, Swedish, and Danish. Oddly enough, whereas the Islamic State forms studied in the CTC's previous work on over 4,000 entry records asked individuals to identify prior foreign travel, no such question exists on these forms. The only travel-related question is whether an individual had traveled to Turkey.

The forms also ask individuals to indicate past employment. Because the Islamic State was ultimately focused on the construction of a state, it would be beneficial to have individuals with backgrounds that can contribute to state-building. For example, one individual noted he previously practiced law, and he and several others indicated they hoped to work in a sharia court. Although it is unknown whether the Islamic State placed those individuals in its court system, it indicates that the group was likely focused on more than just producing fighters.

Also very noteworthy was a specific field that identified computer skills by asking for the specific programs with which individuals were familiar. There were fewer entries here, indicating proficiency with programs such as Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. It is also clear that some individuals read this question differently and responded with assessments of their computer efficiency in general with words such as "mediocre" or "general." This specific field calling for identification of computer talents provides additional evidence of the importance that terrorist organizations place on computer-related skills, which can be useful for managing the bureaucracy itself, publishing propaganda, and creating visual images that speak to the group's overall message.

4. The Islamic State collected information useful for internal security purposes.

In the past several years, a number of stories have emerged regarding the Islamic State's efforts to maintain internal order.¹² One interesting question related to this internal security effort is how the group was able to identify individuals who potentially posed a security threat. These forms reveal that one possible answer is that it was due to the collection of detailed information regarding allegiances, weaknesses, and external connections.

For example, these forms show an effort to collect information about the connections that individuals had with others who could help verify the fidelity of the person on the form. Asking for people who knew the individual's family or the name of their sponsor have become standard fare on these types of forms, but it is important to note the dual purpose that these questions could serve. While they certainly can help provide a character reference for a particular individual, this information could also have been used to identify relationships between individuals. With this information, the organization could potentially identify where internal threats to the organization may lie, especially as allegiances change. If an individual's character reference turns out to be a defector from the group or a spy, perhaps additional scrutiny needs to be given to those they referred.

Beyond personal relationships, these forms also solicited information regarding an individual's organizational relationships and history as well. For example, what other groups did the individual work with and for how long? Of course, this type of information can be used for a variety of purposes. It could be useful in building alliances and figuring out who can help mediate inter-organizational disputes, but it can also be a sign of potential risk. If someone had a long-standing relationship with another organization, then they may need to be watched especially closely during their initial time with a new organization.

This same logic may apply to questions that ask if someone was ever imprisoned by an awakening council (*Sahwat*) or the tyrants (*taghut*).¹³ The Islamic State, especially as its time in control of territory grew and the number of airstrikes directed against it rose, likely felt paranoia over who might be working with its enemies. One way of identifying those potential threats within the organization would be to rely on records that offer information into an individual's work history. In many governments around the world, questions similar in content to those listed above are asked on standard background or security clearance forms, and it seems that the Islamic State was at the very least collecting similar information that could have proven useful for the purposes of assessing whether someone in the organization could pose a security risk.

One other interesting aspect of these forms comes through comparing them with previous forms to see if there has been an increase in the number of vetting questions.¹⁴ The Sinjar documents actually consisted of records from the period the group was known as the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC) and the ISI. The MSC question-

naires contained only two questions focused on vetting incoming fighters by asking who coordinated the incoming fighter's travel and the incoming fighter's method of entry.^j When the group became the ISI, that number increased to nine questions, gathering increased details about how the individual met their coordinator, their travel into Iraq and Syria, other people they met in Syria (including their descriptions), and their relationships with other mujahideen supporters, including phone numbers.

In the 4,000-plus Islamic State foreign fighter intake documents examined by the CTC, the forms asked five questions having to do with vetting and confirming recommenders. More specifically, those documents asked fewer questions about travel coordinators, instead focusing on whomever recommended the individual to the Islamic State. Those documents also added a new field to collect information, asking a question about other countries the individual had visited.

The documents being presented with this article contain 15 vetting-related questions addressing the individual's place of immigration, their relationship with their recommender, specifics about their recommender, and about the Shaykh who incited the individual to undertake jihad. The forms also include specific questions about their imprisonment by an awakening council and/or the tyrants in addition to their travel to Turkey. That the Islamic State's provinces are concerned with gathering potential vetting data beyond that which was gathered (in the case of the foreign recruits) at the border of the Islamic State's territory is indicative of the organization's concern with counterintelligence in the face of so many adversaries. One important caution is that the forms presented in this article appear to be slightly more expansive than the intake forms used in previous studies. The authors also do not know whether such forms existed or not under any of the predecessor organizations to the Islamic State. One must be cautious in assuming that lack of current evidence equals lack of existence. This makes the comparison made here a bit uneven. Nevertheless, the authors believe that the increased number of vetting fields in these forms is a clear indication of the Islamic State's desire to keep better track of who was in its organization and the potential risks they might pose.

Conclusion

This article has examined 27 forms acquired from the Syrian battlefield. These forms appear to be personnel records that, on some level, track an individual's history within the Islamic State. While including standard biographic information, these forms also include information regarding training, disciplinary actions, and individual equipment. The authors argue that while the individual fields contained within the forms are interesting, taken together these forms provide additional insight into how the Islamic State sought to collect information, manage the talent within the organization, encourage accountability among its personnel, and assess potential security risks. More broadly, the authors believe that this article has also shown the importance of continuing to acquire and examine primary source documents created by terrorist organizations.

As the Islamic State continues to fight and attempt to embed

^h Seven fighters responded that they had been imprisoned by one of these organizations, and one fighter said that he had been imprisoned by both.

ⁱ Questions useful in vetting individuals with security risks include the location and method of entry into the Islamic State's territory, details about those who recommended the individuals to the group, their sponsors, travel outside the Islamic State's territory, and details about any time the individual spent in prison.

^j All the individuals in the batch of documents examined identified an individual in the "Method of Entry" field, presumably the person who helped them enter the AQI territory. Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).

itself in Iraq, Syria, and a number of other countries around the world, it will be important for counterterrorism efforts to recognize how the organization collects and uses information. Such informa-

tion, if captured, can not only provide insight into the individuals that make up the organization, but also help illuminate organizational trends and tendencies. **CTC**

Citations

- 1 Richard A. Oppel, Jr., "Foreign Fighters in Iraq Are Tied to Allies of U.S.," *New York Times*, November 22, 2007.
- 2 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).
- 3 Unknown, "Analysis of the State of ISI," *CTC Harmony Program*.
- 4 Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2016).
- 5 Ibid., p. IV.
- 6 Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).
- 7 Rukmini Callimachi, "The ISIS Files," *New York Times*, April 4, 2018.
- 8 Daniel Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Media Organization* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018); Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Evolution in Islamic State Administration: The Documentary Evidence," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:4 (2015): pp. 117-129.
- 9 The radicalization literature is far more voluminous than can be cited here. For a few examples, see John Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618:1 (2008): pp. 80-94, and Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4:4 (2011): pp. 7-36.
- 10 Kristin M. Bakke, "Help Wanted? The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies," *International Security* 38:4 (2014): pp. 150-187; Daniel L. Byman, "Foreign fighters are dangerous—for the groups they join," Brookings, May 29, 2019.
- 11 Dodwell, Milton, and Rassler.
- 12 Nadette de Visser, "ISIS Eats Its Own, Torturing and Executing Dutch Jihadists. Or Did It?" Daily Beast, April 13, 2017; Cole Bunzel, "The Islamic State's Mufti on Trial: The Saga of the 'Silsila 'Ilmiyya,'" *CTC Sentinel* 11:9 (2018): pp. 14-17.

Operation Marksburg: Frontline Field Investigation and the Prosecution of Terrorism

By Damien Spleeters

Despite domestic prosecutors facing a growing problem of connecting the provision of remote technical expertise with criminal activities in foreign conflict zones, the work of Conflict Armament Research's (CAR) field investigators recently aided the prosecution of Haisem Zahab, an Australian citizen. Zahab had been researching rockets and rocket guidance systems as well as other technologies and passed at least some of his findings to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. While the prosecution was not in a position to prove the group used Zahab's work to concretely advance its weapons production efforts, it sought to argue that this could have happened. In drawing on CAR's extensive documentation and analysis of Islamic State rockets, Australian Federal Police were able to show parallels between Zahab's designs and Islamic State production lines and to secure his guilty plea.

The factory floor was silent, save for the click of the author's camera's shutter and the wary shuffling of Iraqi Rapid Response Division soldiers manning the sector. Working his way through the repurposed former cement factory, the author documented any item of relevance to the Islamic State's vast and sophisticated weapons production program. The group had converted the site in Al Arij, to Mosul's south, into an expansive rocket production facility, before Iraqi government forces drove them out.

Relics of Islamic State production lines could still be seen in the machinery now abandoned and idle. The author photographed a thread-cutting machine, a large metal lathe, a sheet metal roller, a notcher that cuts steel, and several work benches. Then, there on the ground, the author found rocket motors, warhead cases in various stages of completion, fins, and nozzles. The author's organization, Conflict Armament Research (CAR), whose job it is to trace illicit weapons flows, had already extensively documented different types of Islamic State-produced rockets since 2015.¹

It was February 2, 2017, and while this factory was no longer operational, elsewhere the Islamic State still manufactured rockets

by the thousands.

Three weeks later, and thousands of miles away, Australian Federal Police (AFP) arrested Haisem Zahab, who would turn out to be providing information to the Islamic State for its weapons production efforts. CAR's investigations of Islamic State rocket production, manifested in an expert witness statement and testimony to the prosecution, would ultimately help secure a guilty plea.

This article first examines the Haisem Zahab case and the ways in which CAR assisted the prosecution. Zahab designed a laser warning receiver to alert to incoming missile strikes,² and later researched and developed rockets and rocket propellant.³ While Zahab communicated at least some of the technical details of his work to the Islamic State, it is difficult to determine whether the group used any of his findings to concretely advance their weapons production program. However, as this article will show, the commonalities AFP found between his research and development and the Islamic State's production on the ground—as documented by CAR—render this a possibility. This is precisely what the prosecution sought to demonstrate.⁴

The author will then delve deeper into CAR's wider findings about the Islamic State's weapons programs and show how they were akin to an 'industrial revolution of terrorism,' with centralized management, quality control, standardization of production, and division of labor. As CAR investigators deployed on the ground have found, the Islamic State's military production effort was propelled by the group's efforts at research and development. As the Zahab case shows, individuals compelled by the call of the 'caliphate' felt the need to contribute to these efforts, even from afar.

CAR's Assistance with the Haisem Zahab Case

AFP arrested⁵ Haisem Zahab in the early hours of February 28, 2017, in Young, Australia, a sleepy town of less than 10,000 people best known for its annual cherry festival. This arrest marked the conclusion of Operation Marksburg, named—like every AFP Counter Terrorism investigation—after a famous castle. An Australian citizen, Zahab, who was 42 at the time,⁶ was charged with "intentionally providing support or resources to a terrorist organization, namely Islamic State, knowing that the organization was a terrorist organization."⁷ He had been designing a laser warning receiver that informs of incoming missile strikes and had been researching and developing rockets, rocket propellant, and rocket guidance systems as well as creating reports, videos, and tutorials based on his work.⁸

At a press conference organized on the day of the arrest, then Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull commented that Zahab "had sought to advise ISIL on how to develop high-tech weapons capability."⁹ Then AFP Commissioner Andrew Colvin added that the police believed Zahab had "networks and contacts in ISIL – not necessarily just in the conflict zones, but in other parts of the world as well and he has been relying on them to pass this infor-

Damien Spleeters is Deputy Director of Operations at Conflict Armament Research, an organization investigating the diversion of weapons, ammunition, and precursors in conflicts around the world. As a field investigator, he has worked in Iraq, Libya, Mali, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen over the past five years. He is the co-author of a dozen publications on the Islamic State's supply chains. Follow @damspleet



Islamic State-produced rocket, documented by the author in the AlArij cement factory on February 2, 2017 (Conflict Armament Research)

mation.¹⁰

The evidence AFP gathered on Zahab, even if printed double-sided, would have been enough to fill hundreds of shipping containers.¹¹ Zahab was not a foreign fighter. But even past cases built on foreign fighter returnees have been dismissed because the prosecution failed to tie them to the realities of the conflict against the Islamic State that raged in Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2018.¹² As CAR noted at the time,¹³ “domestic prosecutors face a growing problem of connecting the provision of remote technical expertise with criminal activities in conflict zones.”¹⁴

This time, the AFP and Australia’s Federal Prosecution Service—the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions—wanted to maximize their chances of successfully prosecuting Zahab. From the evidence found on Zahab’s electronic devices and from the communications he had with individuals connected to the Islamic State, the prosecution was confident they could prove the extent of his research and the fact that he had sought to transfer the fruit of his work to the Islamic State. However, the prosecution was keen to show that Zahab had not been working in isolation but knew his research would interest the group. Australian investigators wanted to see whether there were any correlations between the designs found on Zahab’s computer and those built and used by Islamic State. So, they contacted CAR, a research organization that had been extensively documenting Islamic State military production in Iraq and Syria since 2014.¹⁵

Founded in 2011, CAR sends investigators to conflicts around the world, working in more than 20 different countries. There, investigators work with defense and security forces to gain access to all recovered weapons, ammunition, and associated material in or-

der to thoroughly document them. Through the subsequent tracing of chains of custody, CAR identifies vectors and hubs of diversion. CAR’s database of diverted weapons and ammunition amounts to more than half a million distinct items.

Between 2014 and 2018, CAR deployed its field investigation teams across frontline positions against Islamic State forces, documenting more than 40,000 items recovered from the Islamic State. Investigators covered the full extent of the frontline, from the northern Syrian city of Kobane to the south of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad.¹⁶ Excluding travel and logistics, the teams spent many hundreds of days physically inspecting and documenting weapons across the region, performing more than 100 site documentations¹⁷ and visiting dozens of workshops where Islamic State forces manufactured, filled, stored, repaired, modified, or otherwise developed weapons and ammunition.

Once AFP had established that CAR held information potentially useful to the prosecution, it sought to determine whether the

evidence could be used in a court of law.^a

This was indeed determined to be the case, and over five days in June 2018, CAR provided the AFP with a 200-page statement with evidentiary photos, videos, and 3D laser scans. A few months later, Zahab pleaded guilty to the charges.¹⁸ CAR then provided expert testimony at the Parramatta Supreme Court sentencing hearing in May 2019. CAR's statement and court testimony proved instrumental to the prosecution in showing similarities between Zahab's research and the Islamic State's production as well as the scale of the latter's program.

The following month, the Court sentenced Zahab to nine years in a high-security penitentiary.¹⁹ The sentence, handed down on June 7, 2019, includes a statement of facts agreed between Zahab's defense and the prosecution that relies heavily on the statement CAR provided in the way it portrays Islamic State weapon production, and the similarities found between the group's work, and Zahab's research.²⁰ The statement of facts paints a portrait of a self-taught engineer obsessed by his research into rocketry and eager to share with the Islamic State what he had learned from the internet and his own experimentations.

^a With senior staff having decades of combined experience in conflict areas and with standard operating procedures refined over eight years of intense deployment and field investigation, CAR works to uphold the highest standards of evidence verification and evidence chain of custody. This is because CAR's methodology requires physical access to evidence and first-hand documentation. In an age of social media and open-source intelligence, these methods may seem out of fashion. But they allow CAR to painstakingly gather complete, precise, and verifiable data in non-permissive environments. The rifles, cartridges, missiles, rockets, chemical precursors, circuit boards, and detonators documented across the world form the more than half a million data points that allow CAR to better understand modern conflicts and what fuels them.

Starting in June 2015 and continuing until April 2016, "in the late hours of the evening and early morning at his residential address,"²¹ Zahab researched the manufacture and performance of rocket propellant mixtures. This included "conducting flights of hobby rockets to test the accuracy [...] of [a] computer software that designs and simulates rockets," "designing unguided rockets" using this computer software, and conducting research and development on "guidance for rockets using GPS."²² During this period, Zahab "also generated a number of written reports and a video regarding his research and development into rockets and guidance systems."²³

Zahab started by saving computer-aided-drawing (CAD) files of hobby-sized rocket bodies and nose cones on his computer to amend them and make his own versions.²⁴ Later on, Zahab began researching rocket propellant and other explosive precursors such as ammonium nitrate. According to court documents,²⁵ he created a written report titled "How to make Ammonium Nitrate using house hold chemicals," consisting of instructions on how to make ammonium nitrate from various off-the-shelf chemicals as well as how to obtain it from fertilizer or instant cold packs based on several YouTube videos (wherein Zahab noted that it was "cheaper to buy ammonium nitrate, but that 'our' objective was to explore the chemistry"). In this document, Zahab also explored ways to produce ammonium perchlorate and potassium perchlorate—two powerful, advanced rocket propellant precursors—drawing from a 2012 blog post and a YouTube video.²⁶

His first rocket models were partially based on existing military designs, such as the Soviet 9M22U 122 mm rocket, which is often colloquially referred to as a 'Grad' rocket, though the term 'Grad' should apply to the Soviet BM-21 truck-mounted multiple rocket launcher system. CAR investigators have observed that state and non-state forces in Iraq and other theaters would often refer to large



Zahab photographed and filmed the failed launching of a hobby rocket from the backyard of his residential property. (*R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts*, 629, New South Wales Supreme Court, June 7, 2019, para. 93f)

rockets as ‘Grad’ even if they were not the 9M22U model. In June 2016, CAR documented a ledger in an Islamic State weapon production facility in Fallujah referring to the production and testing of ‘Grad’ rockets.²⁷ Judging by Zahab’s drawings,²⁸ however, the similar features between them and the 9M22U rocket may have been limited to their diameter.

Zahab created his first designs on the computer modeling and simulation software ‘OpenRocket.’ One of these designs had a diameter of 122 millimeters, a length of 312 centimeters, a payload of five kilograms, and a range of eight kilometers. Other designs would be created with a larger payload. He created documents detailing his designs’ “measurements, capable altitude, flight time, speed, and the material type and composition for each section of the rocket.”²⁹

Zahab later wrote another report in which he adjusted some of the designs to plot a flight course from a designated launch point to the Syrian town of Sarrin, which at the time (August 2015) was contested between Kurdish and Islamic State forces. In the report, Zahab provided information on this particular rocket model’s grain propellant and advice on finding the right fuel propellant to match the data and ensure the model’s accuracy.³⁰ The court documents do not reveal whether or not investigators believe Zahab sent this particular report to the Islamic State. He did, however, send previous reports to the group via electronic communication,^b such as a 288-page technical report on a laser warning receiver he had built and tested.³¹ The laser warning receiver was designed to pick up the laser signal used to ‘paint’ a target before a missile strike.³²

On Zahab’s computer’s bash history, which is the file containing previous commands entered by a user, the police found an encoded message referring to the 288-page technical report on the laser warning receiver.³³ In this message, Zahab wrote that he managed to get in touch with an “administrator” thanks to a third party, who showed pictures of Zahab’s work to a “tech team” for analysis. The “administrator” asked why Zahab wasn’t “here” and how they could communicate with him if he wasn’t “here.” Zahab explained his situation, and the administrator requested a full report from him. He said he wanted to help the “techies” and liaise with them for development, but that was not possible because, Zahab had to understand, he was dealing not with a single person, but with a “corporation.”³⁴ While it is not explicitly revealed in the court documents that the “administrator” was part of the Islamic State set-up in Syria/Iraq, this can be inferred from their communications quoted above. Furthermore, in Zahab’s sentencing document, it is stated, “He [Zahab] agreed that once he had compiled his report in relation to the receiver, he sent it to Islamic State with the intention of assisting that organisation.”³⁵

AFP alleged that Zahab also sent this 288-page report to a U.K. national, Samata Ullah,³⁶ who was arrested in September 2016 in the United Kingdom. U.K. investigators found Zahab’s report in the digital evidence seized from Ullah.³⁷ Ullah pleaded guilty of the offenses of ‘membership of a proscribed organisation,’ ‘terrorist

training,’ ‘preparation of terrorist acts,’ and two counts of ‘possession of an article for terrorist purposes.’³⁸ Ullah was sentenced in the United Kingdom in May 2017 to eight years in prison. At the time, the head of the British Metropolitan Police Counter Terrorism Command stated Ullah had “set up a self-help library for terrorists around the world and they were using his library. [...] We know [the Islamic State] was using that material to both seek guidance and instruction.”³⁹

Most of the information gathered by Zahab in instructional reports on experimental rocketry, fuel burn rates, rocket propellants, motor thrust data, and motor designs came from the internet. Zahab used mobile phone applications “to measure degrees and radians,” and he even studied computer coding languages such as Java and Python to model a guided rocket and “study the effects on fin changes, gravity and target GPS acquisition.”⁴⁰ Indeed, Zahab researched GPS guidance systems for his munition designs. He studied how to steer the munition, once it would reach its apogee and begin descent on to its target.⁴¹ To test his simulations, Zahab purchased ready-made hobby rocket engines on eBay,⁴² used a CAD designing software to create files of “outer casings for various different sized hobby rocket engines,”⁴³ completed those files in a 3D printing program, and “3D printed the outer casings.”⁴⁴ He then documented the launch of his rockets on his property.⁴⁵

In terms of fuel propellant, Zahab opted for a mixture of potassium nitrate and sorbitol,⁴⁶ which are two of the precursors CAR has documented, in precise proportions, in use in Islamic State-made propellant.^c Zahab went so far as to purchase a 2.5 kilogram bag of stump remover, made of potassium nitrate.⁴⁷

Zahab created a video, with an Islamic State *nasheed* (religious musical chant) in the background, detailing how accurate the rocket simulation software he was using was “as a validation tool.”⁴⁸ Zahab discussed the content of the video with Ullah, but wrote he did not know “if they [the Islamic State] actually tried it.”⁴⁹ It is not revealed in the court documents whether or not investigators believe Zahab shared the video with the Islamic State.

He also displayed an interest in real-time telemetry visualisation—telemetry being “the process of recording and transmitting the readings of an instrument.”⁵⁰ The prosecution alleged he was studying this topic “to assist him with his research and development” of rocket guidance systems.⁵¹

Zahab’s research stopped when the AFP executed its first search warrant on his Young property in April 2016⁵² over the Zahab family’s activities abroad—members of Zahab’s family having traveled to Syria to fight with the Islamic State.⁵³ Zahab was not arrested then, but during the search, the AFP seized a number of encrypted devices.⁵⁴ Decrypting and analyzing the information they contained took several months and led to a second search on the same property, and to the eventual arrest of Zahab in February 2017.⁵⁵

The statement of facts, which was agreed between Zahab’s defense and the prosecution, noted that:

“the work undertaken by the defendant and Islamic State indicates significant commonality such as:

(a) *Similar design work on a ‘Grad’ rocket by the defendant to the ‘Type 1’ and ‘Type 2’ rockets developed*

^b In one communication, Zahab stated: “I took inspiration from the Iranian design. And modelled it to materials dawlah (Islamic State) had available and radius’s doable for them. But had a hard time with competency [sic] of measurements and weights on the other side and lack of competency [sic] of quality data verification ... actually I sent them a full chemical munitions cook book which explains all that.” It can be inferred from the above that Zahab directly electronically sent the chemical munitions “cook book” to the Islamic State. R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 116cc.

^c Zahab’s simulations worked with a rocket fuel’s composition that was close to the one documented by CAR in some of the Islamic State’s weapon production facilities. See R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 64 and para. 80d fn45.

and manufactured by Islamic State;

(b) Research by the defendant into Potassium Nitrate/Sorbitol and Sugar (KNSB) as a composition for rocket fuel propellant and its use by Islamic State in their rockets;

(c) Research into rocket guidance.”^{56d}

The prosecution wanted to show that Zahab had not been working in isolation and that he knew his research was likely to be of interest to the group, and therefore sought to pass his findings to them since the Islamic State had become more and more reliant on its indigenous weapon production program to wage its expansion war in Iraq and Syria.⁵⁷ Australian investigators were now able to show that there were correlations between the designs found on Zahab's computer and those built and used by the Islamic State. Although it would be difficult to prove that Zahab's research was used by the Islamic State to build rockets, it would now be equally difficult to prove that it was not.^{58e}

CAR's Findings on the Islamic State's Weapons Programs

The statement of facts itself drew upon CAR's findings in describing the Islamic State's weapons' research, development, and manufacture systems as “highly sophisticated and well organized, with a huge output.”⁵⁹ Indeed, CAR's findings, drawn from extensive field research in Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2018, show that the Islamic State's weapons production could be compared to an industrial revolution of terrorism. Similar to the industrial revolution of the late 18th to early 19th century that saw the end of the age of the artisan, this industrial revolution of terrorism was characterized by a strong centralized management, with quality control in place, standardization of production, and defined division of labor, all resulting in a dramatic increase in output. This was supported by a robust supply chain of raw materials and precursors and was driven forward by the group's efforts at research and development.⁶⁰

Since 2014, CAR has sent field investigation teams to embed with Iraqi security forces to gather, first-hand, all available information on weapons and ammunition recovered from Islamic State forces on the battlefield.⁶¹ During their deployments, CAR field investigation teams have gained unprecedented access to several weapon manufacturing facilities once operated by Islamic State forces, recorded extensive documentary evidence of centrally managed weapon production, and documented a wide range of Islamic State-manufactured ordnance recovered during ground combat operations.

Although Islamic State production facilities employed a range of non-standard materials and chemical explosive precursors, the degree of organization, quality control, and inventory management

- d The ‘Type 1’ and ‘Type 2’ rockets are two Islamic State rocket types introduced by CAR in its nomenclature of Islamic State weapons. Conflict Armament Research, *Standardisation and Quality Control in Islamic State's Military Production* (London: CAR, 2016).
- e Zahab maintained that while he had “an intention,” he did not send information on rockets to the Islamic State, according to his sentencing decision document. This further stated: “The offender said that as far as he was aware, Islamic State did not derive any benefit from his research into rockets. However, he accepted that his research could have been used to assist them.” R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Judgment (18 and 21).



Islamic State-produced rockets, ready to be filled in a house transformed into a weapon production facility in Mosul, Iraq, November 12, 2016 (Conflict Armament Research)

indicated a complex, centrally controlled industrial production system. In this system, multiple manufacturing facilities worked to produce weapons according to precise technical guidelines issued by a central authority. As CAR previously reported, “the production of any one weapon system involved the coordinated input of numerous facilities at different stages of the production cycle: from the processing of raw materials to the mixing of chemical explosive precursors to machining, assembly, and final sign-off by dedicated quality control personnel.”⁶²

From its analysis of Islamic State documents it found in Iraq, CAR determined that in order to function, the group’s weapon production line required a sophisticated monitoring system, in which manufacturing facilities regularly reported detailed figures on production rates and quality of output to a central procurement and production authority—all of which would have been critical to forecasting material requirements and ensuring that all manufactured weapons conformed to standard specifications. Islamic State forces operated an administrative unit called the Central Organization for Standardization and Quality Control (COSQC), which fell under the authority of the group’s Committee for Military Development and Production, itself part of the Office of the Soldiers. The COSQC issued specific guidelines on weapon production parameters and controlled manufacturing quality.

Standardization served critical battlefield requirements. The directives issued by Islamic State forces to production facilities sought to minimize the variation among weapons and ammunition manufactured by a multitude of often distant factories and workshops.⁶³ This enabled weapon interoperability, which meant, as CAR found, that “mortar rounds manufactured in one part of Islamic State territory were calibrated to fit mortar tubes produced in facilities located elsewhere.”⁶⁴

As CAR has previously stated:⁶⁵

Consistency in production also requires consistency in the supply of materials used to manufacture weapons and ammunition. IS forces have demonstrated repeatedly that, to ensure all weapon systems function identically, they must be constructed from the same materials. This is particularly so of chemical precursors used to manufacture explosives and propellant. Evidence documented by CAR during 29 months of operations along IS frontlines indicates that IS forces have made one-off, bulk-procurements of chemical precursors from single suppliers. In other cases, production dates spanning a range of years suggest that IS forces have made repeated acquisitions of identical products from the same sources—almost exclusively from the Turkish domestic market. These findings indicate the mass diversion of chemical precursors and a robust supply chain extending from Turkey, through Syria, to Mosul.

The supply of homogenous raw material clearly assists IS forces in the production of uniform weapon systems. Documents issued by IS forces, and CAR’s physical examination of IS-produced weapons, underscore this. The group’s Central Organisation for Standardisation and Quality Control (COSQC) issues blueprints for weapon construction, which provide standard parameters for the manufacture of mortars, mortar rounds, and rockets—in addition to the precise chemical mixes of explosives and propellant—using products of a specific type and origin. CAR’s examination of weapons found

whilst under construction, in addition to those deployed with IS forces and recovered on the battlefield, confirm that production output conforms to these standards—usually to the tenth of a millimetre.

The functioning of this quality control system—illustrated by a stream of written directives and periodic reporting, documented by CAR—provides deep insights into IS forces’ broader command and control systems. The group is highly bureaucratic, adheres to strict reporting lines, and operates a series of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. These are evident, not only in periodic reporting by individual units on weapon production, but also in regular updates sent to central authorities on rations, ammunition expenditure rates, weapon holdings by serial number, and the health of fighters.

While technical in nature, these findings must also be viewed within the framework of the Islamic State’s efforts at the time to instill confidence among its fighters in its capacity as a ‘state’ administration. The uniform painting, labeling, and branding of Islamic State-produced weapons and ammunition contributed to this. Although these measures, such as defining the caliber and date of production, clearly benefit weapon management—notably accounting—they also speak to the Islamic State’s attempts to mirror the functions of a national military force. These factors arguably legitimized the group’s capacity and coherence in the eyes of Islamic State fighters as much as they served clear logistical functions.

As CAR indicated to the prosecution of Zahab’s case,⁶⁶ Islamic State forces conducted their research, development, and production across numerous facilities throughout their territory, which can be broadly categorized as manufacturing, mixing, filling, storage, or repair, modification, and development facilities. In particular, the Islamic State performed in-depth research and testing of different weaponry systems as well as proof-of-concept testing of rockets in 2015, prior to commencing large-scale manufacture. This research and testing resulted in Islamic State forces producing two main design types of rockets on a mass scale as well as other types on a varying scale. In the lead up to this manufacture, the Islamic State performed unique research and development into specific parts of the rockets, which included the fin assembly, nozzle, motor body, warhead, fuse, electric initiator, and fuel propellant mixture and composition. The research and development undertaken by the Islamic State went beyond simple crude weapons development and involved precision manufacturing processes that were reproduced on a mass scale.

Conclusion

While it would have been interesting to see to what extent the prosecution may have been able to prove a direct correlation between Zahab’s work and Islamic State rocket production, this was not necessary because of the guilty plea. That said, some similarities are undeniable: in the design of some of the models; in the composition of the propellant mixture; in the timing of the testing of new models, identically designated; in the timing of the procurement of precursors and mass production of rockets; and in potential research into guidance systems. These similarities, and the fact that Zahab had been in touch with other individuals connected to the Islamic State and had effectively transferred some of his findings to them, support the possibility that his research may have contributed to the Islamic State’s weapon production program.⁶⁷

With many foreign fighters and their relatives still detained in the Syrian camp of Al-Hol, and elsewhere, and their respective countries of origin still pondering what to do should they be repatriated, law enforcement agencies are increasingly faced with the

question of how to build criminal cases against these individuals. In the case of Haisem Zahab, CAR has shown that the evidence gathered in active conflict zones can play a key role in strengthening foreign prosecutions, and should serve as a positive example. **CTC**

Citations

- 1 Conflict Armament Research, *Inside Islamic State's Improvised Weapon Factories in Fallujah* (London: CAR, 2016); Conflict Armament Research, *Standardisation and Quality Control in Islamic State's Military Production* (London: CAR, 2016).
- 2 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, 629, New South Wales Supreme Court, June 7, 2019, Statement of Facts, para. 17-53.
- 3 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 54-98.
- 4 Author interview, Australian Federal Police official, conducted after sentencing hearing, May 2019.
- 5 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 122.
- 6 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 130.
- 7 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Decision (3).
- 8 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision.
- 9 "Man charged in NSW town of Young over alleged missile advice to Isis," *Guardian*, February 28, 2017.
- 10 "Australian charged with helping IS develop missile technology," RTE, February 28, 2017.
- 11 Author interview, Australian Federal Police official, conducted after sentencing hearing, May 2019.
- 12 Author interview, Australian Federal Police official, conducted after sentencing hearing, May 2019.
- 13 "Islamic State Rocket Developer Sentenced in Australia Following CAR Expert Testimony," Conflict Armament Research, press release, 2019.
- 14 See, for instance, Michael Peel, Chloe Cornish, and David Bond, "Europe confronts problem of returning Isis fighters," *Irish Times*, February 20, 2019, in Europe, and Christophe Paulussen and Kate Pitcher, "Prosecuting (Potential) Foreign Fighters: Legislative and Practical Challenges," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague, Research Paper, January 2018.
- 15 Author interview, Australian Federal Police official, conducted after sentencing hearing, May 2019.
- 16 *Weapons of the Islamic State* (London: CAR, December 2017).
- 17 At CAR, the term "documentations" is used to denote site visits by staff that result in the taking of photographic evidence.
- 18 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Judgment, para. 1.
- 19 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Decision (4).
- 20 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 5-8; para. 64-66.
- 21 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 67.
- 22 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 67.
- 23 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 68.
- 24 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 69.
- 25 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 72.
- 26 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 72.
- 27 *Inside Islamic State's Improvised Weapon Factories in Fallujah*.
- 28 The R v Zahab Sentencing Decision contains the statement of facts, which includes drawings and images found by AFP on Zahab's electronic devices.
- 29 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 74.
- 30 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 76.
- 31 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 29.
- 32 For more information on laser designators, see, for instance, "Joint Fire Support," Joint Publication 3-09, April 10, 2019.
- 33 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 31.
- 34 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 31.
- 35 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Judgment, para. 17.
- 36 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 30.
- 37 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 120.
- 38 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 121.
- 39 "Cardiff terrorist who hid extremist data on Bond-style cufflink is jailed," *Guardian*, London, May 2, 2017.
- 40 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 77.
- 41 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 86.
- 42 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 91.
- 43 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 93.
- 44 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 93.
- 45 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 93.
- 46 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 80.
- 47 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 91, 93.
- 48 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 94.
- 49 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 116.
- 50 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 96.
- 51 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 96.
- 52 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 107.
- 53 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 99.
- 54 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 107-112.
- 55 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 117.
- 56 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 66.
- 57 Author interview, Australian Federal Police official, conducted after the sentencing hearing, May 2019.
- 58 Author interview, Australian Federal Police official, conducted after sentencing hearing, May 2019.
- 59 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 5.
- 60 *Standardisation and Quality Control in Islamic State's Military Production*.
- 61 CAR published its findings in multiple reports, notably *Standardisation and Quality Control in Islamic State's Military Production*.
- 62 *Weapons of the Islamic State*.
- 63 These directives were documented by CAR in Mosul in November 2016.
- 64 *Weapons of the Islamic State*.
- 65 *Standardisation and Quality Control in Islamic State's Military Production*.
- 66 R v Zahab, Sentencing Decision, Statement of Facts, para. 6-8.
- 67 The observations in this paragraph are based on the author's analysis of the information provided in court in the Zahab case and the author's analysis of the Islamic State's weapons production.

Hezbollah's "Virtual Entrepreneurs:" How Hezbollah is Using the Internet to Incite Violence in Israel

By Michael Shkolnik and Alexander Corbeil

In recent years, Hezbollah has used social media to recruit Israeli Arabs and West Bank-based Palestinians to attack Israeli targets. A recent innovation in terrorist tactics has given rise to "virtual entrepreneurs," which to date have been largely associated with the Islamic State's online recruitment efforts. Hezbollah's virtual planners, similar to those in the Islamic State, use social media to establish contact with potential recruits before transitioning to more encrypted communications platforms, transferring funds, and issuing instructions to form cells, conduct surveillance, and carry out terrorist attacks. Online recruitment presents a low-cost option that offers plausible deniability for Hezbollah. While every virtual plot led by Hezbollah that targeted Israel has been foiled thus far, Israeli authorities spend time and resources disrupting these schemes at the expense of other more pressing threats. By digitally recruiting Palestinians to attack Israel, Hezbollah and its patron Iran are seeking to cultivate a new front against Israel amid rising regional hostilities.

In 2016, Muhammad Zaghloul, a young Palestinian from Tulkarem in the West Bank, allegedly oversaw the formation of a terrorist cell in the West Bank that planned to carry out a shooting attack targeting Israeli troops.¹ After allegedly communicating with a terrorist handler online and receiving thousands of U.S. dollars, cell members bought a sub-machine gun and ammunition as part of their preparation to assassinate an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) officer. Israeli authorities reportedly

Michael Shkolnik is a research associate and Ph.D. candidate at Carleton University's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, focusing on the evolution of nascent insurgent organizations. He was recently accepted into the Canadian government's Recruitment of Policy Leaders program and previously served as a senior advisor with the Strategic Foresight unit at the Department of Global Affairs Canada. In the past, Michael worked with counterterrorism and international security research institutes in Washington, D.C., Ottawa, and Israel. Follow @Shkolnik_M

Alexander Corbeil is a digital fellow with Concordia University's Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, a fellow with The SecDev Foundation, and a lecturer at Carleton University's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs. He has conducted interviews with members of Hezbollah's armed wing in Lebanon and has written extensively on Hezbollah's involvement in Syria and terrorist use of the internet. Follow @alex_corbeil

disrupted the carefully organized plot in its final stage.² If executed, it would have added an organized element to an otherwise unorganized Palestinian terrorist campaign plaguing Israel from 2015 to 2016, largely involving individuals with no affiliations to established terrorist groups.³ But this alleged cell was not handled by Hamas or any other Palestinian terrorist organization. This plot was allegedly the brainchild of Hezbollah, the powerful Lebanese Shi'a organization and Israel's arch nemesis.⁴

This article examines Hezbollah's use of social media to recruit Israeli Arabs and West Bank-based Palestinians to attack Israeli targets. Understanding this development is important given rising tensions between Israel and Iran—Hezbollah's main benefactor—as Iran further entrenches its presence in Syria and across the region. In response, Israel's government has escalated its kinetic activity against Iran and its proxies in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.⁵ According to Israeli authorities, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is carrying out a covert campaign against Israel involving Iran's proxy militant groups, including Hezbollah.⁶ As part of these efforts, Hezbollah and Iran are expanding their footprint in the Syrian-controlled Golan Heights, cultivating a new base of operations against Israel in a possible future war.⁷ Iran has also established a land corridor from Iraq to Lebanon, facilitating the smuggling of missiles and other weapons.⁸ A lesser-known and more clandestine effort is Hezbollah and Iranian attempts to direct violence in the West Bank and Israel using virtual entrepreneurs.

A recent innovation in terrorist tactics gave rise to a development referred to as "virtual entrepreneurs" or "virtual plotters." Using social media platforms and encrypted messaging services, terrorist operatives attempt to recruit and assist individuals or cells based in different countries to carry out attacks, tactics largely associated with the Islamic State's online recruitment efforts.⁹ Previous research identifies two broad types of Islamic State virtual planners: operatives who engage in direct planning and those who play a more hands-off role by encouraging and facilitating attacks.¹⁰ From the end of 2015 through 2017, the Islamic State increasingly exploited communications and social media platforms—such as Telegram and Kik—to facilitate attacks worldwide.¹¹ Despite receiving little attention from Western media outlets, Hezbollah relied on similar methods during this period to recruit distant operatives to strike its main enemy. It seems that Hezbollah concurrently arrived at a similar conclusion as the Islamic State: virtual plots are low-cost and potentially high-reward options that allow terrorist organizations to expand their reach.¹²

The following sections contextualize Hezbollah's virtual operations by reviewing the group's previous efforts to build relationships with Palestinians and Iran's recent push to escalate violence against Israel from the West Bank. The article then briefly discusses some of Hezbollah's online operations before focusing on key cases of Hezbollah's virtual planners recruiting operatives in the West Bank. Similarities and differences across cases are identified to build an

exploratory look at how other prominent terror groups—beyond the Islamic State—recruit, fund, and support operatives with divergent backgrounds from afar.

A History of Fomenting Terrorism in Israel and the West Bank

Hezbollah's attempts to incite, fund, and direct acts of terrorism in Israel and the West Bank began in the mid-1990s and increased following Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000.¹³ The terrorist organization's activities in this area can be divided into three broad categories: working with established Palestinian terrorist groups; recruiting individuals in Europe to enter and carry out activities in Israel; and recruiting individuals and groups of Israeli Arabs, Palestinians, and Lebanese.

Since the mid-1990s, Hezbollah has focused its efforts on supporting Palestinian terrorist groups to carry out acts of violence in Israel and the Palestinian territories. Hezbollah established Unit 1800 to provide Palestinian organizations with military training and bomb making instructions, while helping Iran transfer significant funds to Palestinians.¹⁴ After the Second Intifada broke out in 2000, Iran assigned Imad Mugniyah, Hezbollah's international operations commander, to bolster the capabilities of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.¹⁵ A direct result of this support was the March 2002 suicide bombing at the Park Hotel in Netanya, Israel, which killed 30 and injured another 140, the deadliest attack against Israelis during the Second Intifada.¹⁶ The mass-casualty attack, labeled the "Passover Massacre" given that it occurred during the Jewish holiday's Seder meal, is believed by Israeli military officials to be the product of Hamas-Hezbollah cooperation.¹⁷

From the mid-1990s to early 2000s, Hezbollah successfully recruited several individuals in Europe who entered, or attempted to enter, Israel to carry out reconnaissance or attacks. One prominent case involved Stephan Joseph Smyrek, a German convert to Islam, who traveled to Lebanon for training in 1997 before arriving in Israel later that year.¹⁸ He was arrested by Israeli authorities at Ben Gurion International airport in Tel Aviv, after a tip from German intelligence.¹⁹ During his interrogation, Israeli authorities concluded that Hezbollah had sent Smyrek to conduct a suicide-bombing attack. As with Smyrek, Israel thwarted every attack plot involving Hezbollah agents recruited in Europe throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s.²⁰

Following Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000, Hezbollah ramped up its efforts to recruit Israeli Arabs. Given their freedom of mobility within Israel, Israeli Arabs were presumably viewed as particularly useful operatives for the Lebanese group, especially for intelligence operations.²¹ Hezbollah recruiters would also approach Israeli Arabs living or travelling abroad, including Khalid Kashkoush—a medical student living in Göttingen, Germany.^a Kashkoush was arrested in July 2008 when he landed in Ben Gurion Airport.²² Hezbollah reportedly instructed him to conduct reconnaissance and identify members of the Israeli security

forces.²³

In the early 2000s, Hezbollah established Unit 133 to facilitate intelligence collection and attacks within Israel and against Israeli interests across the Middle East and Europe.^b The Unit recruits new assets and provides security and military training.²⁴ To fund and arm operatives in the West Bank and Israel, it has relied primarily on Lebanese drug dealers and Israeli-Arab smuggling networks, which have intimate knowledge of the Israeli-Lebanese border area.²⁵ In April 2012, Unit 133 attempted to smuggle C-4 explosives and weapons into Israel using Israeli Arab smugglers.²⁶ Israel's domestic security service, Shin Bet, disrupted the smuggling network and foiled a mass-casualty attack.²⁷ Following a series of failures, Unit 133—likely with Iran's encouragement—increasingly shifted its focus toward online recruitment schemes.²⁸

Rising Regional Tensions

By the end of the Second Intifada, Iran reduced its support for Hezbollah's efforts in the West Bank and focused on strengthening ties with terrorist groups operating in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip.²⁹ But recent developments signal Iran's growing interest in fomenting instability in the West Bank. Following Operation Protective Edge—Israel's 2014 military offensive in Gaza—Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei ordered Iran to arm the West Bank while the IRGC's second-in-command threatened to help make the West Bank a "hell" for Israel.³⁰ Tensions escalated in January 2015 after an Israeli airstrike in the Golan Heights killed a senior IRGC general and Jihad Mugniyah—son of Imad Mugniyah and head of Hezbollah's operations in the Syria/Iraq theater.³¹ During a ceremony that month commemorating the dead operatives, Iran's Defense Minister acknowledged that "arming the West Bank and strengthening the resistance movement and Hezbollah to fight against the murdering and occupant Zionist regime is the general and firm policy of Iran."³² A month later, a senior IRGC commander reaffirmed Iran's desire to enhance its presence in the West Bank in order to "contain the Zionist entity ... so that it never dares to speak about a missile attack on Iran."³³ During the 2015-2016 wave of Palestinian terrorist violence, Iran's ambassador to Lebanon promised that Iran would offer \$7,000 to every family of a Palestinian who carries out an attack.^c These statements signaled Iran's willingness to invest in a new front against Israel and reinforce its deterrence posture.^d

Recent developments suggest senior Iranian leaders are translating these statements into concrete action.³⁴ In July 2019, Israeli authorities thwarted an Iranian-led network in Syria seeking to recruit Israelis and Palestinians "for the benefit of Iranian intelligence," according to a statement from Israel's Shin Bet.³⁵ Iranian operatives reportedly created fake Facebook profiles to contact potential recruits before transitioning to other communications

^b Unit 133 focuses specifically on Israel and Israeli interests in the Middle East and Europe. It is part of Hezbollah's external attack-planning arm known as the Islamic Jihad Organization, or IJO. David Daoud, "Hezbollah tries to shift attention to the West Bank," FDD's Long War Journal, February 5, 2016.

^c The ambassador also promised \$30,000 for any family whose home is subsequently demolished by Israel. See "Iran to Pay Families of Killed Palestinians: Ambassador in Beirut," Reuters, February 24, 2016.

^d Arming terrorists in the West Bank would give Iran more options to impose additional costs on Israel in a possible future war between the two countries.

^a For example, Israeli-Arab Rawi Sultani was recruited by Hezbollah while attending a summer camp in Morocco and was instructed to gather information on Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi with whom he attended the same gym. Sultani was later sentenced to five years and eight months in jail by the Petah Tikva District Court. For more information, see Ofra Edelman, "Israeli Arab Gets 5 Years, 8 Months for Spying on IDF Chief," *Haaretz*, June 4, 2010.

platforms.³⁶ Since April 2019, Israel has launched a widespread operation across Israel and the West Bank to identify individuals who had been approached by Iranian handlers.³⁷ Israel's investigation concluded that some recruits handed information to their Syria-based handlers and expressed a desire to attack Israeli civilian and military targets.³⁸ In April 2019, Israeli law enforcement arrested a Jordanian national accused of entering Israel to help form cells to facilitate long-term surveillance and reconnaissance at Iran's behest.³⁹ These examples could be considered cases of state-on-state covert espionage practices. But Iran's increased willingness to enhance its presence in Israel and the Palestinian territories is part of a wider strategy involving Hezbollah's ongoing efforts to recruit Palestinian terrorists online.

The table at the end of this article outlines alleged plots involving Hezbollah's use of social media over the last few years to recruit Palestinians for attacks against Israel. By systematically compiling English-language open-source data, think tank publications, and arrest-related information concerning these plots, the authors identify key elements of Hezbollah's modus operandi in this realm.^e More details about these cases will likely emerge if and when court-issued gag orders are lifted. In addition, it is possible that Israeli authorities have not released information about other relevant Hezbollah-related plots in Israel and the West Bank. However, it should be noted Israel has had an incentive to release basic details of these plots to signal resolve to its domestic constituency and show the international community that Hezbollah remains dedicated to attacking Israeli targets using various methods.

Jawad Nasrallah

One of the alleged Hezbollah recruiters is a high-profile figure. Jawad Nasrallah, a father of four in his late 30s, is the second eldest son of Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's Secretary General.⁴⁰ Known as a poet, writer, and online personality in pro-Hezbollah circles, Jawad currently lives in Lebanon, is often seen in public, and has published his writings, including a collection of poems entitled *Resistance Letters* in which he glorifies those who have died fighting Israel.⁴¹ It should be noted that his public image online and off has contributed to doubts among Hezbollah supporters that Jawad was ever involved in West Bank plots.⁴² However, during Hassan Nasrallah's only public statement about Jawad, he noted that his son is a member of one of Hezbollah's units, without providing any specifics.⁴³

According to Shin Bet, the Israeli internal security service, Jawad was intimately involved in recruiting the leader of the Tulkarem cell, Muhammad Zaghloul.⁴⁴ Jawad was allegedly tasked with finding potential recruits in Israel and the West Bank via the internet, leveraging his knowledge of social media and online stardom.⁴⁵ It is alleged that working together with "Fadi," an operative from Unit 133, Jawad instructed Zaghloul to recruit others to gather intelligence and carry out terrorist attacks, including a suicide bombing.⁴⁶ The alleged five-man cell established by Zaghloul was eventually arrested by Shin Bet after having allegedly used part of the \$5,000

USD provided by Hezbollah to purchase weapons.⁴⁷

In November 2018, the U.S. Department of State designated Jawad Nasrallah as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT), imposing sanctions to deny him "the resources to plan and carry out terrorist attacks."⁴⁸ The statement characterized Jawad as a rising leader in Hezbollah, and cited his alleged recruitment of the Muhammad Zaghloul-led cell in Tulkarem as proof of his terrorist activities.⁴⁹ Hezbollah supporters took to Twitter to respond to the designation, sharing the hashtags #WeAreAllTerrorists and #WeAreAllJawad.⁵⁰ While signaling that the U.S. government views virtual plots in the West Bank with alarm, the listing of Jawad as a SDGT does little to reduce his operational capacity. Like Hezbollah's other alleged virtual planners, the allegations suggest he relies on the group's extensive monetary resources and can operate comfortably from Hezbollah-controlled territory in Lebanon.

Analysis

Through mass communication networks and social media outlets, virtual planners forge personal relationships with potential attackers, alleviate concerns, and offer words of praise. For example, the Islamic State's virtual entrepreneurs helped form a cell of people who did not otherwise know each other.^f Virtual entrepreneurs can facilitate contact between individuals to build operational cells and wider terrorist networks. Hezbollah's virtual planners appear to be focused on building relationships with individual Palestinians who are then instructed to form cells with other Palestinians—likely among trusted pre-existing social or family networks. Unsurprisingly, recruits and cell operatives were all men and mostly young, according to the open source information the authors collected. (See Table 1.) Apart from Mustafa Ali Mahmoud Basharat, age 49, each of the Palestinian ring leaders and cell members ranged in age from 18 to 32.⁵¹ Recruits hailed from areas across the West Bank, not limited to a certain region.

Hezbollah's virtual planners engaged in a combination of direct plotting and facilitation, relying on a similar strategy to recruit Palestinians in each case. First, Hezbollah operatives used Facebook groups to establish contact with an individual. After a nascent relationship is forged, the Hezbollah operative(s) would usually communicate with the prospective recruit via email and send instructions on how to use encrypted communications platforms, including encrypted email. The next step involved using encrypted programs to issue further instructions and minimize detection. For example, Hezbollah operatives allegedly sent Muhammad Zaghloul 16 encrypted emails over several weeks, including requests for information on IDF bases and instructions on how to carry out suicide bombings.⁵² Not all suggestions flowed top-down, from Hezbollah to the Palestinian cell. It is alleged Zaghloul, for example, initially proposed killing a specific IDF soldier to his handler after providing the officer's picture and personal information.⁵³

Hezbollah handlers likely used fake names, such as "Bilal," to remain anonymous.⁵⁴ However, a series of plots from March-June

^e Information on Hezbollah-related plots in Israel and the West Bank has been collected by the authors from open-source material. Sources are limited to publicly available English-language news reporting, Israeli think tank publications, and statements by Israeli government departments and agencies.

^f One of the more prolific Islamic State operatives was Rachid Kassim. Kassim allegedly inspired terrorist attacks in France, encouraging and guiding plots in his native France from Islamic State-held territory via encrypted messaging applications. He reportedly brought together individuals who previously did not know each other in forming attack cells. For more on Kassim, see Ryan Browne and Paul Cruickshank, "US-led coalition targets top ISIS figure in Iraq strike," CNN, February 10, 2017.

2016 were allegedly overseen by a well-known Hezbollah figure: Fa'iz Abu-Jadian.⁵⁵ Abu-Jadian is allegedly a Gaza-based operative with Hezbollah's Unit 133, which is exclusively devoted to supporting Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israel.⁵⁶ In each case, Hezbollah handlers instructed the Palestinian asset to recruit a small cell of a few trusted and committed individuals. After the cell was formed, members usually conducted surveillance and reconnaissance of potential targets, unless Israeli authorities arrested the suspected operatives first.⁵⁷

According to the allegations in one case, Hezbollah enlisted an online recruit (Yusef Yasser Suylam) to kidnap Israelis and transfer the hostages to Lebanon.⁵⁸ The remainder of the plots' objectives involved conducting suicide bombings or shooting and bombing attacks (or both) against IDF patrols in the West Bank. It is alleged Najm's cell, however, was plotting to carry out a suicide bombing against an Israeli bus and was disrupted after its members had already started to build explosives devices.⁵⁹

In each case, significant sums of money were promised and often transferred. Muhammad Zaghloul reportedly asked for \$30,000 from Hezbollah but was promised \$25,000.⁶⁰ Israeli authorities were able to thwart the transfer of the full amount.⁶¹ However, the cell was allegedly still able to receive \$5,000 via a foreign exchange company, which was used to purchase a sub-machine gun.⁶² Other Palestinian recruits received money as well.⁶³ It is alleged Mustafa Hindi's cell was also able to obtain rifles and engaged in target practice.⁶⁴ Israel's Shin Bet also revealed that several Israeli Arabs were offered the opportunity to join Hezbollah after communicating with Hezbollah operatives via pro-Palestinian Facebook profiles. None of the Israeli Arab names associated with these plots have been released following multiple arrests.⁶⁵

Based on open-source reporting Hezbollah-directed virtual plots appear to stop after January 2017. If Hezbollah is actually reducing its online recruitment efforts, the reasons are not known. It may be the case that, after failing to secure a foothold in the West Bank, Hezbollah is focusing on other fronts—such as consolidating bases of operations and recruitment networks in the Syrian side of the Golan Heights.⁶⁶ The demand for Hezbollah's virtual direction may have declined as well. Hezbollah, along with Hamas, was seeking to hijack the largely popular uprising that plagued Israel between September 2015 into the first half of 2016.⁶⁷ But after the uprising waned, some Palestinians may have reduced their efforts to reach out and establish contact with Hezbollah operatives. Israel's counterterrorism efforts might also play a role in disrupting Hezbollah's ability to sustain contact with potential operatives. On the other hand, the move to encrypted communications platforms can go unnoticed among Israel's security services. There may also be a decline in Israel's willingness to release information related to these types of plots in the public domain.

A substitution effect between Hezbollah and Iran could similarly be a factor in the drop in reported plots. Hezbollah's patron Iran appears to be playing a role in recruiting Palestinians online, evidenced by several foiled plots uncovered in 2018-2019 described at the beginning of this article.⁶⁸ A few uncovered cases are insufficient to establish a trend. But these reports may signal a new effort whereby Iranian personnel are directly involved in online recruitment efforts of Palestinians to attack Israel, in light of Hezbollah's failure to successfully execute a virtually directed operation. As regional tensions between Iran and Israel escalate, it is in Iran's interest to cultivate another border front to challenge Israel.⁶⁹ Fu-

ture research could look at Iranian-directed plots in this realm, as this article primarily focuses on how a non-state armed actor, like Hezbollah, uses the internet for recruitment in other theaters.

Conclusion

Gabriel Weimann, a scholar of terrorists' use of the internet, has noted that "the Internet has been a boon for Hezbollah, boosting its publicity and communication within and outside its constituency."⁷⁰ By digitally recruiting Palestinians to attack Israel, Hezbollah and (more recently) Iran may be trying to escalate their covert conflict against Israel at a time when Iran is preoccupied with securing its gains in Syria's civil war and Hezbollah is reorganizing its forces. Most analysts agree that neither Hezbollah nor Israel is interested in a full-fledged war at this time. Each side continues to largely abide by a seemingly established set of rules.⁷¹ When one side believes the other is violating these 'rules of the game,' retaliation of some kind is expected.⁷² Hezbollah's leadership likely believes that its covert attempts at sponsoring Palestinian militancy is a low-cost option to strike Israel, while maintaining plausible deniability, when opportunities present themselves.

The lack of a comprehensive analysis of this development is likely because all of these plots have been limited to the Israeli-Palestinian arena and disrupted by Israel's security authorities.⁷³ Many of the Islamic State's virtual plots, on the other hand, have been successful and targeted several countries sending shockwaves throughout the world. However, the Hezbollah case is significant because it gives researchers and policymakers a look into how other prominent terrorist organizations use social media for nefarious purposes and planning attacks. Hezbollah's recent covert attempts to strike Jewish and Israeli targets worldwide—in Cyprus, Thailand, Georgia, Egypt, and elsewhere—have similarly received little attention because the group failed to successfully execute the plots.⁷⁴ The exception was when in 2012 suspected Hezbollah operatives detonated a bomb targeting a bus full of Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria, killing six, including the Bulgarian bus driver, and injuring 32 others.⁷⁵ Israel can foil many covert plots. But it would only take one successful attack for Hezbollah to showcase the utility of its virtual operations.

Israel is not the only actor worried about Hezbollah's recruitment in the West Bank.⁷⁶ According to one report, Palestinian Authority (PA) officials are concerned about Hezbollah's efforts to recruit Palestinians—including former operatives from Fatah's militant wing, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.⁷⁷ "The number of [Palestinian] youths involved can be counted on two hands, but nonetheless this is a dangerous development," said a Palestinian security source in 2015 speaking to the Saudi daily *Okaz* and reported by *The Jerusalem Post*, adding that "if it [Hezbollah] manages to carry out just one terror attack, it will change the situation completely. We fear that the issue [Hezbollah's recruitment campaign] will become a phenomenon, with more and more youths being seduced into getting money from Hezbollah. When they number in the dozens, handling them will become much more complicated."⁷⁸ The following year, PA security forces arrested an armed terrorist cell affiliated with Al-Hirak Al-Shababi, an alleged Hezbollah front group that facilitates trips for Palestinian youth to meet Hezbollah and Iranian representatives abroad.⁷⁹ These reports suggest Hezbollah uses a combination of online and in-person approaches to recruit Palestinians.

It is the ability to communicate from Lebanon that has ben-

fited Hezbollah in its efforts to incite violence in Israel and the West Bank. Unlike other mediums, social media allows Hezbollah to digitally approach individual users. As with other terrorist organizations,⁸⁰ the case studies presented in this article indicate that Hezbollah seeks out users who seem most interested in the organization's cause or appear willing to carry out activities on its behalf. Social media also provides a conduit through which self-selected individuals may contact Hezbollah and offer support, as in the case of the 2016 Tulkarem cell's leader who allegedly presented Hezbollah with a specific plan to kill an IDF officer.⁸¹ In all cases, Palestinian users have learned about Hezbollah through direct and indirect contact with the organization's propaganda, which plays on feelings of injustice and humiliation while promising dignity, success, and notoriety.^g

g For instance, it has been reported that Mustafa Kamal Hindi was recruited through the Facebook page "Palestine the Free," which was created by Hezbollah and hosted anti-Israeli and pro-terrorist content. See Judah Ari Gross, "Hezbollah Terror Cells, Set up via Facebook in West Bank and Israel, Busted by Shin Bet," *Times of Israel*, August 16, 2016. In addition, according to a 2005 report by the Jerusalem Media Communications Center, most Palestinians primarily watch three Arabic-language satellite stations including Hezbollah's al-Manar. In its coverage of Palestine, al-Manar plays on similar themes of injustice, humiliation, and dignity. For more information, see Annie Marie Baylouny, "Al-Manar and Alhurra: Competing Satellite Stations and Ideologies," George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. October 2, 2006.

Hezbollah is presumably aware that operations that depend on in-person recruitment and training are time consuming, costly, and rarely bear fruit. Contacting, inciting, funding, and directing self-selecting operatives reduces these associated costs, avoids exposing Hezbollah members to capture in foreign jurisdictions, and skirts the complex logistics of smuggling operatives into Israel or the Palestinian territories.^h A recent uptick in deadly Palestinian terrorist attacks (August–September 2019), one of which involved a sophisticated remotely-detected explosive device, may give Hezbollah new opportunities to exploit heightened tensions in the West Bank.⁸² Even unsuccessful attacks cost Israeli authorities time and manpower, in monitoring, investigating, and intercepting such threats—a small victory for Hezbollah and Iran amid rising regional hostilities. **CTC**

h In October 2000, using a forged U.S. passport, Hezbollah operative Fawzi Ayub arrived in the port of Haifa via Greece. Ayub's mission was to first improve the bomb-making capacity of local terrorist organizations and carry out multiple attacks in cooperation with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. As his last act in Israel, authorities believe Ayub was meant to carry out an assassination attempt targeting the Israeli Prime Minister. Ayub was arrested by the Israel Defense Forces on June 25, 2002. He would later die fighting on behalf of Hezbollah in Syria's civil war. For more information, see Stewart Bell, "Analysis: Hezbollah terrorist a capable and growing presence," *National Post*, July 20, 2012.

Table 1: Alleged Plots Involving Hezbollah Using Social Media to Recruit Palestinians for Attacks Against Israel

Date of Arrest	Alleged Recruiter	Alleged Recruitment Method	Alleged Recruit Name or Cell Ringleader (age at time of arrest)	Alleged Recruit Location	Alleged Objectives	Alleged Preparation
January 2016 ⁸³	Jawad Nasrallah (Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's son); Handler: "Fadi" ⁸⁴	Facebook page, email, and encrypted communications ⁸⁵	Muhammad Zaghloul (32) (recruited four others ranging in age from 19 to 28) ⁸⁶	Tulkarem (east of the Israeli town of Netanya) ⁸⁷	Suicide bombing; ⁸⁸ shooting attack targeting IDF troops and an additional objective to assassinate IDF officer; ⁸⁹ recruit others ⁹⁰	Hezbollah sent \$5,000 (intended to send \$25,000); operatives then bought a submachine gun and ammunition; authorities detained cell while armed; suggests cell was operational ⁹¹
March 2016 ⁹²	Mehmed Fa'iz Abu-Jadian ⁹³	Facebook and encrypted communications ⁹⁴	Usama Nu'af Sid Najm (36) ⁹⁵	Qabalan (southeast of Nablus) ⁹⁶	Conduct suicide bombing targeting an Israeli bus; ⁹⁷ recruit others ⁹⁸	Received \$900 ⁹⁹
May 2016 ¹⁰⁰	Abu-Jadian ¹⁰¹	Facebook, telephone, and email ¹⁰²	Ma'amun Issam Abd al-Rahman Nashrati (22) ¹⁰³	Jenin (northern West Bank) ¹⁰⁴	Shooting attack targeting IDF troops; ¹⁰⁵ recruit others ¹⁰⁶	Told to buy M-16 assault rifle, cell promised \$8,000 if attack was successful ¹⁰⁷
June 2016 ¹⁰⁸	Abu-Jadian ¹⁰⁹	Facebook, telephone, email, and encrypted communications ¹¹⁰	Mustafa Ali Mahmoud Basharat (49) ¹¹¹	Tamum (northeast of Nablus) ¹¹²	Intelligence operations; ¹¹³ construction of an explosive device ¹¹⁴	Recruit expressed interest to build explosives; arrested before major preparations initiated ¹¹⁵
June 2016 ¹¹⁶	"Bilal" ¹¹⁷	Facebook page and encrypted communications ¹¹⁸	Cell leader: Mustafa Kamal Hindi (18); others ranging from age 18 to 22 ¹¹⁹	Qalqiliya (east of the Israeli town of Kefar Sava) ¹²⁰	IED attacks targeting IDF patrols in the West Bank; ¹²¹ shooting attack targeting IDF patrols in the West Bank; ¹²² recruit others ¹²³	Started building explosive devices ¹²⁴
January 2017 ¹²⁵	"Abu Hassin" ¹²⁶	Facebook page ¹²⁷	Yusef Yasser Suylam (23) ¹²⁸	Qalqiliya (east of the Israeli town of Kefar Sava) ¹²⁹	Kidnap Israeli hostages for transfer to Hezbollah in Lebanon; ¹³⁰ surveillance of IDF bases; ¹³¹ reconnaissance of security crossings, sites in Jerusalem; ¹³² recruit others ¹³³	Arrested before major preparations initiated ¹³⁴

Citations

- 1 "Hezbollah Handled a Palestinian Squad in Tulkarm, Which Planned Terrorist Attacks," Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, January 24, 2016; Yaakov Lappin, "Terror Prince: Hezbollah Leader's Son Led Terror Cell in West Bank, says Shin Bet," *Jerusalem Post*, January 20, 2016.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 See, for example, Amos Harel, "How Israel Stopped a Third Palestinian Intifada," *Haaretz*, April 10, 2019.
- 4 "Hezbollah Handled a Palestinian Squad in Tulkarm, Which Planned Terrorist Attacks;" Lappin.
- 5 Liz Sly and James McAuley, "Attacks Blamed on Israel Across Three Middle East Countries Ratchet Up Tensions," *Washington Post*, August 26, 2019.
- 6 Yoav Zitun, "Shin Bet: Iran tried to enlist Israelis, Palestinians for espionage, terror," YNet News, July 24, 2019.
- 7 Yaniv Kubovich, "Hezbollah Operative Said Killed by Israel Recruited Members in Syrian Golan Heights," *Haaretz*, July 24, 2019; "Hezbollah Entrenching Itself in Syrian Golan, Establishing Terror Infrastructure, Israeli Army Says," *Haaretz*, March 13, 2019.
- 8 Seth G. Jones, "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East," Center for Strategic & International Studies, March 11, 2019; Ephraim Kam, "Is Iran About to Operate the Land Corridor to Syria?" Institute for National Security Studies *Insight No. 1021*, February 14, 2018.
- 9 See, for example, R. Kim Cragin and Ari Weil, "'Virtual Planners' in the Arsenal of Islamic State External Operations," *Orbis* 62:2 (2018): pp. 294-312; Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Seamus Hughes, "The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State's Virtual Entrepreneurs," *CTC Sentinel* 10:3 (2017); Rukmini Callimachi, "Not 'Lone Wolves' After All: How ISIS Guides World's Terror Plots From Afar," *New York Times*, February 4, 2017; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Madeleine Blackman, "ISIL's Virtual Planners: A Critical Terrorist Innovation," *War on the Rocks*, January 4, 2017; Bridget Moreng, "ISIS' Virtual Puppeteers," *Foreign Affairs*, September 21, 2016.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 See, for example, Rita Katz, "Almost Any Messaging App Will Do – If You're ISIS," VICE, July 14, 2016; Ahmad Shehabat, Teodor Mitew and Yahia Alzoubi, "Encrypted Jihad: Investigating the Role of Telegram App in Lone Wolf Attacks in the West" *Journal of Strategic Security* 10:3 (2017): pp. 27-53; and Callimachi.
- 12 Gartenstein-Ross and Blackman.
- 13 Matthew Levitt, "Iran's Support for Terrorism in the Middle East," Testimony submitted to the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern and Central Asian Affairs, July 25, 2012.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ben Hartman, "Massacre Survivors Mark 10-Years at Netanya Hotel," *Jerusalem Post*, March 28, 2012.
- 17 Molly Moore and John Ward Anderson, "Suicide Bombers Change Middle East's Military Balance," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2002.
- 18 Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), p. 214.
- 19 Ibid., p. 215.
- 20 See Ibid., pp. 208-245.
- 21 Ibid., p. 232.
- 22 Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*, p. 233.
- 23 "Arrest of Hezbollah agent from Kalansua," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 6, 2008.
- 24 David Daoud, "Hezbollah tries to shift attention to the West Bank," FDD's Long War Journal, February 5, 2016.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 See, for example, Judah Ari Gross, "Hezbollah Terror Cells, Set up via Facebook in West Bank and Israel, Busted by Shin Bet," *Times of Israel*, August 16, 2016.
- 29 Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's West Bank Terror Network," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August-September 2003.
- 30 Ely Karmon, "Iran Funding Palestinian Terrorism," *Times of Israel*, March 1, 2016.
- 31 "Hezbollah Fighters Killed in Israeli Attack," Al Jazeera, January 19, 2015.
- 32 "Defence Minister: Iran Will Use Potential to Arm West Bank, Lebanese Hezbollah," Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA), BBC Worldwide Monitoring, January 27, 2015. Throughout this period, numerous high-profile regime figures praised Iran's efforts to arm Palestinians in the West Bank.
- 33 "Iran Must Strengthen Foothold in West Bank: IRGC Commander," Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, February 3, 2015.
- 34 Dan Williams, "Israel Says Iran Recruited Palestinian Militants Via South Africa," Reuters, January 3, 2018.
- 35 Anna Anronheim, "Shin Bet Foils Iranian Effort to Recruit Israeli Spies Via Social Media," *Jerusalem Post*, July 25, 2019.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Raz Zimmt, "Spotlight on Iran June 16-30, 2019," Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, June 2019.
- 40 Zeina Karam and Bassem Mroue, "Militant or poet? US sanctions Hezbollah leader's son," Associated Press, November 15, 2018.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 "Mystery hangs over sanctioned son of Hezbollah leader," *National*, November 13, 2018.
- 44 Yoav Zitun and Rol Kais, "Nasrallah's son directed West Bank terror cell," YNet News, January 20, 2016.
- 45 Yossi Melman, "Analysis: Why was Nasrallah's Son Recruiting Terrorists in the West Bank?" *Jerusalem Post*, January 20, 2016.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 "State Department Terrorist Designations of Jawad Nasrallah, al-Mujahidin Brigades, and Hizballah," U.S. Embassy in Lebanon, November 13, 2018.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 "Mystery hangs over sanctioned son of Hezbollah leader."
- 51 Gross, "Hezbollah Terror Cells."
- 52 Yoav Zitun, "Coded Messages and Money Transfers: How Hezbollah Recruits West Bank Terrorists," YNet News, January 21, 2016; "Hezbollah Handled a Palestinian Squad in Tulkarm."
- 53 "Hezbollah Handled a Palestinian Squad in Tulkarm."
- 54 Yonah Jeremy Bob and Danielle Ziri, "Hezbollah Cells in West Bank Busted by Israeli Security Forces," *Jerusalem Post*, August 16, 2016.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 See "Hezbollah Handled a Palestinian Squad in Tulkarm;" Bob and Ziri; and Yoav Zitun, "Shin Bet Catches Hezbollah Recruitment Cell in the West Bank," YNet News, August 16, 2016.
- 58 "Israel Arrests Palestinian Hezbollah Suspect who Planned Kidnapping, Terror Attacks," *Jerusalem Post*, March 9, 2017.
- 59 See "Hezbollah Handled a Palestinian Squad in Tulkarm;" Bob and Ziri; and Zitun, "Shin Bet Catches Hezbollah Recruitment Cell in the West Bank."
- 60 "Hezbollah Handled a Palestinian Squad in Tulkarm."
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Bob and Ziri.
- 64 Zitun, "Shin Bet Catches Hezbollah Recruitment Cell in the West Bank."
- 65 See Bob and Ziri.
- 66 Kubovich.
- 67 "Wave of Terror 2015-2019," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 8, 2019.
- 68 Anronheim; Zimmt.
- 69 Congressional Research Service, "Iran and Israel: Tensions Over Syria," *CRS in Focus*, June 5, 2019.
- 70 Gabriel Weimann, "Hezbollah Dot Com: Hezbollah's Online Campaign" in Dan Caspi and Tal Samuel-Azran eds., *New Media and Innovative Technologies* (Beer-Sheva, Israel: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2008), pp. 17-38.
- 71 Daniel Sobelman, "Learning to Deter: Deterrence Failure and Success in the Israel-Hezbollah Conflict, 2006-16," *International Security* 41:3 (2017): pp. 151-196.
- 72 "Hezbollah and Israel: A Timeline of Cross-border Attacks," Al Jazeera, September 9, 2019; James McAuley, Liz Sly, and Ruth Eglash, "Hezbollah

- Retaliates Against Israel with a Missile; Israel Fires Back at Lebanon," *Washington Post*, September 1, 2019.
- 73 The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, an Israeli research institute, has produced several short commentaries on Hezbollah's virtual operations after Israel's security authorities release case information. These publications have been cited throughout this article.
- 74 Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*.
- 75 "Bulgarian bus attack is work of suicide bomber, minister stays," CNN, July 19, 2012; Nicholas Kulish, Eric Schmitt, and Matthew Brunwasser, "Bulgaria Implicates Hezbollah in July Attack on Israelis," *New York Times*, February 5, 2013.
- 76 Elior Levy, "Secret Palestinian Report Warns of Danger of New Intifada," YNet News, January 2, 2014.
- 77 Yasser Okbi and Maariv Hashavua, "Report: Hezbollah enlisting West Bank youth to carry out terror attacks against Israel," *Jerusalem Post*, August 30, 2015.
- 78 Ibid.
- 79 "Israel Bans Palestinian Youth Group as Front for Iran, Hizballah," Radio Free Europe, July 12, 2016.
- 80 Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace: The Next Generation* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2015), p. 27.
- 81 "Hezbollah Handled a Palestinian Squad in Tulkarm."
- 82 "Israeli Teen Badly Hurt in West Bank Stabbing Attack After Visiting Dentist," *Times of Israel*, September 7, 2019; Amos Harel, "Not Just Palestinian 'Lone Wolves': Israeli Teen's Murder Points to Organized West Bank Cells," *Haaretz*, August 24, 2019; "Israeli Teenage Girl Killed in West Bank Bomb Attack," BBC, August 23, 2019.
- 83 "Hezbollah Handled a Palestinian Squad in Tulkarm."
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 Ibid.
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 Ibid.
- 88 Ibid.
- 89 Ibid.; Zitun, "Coded Messages and Money Transfers."
- 90 "Hezbollah Handled a Palestinian Squad in Tulkarm."
- 91 Ibid.
- 92 Gross, "Hezbollah Terror Cells."
- 93 Ibid.
- 94 Ibid.
- 95 Ibid.
- 96 Ibid.
- 97 Ibid.
- 98 Ibid.
- 99 Ibid.
- 100 Ibid.
- 101 Ibid.
- 102 Ibid.
- 103 Ibid.
- 104 Ibid.
- 105 Ibid.
- 106 Ibid.
- 107 Ibid.
- 108 Bob and Ziri.
- 109 Ibid.
- 110 Ibid.; Gross, "Hezbollah Terror Cells."
- 111 Bob and Ziri.
- 112 Gross, "Hezbollah Terror Cells."
- 113 Ibid.
- 114 Ibid.
- 115 Ibid.
- 116 Zitun, "Shin Bet Catches Hezbollah Recruitment Cell in the West Bank."
- 117 Ibid.
- 118 Ibid.
- 119 Ibid.
- 120 Ibid.
- 121 Ibid.
- 122 Ibid.
- 123 Ibid.
- 124 Ibid.
- 125 "Israel Arrests Palestinian Hezbollah Suspect who Planned Kidnapping, Terror Attacks."
- 126 Judah Ari Gross, "Shin Bet: Hezbollah operative in West Bank planned kidnappings," *Times of Israel*, March 9, 2017.
- 127 "Israel Arrests Palestinian Hezbollah Suspect who Planned Kidnapping, Terror Attacks."
- 128 Ibid.
- 129 Ibid.
- 130 Ibid.
- 131 Ibid.
- 132 Ibid.
- 133 Ibid.
- 134 Ibid.