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FEATURE ARTICLE

Colleyville and the Enduring Threat Related to Aafia Siddiqui

BENNETT CLIFFORD

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

David Caulfield

FORMER CHIEF, DEFENSE COMBATING
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FROM THE EDITOR

“The January 15, 2022, hostage crisis at a Jewish synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, resurfaced a longstanding jihadi cause when the armed hostage-taker demanded the release of Dr. Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist-turned-al-Qa`ida-operative currently serving an 86-year-sentence in an American prison for attempting to murder U.S. troops in Afghanistan,” writes Bennett Clifford in this month’s feature article, which looks at how her case continues to motivate jihadi terror plots in the United States. Clifford argues that “the factors that initially skyrocketed her case as a *cause célèbre* for jihadis have grown in importance. The jihadi movement, particularly in the West, has had a particularly intense focus on the plight of Western women jihadis behind bars during the past several years ... [and] Siddiqui is the prototype for the ‘*aseerat*,’ the female prisoners of the jihadi movement who are constantly the subject of propaganda pushes, crowdfunding campaigns, and jihadi operational activities.”

Our interview is with David Caulfield, who served as Chief of the Defense Combating Terrorism Center at the Defense Intelligence Agency before his retirement earlier this year.

Daniel Heinke assesses that the *Querdenken* protest movement in Germany, which emerged in 2020 in opposition to government COVID-19 measures, is “apparently open to conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism” and has become “a serious threat to public security.” He notes that not only did *Querdenken* protestors attempt to storm Germany’s parliament building in August 2020, prefiguring the January 6 U.S. Capitol riot, but an alleged 2021 plot to assassinate Saxony’s premier was “reportedly fueled by corona-skeptic grievances and apparently had linkages to the broader *Querdenken* movement.” He writes: “The threat posed by the movement is that it can fuel anti-government sentiments and thus may form a gateway for the acceptance of more extremist views and ultimately for the belief that resorting to violence may be acceptable or even necessary to defend rights.”

Audrey Alexander and Teddy MacDonald examine how jihadi terrorists in Syria move, hide, and access funds using digital currencies. They assess that “All in all, digital currencies are not replacing other methods of terror finance. Instead, terrorists in Syria often use digital currencies in conjunction with other money service businesses and transfer methods.”

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Cover: Police are pictured in front of the Congregation Beth Israel synagogue on January 16, 2022, in Colleyville, Texas, the day after Malik Faisal Akram held hostages there for more than 10 hours. (Brandon Wade/AP Photo)

The Colleyville Hostage Crisis: Aafia Siddiqui's Continued Pertinence in Jihadi Terror Plots against the United States

By Bennett Clifford

The January 15, 2022, hostage crisis at a Jewish synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, resurfaced a longstanding jihadi cause when the armed hostage-taker demanded the release of Dr. Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist-turned-al-Qaeda-operative currently serving an 86-year sentence in an American prison for attempting to murder U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Since Siddiqui's 2010 conviction, a laundry list of violent Islamist groups around the world have attempted to broker prisoner exchanges to secure her release and appealed to their followers to fight on her behalf. Evaluating the Colleyville hostage crisis and similar plots in the United States with a nexus to Siddiqui's case, this article traces why Siddiqui remains a major figure in the jihadi movement in the West.

On the morning of Saturday, January 15, 2022, at 10:00 AM local time, a man later identified as 44-year-old British national Malik Faisal Akram entered Congregation Beth Israel, a Jewish synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, and took four individuals hostage at gunpoint during a livestreaming of Shabbat morning services.¹ Local police arrived at the scene at approximately 12:30 PM.² During negotiations with police, Akram demanded the release of Dr. Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist who was convicted in 2010 of attempting to murder U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan.³ Siddiqui is currently serving an 86-year sentence at a federal prison in nearby Fort Worth, Texas.⁴

Throughout the hostage crisis, Akram espoused anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, told hostages that he expected to be “going to Jannah [heaven]” after the conclusion of the standoff, and repeatedly demanded to talk to Siddiqui.⁵ At 5:00 PM, Akram released one hostage but continued to hold three others as negotiations with the FBI, local police, and his own family continued.⁶ One hostage—the congregation's rabbi, Charlie Cytron-Walker—reported that Akram became “increasingly belligerent and threatening” in the later parts of the standoff.⁷ At around 9:00 PM, two FBI Hostage Rescue Teams (HRT), which had arrived on the scene earlier that day after being mobilized by the FBI in the early hours of the crisis, prepared to breach the synagogue.⁸ Shortly thereafter, at 9:33PM local time, Texas Governor Greg Abbott and local police sources confirmed that the HRT breached the synagogue and that the remaining

hostages escaped unharmed.⁹ During the rescue, Akram was shot and killed by HRT officers.¹⁰ In total, the standoff lasted 11 hours.¹¹

The FBI's Joint Terrorism Taskforce is currently investigating the Colleyville hostage crisis as “a terrorism-related matter, in which the Jewish community was targeted.”¹² In the weeks following the attack, law enforcement investigations in the United States and United Kingdom and reporting by international media have uncovered additional information about Akram's background, motives, planning process, and travel from the United Kingdom.¹³ Prior to the attack, Akram's longstanding financial problems, criminal record, and mental health issues were well-known to the local community in his hometown of Blackburn, as was his involvement in the conservative Islamist Tablighi Jamaat movement.¹⁴ According to media reports, he was a known figure to British counterterrorism authorities, having been the subject of a 2001 court exclusion order for making threatening comments about the 9/11 attacks, two referrals to the British counter-extremism program PREVENT in 2016 and 2019, and a 2020 counterterrorism investigation by MI5.¹⁵

Despite this, White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters that “the U.S. government did not have any derogatory information” about Akram when he arrived in the United States at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport on December 29, 2021.¹⁶ After his arrival, Akram reportedly traveled to Dallas around New Year's Day, stayed in several homeless shelters in the area between January 1 and January 15, and purchased the Taurus Model G2C semiautomatic pistol used in the hostage-taking two days before the attack.^a FBI and British law enforcement investigations into Akram's pre-incident planning are ongoing. On January 26, 2022, the U.S. Department of Justice charged the individual who allegedly sold Akram the pistol he used in the hostage-taking with unlawful possession of a firearm.¹⁷ Throughout January 2022, police in the United Kingdom arrested six individuals in Manchester and Birmingham in connection with the Colleyville incident, including two of Akram's teenage sons; all were eventually released without

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a A complete accounting of Akram's whereabouts, especially where he stayed each night during the two weeks he spent in the Dallas area before the attack, is currently not publicly available. Jack Douglas, Matt Zapotosky, and Marc Fisher, “Angry Outbursts and Cool Determination: Inside the Synagogue Attacker's 18-Day Journey to Terror,” *Washington Post*, January 22, 2022; “Criminal Complaint,” *United States of America v. Henry Dwight Williams*, United States District Court for the Northern District of Texas, January 25, 2022.

charge.^b

While more details about Akram and the Colleyville siege are likely forthcoming, the initial information, confirmed by the FBI, that Akram demanded Siddiqui's release connects his plot to dozens of attempts by jihadi groups and their supporters in the West toward freeing Siddiqui from U.S. federal prison.¹⁸ To this end, this article examines the enduring role of Siddiqui's case for American jihadis, evaluating the Colleyville hostage crisis within the context of over a decade of jihadi efforts to secure her release from prison through various means. Beginning with a brief summary of Siddiqui's case and role in the jihadi movement, the article then explains how freeing Siddiqui has become a *cause célèbre* for jihadis around the world, particularly in the West. It then evaluates the Colleyville siege alongside other American jihadi plots with a nexus to Siddiqui since her arrest, documenting instances of attack plots with inspirational ties to Siddiqui and attempts by Americans to secure her release through attacking prisons and taking hostages. Finally, the article offers a brief assessment of what the Colleyville hostage crisis and its linkages to Siddiqui might augur for future jihadi activity in the United States.

Who is Aafia Siddiqui?

Aafia Siddiqui is a singular figure within the history of jihadism, particularly in the West. Her case has understandably acquired a great deal of international interest and scrutiny, especially after her arrest, conviction, and imprisonment during the early 2010s. Without a doubt, the high-profile nature of her case and her relatively unique status as a woman with a reported operational role in al-Qa`ida contributed to her infamy, as does the enduring belief among her supporters that she was unjustly convicted.¹⁹ Nevertheless, decades after her story initially made headlines, today's jihadi groups remain committed to ensuring her release from prison and continue to use her imprisonment as a propaganda device.

Born in Karachi, Pakistan, Siddiqui traveled to the United States on a student visa in 1990, eventually settling in the Boston area and enrolling in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.²⁰ She later obtained a doctorate in cognitive neuroscience from Brandeis University in 2001.²¹ In June 2002, Siddiqui returned to Pakistan with her children after divorcing her first husband.²² The U.S. government and several other sources believe that she remarried in 2003 to Ammar al-Baluchi, an al-Qa`ida operative and a key lieutenant of his uncle Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the alleged mastermind of the 9/11 attacks.^c Reportedly, according



Aafia Siddiqui (FBI)

to intelligence assessments from interrogations of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, between 2002 and 2003, Siddiqui provided assistance to a Khalid Sheikh Mohammed-directed operation to smuggle explosives and al-Qa`ida operatives into the United States and United Kingdom for attacks.²³ These reports further allege that Siddiqui traveled from Pakistan to the United States in January 2003 to apply for travel documents and open a post office box in Baltimore, Maryland, for Majid Khan, another al-Qa`ida operative who planned to conduct attacks in the United States.²⁴ The plot collapsed when Khan was arrested in Pakistan.²⁵

Two months after her reported January 2003 visit to the United States, the FBI issued a "seeking information" notice relating to an active counterterrorism investigation on Siddiqui.²⁶ Days later, her parents reported that she had disappeared from their house in Karachi.²⁷ Sources vary as to Siddiqui's whereabouts between March 2003 and July 2008. The U.S. government claims that after the FBI issued its notice, Siddiqui fled with al-Baluchi and other al-Qa`ida operatives to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area, which at the time was an al-Qa`ida safe haven.²⁸ In contrast, the government of Pakistan, her family, and many of her supporters claim that she was being held incommunicado by the U.S. military in various facilities, including at the Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan.²⁹ On May 26, 2004, the FBI named Aafia Siddiqui as one of its most wanted terrorists, making her the first woman wanted by the FBI for her role in al-Qa`ida.³⁰ Former Central Intelligence Agency counterterrorism analyst Rolf Mowatt-Larssen claimed in a 2012 interview that Siddiqui was the only woman at the time on the CIA's authorized "kill or capture" list.³¹

On July 17, 2008, Afghan National Police officers in the city of Ghazni approached a woman who was loitering outside of the provincial governor's office, holding several bags.³² The officers became suspicious when the woman did not speak either of Afghanistan's main languages, detained her, and conducted a search of her luggage.³³ They found, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, "numerous documents describing the creation of explosives, as well as excerpts from the Anarchist's Arsenal ... descriptions of various landmarks in the United States, including in New York City,"

b This figure comprises two teenagers arrested in south Manchester, believed to be Akram's sons, on January 17, 2022; two men arrested in Birmingham and Manchester on January 20, 2022; and two men arrested in Manchester on January 26, 2022. "Texas Synagogue Siege: Teens Held in UK as Briton Named as Hostage-Taker," BBC, January 17, 2022; Jessica Murray, "Police Arrest Two Men in UK over Texas Synagogue Attack," *Guardian*, January 20, 2022; "Texas Synagogue Siege: Two Men Arrested in Manchester," BBC, January 26, 2022; Sean Gleaves, "Manchester Man Released Following Arrest in Texas Synagogue Siege Investigation," *Lancashire Post*, January 31, 2022.

c The Siddiqui family denies that this marriage took place, contra U.S. and Pakistani intelligence. Notably, Ammar al-Baluchi is also the cousin of Ramzi Yousef, convicted for his role in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. "Detainee Biographies," Office of the Director of National Intelligence, September 6, 2006.

as well as “substances that were sealed in bottles and glass jars.”^d The next day, a team of U.S. federal law enforcement officers and military personnel arrived at the police station where the woman was being held. The DOJ claimed that the woman, later identified as Siddiqui, recovered an unsecured U.S. Army M-4 rifle from an Army Warrant Officer present at the scene and fired the rifle at the U.S. personnel.^e The Warrant Officer returned fire with a sidearm, striking Siddiqui in the stomach, and subdued her.³⁴ As a result of her injury, Siddiqui lost consciousness and was transferred to Forward Operating Base Orgun-E in southeastern Afghanistan to receive medical aid.³⁵

On August 4, 2008, after receiving treatment for her gunshot wound, Siddiqui was extradited to the United States to face trial on several federal charges of attempted murder and assault with a deadly weapon.³⁶ After a drawn-out trial process, involving a series of medical and psychological evaluations and frequent endeavors by Siddiqui to frame the trial as a ‘Zionist’ conspiracy against her, on February 3, 2010, a jury found Aafia Siddiqui guilty on all charges.³⁷ Later that year, she was sentenced to 86 years in federal prison.³⁸ She has served the majority of her sentence in the Federal Medical Center (FMC) Carswell in Fort Worth, Texas, a federal prison mainly for women with special medical, mental health, or security management needs.³⁹

How “Free Aafia Siddiqui” Became a Jihadi Cause Célèbre

As evidenced by the recent hostage-taking in Colleyville, jihadis remain fascinated by Siddiqui’s case more than a decade after her arrest and imprisonment. Arguably, no incarcerated jihadi alive today has elicited the same outpouring of support, propagandization, and effort by jihadi organizations and their acolytes to release them from prison. This specialized distinction for Siddiqui is in spite of the fact that dozens of major jihadi figures are currently or were previously imprisoned in the United States concurrently with Siddiqui. The list includes high-profile jihadi ideologues (Abu Hamza al-Masri, Omar Abdel Rahman, Abdullah al-Faisal, Ali al-Timimi, Ahmad Musa Jibril), operatives (Ramzi Yousef, Zacarias Moussaoui, Richard Reid, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev), and attack planners (Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Abu Zubaydah, Ammar al-Baluchi).⁴⁰

Indeed, Aafia Siddiqui is not the only incarcerated jihadi whose

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cause al-Qa`ida and other organizations have promoted in recent years, or the only subject of demands for the release of jihadi prisoners. Yet, despite their status and prominent roles within the jihadi movement, no other currently imprisoned jihadi has received the same frequency and intensity of attention to their cause as Siddiqui. In the 14 years since her capture, various jihadi groups, including several al-Qa`ida branches, the Islamic State, and the Taliban, have offered to trade captive Americans and other Westerners to the U.S. government in exchange for Siddiqui’s release and have used Siddiqui’s case as a focal point of their propaganda efforts.⁴¹ Perpetrators of major jihadi terrorist attacks, including the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan-linked suicide bomber who conducted the 2009 attack on Forward Operating Base Chapman that killed several CIA employees and contractors, claimed that revenge for Siddiqui’s capture was a motivation for their attacks.⁴²

The promotion of Siddiqui’s cause within the jihadi movement by its leaders and in its propaganda has also had an indelible effect in the minds of its supporters across the world. By tracing a line between jihadi narratives and the Colleyville hostage-taker Malik Faisal Akram’s worldview, as expressed in a call that he made to his brother and other statements during the hostage negotiations, three prevalent themes emerge that help explain why Siddiqui’s case is continually and vitally important for the jihadi movement.^f These themes also help connect the Colleyville hostage crisis to other jihadi plots with connections to Siddiqui.

The first theme centers on gendered narratives within the jihadi movement. Siddiqui is not the most high-value al-Qa`ida operative currently behind bars, but she is arguably the most high-

d The items that the Afghan police found during the search are detailed in full in the U.S. Attorneys’ sentencing memorandum from Siddiqui’s trial. They include personal effects, approximately two pounds of the poison sodium cyanide, Siddiqui’s handwritten documents describing weapons construction, anti-drone measures, and mass-casualty attacks (including the construction of radioactive “dirty bombs”), printed instructional materials in English and Urdu on constructing explosives, and a thumbdrive with electronic documents on conducting chemical weapons. Apart from the sodium cyanide found on her person, the precise makeup of the “substances sealed in bottles and glass jars” was not described in court documents, but the U.S. Attorney noted that several of the chemicals “can be used in explosives.” “Aafia Siddiqui Arrested for Attempting to Kill United States Officers in Afghanistan,” U.S. Department of Justice, August 4, 2008; “Government’s Sentencing Submission,” *United States of America v. Aafia Siddiqui*, United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, July 29, 2010.

e Many of Siddiqui’s supporters still dispute the ensuing version of these events, but a federal jury found Siddiqui guilty of these allegations beyond a reasonable doubt.

f This article frequently cites a phone call between Akram and his brother that took place during the commission of the siege. All available evidence shows that Akram’s brother attempted to end the siege, urging Akram to “release the hostages, serve time in prison, and return home to his family.” “Exclusive: Texas Synagogue Terrorist Ranted about ‘F***ing Jews’ in Last Call to Family Made during Siege,” *Jewish Chronicle*, January 19, 2022; Douglas, Zapotosky, and Fisher.



Police are pictured in front of the Congregation Beth Israel synagogue on January 16, 2022, in Colleyville, Texas, the day after Malik Faisal Akram held hostages there for more than 10 hours. (Brandon Wade/AP Photo)

value female al-Qa`ida operative currently behind bars.⁸ Jihadi propaganda has exploited this fact to a great extent by making appeals to their male followers' concept of masculinity, depicting Siddiqui as the paragon of "the chaste Muslim woman ... who is undergoing persecution from the forces of Kufr [disbelief] and their apostate Muslim allies and clients."⁴³ Highlighting Siddiqui's case specifically, scholar Nelly Lahoud has argued that jihadi propaganda has benefited immensely from her incarceration, as they are able to use her case "as a recruiting tool to highlight Muslim men's lost honor and awaken feelings of chivalry in their psyche by calling on them to join jihad."⁴⁴

Among supporters of the global jihadi movement, this theme is resonant in a dual sense: It appeals to their position that the men of the movement are responsible for using force to defend oppressed women from persecution and, more importantly, shames men by

depicting a woman who is wholly committed to the movement, encouraging those potentially "on the fence" into mobilization and violent action.⁴⁵ These themes have been present in earlier jihadi messaging about Siddiqui from the time of her conviction, such as Ayman al-Zawahiri's speech "Who Will Support Scientist Aafia Siddiqui?" in 2010 and "Prisoner 650," a post from Anwar al-Awlaki about Siddiqui's imprisonment.⁴⁶ The jihadi movement sustains this narrative about women operatives and gender through a barrage of propaganda that simultaneously utilizes the plight of Siddiqui as both a bargaining chip and a call to action for supporters of the movement.⁴⁷ In the final call he made to his family, Akram drew on these narratives by using Siddiqui's case as an example of the jihadi responsibility to defend the honor of Muslim women against the perceived enemies of Islam: "They will never take another woman from a Muslim ... they come into our [expletive] countries and rape our women and [expletive] our kids ... I'm setting a precedent."⁴⁸

Second, unlike many of Siddiqui's imprisoned jihadi contemporaries, calls for her release are not limited to jihadi circles but are also common among a wider swath of Islamist actors, as well as more mainstream Muslim movements and various parts of American society. Many of the non-jihadi actors that support Siddiqui's release would be unlikely to call for the release of other imprisoned jihadis. Notably, the government of Pakistan has been a constant intercessor for her case and has made repeated diplomatic requests to the United States for her release.⁴⁹ In the fall of 2021, just months before the attack in Colleyville, a coalition of organizations led by the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) and Siddiqui's family launched protests in several American cities under the banner of the "Free Dr. Aafia Movement."⁵⁰ Some secular labor

⁸ A case could be made that prior to 2015, the failed suicide bomber Sajida al-Rishawi may have rivaled Siddiqui for this dubious honor. After al-Rishawi's explosive belt failed to detonate during the November 9, 2005, coordinated bombings of several hotels in Amman, Jordan, by al-Qa`ida in Iraq, she was arrested and sentenced to death by a Jordanian court. During her 10 years in prison, al-Rishawi also elicited some notable interest from the jihadi movement, most notably in January 2015 when the Islamic State offered to trade imprisoned Royal Jordanian Air Force pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh and Japanese journalist Kenji Goto to secure al-Rishawi's release. The Kingdom of Jordan agreed to the terms of swapping al-Kasasbeh for al-Rishawi, but when the Islamic State failed to provide verifiable proof of life for al-Kasasbeh, the deal collapsed. On February 4, 2015, hours after the Islamic State released a video of its executioners burning al-Kasasbeh alive, Jordan executed al-Rishawi by hanging. Ray Sanchez, "Who was Sajida al-Rishawi? And why did ISIS care about her?" CNN, February 4, 2015.

and anti-war groups in the United States have also signed petitions to the U.S. government on her behalf.⁵¹ In the aftermath of the hostage-taking in Colleyville, each of these organizations released statements decrying the use of violence on behalf of Siddiqui's cause.⁵² Nevertheless, the heightened exposure of this case and her imprisonment in the United States may be contributing in part to her notoriety among jihadis, particularly in the West. It is possible that Western jihadis may misinterpret non-jihadi statements about Siddiqui's plight as further justification for violent action, even if non-jihadi calls for her release promote a non-violent response.⁵³

This is particularly true when non-jihadis promote the idea that a broader Jewish or Zionist conspiracy is responsible for Siddiqui's imprisonment or mistreatment. Rather than make legitimate legal arguments for her release, many individuals and groups involved with her case, including Siddiqui herself, prefer and propagate anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.⁵⁴ During her trial, Siddiqui infamously attempted to fire her lawyers because she believed they were Jewish, demanded that all jurors be DNA-tested to prove they didn't have "Zionist or Israeli" backgrounds, and wrote an anti-Semitic missive to then-President Obama from prison, urging him to "study the history of the Jews ... they have always back-stabbed everyone."⁵⁵

The impact of these theories was on full display during the Colleyville crisis, in both the choice of target and the perpetrator's statements. Echoing Siddiqui's constant allegations of a broader Jewish conspiracy, Akram told his brother that "she's got 84 years right, they [expletive] framed her ... even if they don't release Dr. Aafia, who gives a [expletive] ... maybe they'll have compassion for [expletive] Jews."⁵⁶ Rabbi Cytron-Walker told the media that Akram "literally thought Jews control the world ... [that] we could get on the phone with the 'Chief Rabbi of America' and he could get what he needed."⁵⁷ Jihadis sometimes share these sentiments with more mainstream actors (despite disagreeing over the appropriate response), including some of Siddiqui's most ardent non-jihadi supporters. For instance, a month before the Colleyville attack, a local office director for CAIR who has been a longstanding advocate for Siddiqui's cause told an audience at a conference that "Zionist synagogues" and major Jewish organizations were "enemies," part of a conspiracy responsible for Islamophobia, police brutality against African-Americans, and the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border.⁵⁸

Finally, because of Siddiqui's current custody situation and the perception that her cause is acceptable within a broader range of American society, jihadi organizations and their supporters may believe that operations to free Siddiqui—either through hostage-taking and exchange or through direct assaults on prisons—are more feasible. Despite the fact that the U.S. government has repeatedly turned down demands by jihadis to release Siddiqui in exchange for hostages, they continue to make the same request time after time.⁵⁹ Each time a jihadi group does so, it draws attention to Siddiqui's case both inside and outside the jihadi movement. Even though the U.S. government is extremely unlikely to accede to their demands, jihadis may view constantly mentioning Siddiqui's case as a way to galvanize support within American society for her release.⁶⁰ This process represents a rare opportunity for jihadis to elicit a wider degree of public sympathy in the United States for one of their causes.

Moreover, while planning attacks on prisons to release major leaders has been a core *modus operandi* for the jihadi movement for decades, freeing prisoners in U.S. custody poses additional difficulties.⁶¹ Most of the aforementioned major jihadi figures in

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U.S. prisons are currently housed in the United States Penitentiary-Administrative Maximum Facility (ADMAX) in Florence, Colorado, designed to be the most secure facility in the entire American prison system.⁶² While FMC Carswell, where Siddiqui is being held, also has an administrative high-security unit for women deemed as "special management concerns," from a jihadi perspective an attack on FMC Carswell is at least within the realm of possibility, as evidenced by a previous plot against the institution detailed in the next section.^h

While these factors—the role of gendered narratives, mainstream support, and perceived operational feasibility— influence jihadi devotions to Siddiqui's cause across the world, they have understandably been most influential to supporters of the jihadi movement who target the United States or U.S. interests. If the hostage crisis in Colleyville is any indication, the jihadi goal of freeing Aafia Siddiqui is unlikely to abate any time soon. In fact, as the next section details, the hostage crisis was not the first jihadi plot in the United States in recent years with linkages to Siddiqui. Although the investigation into the Colleyville attack is ongoing, it is nevertheless pertinent to place the early findings surrounding the motivations and actions of the attacker within this broader context.

Jihadi Plots Against the United States with a Nexus to Aafia Siddiqui Since 2010

Since her arrest and conviction in 2010, several jihadi plots in the United States or targeting U.S. citizens have had some connection to the case of Aafia Siddiqui. These plots have taken three forms: 1) plots involving perpetrators who drew ideological influence or succor from Siddiqui, 2) plotting to directly free Siddiqui by attacking her federal prison, and 3) plots involving perpetrators

^h It is unclear whether Aafia Siddiqui is housed in this administrative high-security unit, which holds inmates with "mental illness, with histories of escape, chronic behavioral problems, repeated incidents of assaultive or predatory behavior, or other special management concerns." "Review of the Federal Bureau of Prisons' Use of Restrictive Housing for Inmates with Mental Illness," Office of the Inspector General, U.S. Department of Justice, July 2017.

who take hostages and attempt to negotiate Siddiqui's release. These will be examined in turn below.

Intriguingly, although Siddiqui was associated with al-Qa`ida prior to her imprisonment, some of the plots detailed in this section were conducted by Islamic State supporters. This would seemingly place Siddiqui among the category of al-Qa`ida ideological figures and causes that survived the bitter split between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State and continue to be lionized by the latter group's Western followers.⁶³ Several explanations for this are possible, including the fact that Siddiqui was in prison during the entirety of the conflict in Syria and was therefore unable to publicly opine on the split between the two groups.ⁱ In addition, the Islamic State relies on many of the same tropes described in the previous section, including the utilization of female operatives as propaganda to shame men and an emphasis on prisoners and prison breaks, to an equal if not greater extent as its competitors in the jihadi movement.⁶⁴ These factors help explain why Siddiqui's celebrity within the jihadi movement in the West has survived changing tides in its organizational makeup.

Inspirational Linkages

Even from behind bars, Aafia Siddiqui continues to ideologically inspire newer participants in the jihadi movement around the world, including in the United States. Her role may be especially important for female jihadis who are seeking to create space for active participation in attack planning despite ideological restrictions to the contrary.⁶⁵ The scholar Devorah Margolin has noted that in recent years, female followers of the Islamic State who commit and plan attacks outside of the group's previously held territories in Syria and Iraq have forced the group into issuing mixed messages, wherein it "has praised or spoken ambivalently about women who carried out operations ... despite not wanting women to actively take up arms."⁶⁶ Without a clear signal from the group's ideological authorities, women in the West interested in conducting jihadi attacks turned to pertinent, previous examples for inspiration. The Islamic State callouts to prominent women operatives in its English-language propaganda cemented Siddiqui's, among others', legacy for a new generation of jihadi women attack planners.^j

As early as 2006, a New York woman named Asia Siddiqui

(no known relation to Aafia Siddiqui) began contacting several jihadi prisoners in the United States, as well as other Americans associated with the jihadi movement.⁶⁷ She corresponded online with Samir Khan, who at the time managed an English-language jihadi blog called Jihad Recollections before he moved to Yemen in 2009 to join al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).⁶⁸ Between 2010 and 2014, Asia Siddiqui sent letters to three convicted terrorists in U.S. federal prisons: Mohamed Mohamud, convicted in 2013 of attempting to detonate a bomb at a Christmas tree lighting in Portland, Oregon; Tarek Mehanna, found guilty in 2011 of attempting to travel to Yemen to join AQAP and translating propaganda for the group; and, according to a court document released during Asia Siddiqui's 2019 trial, Aafia Siddiqui.⁶⁹ Some evidence suggests that Asia Siddiqui attended Aafia Siddiqui's sentencing hearing in 2010 as a "correspondent" for the Justice for Aafia Coalition.⁷⁰ An article on the group's website that covers the hearing is written by a woman using the same pseudonym that Asia Siddiqui used in her letters to various jihadi prisoners, and the writer notes that "a stranger saw my name and smiled, saying how similar it was to Aafia Siddiqui."⁷¹

After the FBI conducted a 2014 interview with Asia Siddiqui to ask her about her correspondence with jihadis, an investigation found that she had been meeting with Noelle Velentzas, another jihadi sympathizer in New York City, to discuss conducting a bombing on behalf of the Islamic State.⁷² After reviewing the approaches used in similar plots—including jihadi (the 1993 World Trade Center bombing) and non-jihadi attacks (the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing)—the pair resolved to construct an explosive device for use in an attack on law enforcement.⁷³ The Department of Justice noted that Asia Siddiqui and Velentzas "taught each other chemistry and electrical skills related to creating explosives and building detonating devices, conducted research on how to make plastic explosives and how to build a car bomb, and shopped for and acquired materials to be used in an explosive device."⁷⁴ The pair were arrested in April 2015 and pleaded guilty to federal explosives charges in 2019.⁷⁵ In 2021, Asia Siddiqui was sentenced to 15 years in federal prison; her co-conspirator Velentzas received a 16-and-a-half year sentence.⁷⁶

The contents of Asia Siddiqui's earlier correspondence with Aafia Siddiqui have not been released to the public, so it is unclear what specific impact their interaction might have had on Asia Siddiqui's later plot. Nevertheless, shades of Aafia Siddiqui's influence appear throughout the evidence from Asia Siddiqui's and Velentzas' criminal cases. The focus of the two women in 2014 and 2015 on "learning science," including by acquiring chemistry books, bombmaking instructional material, and precursor chemicals, parallels the materials found on Aafia Siddiqui when she was arrested in Afghanistan in 2008.⁷⁷ While these inventories would be common for any jihadi attack planner who is interested in conducting attacks using explosives, examples of women involved in this type of planning are exceptionally rare.⁷⁸ In that regard, the inspirational linkage becomes clearer. Asia Siddiqui and Noelle Velentzas were in many ways following a path within the American jihadi movement that may not have been possible for women if not for Aafia Siddiqui.⁷⁹

Prison Break Plotting

Assaulting prisons to free captive jihadis is a tried-and-true method for jihadi organizations.⁸⁰ By attacking prisons, jihadi groups can

i This is a similar argument to those that compare the impact of English-speaking al-Qa`ida ideologues who were either deceased or in prison at the time of the rise of the Islamic State (e.g., Abu Hamza al-Masri or Anwar al-Awlaki) to those who were not in prison and free to continue their proselytizing (e.g., Ahmad Musa Jibril or Abdullah al-Faisal.) Seamus Hughes, Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, and Bennett Clifford, "The Ideologues," in *Homegrown: ISIS in America* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020); Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, *Incitement: Anwar al-Awlaki's Western Jihad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020); Joseph A. Carter, Shiraz Maher, and Peter Neumann, "#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2014.

j Other women operatives who appeared in the Islamic State's English-language propaganda include Tashfeen Malik, one of the perpetrators of the 2015 San Bernardino shooting; Sajida ar-Rishawi, who was arrested and later executed in Jordan for attempting to conduct a suicide bombing for al-Qa`ida in Iraq in Amman in 2005; and three women who conducted a suicide bombing at a police station in Kenya in 2016. Devorah Margolin, "The Changing Roles of Women in Violent Islamist Groups," in *Perspectives on the Future of Women, Gender, and Violent Extremism* (Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, Program on Extremism, 2019).

restore their operational capacity through force regeneration in freeing high-value prisoners and, in the process, garner major propaganda victories.⁸¹ For the most part, jihadi prison assaults have targeted facilities in the developing world where prisons' security mechanisms and infrastructure have been easier to exploit.⁸² As a result, jihadis generally have preferred attempting to secure the release of high-profile prisoners in the United States and Western Europe through hostage trading rather than planning risky and potentially costly direct attacks against prisons.⁸³ Nevertheless, at least one exception to this norm exists: a 2014 plot by then-al-Qa`ida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra to send American operatives from Syria to Texas to attack FMC Carswell and free Aafia Siddiqui from prison.

On April 18, 2014, a 23-year-old Columbus, Ohio, man named Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud traveled from Ohio to Syria to fight for Jabhat al-Nusra.⁸⁴ His brother Abdifatah Aden had already joined the group, and assisted Mohamud in coordinating travel arrangements, finances, and logistics.⁸⁵ During a two-month training stint with Jabhat al-Nusra, Mohamud received instructions on how to use various weapons and told his commanders that he intended to stay in Syria to continue fighting and die a martyr.⁸⁶ However, he was tasked to an al-Nusra attack planner who, seeking to take advantage of Mohamud's U.S. citizenship, instructed him to return to the United States and plan a terrorist attack there instead.⁸⁷

Mohamud later told investigators that his handlers gave him the simple objective of freeing Aafia Siddiqui from prison.⁸⁸ To achieve this objective, Mohamud and an unnamed senior operative in Jabhat al-Nusra devised two attack plans: one in which Mohamud would directly attack the prison where Siddiqui was incarcerated and another in which Mohamud would attack a military, law enforcement, or government facility.⁸⁹ While he was still in Syria, Mohamud conducted research for the first plot, including internet searches for the Federal Bureau of Prisons website, the prison in which Aafia Siddiqui was being held, and a Google Maps search for FMC Carswell.⁹⁰

After Mohamud's brother was killed in Syria in early June 2014, Mohamud returned to the United States.⁹¹ After arriving in Columbus, he attempted to recruit several of his friends to help carry out the plot, and remained in contact with his Jabhat al-Nusra handlers.⁹² In November 2014, Mohamud purchased a plane ticket from Columbus to Dallas, Texas, so that he could conduct reconnaissance for the prison plot.⁹³ However, Mohamud did not board the flight.⁹⁴ In February 2015, he was arrested during a traffic stop when he attempted to present his dead brother's driver's license as his own.⁹⁵ He was subsequently charged in federal court with provision of material support to terrorism and making false statements to the FBI.⁹⁶ Mohamud pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 22 years in prison in 2018.⁹⁷

The Jabhat al-Nusra-coordinated plot to attack FMC Carswell was only in its nascent stage when Mohamud shifted his focus to another option, which will be detailed in the next subsection. In its entirety, the publicly available information about the FMC Carswell plot does not suggest which types of methods the group was planning to use in a prison assault. Nevertheless, it was the first occasion in which jihadi groups entertained the idea of directly attacking a federal prison in the United States and devoted an operative to conduct the plot.⁹⁸ The fact that the objective of this effort was freeing Aafia Siddiqui is a major indication of her status

within jihadi circles.

Hostage Negotiations

As previously discussed, various jihadi groups have attempted to offer captive Americans with the U.S. government in exchange for Aafia Siddiqui. Most of the time, these efforts began after jihadis captured U.S. citizens overseas, although al-Qa`ida-linked groups have also attempted to trade captured British, Czech, and Swiss citizens for Siddiqui.⁹⁹ In 2010, days after Siddiqui's conviction, the Taliban threatened to execute U.S. Army deserter Bowe Bergdahl if Siddiqui was not immediately released.¹⁰⁰ After American aid worker Warren Weinstein was kidnapped in Lahore, Pakistan, in 2011, Ayman al-Zawahiri demanded Siddiqui's release in exchange for Weinstein's.¹⁰¹ In 2013, a North African al-Qa`ida faction led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar took hostages, including Americans, at a gas field in In Amenas, Algeria.¹⁰² The kidnappers included in their demands a call on the U.S. government to free Aafia Siddiqui and Omar Abdel Rahman, also known as the "Blind Sheikh."¹⁰³ Former AQAP head Qasim al-Raymi made the same demands to the U.S. government after kidnapping American journalist Luke Somers in Yemen in September 2013.¹⁰⁴

On at least three occasions, an Islamic State cell of English-speakers known colloquially as "the Beatles" made its own prisoner exchange offers for Siddiqui.^k When American aid worker Kayla Mueller was kidnapped in Aleppo, Syria, in 2013 by the group now referred to as the Islamic State, the group attempted to negotiate with the U.S. government to secure Siddiqui's release.¹⁰⁵ In a 2013 proof-of-life video recorded and published by the group, Mueller stated that "those detaining me are demanding an exchange of Dr. Aafia Siddiqui's release for my release. If this is not achievable, they are demanding 5 million euros to ensure my release."¹⁰⁶ Although the Mueller family reportedly encouraged the Obama administration to approve the trade, it never came to fruition, and Mueller was murdered in February 2015.¹⁰⁷ In August 2014, "the Beatles" sent captured American journalist James Foley's family an email, days before he was eventually murdered.¹⁰⁸ Claiming that the U.S. government refused to negotiate, the message from the Islamic State asserted that "we have also offered prisoner exchanges to free the Muslims currently in your detention like our sister Dr Afia [sic] Siddiqui [sic], however you proved very quickly to us that this is NOT what you are interested in."¹⁰⁹ Two weeks after Foley's murder, the Islamic State again offered the same terms to the U.S. government for the release of Steven Sotloff, another American journalist captured by the organization in 2013.¹¹⁰ The U.S. government again rejected this deal, and Sotloff was murdered in September 2014.¹¹¹

While the Colleyville hostage-taker Malik Faisal Akram's stated motivations, target, and broader beliefs suggest a jihadi outlook, it is currently unclear whether he associated with any particular jihadi group.¹¹² Nevertheless, the goals, objectives, and method of the hostage-taking in Colleyville in many ways mimic the constant

k In 2012, a search warrant executed in the United Kingdom on the laptop of Alexandra Kotey, one member of "the Beatles," found that he conducted searches for "Justice for Afia [sic] Siddiqui" and had corresponded through email with the Justice for Aafia Coalition prior to leaving the United Kingdom for Syria. "Statement of Facts," *United States of America v. Alexandra Amon Kotey*, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, September 2, 2021.

efforts by overseas jihadi groups to negotiate prisoner trades for Siddiqui.¹¹³ Akram was the first individual to carry out a hostage-taking in the United States with Siddiqui's release as an objective, but the crisis in Colleyville was not the first attempt by American jihadis to plan this type of operation.

After Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud pleaded guilty to providing material support to Jabhat al-Nusra in late 2017, he attained a proffer agreement with the U.S. government to discuss other plans that he and a network of associates allegedly made to conduct attacks in the United States after he returned from Syria in 2014.¹¹⁴ In place of the idea to attack FMC Carswell directly, Mohamud told investigators that he and several friends, whom he met playing basketball at a local YMCA in Columbus, planned to "save Aafia Siddiqui by grabbing and kidnapping U.S. soldiers and taking them as hostages."¹¹⁵ The group allegedly raised money to purchase handguns, military-style clothing, and ski masks.¹¹⁵ Mohamud claimed that they planned on surveilling several military installations in Texas and Ohio to select a site for the hostage-taking.¹¹⁶

As Mohamud had just returned from Syria at the time that the cell formed, he became its leader, with several other individuals reportedly swearing an oath of allegiance to him.¹¹⁷ An individual that Mohamud reportedly attempted to recruit later told the FBI that Mohamud believed he was following orders from his handlers in al-Nusra to "go back [to the United States] and do something there ... [which] is why he returned to the U.S. ... his plan was to lay low and get with a group of guys."¹¹⁸ Mohamud was arrested before the group was able to carry out any hostage-taking. As recently unsealed search warrants revealed, several members of his reported cell were subject to FBI investigations, although to date, none have been arrested or charged.¹¹⁹

The attack plots involving Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud were novel in two ways. First, they were the first and only examples of attack planning in the United States by a returned jihadi traveler who participated in the conflict in Syria.¹²⁰ In addition, they were

the first plots by jihadis in the United States aiming to take hostages on U.S. soil and attempt to barter their release for Aafia Siddiqui's. Although Mohamud and his alleged co-conspirators were unsuccessful in their hostage-taking plans, this type and method of attack planning would set a precedent for what would unfold at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville nearly seven years later.

Conclusion

Using the evidence available in the public record to date, the Colleyville hostage crisis contains two predominant, interlinked features of jihadi activity in the United States in recent years. The incident jump-started the second decade in which jihadis in the United States have attempted to conduct attacks with the goal of freeing Aafia Siddiqui from prison. Her continued celebrity within the movement is persistent because the factors that initially skyrocketed her case as a *cause célèbre* for jihadis have grown in importance. The jihadi movement, particularly in the West, has had a particularly intense focus on the plight of Western women jihadis behind bars during the past several years, whether they are imprisoned in FMC Carswell or in the al-Hol and al-Roj camps in Syria.¹²¹ Siddiqui is the prototype for the "aseerat," the female prisoners of the jihadi movement who are constantly the subject of propaganda pushes, crowdfunding campaigns, and jihadi operational activities.¹²² More importantly, Siddiqui's case represents a rare opportunity for jihadis to share a common cause with a wider, more mainstream group of actors in the Muslim world and beyond who share convictions that Siddiqui's jailing is unjustified.

Moreover, Akram's belief that storming a synagogue and taking its congregants hostage was the best method to secure Siddiqui's release is not coincidental. The theory of change expressed through the attack—that the same Jewish conspiracy that "framed" Siddiqui held the levers of power necessary to release her—is reflective not only of Siddiqui's own views, but also mirrors a broader trend in jihadi terrorism in the West. To attract new recruits and continue to mobilize new generations of Westerners, the jihadi movement remains highly dependent on anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.¹²³ Anti-Semitism has long been the ideological glue connecting violent jihadi thought to its counterparts in non-violent Islamist movements, and to other violent extremist groups, including on the far-right.¹²⁴ Therefore, these forms of conspiracy theories are likely to be a central mobilizing theme, inspiring jihadi and other violent extremist attacks in the United States for years to come. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: David Caulfield, Former Chief, Defense Combating Terrorism Center, Defense Intelligence Agency

By Richard M. Yon, Don Rassler, and Nakissa Jahanbani

Mr. Caulfield's career in the United States Intelligence Community spanned approximately 39 years as a U.S. Navy Officer, civilian Senior Executive, and intelligence professional. Previous civilian Senior Executive positions include Chief of the DIA Forward Element Afghanistan, Chief of the DIA Liaison Office – Berlin, and Senior Defense Intelligence Expert for Strategy, Plans and Policy in DIA's Office of the Chief of Staff. Other positions involved all-source analysis, congressional testimony and speech writing, international partner engagement, human intelligence collection, targeting and battle damage assessment, operational support, and intelligence collection management. He is the recipient of numerous civilian and military awards and medals from the U.S. Navy, Defense Intelligence Agency, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. He earned a master's degree in National Security and Strategic Studies from the U.S. Naval War College and a bachelor's degree in Government and International Studies from the University of South Carolina.

CTC: You have worked in the field of intelligence for nearly four decades, including considerable time spent with the U.S. Navy and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). What led you to pursue a career in public service? And what kept you in public service all this time? What accomplishment are you most proud of during that time period?

Caulfield: Why did I get into this business? That's a very good question. I was born in the late 1950s, grew up in the 1960s and 1970s; they were very formative years for myself, of course, but also very dynamic when it came to politics and international security issues. I just got wrapped up in the times and started studying a lot of history and politics. So, it was just natural for me to continue in that vein. Additionally, my father's side of the family has an extensive military history in this country dating back even before the American Revolution and in Europe. So maybe it was a little of nature and nurture that guided me to this profession.

Secondly, I just had one great job after the other, both in the Navy as well as the Defense Intelligence Agency. Growing up in New England, very close to the water, the U.S. Navy was a natural choice. My father and most of his brothers in Rhode Island had boats; it's almost a requirement to have a boat in that state. And then I made the switch in 1993 to be a DIA civilian. I've had several fantastic jobs. I've worked for great bosses and with outstanding colleagues and friends. And I've had, as one of my fellow seniors said, quite the eclectic career: working all-source analysis; human intelligence collection; operational support; strategy, plans, and policy; Congressional testimony and speech writing, foreign partner engagement and combating terrorism, which I've worked in various positions, but most intensely, the last six years as the deputy and then the chief of the Defense Combating Terrorism Center.

You asked about what I'm proud of. Three jobs in particular stand out in my mind. The first one is working as the senior involved in strategy, plans, and policy for the Defense Intelligence Agency and speech writing for Vice Admiral Lowell Jacoby^a and Lieutenant General Michael Maples^b at a very critical time in both defense intelligence and the U.S. intelligence community. I was responsible for preparing those two directors for their congressional hearings on the worldwide threat testimony, the annual budget testimony, the war in Iraq, and intelligence reform. It was an interesting time addressing the conclusions and recommendations from both the WMD Commission report as well as the 9/11 Commission report, getting very much involved in intelligence reform in the middle of the 2000s. That was important. I'm proud to have contributed to that effort, and I think because of all of our work in the intelligence community, the U.S. Intelligence Community is in a much stronger position now than it has ever been in the past. And I think you're seeing the benefits of that over the past decade, in addition to the intelligence successes we've had going on right now regarding the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

The second thing I'm most proud of is that I stood up the Defense Intelligence Agency Liaison office in Berlin. That really was a very rewarding job for me personally, working with German intelligence both on the civilian foreign intelligence side as well as the defense intelligence side. And also working with all of the Defense Intelligence Enterprise; and the Defense Intelligence Enterprise really is not only DIA, but the Service Intelligence Centers as well as all the Combatant Command J2s [Intelligence Directorate]. I was representing their interests with German intelligence and brokering increased information sharing and collection operations. And I tell you, it was an eye-opening experience to take a look from the German perspective at the strength of U.S. intelligence and particularly Defense Intelligence, and then developing and deepening that relationship. I was there from 2009 to 2013 where we dealt with the fallout from Wikileaks as well as the release of classified intelligence from Edward Snowden. So, I can tell you there were a lot of tense meetings with our German colleagues at the time, but I think we came through it quite well in part because we had developed such a rich and cooperative relationship with German intelligence.

And the last one, of course, has got to be my job with Defense Combating Terrorism Center (DCTC) and what we have been doing over the past six years to provide intelligence support to all of our consumers to include the President of the United States, the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, all

a Editor's Note: Vice Admiral Lowell E. Jacoby served as the 14th director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (October 2002-November 2005).

b Editor's Note: Lieutenant General Michael D. Maples served as the 15th director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (November 2005-March 2009).

the way down to the individual special operations task forces who are going after terrorists in a number of areas around the world. To be able to work through all the declining resources in Defense Intelligence when it came to combating terrorism matters and still produce outstanding intelligence and intelligence support. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we continued intelligence operations, making sure nothing fell through the cracks. I'm very proud of that and proud of my leadership team, all the personnel in DCTC and the rest of the combating terrorism intelligence professionals in the U.S. Intelligence Community. I don't think we missed a beat through COVID, and I think that's saying a lot.

CTC: Prior to your recent retirement, you led the DCTC at DIA. Can you tell us a little bit about the history, purpose, and evolution of DCTC during your career at DIA?

Caulfield: DIA's been in counterterrorism, both collection and analysis, for quite some time. The agency has existed since the first days of the Kennedy administration, about 61 years. For the last 40 years, DIA has been very much involved in combating terrorism. Before that, really the early 1980s, I think we considered CT the realm of the security and counterintelligence entities of the Department of Defense. The all-source analytic portion and human intelligence collection of DIA was marginally involved, but not to the extent it became since then. Over the last 40 years, a series of major terrorist attacks resulted in significant changes in approach. In the wake of those attacks, blue-ribbon panels were created either by the Department or the White House to investigate what the challenges were and propose reforms, and this formed the foundation of how DIA currently does business. The first set of formative lessons learned came out of the 1983 attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut and the subsequent Long Commission report. The second came out of the 1996 Khobar Towers attack and the Downing Assessment report. The third stemmed from the 2000 attack on the USS Cole and the USS Cole Commission report. I was actually a staff member on the commission and contributed to the investigation and recommendations. The fourth came out of the 9/11 attacks and the 9/11 Commission report. I was there that day in the Pentagon, and so I can vouch for the impact that attack made on the Department and country and the resolve that we came out with that day to prevent a similar attack on our fellow citizens and allies. And then last, but not least, a formative set of lessons learned came out of the 2009 shooting at Fort Hood and the Webster Commission report on that attack.

These five reports formed the foundation of what we should be doing in intelligence, increasing resources to counterintelligence, human intelligence reporting, and all-source analysis. The Long report on the Beirut Marine Barracks attack and Downing report on the Khobar Towers attack were important in spurring us to build target packages on various groups that we thought contributed to these attacks and providing options to attack these groups to prevent future attacks. The USS Cole Commission report identified gaps in our intelligence support to DoD forces moving throughout the world. So, it was determined that we needed to have one central location within the Department of Defense to provide indications and warning reports for such an event. Our intelligence warning center in DCTC, the Warning and Fusion Center, was created to do just that. Last but not least were the lessons learned from Fort Hood, where gaps were identified in what the FBI and DoD were



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investigating separately or not aware of the other's investigation. So again, we developed measures to cover those gaps and do a better job of sharing information.

Our resources grew from the 1980s all the way up to about 2012. Since then, we have been decrementing resources to both intelligence collection and analysis for CT issues within the Defense Department, but there has been no cut back in the CT mission or functions that Defense Intelligence is supposed to do.

With regard to the DCTC mission today, DCTC is one [of] that few parts of DIA where the public can actually read what our mission is; if you take a look at DoD instruction 2000.12, it lists DCTC's responsibilities.

Here are some of the things we do at DCTC: One, we serve as the lead national level, all-source intelligence effort for combating terrorism for the Department of Defense. That means that DCTC represents the interests of all the Service Intelligence Centers and the Combatant Commands to the Office of Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security as well as the Director of National Intelligence. On that score, a key task has been writing CT assessments for our departmental customers and participating in the writing or coordinating on the CT assessments by the National Intelligence Committee.

Furthermore, we operate the Defense Terrorism Threat Warning System for the Department. That involves being in contact with the combatant commands, making sure that we are synced up with what they're doing in terms of their indications and warning assessments. We manage the threat warning system for the Department of Defense and work with the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) in the National Indications and Warning Network as well. To do that, we maintain a 24-hour intelligence and warning fusion center within DIA. Several times a day, we are in touch with the rest of the national level intelligence community—sharing information,

intelligence reporting, and assessments. And again, we're doing this in concert with all the other Combatant Commands.

We also function as the DoD intelligence lead for the Intelligence Community's terrorist watchlist effort. That means all the DoD reporting—predominantly HUMINT and MASINT^c reporting produced by Defense Intelligence; it doesn't refer to NSA's SIGINT or NGA's [National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency's] imagery—we take that information from the various reports (human intelligence reports, interrogation reports and so on), identify known or suspected terrorists within those reports, review that information, combine it with other information from the community, and put forward terrorist identity nominations for NCTC and its Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE) database.^d DCTC is one of the largest producers of what we call 'TINs' [Terrorist Identity Nominations] within the Intelligence Community.

We also serve as the Defense Intelligence Enterprise's primary intelligence mission manager for combating terrorism and point of contact with NCTC. For instance, anytime we have to coordinate a national technical means of collection, we do that in concert with the combatant commands to fill those requirements. Another example would be any particular question asked by NCTC on the health and well-being of the CT intelligence community; we would request that information from the rest of the Defense Intelligence Enterprise and consolidate the response for the Department.

DCTC is one of the few offices within DIA that also has a domestic mission. We get involved when it comes to collection and analysis on terrorism that occurs in the United States when the following two conditions are met as mandated by DoD instruction 2000.12. The first condition is if there is some type of DoD nexus—and by that I mean, the target (facility/unit/individual) is associated with the Department or unfortunately we have some type of DoD member—whether they are military, civilian, or even contractor—who is involved in some type of plot or execution of a terrorist attack in the United States. And the second condition is, if they are in contact or [have] some type of connection with an international terrorist group, like Fort Hood shooter Major Nidal Hasan.

For the past several years, our combating terrorism efforts within the United States have focused on reporting on trends when it comes to salafi-jihadists and their ability to encourage people to conduct terrorism here, but now we are also focusing on racially and ethnically motivated violent extremist groups and individuals with international connections in concert with U.S. law enforcement and international partners.

“For the past several years, our combating terrorism efforts within the United States have focused on reporting on trends when it comes to salafi-jihadists and their ability to encourage people to conduct terrorism here, but now we are also focusing on racially and ethnically motivated violent extremist groups and individuals with international connections in concert with U.S. law enforcement and international partners.”

CTC: Today's terrorism landscape is very complex. What threats are you most concerned with and why?

Caulfield: Since 9/11, the United States and our allies have done a superb job degrading ISIS and al-Qa`ida leadership, external operations operatives, and communication specialists, as evidenced by the low numbers of directed attacks in Western countries. For readers not aware of the nomenclature, the Intelligence Community characterizes attacks based on whether they are directed, meaning individuals are recruited, vetted, trained, and sent to conduct attacks overseas; whether they're enabled, where some individual who becomes radicalized by himself reaches out to al-Qa`ida, ISIS, or other groups for assistance in planning an attack; or inspired, that they have become radicalized by reading their literature online or some other means and decide to plan, organize, and conduct an attack on their own without outside assistance.

Directed attacks, obviously, can be the most significant as we saw on 9/11. The numbers of these directed attacks, as you and your readers know, have decreased significantly over the past several years because of our country's counterterrorism efforts and because the United States, our allies, and a lot of other countries have become much more difficult to attack.

The Intelligence Community has assessed that both ISIS and al-Qa`ida are now more focused on reconstituting their base and internal capabilities and attacking the near enemy as opposed to us, the far enemy. Not that they will ever give up on that. I think all of us are very concerned that if an opportunity presents itself, they will take advantage of that opportunity and attempt a directed attack. But again, enabled and especially inspired attacks have increased over the years, and that is still very much a concern.

Racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism (RMVE) is a growing concern not only for us, but also our allies. We've been focused on RMVEs for the past, I'd say, four years. So, it actually predates January 6th by a considerable amount. We saw that threat increasing. Those groups and individuals are particularly challenging because they are far less organized and less structured than either al-Qa`ida or ISIS in their organization

c Editor's Note: "Measurement and Signature Intelligence (MASINT) is technically derived intelligence data other than imagery and SIGINT. The data results in intelligence that locates, identifies, or describes distinctive characteristics of targets. It employs a broad group of disciplines including nuclear, optical, radio frequency, acoustics, seismic, and materials sciences." U.S. Naval War College website.

d Editor's Note: "Federal agencies nominate individuals for inclusion in TIDE based on evaluations of intelligence and law enforcement terrorism information. Each day analysts create and enhance TIDE records based on their review of nominations received. Every evening, NCTC exports a sensitive but unclassified subset of the data containing the terrorist identifiers to the Terrorist Screening Center (TSC) for use in the USG's consolidated watchlist. This consolidated watchlist, which is a critical tool for homeland security, supports screening processes to detect and interdict known and suspected terrorists at home and abroad." "Fact Sheet on the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE)," DNI website.

“The timeline for al-Qa`ida to return to the level they were before 9/11 in Afghanistan could take anywhere from one to two years after they make the decision to do so. However, that begs the question, ‘Do they need to do so?’ What is the strategic significance of Afghanistan now? And for that, I would say, Afghanistan is not as strategically relevant for salafi jihadists as it was in the 1990s and the early 2000s.”

and communication. It appears that most of their attacks are inspired, and that individuals have become radicalized by multiple and often conflicting ideologies. Last but not least, RMVE groups in particular seem to be focused on recruiting people with a law enforcement background and military members—whether they’re current, former, or retired and engage in attacks or train others to do so.

Finally, I’d like to say something about the events of January 6th. Every military and civilian member of the Department of Defense has taken an oath to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies both foreign and domestic.” I was personally appalled by the events on January 6th at the U.S. Capitol; it was terribly embarrassing for our nation. We had instances, not the people protesting outside in peaceful demonstrations, but individuals who attacked law enforcement officers, and broke into the Capitol with the intent to interfere or prevent the constitutional and peaceful transfer of power from one government to the other. I was enraged when I learned that unfortunately too many people had some type of DoD background. I trust the Justice Department has and will be prosecuting those individuals to the full extent of the law. Those DoD-affiliated individuals found guilty are an embarrassment to their Services and to the Department.

CTC: As you mentioned earlier, you stood up and served as the chief of the DIA’s liaison office in Germany for several years. Over the last two decades, German authorities have disrupted several terror plots associated with salafi-jihadi networks that included U.S. and NATO military facilities and/or personnel as intended targets. For example, in April 2020 German authorities disrupted a plot linked to the Islamic State.¹ What’s your assessment of the threat that European-based jihadi networks pose, and how have those networks evolved?

Caulfield: I would say the threat in Europe is very much akin to what it is here in the United States: that we’ve seen a decrease in the level of directed attacks because of increasing combating terrorism capabilities and successful operations that we and our Western European allies have engaged in. While directed attacks went down, we saw an increase in the number of enabled and inspired terrorist

attacks.

Salafi-jihadist groups appear to be more focused in enabling and inspiring disaffected Muslim youth within Europe as opposed to recruiting, training, and organizing foreign fighters to enter Europe for the purposes of directed terrorist attacks. Another concern in Europe relates to the outflow from prisons of individuals previously convicted for violent extremism related offenses and who have completed their sentences. The numbers are relatively large and may exceed the capacity of many European nations to adequately monitor their activity once they’re released from prison.

I’m also concerned that as COVID restrictions ease, we may see more operatives and potential terrorists come into Europe. The opportunity for conducting attacks and moving around the continent is going to increase.

Overall though, European countries are doing a much better job of sharing information, whether it’s defense, civilian foreign intelligence, domestic intelligence, law enforcement. I think a lot of the European countries have addressed the same problems we had in the 1990s and earlier—that a lot of those organizations within their countries were stove-piped, not sharing information or cooperating in their investigations or other operations.

CTC: Turning to Afghanistan, the United States’ departure from the country and the Taliban’s takeover dramatically altered the status quo. The change is likely to create opportunities for armed non-state groups in the region and complicate the ability of the U.S. and its partners to monitor and disrupt terrorist networks there. As a result, two key questions have surfaced. First, how long will it take al-Qa`ida to reconstitute its external operations capabilities, and two, how effective will over-the-horizon CT capabilities be in practice?

Caulfield: I’m not going to differ from a whole bunch of experts out there, including a number you [have] interviewed. The timeline for al-Qa`ida to return to the level they were before 9/11 in Afghanistan could take anywhere from one to two years after they make the decision to do so. However, that begs the question, “Do they need to do so?” What is the strategic significance of Afghanistan now? And for that, I would say, Afghanistan is not as strategically relevant for salafi jihadists as it was in the 1990s and the early 2000s. Unfortunately, they have incorporated other terrorist organizations as affiliates or branches, increasing the number of operatives in both ISIS and al-Qa`ida, as well as the number of locations or countries they operate. They really don’t need to return to Afghanistan to be able to organize, plan, and execute a terrorist attack on the West as they did in the past.

I’d also say that the world is very different today than it was back in late 1990s. It is a much smaller place. Transportation is far easier; it’s far easier to move around the world. Given the advances in communication and the ability to access the internet almost globally now, they can communicate from numerous areas for different purposes—for intelligence collection, for command and control. It is also easier [to] transfer money around the world. So again, the strategic importance of having a base in Afghanistan is not as significant as it was back then.

I’d also like to say that from my personal experience, I was the chief of the DIA Forward Element in Afghanistan for about 10 months in the 2014-2015 timeframe. One thing that concerned me was that Afghanistan was absorbing a lot of the CT resources

for both intelligence collection and analysis. If we were still in Afghanistan, we might have had that country adequately covered, but given the declining trend in CT intelligences resources, I'd be concerned that this would have monopolized a lot of the intelligence resources we would need for organizations like AQAP, al-Shabaab in the Horn of Africa, JNIM, CT developments in Syria and Iraq and other areas, opening up potential gaps for ISIS and al-Qa`ida to exploit and attack us from areas outside of Afghanistan.

In response to the second part of your question, whether over-the-horizon is going to be effective, my answer is that it is going to be very challenging. Counterterrorism today is all about going after the individuals. So, to get to the level of intelligence needed to receive authorization from the National Command Authority to conduct an operation, we need to acquire what we consider exquisite intelligence, finely detailed intelligence and then combine that with precision-guided munitions to achieve a very high probability of success and a very low probability of collateral damage. I'm not sure we can get to that type of targeting without either working with host intelligence services or having some type of intelligence assets in the immediate vicinity to monitor these organizations, identify the key individuals, to know exactly where they are located before we are given the go-ahead to launch a strike. Otherwise, you're going to have increased risk of mission failure and increased risk of collateral damage. So, it's going to be very difficult. By the way, both the intelligence and policy communities are moving away from the term "over the horizon" because of the challenge.

CTC: Data and technology have been central to the evolution of U.S. counterterrorism during the post-9/11 era and will remain key drivers of what counterterrorism and counterterrorism capabilities look like in the future. You've led a key DIA intelligence unit focused on CT and have also led transformation projects for the U.S. government. When you look forward, what types of teams need to be built to ensure that we're leaning forward in making innovative use of data, and what do those teams look like and how can they be built and integrated across the enterprise?

Caulfield: Artificial intelligence, machine learning, increases in data, it affects not just CT, but every intelligence issue we have in Defense Intelligence and the greaterUSIC. It is a horribly complicated subject, especially for a predominately all-source intelligence agency. It is difficult but less complicated for some of our national collection agencies—for instance, NSA, NGA, they have a slightly easier job of it because they know the data injects they're going over. At least that is my perspective coming from an all-source intelligence agency. All-source agencies like DIA, the Combatant Commands, Service Intelligence Centers, CIA, and even State INR [Bureau of Intelligence and Research] have got to deal with all of the information collected, so it's a lot more complicated for them.

We have different datasets, types of databases; networks, some of which do a good job talking with each other, some which do not. So, that is a problem or complication. So too is the need to combine some of the most highly classified data with some unclassified information. How you go about moving one set of data to another higher classified system is a challenge, not only from a technical perspective but also a policy and security perspective.

It's been well documented [that] the amount of data out there

is growing exponentially. It is a challenge for us, but it's a good problem to have—the problem of overabundance. It's not a question of having absolutes within the U.S. Intelligence Community; we just have to be better at exploiting that data compared to our adversaries. So, you need to think about it in that context. Obviously, you need to have collectors involved, you need to have analysts involved, you need to have IT experts, you need to have data scientists. I will tell you data scientists are few in number and horribly expensive; the private sector pays true data scientists much more than we can in government. So that is a particular challenge.

You need to have security, budget, and acquisition professionals on your teams, too. And these teams don't have to be permanent. They can be ad hoc, but those are the type of individuals you need in your teams to be successful. And what you need is a lot of computing power, and unfortunately, you need a lot of money. We talk about reforming the acquisition process and the budget process; I will tell you that whatever we're doing right now, it's not working fast enough. So again, we're falling further and further behind in our ability to exploit the increasing amounts of data.

And also we should not exaggerate the gains that have so far been made when we talk about artificial intelligence, machine learning. Those are systems that can take a set of data, they have a defined mission, the systems can on their own improve their effectiveness and efficiency. I have not seen those systems being used within the CT community in theUSIC—at least not in analysis. Instead, the progress that has been made is in automation, and I can say we have made great strides in automation. So, it's not the old days when you're plotting information and personally reviewing individual intelligence reports for relevant information; that is done automatically and presented to the analyst. Analysts then need to confirm the importance or relevance of that information and place it in context for their overall assessments. The human for the analytic portion is still key and will be so for the foreseeable future.

CTC: The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) identified interstate strategic competition as the United States' primary national security concern. That same document also recognized that terrorism remains a persistent condition. Since the release of the 2018 NDS, the United States government has been trying to navigate and figure out how counterterrorism as an enduring priority should be pursued given the understandable strategic rebalance to interstate competition and what that looks like in practice. In your view, how should we think about how these two priorities intersect and how the U.S. can conduct and be effective at both at the same time?

Caulfield: That's an excellent question. Very timely with what's going on with Ukraine right now. I think the NDS does an excellent job of providing us a framework to focus on the five most critical issues: China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and violent extremist organizations. Clearly, those are not equal. Russia and China, because their strategic nuclear forces are an existential threat to United States, are in a category of their own. The threat from North Korea and Iran are more regional in nature, while terrorism and violent extremist organizations is a global challenge for us. And also given the success, unfortunately, that al-Qa`ida has had, we know the capabilities or the worst-case situations if these groups go unchecked; it can have dramatic effects on U.S. foreign policy and other security issues. So those are basically the five key issues.

There are a large number of other issues around the world [about which] we need to maintain situational awareness, but that's where the Intelligence Community should focus most of its efforts. Additionally, it's not a question of doing one or the other; we have to do all at the same time. We don't get to pick and choose what threats we are facing. Our adversaries get a vote. Unfortunately, we have previously ignored or underappreciated security threats to ourselves and our allies to our detriment.

Additionally, efforts to counter violent extremist organizations can be supportive of our initiatives to address great power competition when we work with foreign partners. In addition to furthering our efforts on addressing counterterrorism, we are developing relations with host nations' military, intelligence, and law enforcement personnel, building trust and goodwill that can be leveraged for other purposes such as great power competition. Russia and China recognize this. They are also reaching out to many of our foreign partners to offer combating terrorism assistance. We're in competition with them, not just because Russia and China believe that there is a significant benefit solely in CT, but because there can be secondary gains with these countries on other issues.

CTC: The shift to interstate strategic competition has led to a right-sizing, or what some would characterize as a downsizing, of the resources devoted to the counterterrorism mission set within the U.S. Given the resource constraints or trade-offs agencies with CT missions face, what strategies can those organizations employ to ensure their missions are maintained so they can effectively respond and prevent current and future terrorist threats? How do we get the shift and balance right?

Caulfield: That is the big question and key challenge. As a member of the Counterterrorism Advisory Board, all the seniors at the national level in theUSIC-CT community, we get together on a quarterly basis and discuss a number of these issues such as where our budgets are going. In my 39 years in this business, I haven't seen where we've got it just right. In my humble opinion, we did not have enough resources dedicated to Russia and China in the 1990s and 2000s. That changed in the 2010s with China. I'd say [with] Russia, up until a short time ago, we didn't have the right resources there either.

We did the typical American thing after the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in 2001: We threw a whole bunch of money, personnel, collection systems, and overinvested in CT. We have been making the shift, at least within Defense Intelligence, from CT to great power competition for the past 10 years. The actual number of resources dedicated to CT in Defense Intelligence is a fraction of what it used to be. We are probably just where we need to be when it comes to CT.

CTC: Have we hit bottom in terms of the cuts, or do you think that there might be more cuts on the horizon?

Caulfield: I don't know whether we have hit bottom. I retired before we began serious discussions on the next fiscal year's budget. I am concerned that if we go any lower, we will significantly increase the risk of a successful major terrorist attack in the coming years. Unfortunately, this is not something that can be quickly reversed once the cuts have been made, collection assets have been reallocated, and CT analysts have moved on to other problems sets.

“Efforts to counter violent extremist organizations can be supportive of our initiatives to address great power competition when we work with foreign partners. In addition to furthering our efforts on addressing counterterrorism, we are developing relations with host nations' military, intelligence, and law enforcement personnel, building trust and goodwill that can be leveraged for other purposes such as great power competition. Russia and China recognize this. They are also reaching out to many of our foreign partners to offer combating terrorism assistance.”

Our budget and allocation processes are quite lengthy. They can take multiple years to formulate and execute. And you and your readers know how quickly ISIS and al-Qa`ida and even RMVE groups can change direction, develop capabilities, and come at us. So there comes a point, if we continue to cut our CT resources that we will not have the collection, we will not have the analysis to accurately provide policymakers and warfighters with what they need to do to deter, defend against, and react to significant changes in ISIS, al-Qa`ida, and RMVE groups.

CTC: When you look out across the horizon to terrorism threats and challenges that we might face in the next five to 10 years, what actors and threats come to mind for you?

Caulfield: Five to 10 years is an awfully long time for the terrorism problem set. A lot can change. It's not like countries or militaries that can take typically numerous years or even decades to produce new capabilities or military technologies. When it comes to terrorist groups, the entry bar is very low; the groups are very small, the technology is not terribly sophisticated, there are no shortages of ungoverned or poorly governed areas of the world to set up shop, and most importantly, there is no shortage of political, social, or economic strife around the world to propel these groups. So a lot can happen over a five- or 10-year period. I look back at where we were in 2016, 2017; looking at ISIS Libya and Libya as a potential new base for ISIS senior leadership, including Baghdadi. If they were tossed out of Iraq and Syria, Libya could have served as a potential base of operations and [to] establish a new caliphate. Where is ISIS Libya today? ISIS Libya is a minor concern for most of us here in the United States and Western Europe. So, a lot can change.

If I'm going to look at the next five to 10 years pessimistically, I'm concerned that ISIS and al-Qa`ida may be able to reconstitute

and expand their bases. Racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists may continue to grow in strength over the next years. In terms of technology, again, I am surprised we have not seen cyber-attacks by terrorist groups, given the availability of cyber tools on the dark web. There are always new types of explosive devices being created. Renewed interest in chemical and biological weapons, that is a potential area of concern for us in the next five to 10 years. Continued advances in UAV technology and operational employment are another concern over the next five to 10 years.

We may see the reintroduction of state-sponsored terrorism on a significant scale, especially if we are entering a new Cold War with authoritarian regimes such as Russia. State-sponsored terrorism would be intended to foment or increase political instability in democratic societies around the world.

The targets of terrorist attacks may be different. In addition to what we've seen in the past, I would be concerned about an increase in assassinations of political and government officials. I'd also be concerned about environmental terrorism. I'm not talking about environmental groups using terrorism, but environmental terrorism in and of itself. We're seeing climate changes in different parts of the world. Many continents or parts of continents are becoming drier [and] more prone to forest fires. I can easily see terrorist groups start fires to cause hundreds of millions, if not billions, [of dollars] worth of damage to property. Terrorist groups, including those which are state-sponsored, could target critical infrastructure in our

countries, such as transportation, electric power grids, petroleum or gas pipelines, finance, and so on.

CTC: Is there anything else you'd like to emphasize that we haven't touched on?

Caulfield: Your questions have been superb, allowing me to make just about all the major points I'd hope to make when I agreed to this interview. I have read your monthly publication, the *Sentinel*, and previous "A View from the CT Foxhole" interviews for years. It is an honor for me to be associated with many of those CT and security professionals. Thank you all for the opportunity to talk with you today.

And thank you for your partnership with the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Defense Combating Terrorism Center. The Combating Terrorism Center has been an outstanding source of counterterrorism academic expertise that the Defense Combating Terrorism Center, the Department of Defense, and other government agencies have relied upon for an outside-government perspective on the challenges the United States and our allies face from numerous terrorist groups and movements. It is comforting for me to know that there remains a cadre of terrorist experts both inside the government and out dedicated to the study of terrorism and able to help national policymakers and warfighters warn of and combat terrorism. Please keep up your great work. **CTC**

Citations

- 1 See Nodirbek Soliev, "The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany: The Tajik Connection," *CTC Sentinel* 14:1 (2021).

The Security Threat Posed by the Corona-skeptic *Querdenken* Movement in Germany

By Daniel H. Heinke

The corona-skeptic *Querdenken* movement in Germany, though not centrally organized and not inherently extremism-motivated, has become a serious threat to public security. What started as a protest platform against government restrictions intended to curb the COVID-19 pandemic quickly evolved into a large-scale movement that is apparently open to conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism. *Querdenken* rallies have turned into violent riots, and individuals who seem to have shared some of the same beliefs as the protestors plotted or even employed deadly force to assert themselves. The threat posed by the movement is that it can fuel anti-government sentiments and thus may form a gateway for the acceptance of more extremist views and ultimately for the belief that resorting to violence may be acceptable or even necessary to defend rights. With right-wing extremists trying to benefit from the protests and celebrating individual acts of violence as proof that the government they detest may be vulnerable to their resistance, there is a danger that some individuals or small groups may radicalize into a violent anti-government ideology. A case in point was an alleged 2021 plot to assassinate Saxony's premier, which was reportedly fueled by corona-skeptic grievances and apparently had linkages to the broader *Querdenken* movement.

On December 15, 2021, several premises in the greater Dresden area were raided and searched as part of a large-scale counter-extremism investigation in the eastern federal state of Saxony, Germany,¹ leading to the seizure of, among other evidence, weapons and weapon parts.² The investigation was launched a couple of days after public broadcaster ZDF had published an investigative report.³ Based on an infiltration of a Telegram chat group of 103

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persons, ZDF reporters revealed several individuals had discussed a plot to assassinate Saxony's premier, Michael Kretschmer, and other members of the state government.^{4a}

The chat group named *Dresden Offlinevernetzung* (Dresden Offline Networking) disseminated anti-government propaganda, including on its opposition to vaccinations and public health measures to curb the pandemic.⁵ Within this group, six individuals (five men aged 32, 34, 42, 45, and 64 at the time of the raids and a 34-year-old woman) are suspected of plotting the murder of Premier Kretschmer and other members of the Saxony cabinet.^b According to media reporting, the plot was mainly fueled by the suspects' opposition toward potential additional COVID-19-related restrictions and the possibility of mandatory vaccinations.⁶

The ZDF report revealed that several members of the chat group voiced that they had participated in rallies of the corona-skeptic *Querdenken* movement in Germany before, including a large protest in Berlin in late August 2020 during which rioters attempted to storm the Reichstag (German parliament).⁷ 'Corona-skeptic' as used in this article describes an attitude—not necessarily aligned with a specific ideology—that denies the existence of the pandemic or downplays the health threat posed by the pandemic or views government measures to curb the pandemic as a masked attempt to restrict citizens' individual freedom rights.

During the search led by the state's specialized *Soko Rex* anti-extremism unit, several crossbows and other weapons were seized. The suspects, who had met virtually as well as in person,⁸ were not taken into custody. The prosecutor general argued that there was no risk of the suspects absconding.⁹

A ZDF follow-up report suggesting a connection between the *Dresden Offlinevernetzung* group and the U.S.-based neo-

a Kretschmer of the center-right party Christian Democrats initially had been reluctant to order extensive anti-pandemic regulation and even warned of "Corona hysteria," but later changed his government's position and backed strict measures. At the time of the alleged plot, Saxony had both one of the lowest vaccination rates in Germany and one of the country's highest COVID-19 caseloads. "Germany: Police raid COVID sceptics over alleged assassination plot," Deutsche Welle, December 15, 2021.

b Despite this allegation, all suspects are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law. At the time of publication, the suspects have not yet been indicted. The portrayal of the findings is primarily based on media information released by local police (Landeskriminalamt Sachsen) and the prosecutor general's office (Generalstaatsanwaltschaft Dresden) and additional information from the prosecutor general's office received by the author.

Nazi network MZWNEWS¹⁰ c has not yet been commented on by law enforcement officials so as to not jeopardize the ongoing investigation.¹¹ The report indicated that among the content shared in the *Dresden Offlinevernetzung* chat group was an instruction manual on the preparation of improvised explosive devices and other information for violent attacks, and that this manual had previously been shared by MZWNEWS on another chat group connected to the *Dresden Offlinevernetzung* chat group.¹²

A total of eight suspects, including the administrator of the chat group who is considered to be the main suspect, are under felony investigation for preparation of serious violent offenses endangering the state under German criminal law—a murder or a comparable offense intended and suited to undermine the security of the state. Only one of the suspects has prior criminal convictions, to include weapons offenses and incitement to racial hatred. At the time of publication of this article, the investigation is still ongoing.¹³

The case, which bears some similarities to the alleged 2020 conspiracy to abduct Michigan's governor Gretchen Whitmer in the United States,⁴ quickly made international headlines¹⁴ and increased attention on the *Querdenken* movement in Germany.

This article examines the security concerns generated by the rise of the *Querdenken* movement in Germany and its connections to far-right extremism. The first two sections of the article outline the emergence of the movement and the descent into violence by some of its adherents. Just five months after the emergence of the movement, *Querdenken* rioters attempted to storm the Reichstag parliament building in Berlin, foreshadowing some of the scenes later seen during the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. The third section of the article examines the nexus between the *Querdenken* movement and far-right extremism. In the final section, the article assesses the degree to which the *Querdenken* movement is a security concern and its future potential trajectory.

The Emergence of the *Querdenken* Protest Movement

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic—or corona pandemic, as it is usually referred to in German-speaking countries—the German government first initiated a set of containment regulations in mid-March 2020, including rules to minimize personal contact, a ban on public gatherings, and the closure of restaurants.¹⁵ Though acceptance of these rules was generally high among the population, almost immediately some people expressed grievances over these constraints publicly, albeit initially without any structure and little, if any, coordination between them.¹⁶

A couple of weeks later, Michael Ballweg, a software business owner from Stuttgart, founded the initiative *Querdenken 711*,

ostensibly motivated by concerns over the timeframe of the lockdown measures, the possible implementation of mandatory vaccination, and the economic consequences of a lockdown.¹⁷ *Querdenken*—literally “lateral thinking” or “cross-thinking”—refers to the (positive) German figure of speech of someone thinking outside the box;¹⁸ the additional identifier ‘711’ alludes to the phone area code for Stuttgart.

Ballweg wanted to organize a rally in Stuttgart, but the city of Stuttgart proscribed the event, citing pandemic-related regulation. When Ballweg challenged this administrative act, the Federal Constitutional Court ruled in his favor.¹⁹ Subsequent rallies in Stuttgart were attended by a rapidly growing number of protesters with around 80 persons on April 18, 2020, and several thousand just three weeks later.²⁰ As the *Querdenken* movement spread throughout the country, many local groups began to identify themselves by their respective phone area codes.²¹

The *Querdenken* movement claims it is a non-partisan initiative with no links to any political parties.²² A sociological study²³ found that the *Querdenken* movement was composed of supporters from nearly the entire political spectrum, with substantial parts identifying with far-left, green, or far-right parties,²⁴ and some observers remarking that the initial rallies looked like 1960s peace demonstrations.²⁵

Over the following weeks, the *Querdenken* movement—developing more into a franchise model than a centrally organized organization—dominated the organized protests in Germany,²⁶ with its protesters totaling between several dozen in some cities to over 30,000 at the movement's first major rally in Berlin on August 1, 2020.²⁷ By then, *Querdenken* had become the umbrella term for most protests against pandemic-related legislation in Germany.

The Assault on the Reichstag

An extremely important incident both for the self-conception of the movement and public awareness of its potential for violence was the attempted storming of the Reichstag, the federal parliament building in Berlin, on August 29, 2020, during a follow-on *Querdenken* protest in the capital.

On that Saturday, an estimated 38,000 people rallied in the capital in various protests against the government's anti-coronavirus measures. The demonstrations were mainly initiated by *Querdenken 711*.²⁸ Several protesters were identified as being linked either to the ‘Reichsbürger’^e (Reich citizen) ideology or to right-wing extremist organizations.²⁹ Photos of the rally disseminated online also showed flags and slogans linked to the conspiracy theory QAnon.³⁰

Around two hours into the protests, police began to disperse some of the demonstrators because they were disregarding mandatory social distancing rules.³¹ During the afternoon, several hundred protesters gathered between the Chancellery and the

c According to a consortium monitoring online hate speech “MZWNEWS, or Mut Zur Wahrheit News,” whose name means ‘(Have) the courage to speak the truth’ is a German-language blog registered in Michigan. It was founded by John De Nugent, a U.S. white nationalist writer who describes himself as an ‘activist for the white race.’ De Nugent has worked with numerous hate groups and is behind several antisemitic websites.” “US White Nationalist Website MZWNews Claims to ‘Reject’ Violence, While Celebrating Nazism,” Get the Trolls Out, February 21, 2022.

d Allegedly, the COVID-19-related restrictions imposed in Michigan formed a main motivating factor for the conspiracists. For a detailed breakdown of this case, see Graham Macklin, “The Conspiracy to Kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer,” *CTC Sentinel* 14:6 (2021).

e “Reichsbürger,” as defined by the *BfV*, “are groups and individuals who for various motives and on various grounds – [inter alia] by referring to the historical German Reich, lines of argument used by conspiracy theorists or a self-defined law of nature – reject the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany and its legal system, deny the legitimacy of its democratically elected representatives or claim that the German legal order does not at all apply to them.” (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*, “‘Reichsbürger’ and ‘Selbstverwalter,’” *BfV* homepage). The movement is roughly comparable to the ‘sovereign citizen’ idea in the United States.



Participants in a rally against coronavirus measures stand in front of the Reichstag in Berlin, Germany, on August 29, 2020. (Lukas Dubro/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)

Reichstag building in central Berlin. As a large group of protesters moved from the nearby Brandenburg Gate toward the Reichstag lawn, police regrouped to prepare crowd control operations. This moment was exploited by a cluster of 300-400 rioters who rapidly overcame the police barriers and pushed through to the steps of the Reichstag building.³² As the rioters approached and tried to breach the entrance, a handful of police officers confronted the mob and defended the area, successfully securing the entrance zone while they waited for reinforcement by additional units.³³

Even though there was no breach of the national legislature, unlike on January 6, 2021, in the United States, the images³⁴ of a few lone officers fighting off a mob carrying flags resembling the historic German imperial war flags^f only a few yards from the entrance to the parliament attracted global attention.³⁵

Over the course of the day, 33 police officers were injured, and 316 suspects were arrested.³⁶ It is noteworthy that a politician of the far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany) who was a former member of the Baden-Württemberg (southwest

Germany) state parliament was convicted and sentenced to prison time on parole for his participation in the riot and assaulting a police officer during it.³⁷

The assault was subsequently condemned by politicians across the political spectrum with the exception of the far-right. *Querdenken 711* did not distance itself from the riots. To the contrary, a press release issued two days later called the rally “a full success.”³⁸

Since August 2020, *Querdenken* rallies have been a common occurrence throughout Germany, albeit with noteworthy regional differences, with the number of protesters ranging from a few dozen to tens of thousands. Right-wing extremists have participated, especially at the large protests, and QAnon banners have been seen on a regular basis.³⁹ The support for these rallies roughly followed the development of the pandemic itself; with decreasing numbers of infections and reduced restrictions in fall 2020, fewer protests took place, while another wave of the pandemic in late 2020 and early 2021 led to a rising number of rallies and protesters again, before ebbing over the summer and reaching high numbers again in late fall of 2021.

The Nexus between the *Querdenken* Movement and Far-Right Extremism

The pandemic and the extraordinary measures introduced to protect public health have created fertile ground for conspiracy

f Under German law, publicly displaying symbols of the so-called Third Reich (i.e., the national-socialist era of Germany) is a criminal offense (Sec. 86a German Criminal Code). Many right-wing extremists try to circumvent this proscription by using flags of Germany's imperial era, especially the imperial war flag. See “Zeigen von Reichskriegsfahnen und Reichsfahnen wird verboten,” Bremen state ministry of the interior, September 18, 2020.

“The protesters participating in *Querdenken* rallies are a heterogeneous group, composed of both established extremists from both sides of the political spectrum and previously non-political individuals, forming a melting pot of right-wing extremism, anti-Semitism, conspiracy theories like QAnon, or *Reichsbürger* (‘Reich citizens’) and sovereign citizens.”

theories. Far-right extremists and other anti-government ideologists have aggressively exploited the situation to spread skepticism of government activities.⁴⁰ Germany is no exception.

In Germany, the protests against COVID-19 regulations have attracted the entire spectrum of the far-right,⁴¹ including the neo-Nazi party *Der III. Weg* (“The Third Way”),^g the right-wing extremist party NPD, the extreme far-right organization *DIE RECHTE* (“The Right”),^h the Identitarian Movement,ⁱ as well as the far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* [AfD] (“Alternative for Germany”) and

g *Der III. Weg* (The Third Way) is a small right-wing extremist party with some 600 members across 20 regional ‘bases’ linked to its three associations in the federal states of Bavaria, Saxony, and a region referred to as ‘West’ (encompassing Hesse, North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland Palatinate). The party serves as a catch-all for members of the neo-Nazi scene, some of whom belonged to organizations that have been proscribed. “Verfassungsschutzbericht 2020,” Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (federal domestic intelligence service), June 15, 2021; “Brief summary: 2020 Report on the Protection of the Constitution, Facts and Trends,” Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (federal domestic intelligence service), June 15, 2021.

h The equally small right-wing extremist party *DIE RECHTE* is made up of eight federal state associations (Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Bremen, Hesse, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saxony-Anhalt and a southwestern association made up of Rhineland-Palatinate and Saarland) with 16 local associations and a small number of ‘bases.’ Some associations at the local or state level are currently being established, have existed only for a few months, are inactive, or are being re-established without having been formally dissolved. Other associations only exist in name and have never been active. North Rhine-Westphalia remains the party’s heartland. The party has 550 members. See “Verfassungsschutzbericht 2020” and “Brief summary: 2020 Report on the Protection of the Constitution, Facts and Trends.”

i The *Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland* (Identitarian Movement Germany) first appeared in October 2012 on social media. With some 575 members and supporters (as of 2020), it describes itself as a “non-parliamentary patriotic youth movement” and focuses on quick flashmobs that are covered on various social media platforms. Its ideology centers in the concept of ethnopluralism (i.e., preserving and mutually respecting separate and bordered ethno-cultural regions and promoting an ethnically and culturally homogenous nation-state). It strongly opposes multiculturalism and globalization, and is inherently xenophobic. See “Verfassungsschutzbericht 2020” and “Brief summary: 2020 Report on the Protection of the Constitution, Facts and Trends.”

its youth organization *Junge Alternative*.⁴² The AfD has been very active in these protests, especially in the states of eastern Germany,⁴³ and has often tried to play a leading role.⁴⁴

Far from forming a coherent movement, however, the protesters participating in *Querdenken* rallies are a heterogeneous group, composed of both established extremists from both sides of the political spectrum⁴⁵ and previously non-political individuals, forming a melting pot of right-wing extremism, anti-Semitism, conspiracy theories like QAnon, *Reichsbürger* (‘Reich citizens’) and sovereign citizens.⁴⁶ The Lower Saxony state domestic intelligence service identified four main connecting elements linking these different milieus:⁴⁷

1. The belief in conspiracy theories and a worldview based on these theories;
2. An intense connection to (right-wing influenced) esotericism;
3. A fundamental opposition toward modern society and a reference to a (constructed) ‘natural’ way of life;
4. A narrative of opposition against the state: The fight of the not sovereign people against a perceived dictatorship of ‘elites.’

According to the analysis by this security service, not only have right-wing extremists tried to utilize the initially more libertarian than far-right motivated⁴⁸ *Querdenken* protests to leverage their anti-government positions, they have worked to politicize—and ultimately radicalize—many previously non-political persons toward a fundamentally skeptical or even anti-government position in order to gain future allies in their opposition against liberal democracy.⁴⁹ According to this assessment, the intent of this influence is to undermine the acceptance of government regulation and ultimately deny the state’s monopoly on violence.⁵⁰ As with most conspiracy theories, the imagined ‘elites’ very often are linked to equally imagined Jewish masterminds, thus reinforcing pre-existing anti-Semitic sentiments.⁵¹

The narrative of necessary resistance toward an increasingly authoritarian state lays the groundwork for legitimizing violence.⁵² Hitherto not primarily ideologically motivated individuals are drawn toward far-right narratives without being forced to explicitly associate themselves with right-wing extremist organizations, which still are seen as beyond the pale for the majority of German society. Thus, for some individuals the *Querdenken* movement may be the proverbial rabbit hole leading to a range of extremist ideologies. What makes this potentially so problematic is that the *Querdenken* movement addresses fear and insecurity experienced by many people who feel overwhelmed by the pandemic and the societal challenges it carries. In potentially fueling anti-government sentiments, it may thus form a gateway for a significant number of individuals to accept more extremist views and ultimately the belief that resorting to violence may be acceptable or even necessary to defend one’s rights.

A detailed analysis by the North Rhine-Westphalia state domestic intelligence service shows that while established right-wing extremist parties had difficulties in linking up with non-aligned protesters, *Reichsbürger* conspiracy theorists and unorganized right-wing extremists oftentimes easily joined *Querdenken* rallies and were accepted by the other protesters.⁵³

Generally speaking, conspiracy theories resonate among people skeptical about government regulation. A very prominent recent example is the former head of Germany’s federal domestic

intelligence service who publicly voiced his ‘suspicion’ that the government measures to reduce the spread of the coronavirus are secretly utilized as a pretense to restructure the state into a more authoritarian model with fewer rights ensuring personal freedom.^j

Security Concerns and Future Trajectory

The security concerns generated in Germany as a result of the rise of the *Querdenken* movement are far from unique. During the pandemic, protests against government regulations were widespread throughout Europe and the Western world and recently erupted into serious clashes with law enforcement and full-scale riots in countries like France,⁵⁴ Italy,⁵⁵ and especially Belgium⁵⁶ and the Netherlands.⁵⁷

The American analyst Colin Clarke has documented how anti-vaccination, anti-lockdown protests have deteriorated into violent riots around the globe as a result of already existing—and very diverse—anti-government extremists exploiting these protests to spread their ideology.⁵⁸ Relating to the aforementioned riots in several countries, he observed an “anti-corona” ecosystem throughout Europe fueling real-world violence.⁵⁹ And this development is not limited to Europe; anti-vaccination activists in the United States found common ground with both conspiracy theorists (including QAnon adherents) and far-right extremists in general, especially individuals and groups holding strong anti-government views.⁶⁰ The protests against COVID-19-related restrictions seem to be a rallying point for a diverse range of groups and individuals who are discontent with their respective governments.

In Germany, the radicalization of at least parts of the *Querdenken* movement is a development that is closely monitored by both law enforcement agencies and the domestic intelligence service. The federal domestic intelligence service *BfV*⁶¹ as well as the majority of the state intelligence services⁶² have decided to open investigations into the *Querdenken* movement. These range from investigation of the movement in its entirety to investigations into defined parts of it, deemed “groups of intelligence concern,” thus providing the legal framework to gather and analyze information on these groups and their development.

Riots aside, the connecting elements that form the *Querdenken* worldview have the potential to also fuel lethal plots, as the investigation into the alleged murder plot against Saxony’s premier has illustrated.

The potential for violence of this ideology was also demonstrated by the September 2021 Idar-Oberstein gas station murder, which is assessed to be the first COVID-19-related homicide in Germany.

j Hans-Georg Maaßen voiced this idea in an interview distributed via social media on January 2, 2022. To verify or falsify the authenticity of the interview, the author reached out to Maaßen and asked him to confirm or to deny the sequence. Maaßen did not respond. His comment referred to the right-wing conspiracy theory of “The Great Reset.” This was initially an initiative of the World Economic Forum aimed at rebuilding society and the economy following the pandemic but as outlandishly imagined by conspiracy theorists was a secret plot by an elite of world leaders who planned and executed the coronavirus pandemic in order to take control of the world economy and establish an authoritarian new world order. See Jack Goodman and Flora Carmichael, “The coronavirus pandemic ‘Great Reset’ theory and a false vaccine claim debunked,” BBC, November 22, 2020. For more on the Maaßen remarks, see “Maaßen verteidigt sich gegen Rufe nach Parteiausschluss,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 5, 2022, and Volker Petersen, “Neuer Maaßen-Eklat treibt CDU um,” NTV, January 3, 2022.

“Riots aside, the connecting elements that form the *Querdenken* worldview have the potential to also fuel lethal plots, as the investigation into the alleged murder plot against Saxony’s premier has illustrated.”

Late on the evening of September 18, 2021, a 20-year-old employee at a gas station in the southwestern German town of Idar-Oberstein was shot and killed over a dispute regarding a customer not wearing a face mask. Police arrested a 49-year-old suspect the next day. He confessed to the homicide and is currently on trial.^{63 k} The suspect allegedly entered the gas station around 7:45 PM and picked up two six-packs of beer. He was not wearing a mask as required by German law at the time. The cashier, a local student on a side job, pointed out that it was mandatory to wear a mask inside the gas station, at which time the man put down the beers after a brief discussion and left, raising his hand in a threatening manner. He returned to the gas station around 9:25 PM wearing a mask. As he stepped to the counter, however, he pulled the mask down, prompting the cashier once again to remind him of the obligation to wear a mask. He then allegedly pulled a .357 Magnum revolver from his pocket and shot the student in the face, fatally wounding him. He fled the scene, but turned himself in the next morning after an intense manhunt was started utilizing pictures from the gas station’s CCTV system, and confessed to the murder.⁶⁴

During the suspect’s interview with police, he stated that the coronavirus pandemic had put a strain on him.⁶⁵ Feeling cornered, he had seen no other “way out” than to set an example. He perceived the cashier as embodying the enforcement of the anti-virus legislation he himself opposed.⁶⁶

The suspect was not known to police or the domestic intelligence service prior to the assault. The gun he used was obtained illegally. A search of his house turned up another gun and ammunition for which he had no permit under the strict German weapons legislation.⁶⁷

Police investigated leads with regard to the suspect’s prior activities on social media, suggesting he discussed conspiracy theories related to the coronavirus pandemic and other topics.^{68 l} At the time of publication, it was not clear how the man specifically viewed the *Querdenken* protest movement. However, the analysis

k The suspect confessed to the homicide. He has been indicted on murder and weapons-related charges. The criminal trial started on March 21, 2022, and is currently ongoing. The portrayal of the assault is based on media information released by local police (Polizeipräsidium Trier), the prosecutor’s office (Staatsanwaltschaft Bad Kreuznach), and the criminal court (Landgericht Bad Kreuznach). An indictment is merely an allegation, and all suspects are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

l The Germany-based non-governmental organization Center für Monitoring, Analyse und Strategie (CeMAS) (Center for monitoring, analysis, and strategy), specializing on conspiracy theories, disinformation, anti-semitism, and right-wing extremism, published Twitter content attributed to the suspect. See Gunnar Herrmann, “Mord in der Tankstelle: Wer ist der Täter von Idar-Oberstein?” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, September 22, 2021. This content has not been confirmed by law enforcement authorities so far.

of evidence seized in his home indicates the suspect pitted himself against the majority of society and the state, a prosecutor declared. During his interviews, the suspect claimed he read up on news not using established media, but only so-called free media, referring to chat groups on the messenger service Telegram.⁶⁹

Going far beyond a tragic escalation of an everyday argument, the murder underlined the threat emanating from a deep-rooted feeling among some Germans that COVID-19 restrictions amount to unjust government oppression and that they need to defend themselves against this oppression. The homicide is widely viewed by German law enforcement and intelligence officials as highlighting the lethal violence potential embedded in this mindset.

Exactly how the *Querdenken* movement in Germany will evolve is unclear. Notwithstanding a recent spike in rallies due to the political discussion of mandatory vaccination, the scale of protests has been declining, and so it is entirely possible it may dry out as a mass movement over the coming months as the pandemic becomes less of a dominant topic. But even if this transpires, the harm to democracy appears to be already done. A large number of people convinced themselves of conspiracy theories and bought into the idea of a government seeking to undermine liberal democracy and the freedom rights of the country's citizens, thus probably alienating them from the political system in a long-lasting manner. This makes these individuals vulnerable to any new disinformation or conspiracy-directed campaign in the near future—be it extremism-

affiliated or part of a state-sponsored disinformation campaign.^m

At the same time, recent months have revealed a growing willingness of certain individuals to employ physical violence in pursuit of their convictions. Nancy Faeser, Germany's newly appointed minister of the interior, has cautioned about a radicalization of the *Querdenken* movement.⁷⁰ With right-wing extremists trying to benefit from these protests and celebrating individual acts of violence as proof that the government they detest may be vulnerable to their idea of resistance, it is entirely possible that some individuals or small groups may radicalize into a violent anti-government ideology.⁷¹ Referring to the left-wing extremist Red Army Faction terrorist organization that conducted several terror attacks in Germany, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, the German scholar of terrorism Peter Neumann believes it is even possible a 'Corona-RAF' will emerge.⁷²

COVID-19 is not only an ongoing public health and economical challenge; the government measures intended to curb the pandemic made a perfect bogeyman for right-wing extremism-influenced skeptics who have increasingly withdrawn from democratic discourse. The long-term impact of this development cannot yet be fully assessed, but it will remain a serious concern for Germany's society as well as its law enforcement and intelligence services for years to come. **CTC**

m Russia has for years been actively engaged in large-scale disinformation activities targeting the member states of the European Union. For further information, refer to the European Union's East StratCom Task Force project EUvsDisinfo (www.euvsdisinfo.eu), which provides background information and a highly recommended reading list.

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Examining Digital Currency Usage by Terrorists in Syria

By Audrey Alexander and Teddy MacDonald

To help increase understanding of terrorist exploitation of digital currencies, this article narrowly explores examples emerging from networks operating in Syria. After a brief discussion about the benefits and drawbacks of digital currencies for illicit actors, including terrorists, the authors explore some of the specific factors in Syria that might influence the use of digital currencies by networks linked to the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida's past and present Syria-based associates. An analysis of three different clusters of activity demonstrates how some terrorists in the country raise, move, hide, and access funds using digital currencies. The article concludes with a brief discussion about what counterterrorism policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can learn about terrorist exploitation of digital currencies from the Syrian context.

In recent years, the security community's degree of concern about terrorist exploitation of digital currencies has varied. While some entities argue the threat is understated, others suggest that terrorist adoption of digital currencies is overstated. Ultimately, as numerous factors may influence the financial behaviors of individuals, networks, and groups, it is crucial to recognize that the use of digital currencies is often context-dependent.

Relative to other topics, publicly available information about terrorism financing is limited because terrorists strive to act clandestinely, and the entities working to counter their activities need to protect sensitive details for security reasons.¹ As a result,

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commentary on terrorist exploitation of digital currencies is often hypothetical, speculative, and anecdotal, raising questions about the threat based on limited evidence.^a Such analyses can be valuable when consumers recognize the limitations of the work, but research drawing on concrete examples can also help piece together a clearer understanding of trends in specific networks and environments. Consequently, this article narrowly examines examples of digital currency usage in Syria by the Islamic State as well as al-Qa`ida and its past and present Syria-based associates. The authors use publicly available information from various sources to highlight some of the tactics, techniques, and procedures adopted by terrorists with interests in the region. For added depth, the article also draws on the authors' interview with Collin Almquist, the head of Intel Production at Chainalysis, a company providing cryptocurrency data, software, and services to numerous governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Before delving into specific instances where terrorists in Syria exploit digital currencies, it is helpful to review what digital currencies are and discuss why terrorist organizations and their members occasionally use these tools, particularly in Syria. In examining the specific cases in Syria, this article outlines some broader observations and walks through examples, highlighting some of the logistical nuances of various schemes. Finally, it concludes with a discussion about what policymakers, practitioners, and scholars can learn about terrorist exploitation of digital currencies from the Syrian context.

Digital Currencies and Terrorists: A Primer

The global financial system is experiencing notable disruptions from new financial technology, notably blockchain,² cryptocurrencies,^b and decentralized finance (DeFi).^c In short, these innovations offer alternatives to the traditional banking system by making it possible to transact online without the involvement of centralized financial institutions. Since more actors worldwide are using DeFi and cryptocurrencies, terrorist and criminal networks' adoption of these technologies is unsurprising. Even so, international organizations, governments, and financial institutions are still learning how to navigate the proliferation of these financial instruments and

a In an interview with the authors, Collin Almquist, the head of Intel Production at Chainalysis, said, "[We] see a lot of misinformation in the headlines about millions of dollars of Bitcoin being raised for terrorist organizations, and that's not true." Authors' interview, Collin Almquist, January 2022.

b Cryptocurrencies, or digital currencies, are various types of decentralized digital money. For a primer on digital currencies, see "What is Cryptocurrency?" Coinbase, February 9, 2022.

c In short, decentralized finance, or "DeFi," is a term for financial services on public blockchains. For a primer on decentralized finance, see "What is DeFi?" Coinbase, February 9, 2022.

practices. Unpacking why these financial services have a place in some terrorists' toolkits may help inform relevant stakeholders' efforts to prevent, detect, and disrupt the exploitation of DeFi infrastructure.

For starters, DeFi infrastructure offers logistical benefits that may appeal to terrorists and other illicit actors.³ In short, it affords individuals speed, ease, and security with less oversight than traditional banking. Again, in a decentralized network, users can transact with any other user without clearing from any central authority. Creating a virtual wallet, which essentially amounts to opening an account or a node on the network, does not require contact details or additional personally identifiable information.⁴ Generally, after incurring a comparatively modest fee,⁵ transactions are nearly instantaneous and verified by "smart contracts," which help increase security by creating records in ledgers. The ledgers are immutable, irreversible, and stored across the network using blockchain technology,⁴ though different technical configurations affect "who can join and participate in the core activities of the blockchain networks."⁵ While blockchain technology has uses in many industries, this article focuses on digital currencies such as Bitcoin (BTC) and Ethereum (ETH).^f

Taking a step back, decentralized financial networks involve interactions between multiple people, technologies, and businesses.⁶ People can exchange cryptocurrencies directly with peers or through exchanges and other intermediaries, like money service businesses (MSBs). As third parties, exchanges and MSBs do not issue currency but provide a marketplace for transactions. They also facilitate converting digital currency to other forms of money, primarily real (fiat) currency. Some bad actors think they can abuse this system to raise, move, or launder money and evade sanctions with digital currencies. For the most part, registered exchanges that comply with internationally recognized anti-money laundering and combating the financing of terrorism standards (AML/CFT) and "know your customer" (KYC) requirements help prevent these activities.⁷ However, if exchanges are unlicensed, unregistered, or non-compliant with such standards and requirements, they create more opportunities for terrorists to act without interference.⁸ While international transfers through traditional banking systems are

accountable to international protocols such as SWIFT or CHIPS,^g decentralized networks and exchanges lack such supervision. As networks and exchanges transcend borders, many governments and institutions have yet to determine how best to create and enforce standards in different jurisdictions. Even if various jurisdictions developed more consistent regulations for decentralized finance, many emerging economies and areas of conflict might lack the will or resources to enforce them, creating vulnerabilities that bad actors can exploit.⁹

Although DeFi and digital currencies may appeal to terrorists in some ways, these tools also have drawbacks. First, the most widely adopted digital currencies are not genuinely anonymous since all transactions on public ledgers can be viewed. Despite misconceptions to the contrary, private and public entities can trace transactions across BTC, ETH, and other open ledgers. Although bad actors may leverage additional evasion tactics while using digital currencies, such as using private coins,^{10 h} virtual private networks (VPNs), single-use wallets, or digital money laundering techniques involving "mixing" services,ⁱ there are still security limitations and vulnerabilities.¹¹

Second, digital currencies are subject to varied economic risks and nuances. On this point, characterizations of market values, changes, and functions of money also warrant discussion. For one, increased security may come at a cost: Digital currencies with private ledgers, for example, may promote anonymity, but those tokens often do not carry high market value, ability to convert, and subsequent utility (the transparency of BTC and ETH arguably drives much of their value).^j Another important point on value is volatility. Digital currencies are volatile, and coins with low adoption and market value (typically private ledger currencies) are even more so. Increased volatility invites the risk of a quick loss of value as assets are stored, especially with delays in converting to real currency. Such realities may reduce the appeal of digital currencies.

Third, virtual currencies do not eliminate the need to convert into more traditional forms of money like cash, and they do not

d No Personally Identifiable Information (PII) is needed for a node to mine for tokens. However, PII and "know your customer" protocols are required for exchanges and real currency conversions. These procedures, and potential challenges concerning compliance, are discussed in greater detail later in the article.

e The fees described are known as "gas," and they vary depending on trading volume and mining on a network relative to its maximum capability in "transactions per second." Transactions can lag, but they are still relatively instantaneous compared to most other methods of funds transfer.

f Today, the most renowned digital currencies are Bitcoin (BTC) and Ethereum (ETH), which have the highest market value and (in original form) both provide open (i.e., "public," as opposed to "closed" or "private") ledgers. The distinction of a public ledger is critical as any person on the network can see every transaction after every "block" update on the chain. New and competing applications and coins are constantly developed and released, to include closed ledgers, but BTC and ETH historically and currently are the most transacted digital currencies both for legitimate and illicit use.

g The Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) is a global messaging platform to facilitate transfers; the Clearing House Interbank Payments System (CHIPS) is the largest private USD clearing system.

h In short, private coins and ledgers use the same DeFi blockchain principles as public but have certain technical aspects that obscure who is behind a transaction: either by providing anonymity of who the node is, transaction details such as the amount or time, or not allowing everyone to see the entire ledger (blockchain).

i Malign users can also seek to evade capture by using a single use wallet (opened, used once, closed) or digital money laundering techniques known as "mixing" (multiple, rapid transactions with "clean" and "dirty" crypto; often across networks and across several jurisdictions). Tom Keatinge, David Carlisle, and Florence Keen, "Virtual currencies and terrorist financing: assessing the risks and evaluating responses," Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament's Special Committee on Terrorism, May 2018.

j Private coins are less common on main exchanges or MSBs, making conversion more difficult. Of some of the more suspicious coins (Monero, Zcash, ShadowCash, Dash, BlackCoin), only two are available to trade on Coinbase. Lesser-known exchanges may accept them, but with fewer resources at those exchanges' disposal they are less compliant and incur greater risk of theft. Even if private coins become accepted on secure exchanges, that does not guarantee that exchanges or MSBs will be available in a conflict area.



This photo captures the front of the Bitcoin Transfer office, a purported cryptocurrency exchange based in Idlib, Syria, that is accused of facilitating a Bitcoin money laundering scheme involving terrorist organizations in Syria. (Photo made available by Chainalysis)

make legacy terrorism financing techniques obsolete. While some actors may be inclined to use digital currencies as a medium of exchange, many prefer traditional methods of funds transfer. Even if anonymous transactions occur on a private chain, a trusted exchange or MSB must convert those currencies into widely accepted currencies for that value to be utilized. Such businesses are not necessarily common or accessible in many parts of the world, especially areas affected by conflict. Individuals may use additional financial facilitators, the *hawala* system, or cash couriers to help move funds, but these logistics can add the sort of costs and vulnerabilities that bad actors try to avoid in the first place. That said, the potential utility of digital currencies (including private coins) for illicit online services where vendors accept them as a medium of exchange for services is cause for concern, especially if private coins become more popular, valuable, and easy to convert.

After this brief discussion of the potential merits and drawbacks of DeFi and cryptocurrencies for terrorists at the tactical level, it is helpful to reflect on research about digital currency usage in general. A blog post by Chainalysis, a blockchain services firm, reports that total crypto volume grew from \$2.4tr in 2020 to \$15.8tr of value (+558% year-over-year) in 2021.¹² Within that, illicit use grew from \$7.8bn to \$14bn of value (+79% YoY).¹³ Interestingly, although illicit use increased in 2021, that growth did not occur at the same rate as cryptocurrency usage writ large. The overwhelming majority of cryptocurrency usage was assessed to be legitimate, and Chainalysis assesses that in 2021, as little as 0.15% of transactions involved an

illicit address.^{14 k} Even though illicit transactions only comprise a small segment of cryptocurrency usage overall, the reality that such transactions can help advance nefarious actors means these trends still warrant further analysis.¹⁵

Considering the Economic Environment in Syria

Turning the focus to the Syrian context, the macroeconomic situation could incentivize many actors' pursuit of alternative money solutions, including DeFi and digital currencies. The defunct financial system and negligible economic growth in Syria are pertinent as they affect everyone, albeit with regional nuances.¹ Today, the Syrian pound is worth about one-four hundredth of what it was against the USD in 2010, before the start of the Syrian civil war.^{16 m} A suite of economic sanctions stifles financial transactions for many actors in Syria,¹⁷ and violence and economic

k To reiterate, these figures speak to a global trend and are not limited to one region.

l Though macro indicators relate generally to the remaining regime-controlled areas, they still provide valuable snapshots of the economic destruction since the beginning of the Syrian civil war. GDP per capita in 2019 was approximately one-tenth of what it was in 2010, even with a population decline of approximately 20 percent left holding the wealth (that is, four million fewer people). "Syrian Arab Republic," World Bank Data, February 23, 2022.

m Even Iran, a stalwart ally, temporarily stopped selling oil to Assad on credit in 2018. Karam Shaar, "The Syrian Oil Crisis: Causes, Possible Responses, and Implications," Middle East Institute, August 27, 2019.

depression have disrupted every service and industry, especially oil.ⁿ Meanwhile, humanitarian assistance to Syria by governments and NGOs is limited due to security concerns, among other factors, and a marked change from the status quo is unlikely. Against this backdrop, informal employment, markets, and mediums of exchange are only likely to grow.^o

Given the economic situation, one might expect that people across the fragmented country want to find ways to work around enduring liquidity, inflation, and capital issues. In northeastern Syria, an area controlled by the Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), the USD has become an increasingly popular alternative to the Syrian pound.¹⁸ Meanwhile, in northwest Syria in 2019, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) reportedly “called bitcoin the ‘Currency of the Future Economy’ and released a 26-minute video of a HTS cleric discussing its compliance with Shariah-law.”¹⁹ By mid-2020, HTS-controlled parts of northwestern Syria (namely Idlib), and separately, Turkish-controlled parts of northern Syria moved to replace the Syrian pound with the Turkish lira.²⁰ However, when the value of the Turkish lira to the U.S. dollar crashed in late 2021, along with inflation, it negatively affected parts of Syria that had adopted the Turkish lira.²¹ With most currencies proving unreliable or challenging to access, some individuals and networks may be more interested in exploring other money solutions, such as digital currencies.

With this backdrop in mind, this article focuses on some digital currency-related activities by terrorists in Syria. This assessment is beneficial for understanding the broader nexus between digital currencies and terrorism for several reasons. First, Syria’s economic and political environment and the terrorist organizations operating in the country may incentivize a shift for some away from the traditional financial system and real currencies toward DeFi and digital currencies. Second, there is a decent amount of publicly available information about terrorists’ use of digital currencies in the country, making it easier to observe potential trends. Third, increasing understanding of dynamics in Syria might offer insights into how terrorists in other countries might leverage digital currencies, particularly in similar political and economic contexts.

Terrorist Use of Digital Currencies in Syria

This section will highlight some general observations about terrorist use of digital currencies in Syria and then unpack some specific examples. First, an evolving list of terrorist groups and affiliate networks experimenting with digital currencies in Syria includes the Islamic State, al-Qa`ida, and a complex string of past and present

al-Qa`ida-associated groups such as Al-Nusra Front, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, and Hurras al-Din (which receives necessary attention in the following footnote).²² Digital currencies are not the most popular method of funds transfer among terrorists in Syria, who more often rely on various financial institutions, including banks, money services businesses, the *hawala* system (registered and unregistered), courier networks, and other financial technologies, such as crowdfunding platforms.²³ Numerous factors limit digital currency usage in Syria: At the very least, groups generally need internet access, people who understand the basics of using digital currencies, and access to vendors who accept digital currencies or facilitators who can convert them into cash or other financial assets.

A compilation of sources suggests that a list of digital currencies used by terrorists in Syria includes BTC and ETH, and expands to anonymity-enhancing cryptocurrencies that sometimes use private

p Al-Qa`ida’s past and present Syria-based associates include a dynamic matrix of players with changing names, postures, and allegiances. Various stakeholders in the counterterrorism community have different assessments of the organizations. Tracing back to late 2011, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State movement in Iraq (then known as the Islamic State of Iraq and formerly al-Qa`ida in Iraq), instructed Abu Muhammad al-Julani to create an affiliate group in Syria. Commonly known as Jabhat al-Nusra or al-Nusra Front, the group emerged in 2012, and by 2013, it rejected the Islamic State and its leadership and moved to pledge allegiance to al-Qa`ida. In 2014, the U.S. State Department recognized al-Nusra Front as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, since before, it was seen as a group within the Islamic State. By mid-2016, al-Julani and his group reportedly wanted to distance al-Nusra from al-Qa`ida. The organization rebranded to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) and later Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). There is no clear consensus about the motivation for and sincerity of these rebranding efforts within the extremist movement and separately the counterterrorism community. See Tore Hamming and Pieter Van Ostaeyen, “The True Story of al-Qaeda’s Demise and Resurgence in Syria,” *Lawfare*, April 8, 2018. See also “Terrorist Designations of Groups Operating in Syria,” U.S. Department of State, May 14, 2014. See also “Country Reports on Terrorism 2017 - Foreign Terrorist Organizations: al-Nusra Front,” U.S. Department of State, September 19, 2018. Despite this, both the U.S. State Department and the United Nations amended designations and sanctions of al-Nusra Front to include Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other affiliates in 2018. See “Amendments to the Terrorist Designations of al-Nusra Front,” U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, May 31, 2018. See also “Al-Nusra Front for the People of the Levant,” United Nations Security Council, June 5, 2018. In recent years, al-Julani and HTS have continued to push against claims that HTS is linked to al-Qa`ida and acted in some ways that support that claim. Al-Qa`ida loyalists defected to form Hurras al-Din (HAD), and HTS has worked to beat back the HAD and other challengers. For more on this, see Charles Lister, “Twenty Years After 9/11: The Fight for Supremacy in Northwest Syria and the Implications for Global Jihad,” *CTC Sentinel* 14:7 (2021). See also Orwa Ajjoub, “HTS is not al-Qaeda, but it is still an authoritarian regime to be reckoned with,” Middle East Institute, June 24, 2021. Regardless of HTS’ efforts to reposition itself, the group still demands scrutiny, especially since rivalries and partnerships between al-Qa`ida’s past and present Syria-based associates are not always clear-cut. For example, according to a recent U.N. report citing some member states, fighters in the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement/Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIM/TIP) “continue to serve under the HTS. They also collaborate with HAD and Katiba al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (KTJ) on joint attacks on Syrian armed forces.” See “Twenty-ninth 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,” United Nations Security Council, February 3, 2022. This observation indicates that elements of HTS, here ETIM/TIP, sometimes work with HAD, the offshoot of HTS that remains committed to al-Qa`ida. Ultimately, since the United States and the United Nations still recognize HTS and some of its leaders as part of al-Nusra Front, this article regards HTS and its subsidiaries as associates of al-Qa`ida, even if that relationship is complex and evolving. Moreover, when citing or drawing from sources, this article defers to the terminology used by the original source.

n The regime currently produces approximately less than a quarter of the oil than it did in 2010 and a little more than a third of the gas than it did around the start of 2011. The regime also relies heavily on Iranian assistance. Of the oil, over three-quarters is produced in U.S.-backed SDF controlled territory, with revenue splitting difficult to ascertain. “Losses [incurred by Syria’s petroleum sector] since the start of the civil war in 2011 have come to \$100.5bn, the [oil] ministry said without elaborating on whether this was in terms of lost hydrocarbon revenues, losses due to damaged infrastructure or both.” Leva Paldavičiute, “Syria oil sector losses top \$100bn since start of war,” *Argus*, February 6, 2022.

o The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA) projects sustained or increased poverty, unemployment, hyperinflation, trade deficits, migration, and capital flight for the next several years. “Realities and Prospects: Survey of the Economic and Social Developments in the Arab Region 2020-2021,” UNESCWA, February 23, 2022, p. 50.

ledgers such as Monero, Dash, Lumens, Zcash, and Verge.²⁴ Some of the actors promoting the use of digital currencies also encourage others to adopt specific operational security practices within this funds transfer method. Such actions can involve using other security-minded technologies, like VPNs, single-use wallets, and cryptocurrency mixing services.²⁵ Additionally, increased security might require individuals using virtual currencies to be more vigilant about practicing operational security and learning new measures as needed.

For example, accounts raising funds on social media or messengers might try to vet prospective donors in online conversation before providing an address for a digital wallet.²⁶

According to Almquist, the analyst from Chainalysis, the terrorist networks using digital currencies in Syria tend to be more consolidated or centralized (i.e., involve fewer institutions and facilitators) than the traditional, non-digital-currency-using networks operating in the country.²⁷ At least in part, this is because “fewer facilitators in Syria are knowledgeable about and comfortable using digital currencies” compared to other methods of moving and hiding funds.²⁸ Even so, some online actors linked to terrorist groups in Syria are opportunistic in their efforts to teach others how to use digital currencies and try to promote operational security practices.²⁹ The following sections will review three different cases to show how terrorists in Syria leverage digital currencies to raise, move, hide, and use funds.

Al-Qa`ida, HTS, and BitcoinTransfer

In August 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) announced the disruption of three terror finance cyber-enabled campaigns, stating that this effort represented the “largest ever seizure of terrorist organizations’ cryptocurrency accounts.”³⁰ According to DOJ, al-Qa`ida and some of its affiliates in Syria managed one of the three campaigns, leveraging digital currencies to raise, move, and obscure funds for terrorism financing.³¹ In greater detail, a criminal complaint explains that “[al-Qa`ida] and affiliated terrorist groups have been operating a BTC money laundering network using Telegram channels and other social media platforms to solicit BTC donations to further their terrorist goals.”³² Posing as charitable organizations to promote fundraising campaigns online, these entities allegedly used multi-layered transactions to mask their movement of funds.³³ Additionally, the criminal complaint notes that a “central hub” collected and later redistributed funds to entities within the money laundering scheme.³⁴

Through blockchain analysis, Chainalysis revealed that the hub described in the criminal complaint was the BitcoinTransfer office in Idlib, Syria.³⁵ A blog post by Chainalysis explains that “BitcoinTransfer^q purports to be a cryptocurrency exchange but has been implicated in several terrorism financing schemes and appears to be fully under the control of terrorist groups. Since the service became active in late December 2018, more than \$280,000 worth of Bitcoin has passed through BitcoinTransfer, much of it related to terrorism financing.”³⁶ Some of the clusters of entities involved in the network include Al Sadaqah, Al Ikhwa, Malhama Tactical, and Reminders from Syria.³⁷ A few of these entities are described below.

Some campaigns in the network were relatively transparent about their intentions: Al Sadaqah, for instance, allegedly described

itself as “an independent charity organization that is benefiting and providing the Mujahidin in Syria with weapons, finical [sic] aid and other projects relating to the jihad.”³⁸ In testimony for a 2018 hearing before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee of Terrorism and Illicit Finance, analyst Yaya Fanusie explained how Al Sadaqah “encouraged followers to purchase bitcoin vouchers for a website that took payment in euros. The group posted sites where supporters could use bitcoin ATMs to buy cryptocurrencies. Clearly, the campaign organizers were trying to make the bitcoin process easier for novices.”³⁹

Within the broader scheme, another cluster of activity involved a supposedly charitable entity called “Al Ikhwa,” which claimed to be “supporting the brothers in Syria, Wives of [martyrs] and their families ... [and] ... help those who defend the Muslims in [Syria].”⁴⁰ Despite U.S. efforts to disrupt the scheme, some entities appear to remain operational. On Telegram, for example, the authors have observed the latest iteration of the Al Ikhwa campaign soliciting donations, often posting photos of children receiving aid from the group, and offering prospective donors multiple payment methods including PayPal, Western Union, and Bitcoin.

Malhama Tactical’s apparent use of digital currencies and the BitcoinTransfer office in Idlib warrants further attention. Malhama Tactical, occasionally nicknamed the “Blackwater of Jihad,” is a small jihadi private military that advertises its training services online and sometimes participates more directly in the Syrian conflict.⁴¹ Reportedly, Malhama Tactical’s membership is comprised mostly of foreign fighters from Russia and Muslim-majority federal republics of the former Soviet Union, but it also has members and trainees from diverse backgrounds.⁴² While known for its connections to HTS and a range of groups fighting for HTS, Malhama Tactical appears to have multiple sources of funds.⁴³ For example, the group fundraises on social media and messengers [messaging apps], sometimes partnering with other networks, but it does not necessarily position itself as a charitable organization.⁴⁴ Malhama Tactical’s methods of funds transfer for online donations reportedly include “services such as Wallet One and QIWI Koshelek” and “online cryptocurrencies.”⁴⁵ On Twitter and Telegram, Malhama Tactical and some of its leadership have reportedly mentioned the group’s use of Bitcoin Wallet, an “online ‘Bitcoin mixing’ service,” and Monero, which is another digital currency.⁴⁶ Researchers following the group’s activities note that Malhama Tactical’s efforts to promote itself online face some challenges due to content moderation and account suspensions by social media providers.⁴⁷ However, researchers caveat the setbacks, explaining that “to circumvent increasing counterterrorism financing obstacles, Malhama Tactical has started to explore alternative ways of raising funds.”⁴⁸ The organization’s use of digital currencies and involvement in the network that used the BitcoinTransfer office in Idlib demonstrate part of that effort.⁴⁹

Finally, based on blockchain data explored on the Chainalysis Reactor platform, other entities with suspected ties to violent extremists in Syria also used the BitcoinTransfer office.⁵⁰ At least anecdotally, it is worth noting that there are some indications that the BitcoinTransfer office in Idlib had interactions with Islamic State-linked entities as well. In mid-2020, BitcoinTransfer received

q Whenever BitcoinTransfer is mentioned in this article, it refers to the single business/hub based in Idlib.

r Chainalysis’ Reactor tool also indicated that entities called The Merciful Hands and Tawheed & Jihad Media were among those that used the BitcoinTransfer office.

.44 BTC from a cluster associated with a likely pro-Islamic State initiative.^s All in all, this case of the BitcoinTransfer office in Idlib, and the networks surrounding that hub, shows how complex and interconnected terrorism financing activity involving digital currencies can be. Despite U.S. efforts to disrupt this activity, new iterations of the BitcoinTransfer office and some groups from the original scheme remain operational today.^t

Transnational Networks Supporting HTS and HTS Elements with Digital Currencies

Noteworthy activities concerning the use of digital currencies by terrorists in Syria often involve transnational ties that help raise and move funds. As discussed earlier, Malhama Tactical, the jihadi mercenary group that trains personnel and sometimes fights in support of HTS, has worked with other groups to raise funds. The Abu Ahmed Foundation, an Indonesian fundraising group demonstrating interest in multiple al-Qa`ida-associated groups in the Syrian conflict, has coordinated fundraising campaigns with Malhama Tactical.⁵¹ In October 2018, the Abu Ahmed Foundation and Malhama Tactical coordinated a fundraising campaign and reportedly directed prospective donors to use Bitcoin, Monero, Dash, and Verge to send funds.⁵²

As a different example of a transnational network, in September 2020, French authorities conducted an operation across France to disrupt a scheme that moved funds to Islamist extremists in Syria using cryptocurrencies; that effort culminated in the arrest of 29 people suspected of involvement in the network.⁵³ Initially discovered by Tracfin, a specialized unit within the French Ministry of Finance focused on uncovering financial fraud, money laundering, and terrorism financing, the scheme had allegedly operated since 2019.⁵⁴ Beyond those arrested in France, two French jihadis, both suspected members of HTS believed to be living in northwest Syria, were reportedly central to the broader financing scheme.⁵⁵

Although most of those arrested in France were suspected of donating funds to the network, two of the 29 detained by authorities were believed to have distinct logistical roles in managing the scheme.⁵⁶ In short, the plan centered around “the purchase of cryptocurrency coupons for relatively small amounts in tobacco shops across France.”⁵⁷ Citing the prosecutor’s office, some reporting on the arrangement explained that “dozens of people in France constantly and anonymously bought cryptocurrency coupons worth 10 to 150 euros (\$11 to \$165).”⁵⁸ From there, “beneficiaries in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic were able to recover the funds following receipt of a code sent through encrypted text messages,”⁵⁹ and facilitators could then convert the cryptocurrencies into cash. In total, “hundreds of thousands of euros are thought to have been supplied via the network,” and in addition to supporting al-Qa`ida-associated groups like HTS, some funds reportedly benefited the Islamic State as well.⁶⁰ In an interview with the authors, Almquist also confirmed that this network had touchpoints with the previously mentioned BitcoinTransfer office in Idlib,⁶¹

demonstrating the relative centralization of entities using digital currencies in Syria.

Digital Currency Activity Concerning Islamic State Detainees^u

Financial networks raising, moving, and obscuring funds supposedly intended for Islamic State affiliates held in detention facilities in Syria, particularly those in the northeastern part of the country, offer more insights on the use of digital currencies. Amidst an ongoing humanitarian and detention crisis, the circumstances of Islamic State-affiliated adults and minors held under guard in camps and prisons have drawn attention from sympathizers worldwide.^v These facilities, managed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES); its military arm, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF); and non-governmental organizations, are notoriously under-resourced and insecure.^w Ultimately, since many detainees have no clear legal pathway out of the facilities, many need funds for daily life (especially in the camps) and aspire to escape. Research about financing trends concerning Islamic State affiliates held in detention facilities, particularly the camps, suggests several pathways allow funds to reach detainees, and digital currencies appear to be an evolving part of that process.^x

To unpack this trend, it is helpful to remember that people in various countries may send funds to Islamic State detainees, including friends and family, sympathetic donors, and charitable

u In this context, the term “detainee(s)” refers to the population of alleged Islamic State affiliates, including adults and children, held under guard in AANES, SDF, and NGO-run camps and prisons. The word “detainee” is not universally adopted by stakeholders working on this topic, but this article uses a similar conceptualization about what constitutes a “detainee” in the current situation as the International Crisis Group and the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency. For more on differing definitions, see “Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019,” U.S. Department of Defense, February 4, 2020, p. 48.

v The detainee population encompasses Islamic State-affiliated Syrians and Iraqis, and many other nationalities as well. Bel Trew and Rajai Bourhan, “Cryptocurrency and the crumbling caliphate: The high tech money trail left as jihadi families try to flee refugee camps,” *Independent*, November 29, 2020.

w The composition of the camps and prisons can vary in important and complicated ways. In this article, the authors use the term “detention facilities” to refer to the network of prisons and camps in northeastern Syria managed by the AANES, generally alongside the SDF and non-governmental organizations. For more context on the facilities, see Charlie Savage, “The Kurds’ Prisons and Detention Camps for ISIS Members, Explained,” *New York Times*, October 22, 2019. See also the “Background” section in Audrey Alexander, *Cash Camps: Financing Detainee Activities in Al-Hol and Roj Camps* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2021).

x A CTC report by one of the authors (Alexander) narrowly studied how funds for Islamic State detainees move into, around, and out of al-Hol and Roj camps. The report summarized trends regarding the transfer of funds, explaining: “Before money intended for Islamic State detainees in Al-Hol and Roj arrives in the camps, it may move through banks and other financial institutions, money services businesses, the hawala system, cash couriers, and a range of financial technologies, including crowdfunding platforms, cryptocurrencies, and possibly online retail platforms.” See Alexander, p. 14. For more sources on this topic, see also “Treasury reported that during this quarter ISIS and its supporters also relied on cryptocurrencies and online fundraising platforms, apart from traditional methods of transferring funds into Iraq and Syria” in “Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2021– March 31, 2021,” U.S. Department of Defense, May 4, 2021, p. 107; Vera Mironova, “Crowdfunding the Women of the Islamic State,” *Lawfare*, October 29, 2020; and Trew and Bourhan.

s At the time of the transfers in mid-2020, .44 BTC was about 4,000 USD.

t For example, at the time of writing, social media monitoring by the authors shows that Al Ikhwa is still promoting fundraisers on Telegram asking for Bitcoin donations. Additionally, Collin Almquist confirmed that a new iteration of the BitcoinTransfer office and its management are using a new wallet address. Authors’ interview, Collin Almquist, January 2022.

“Research about financing trends concerning Islamic State affiliates held in detention facilities, particularly the camps, suggests several pathways allow funds to reach detainees, and digital currencies appear to be an evolving part of that process.”

organizations. The donors' considerations of efficiency and security within their respective operating environments can influence how they raise and move funds for detainees.⁶² One news article highlights how this dynamic manifests among some families in Europe: “While families have long sent money to the refugee camps via money transfer agencies such as Western Union and MoneyGram, in recent months many have reported being barred from using such services - leading them to turn to cryptocurrencies [i.e., digital currencies] such as Bitcoin.”⁶³ The U.N. Secretary-General's 12th report on the Islamic State threat (published in early 2021) reinforces this observation, stating, “The reported use of cryptocurrency in the Syrian Arab Republic has increased in recent months. There are ongoing reports of terrorist fighters or their family members seeking to raise funds via cryptocurrency wallet addresses.”⁶⁴

Cases where individuals use digital currencies to send funds to Syria for Islamic State detainees also shed light on the global reach of fundraisers operating in Syria. For example, in July 2021, a jury in the United Kingdom found Hisham Chaudhary guilty of using Bitcoin to send money to the Islamic State to help free members from detention camps.⁶⁵ According to a news report about the case, electronic records revealed that Chaudhary purchased over 50,000 of Bitcoin and discussed how to move those funds covertly.⁶⁶ In another case emerging around March 2020, Indian authorities reportedly arrested a man and woman in Delhi after discovering their interest in attack planning.⁶⁷ According to a news article citing the National Investigation Agency's charge sheet, the couple also connected with a woman in Syria who used the Threema messaging app to share a Bitcoin wallet address and solicit donations.⁶⁸ According to reporting referencing the charge sheet, the man directed his contacts to deposit funds into that wallet address.⁶⁹

Many online crowdfunding campaigns geared toward assisting Islamic State detainees promote several methods of funds transfer to attract prospective donors.⁷⁰ While monitoring social media for an ongoing CTC project investigating how funds move into, around, and out of camps holding Islamic State affiliates, the authors noticed that most of these campaigns do not explicitly list a wallet address. Instead, along with offering other funds transfer methods, like PayPal, Western Union, or bank details, these campaigns tend to encourage interested parties to reach out for more information.⁷¹ This approach is likely part of a broader effort to enhance security and vet potential donors on a case-by-case basis rather than broadly posting financial information that is easily detected by law enforcement and intelligence practitioners.⁷² Among pro-Islamic State crowdfunding campaigns observed by the authors, Bitcoin and Monero appear to be the most common digital currencies.

Conclusion

Many policymakers, practitioners, and academics are still developing a clearer understanding of how terrorists exploit digital currencies. In an effort to support that process, this article examined some instances in which terrorist organizations operating in Syria used digital currencies.^y In short, this analysis finds that some terrorist networks in Syria exploit digital currencies and experiment with DeFi, mainly with the intent to raise, move, and hide funds. Operational security appears to be a priority among some actors, but so is convenience, particularly among networks trying to promote supposedly safe and easy methods of funds transfer to prospective donors online. In the cases detailed above, opportunism is also a recurring theme, as Islamic State-linked digital currency activities sometimes use financial infrastructure and businesses associated with al-Qa`ida and its evolving network in Syria, like the BitcoinTransfer office in Idlib. All in all, digital currencies are not replacing other methods of terror finance. Instead, terrorists in Syria often use digital currencies in conjunction with other money service businesses and transfer methods. Moreover, especially in the context of raising and moving funds, social media and messengers are also commonly used to coordinate activities and connect with donors.

While discussing Chainalysis' analytical work concerning Syria, Almquist observed, “Cryptocurrency isn't a great mechanism for purchasing arms, explosives, or other weapons; the *hawala* networks and other traditional MSBs still work for those transactions. What we do see, however, is that terrorist groups use cryptocurrencies for things like fundraising, strategic procurement, and online infrastructure.”⁷³ Although these trends invite security concerns, they also punctuate the vulnerabilities practitioners can exploit to detect and disrupt facilitation networks using digital currencies. Commenting on the utility of blockchain analysis to trace terrorist actors using digital currencies, Almquist explained, “It is a great mechanism for both partner nation and interagency collaboration because it's entirely unclassified. That means that information related to such activities is very easily shareable and actionable.” He added, “Blockchain data as a whole doesn't work out really well [for criminals using cryptocurrencies] because of its evidentiary nature. It's documented; it's immutable. There are no questions of manipulation.”⁷⁴

Looking forward, security-minded policymakers, practitioners, and researchers should continue to develop more awareness about digital currency usage for illicit purposes and understand how various conditions might influence terrorist adoption of digital

y All in all, although this article is not a comprehensive review of terrorist activities involving digital currencies in Syria, these cases offer concrete examples of how members of terrorist groups in the country use digital currencies to raise, move, and hide funds for their causes. Some other interesting examples involving funds supposedly destined for groups in Syria, though largely facilitated outside of Syria, include Zoobia Shahnaz, Murat Cakar, and the FaceMaskCenter scheme. For more on this, see Andrew Mines and Devorah Margolin, “Cryptocurrency and the Dismantling of Terrorism Financing Campaigns,” *Lawfare*, August 26, 2020.

currencies.^z This recommendation concerns terrorist activity in Syria and other regions where conflict and other factors might motivate violent extremists and other illicit actors to pursue alternative money solutions, such as Afghanistan.⁷⁵ Reflecting on the broader landscape, cryptocurrency adoption and the operational security practices associated with cryptocurrency usage will continue to evolve and challenge the security community. Based on the cases highlighted in this article and a range of other sources, some countries, companies, and financial institutions are rising to

meet these challenges, often through collaboration.^{76 aa} To expand efforts to counter terrorism financing activities involving digital currencies in Syria and other countries, these stakeholders across multiple sectors must maintain a pulse on terrorist networks using digital currencies; trace nefarious actors' tactics, techniques, and procedures; and communicate effectively with partners to detect and disrupt terrorist networks. **CTC**

z For example, if MSBs and other real currency conversion options become more common in Syria and the ability to convert digital currencies was easier, would terrorist usage increase? Additionally, if coins like BTC or ETH became a more commonly accepted medium of exchange in Syria, how might it affect the activities of terrorist organizations operating in the area? What if private coins become more popular, valuable, and easy to convert?

aa For example, a recent U.N. report stated: "One Member State observed that its financial intelligence unit is beginning to receive high-quality suspicious transaction reports from virtual currency exchanges, which, upon investigation, have shown links to terrorism financing. That observation underscores the developing maturity of both the analytical tools necessary to identify suspicious activity involving blockchain transactions and the regulatory frameworks that require it to be reported to authorities." See "Twenty-ninth 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."

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