



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

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FEATURE ARTICLE

## The Spring Terror Wave in Israel

BOAZ GANOR

FEATURE ANALYSIS

## The 2022 Ukraine Conflict

Kacper Rekawek on the small flow of far-right foreign fighters

Don Ressler on considerations for the counterterrorism community

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### FROM THE EDITOR

In this month's feature article, Boaz Ganor looks at the lessons that should be learned from the spring 2022 terror wave in Israel. His analysis kicks off the "CTC-ICT Focus on Israel" series, a joint effort between the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC) and the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at Reichman University in Israel. In the coming months, the series will examine the terrorist threat landscape in Israel and the lessons other countries can learn from Israel's counterterrorism efforts.

The two feature analysis articles focus on the foreign fighter problem set in Ukraine and the evolving linkages to far-right extremism of actors on both sides of the conflict. Kacper Rekawek finds that unlike in 2014, "the 2022 conflict has, for the most part, not energized Western right-wing extremists, nor persuaded them to travel. In what is for Ukrainians a war for national survival and a fight to secure a Western democratic future for the country, the allure of the far-right in Ukraine has dimmed. Ukrainian units with far-right histories are now deeply integrated into Ukraine's armed forces and eschew foreign recruitment, and one of those units, the Azov Regiment, was decimated during the siege of Mariupol. Very few foreign right-wing extremists have been recruited into Ukraine's International Legion. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests most of the foreign fighters who have traveled this year to fight on the Ukrainian side are fighting to safeguard Ukraine's future as a Western democracy." Don Rassler examines key concerns and questions about the war in Ukraine that are relevant to counterterrorism practitioners.

Continuing this month's focus on the impact of nefarious Russian actions, Christopher Faulkner examines the activities in Africa of the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company closely tied to the Kremlin. He writes: "Wagner's role in Africa poses a severe threat to the security and stability of African states as well as the strategic interests of the United States and allied nations." Finally, Tara Candland, Ryan O'Farrell, Laren Poole, and Caleb Weiss assess the rising threat to Central Africa posed by the 2021 transformation of the Islamic State's Congolese branch.

Paul Cruickshank, Editor in Chief

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Cover: A tribute to terror victims at the location of an attack in central Tel Aviv, Israel, is pictured on April 8, 2022. (Ilia Yefimovich/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)

# CTC-ICT Focus on Israel: What Can We Learn from the Spring 2022 Terror Wave in Israel?

By Boaz Ganor

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**During the spring of 2022, Israel suffered six attacks by lone actors or local networks—at least three inspired by Palestinian organizations and at least two by the global jihad—and a multitude of thwarted plots. The motivations that underpinned the spring 2022 wave of attacks (and previous waves) appear to have been a combination of ideological and personal, including psychological problems, and a desire for ‘honor.’ Irresponsible media coverage increased the impact of these recent terror attacks. Israeli media needs to adopt baseline editorial standards for the coverage of terrorist attacks to ensure that it is professional, reliable, and responsible, and will not play into the hands of terrorists.**

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In recent years, the month of Ramadan has been characterized by an escalation in political violence and terrorism in the Israeli-Palestinian arena.<sup>a</sup> Given that this important Muslim holiday has been coupled with the deliberate and targeted incitement by Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and global jihadis as well as extremist religious preachers calling for violence and terrorist attacks, it is hardly surprising that every year during Ramadan, there is a rise in terrorist attacks in Israel. This year, Ramadan took place during April, a particularly significant period of festivals for the Jewish public as well, including

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a The same is true for some other theaters of conflict. See Shelly Kittleson, "Islamic State ramps up attacks in Iraq during Ramadan," *Al-Monitor*, May 3, 2020.

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*Editor's Note: This article is the first in a series examining the terrorist threat landscape in Israel and the lessons other countries can learn from Israel's counterterrorism efforts. The series is a joint effort between the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC) and the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at Reichman University in Israel.*

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Passover, one of the three pilgrimage festivals when devout Jews are commanded to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem; the national holidays and memorial days marking Holocaust Remembrance Day; Israel's Memorial Day for Fallen Soldiers; Jerusalem Day; and Independence Day, the date of the founding of the State of Israel (marked by Palestinians as "al-Nakba"—the Day of Catastrophe). Both sides' religious and national holidays are exploited by extremists to inflame tensions and carry out extreme acts in an effort to lead others to follow them and further ignite the fire.

This article first outlines the spate of attacks that took place in Israel in the spring of 2022. It then assesses the driving factors behind the recent wave of attacks and compares it to previous waves of terrorism in Israel. The final section focuses on the often sensationalist and unfiltered coverage of the attacks by Israeli media. Terrorism is designed to terrify, and the way these attacks were reported increased their psychological impact on the Israeli population.

## The Spring 2022 Terror Wave in Israel

The wave of terrorism that befell Israel between March and May 2022 came after a quiet period during which the Palestinian terrorist organizations operating in the Gaza Strip, namely Hamas and PIJ, maintained relative quiet. After Operation Guardian of the Walls, an 11-day assault in May 2021 that saw nearly 4,400 rockets launched toward Israel, Hamas and PIJ leadership put a stop to common tactics utilized by their members such as intermittently firing rockets from Gaza and launching incendiary balloons to set fire to agricultural fields in southern Israel.<sup>1</sup> This calm came about against the backdrop of the new Israeli government's policy of allowing the resumption of payments from Qatar to Gaza residents,<sup>2</sup> as well as Egypt's restraining influence on the arena.

This is not to say that Hamas and PIJ ceased their subversive activities in the West Bank, however. Rather, they have continued their attempts to establish sleeper terrorist cells in the area, challenge the leadership of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman Mahmood Abbas, and, above all, incite and call for Palestinians in the territories to carry out terrorist attacks against Israelis. Indeed, the governance failure in the West Bank has worsened over the past year, creating areas (for example, in Jenin) that quickly became lawless and extraterritorial, from which Palestinian security forces have fled and where some young Palestinians have responded to the terrorist organizations' incitement by carrying out attacks in Israel. This was seen in a series of 'lone actor' or 'local network' attacks in Israel and the West Bank that started in late March, on the eve of Ramadan, and continued into April and May. However, this series of terrorist attacks recently carried out in Israel had a stronger nexus to global jihadism than prior waves of violence.

By early May 2022, Israel had suffered six attacks and had thwarted over a dozen attacks in the spring wave of violence.<sup>3</sup> The

first of these attacks took place on March 22 in the southern city of Be'er Sheva, and was carried out by an Arab citizen of Israel, Mohammed Abu al-Kiyan, a resident of the Bedouin village of Hura.<sup>4</sup> Abu al-Kiyan ran over a cyclist with his vehicle, killing him, and then embarked on a stabbing spree of passers-by that resulted in the murder of three more civilians and the wounding of two others before Abu al-Kiyan was shot dead by an Israeli civilian. The attack stood out not only because it was carried out by an Israeli citizen (a very uncommon phenomenon among Israeli Arabs, who constitute about 17 percent of the country's citizens<sup>5</sup> and who, with a small number of exceptions, traditionally avoid involvement in terrorist attacks), but also because its perpetrator was inspired by the Islamic State.<sup>6</sup> The terrorist had served a sentence in Israeli prison between 2016 and 2020 for his support of the Islamic State after he was caught trying to cross the border into Syria to join the organization.<sup>7</sup> In this context, too, the attack was unusual because Arab Israeli society is largely opposed to the Islamic State's global salafi jihadi ideology. When there has been support for terrorism from a small number of individuals in the community, it has been for Palestinian organizations and has stemmed from familial, cultural, and/or nationalist ties rather than from global salafi jihadi ideology. In this sense, the attack in Be'er Sheva is more similar to those carried out by second- and third-generation immigrants in Europe inspired by the Islamic State who executed attacks individually or as a part of local networks in various countries. Like Abu al-Kiyan, some did so after serving prison sentences for various (usually criminal) offenses and underwent accelerated radicalization processes while in prison.<sup>8</sup>

A few days later, on March 27, 2022, another terrorist attack was carried out in the Israeli city of Hadera.<sup>9</sup> Two cousins from the Agbaria family in the Arab city of Umm al-Fahm planned and executed a complex attack in the heart of Israel. The two perpetrators, also Israeli citizens inspired by the Islamic State rather than Palestinian organizations, entered the center of the city armed with pistols, shot and killed two Border Police officers at a bus stop, snatched their automatic weapons (M16s), and embarked on a shooting spree that injured five Israeli citizens using magazines and M16 ammunition they had obtained ahead of the attack.<sup>10</sup> The terrorists quickly encountered two officers from the Border Police's special undercover unit who happened to be at the scene and shot dead the terrorists.<sup>11</sup> Prior to the attack, the two terrorists filmed themselves in front of an Islamic State flag, swearing allegiance to the group.<sup>12</sup> As with the Be'er Shiva attacker, one terrorist had served a sentence in Israeli prison for supporting the Islamic State and attempting to join the organization in Syria.<sup>13</sup>

Two days later, on March 29, 2022, a third attack was carried out in a central Israeli city, Bnei Brak, by a Palestinian terrorist, Dia Hamarsha, a resident of the Ya'bad village in the Jenin district.<sup>14</sup> Due to the proximity of the events, it is probable that Hamarsha was inspired by the two preceding attacks, though this time the perpetrator was a Palestinian from the territories in Israel illegally.<sup>15</sup> He arrived on the scene bearing an automatic weapon and killed four passers-by and a police officer before being shot dead by the police.<sup>16</sup> The 26-year-old terrorist had previously served a prison sentence in Israel for belonging to a Palestinian terrorist group and was likely inspired by similar organizations.<sup>17</sup> One unique aspect of this attack was the fact that the terrorist used an automatic weapon, in contrast to the majority of the lone-actor terrorist attacks of the past carried out by terrorists from the West Bank

and East Jerusalem using cold weapons (e.g., knives, screwdrivers, and other sharp objects).<sup>18</sup> Following this attack and considering the attacks that preceded it, Israel launched a military operation to seize wanted individuals in Jenin and its surroundings, with the aim of thwarting further attacks and stabilizing security in the region. The operation involved clashes and exchanges of fire with Palestinian militants in the area.<sup>19</sup>

About a week later, on April 7, 2022, six days after the start of Ramadan, another shooting attack was carried out, this time on Tel Aviv's central Dizengoff Street by a lone terrorist actor who fired an automatic weapon at Israeli civilians sitting in a local bar.<sup>20</sup> The terrorist, Ra'ad Hazem, a Palestinian resident of Jenin who was residing in Israel illegally,<sup>21</sup> arrived on the scene armed with a gun and murdered three civilians, wounding six.<sup>22</sup> After a long manhunt, Hazem was shot and killed by security services the next morning in Jaffa. According to the Israel Security Agency (ISA, or Shin Bet), he had "no clear organizational affiliation" and appears to have carried out the attack as a copycat of the previous attacks.<sup>23</sup> Notably, the perpetrator's father is a former senior member of the Palestinian Authority's general security forces.<sup>24</sup>

On April 29, 2022, a security guard in Ariel, an Israeli settlement in the West Bank, was shot by Youssef Sameeh Assi and Yahya Marei, two Palestinians coming from a nearby village<sup>25</sup> who used improvised Carlo submachine guns. They had entered Israel illegally, and one had previously served time in an Israeli jail.<sup>26</sup> While Israeli officials did not link the attack to a specific organization, both Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and Hamas' Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades claimed responsibility for the attack.<sup>27</sup> According to news reporting, the attackers conducted preliminary surveillance prior to the attack, and "drove to the area, went to a high point overlooking the settlement entrance, and observed the community's gate and its security." They "were local, knew the area well and were already familiar with the entrance to the settlement."<sup>28</sup>

Finally, on May 5, 2022, As'ad Yousef As'ad al-Rifa'i, 19, and Subhi Emad Sbeihat, 20, from Jenin, entered the ultra-orthodox city of Elad in central Israel. Armed with an axe and a knife, they killed three people and injured several others.<sup>29</sup> The attack, which took place during the evening of the celebration of Israel's Independence Day, came after a call by Hamas' leader, Yahya Sinwar, to continue attacks against Israelis using a cleaver, an axe, or a knife.<sup>30</sup> The perpetrators were arrested in a nearby forest after a 60-hour manhunt. After the attack, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennet announced that Israel was "at the beginning of a new stage in the war on terror."<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, in the second half of April, following the first three attacks, tensions had continued to increase, mainly as the result of riots<sup>32</sup> by young Israeli Arabs and Palestinians on the Temple Mount and their subsequent containment by Israeli police in order to protect Jewish worshippers at the Western Wall. These young men, who had brought rocks and stones to be thrown at the worshippers and policemen, entrenched themselves inside the Al-Aqsa Mosque. These young rioters tried to inflame the Palestinian masses, incite further terrorist attacks in Israel, and encourage the intervention of Palestinian terrorist organizations by firing rockets into Israel from Gaza (as had occurred the year before) under the pretext of "protecting the Al-Aqsa Mosque" and supporting the rioting youth.<sup>33</sup>



*Israeli security forces respond during the terror attack on Dizengoff Street in central Tel Aviv on April 7, 2022. (Ilia Yefimovich/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)*

## Analysis

In assessing terrorist activity, it is helpful to classify terrorist attacks (in Israel and around the world) into three types.<sup>34</sup> The first is terrorist attacks by ‘lone actors,’ which are inspired attacks by individuals who have undergone a process of radicalization most often due to exposure to incitement. Most operate in solidarity with one terrorist organization or another, although they have not been recruited or trained by it, nor have they benefited from any operational assistance for their attack.

The second category comprises attacks by local independent networks. Similar to the first group, these are attacks inspired by one organization or another, but without any operational ties to them. Unlike the previous group, this involves not one perpetrator, but a small group of terrorists—two or more—who are usually relatives or close friends who underwent radicalization processes and decided to carry out the attack together.

The third type of terrorist attack is organized attacks. These are carried out by a terrorist cell belonging to an organization and consisting of operatives recruited into the organization, trained by it, and sent on its behalf to carry out the attack while receiving operational assistance from it.

In light of this classification, it can be determined that all of the attacks carried out in Israel over the course of the spring 2022 wave were attacks executed by lone actors (for example, the Be’er Sheva attack) or local networks (as in the case of the Hadera attack) inspired by Palestinian terrorist organizations or the Islamic State. In contrast to the terrorist waves of the 1990s and 2000s in Israel, most of which were organized suicide bombings (belonging to the third category of organized attacks), these were not suicide

attacks—though most of the perpetrators did die while carrying out the attack, likely took into account that there was a chance they would be killed, and may even have wanted to die. These attacks should be seen as ‘sacrifice’ attacks, which are inherently different from suicide bombings (which involve the guaranteed death of the perpetrator).<sup>35</sup>

The motivations that underpinned the spring 2022 wave of attacks (similar to the those that motivated the lone terrorists in previous waves in Israel) appear to have been a combination of several factors<sup>36</sup>—ideological motivations (Palestinian and Islamist nationalism), personal motivations (personal, family, economic, or other crises), psychological factors (mental illness, psychological instability, suicidal aspirations), and a desire for honor (protection of religion, nationality, family, wife, etc.).<sup>37</sup> Most of the perpetrators (even those whose main motive was ideological) apparently had a problematic personal history and in some cases also clinical psychological disorders.<sup>38</sup>

A distinction must be made between the terrorist attacks carried out by Israeli citizens inspired by the Islamic State and attacks by Palestinians that came from the territories and acted in the name of Palestinian causes. Islamic State-inspired (and global jihadi-inspired) attacks have been rare in Israel in the past,<sup>39</sup> but this is the first time that there have been Islamic State-inspired attacks in such quick succession, possibly indicating a trend of escalation.

Past terror waves in Israel have begun with organized incitement just before and during holidays, commemoration days, and regional geopolitical events, continuing with terrorist attacks inspired by this incitement, and ending (if the parties fail to contain it) in a direct, high-intensity confrontation (the firing of thousands of

rockets and hundreds of Israeli bombing raids) between Israel and the terrorist organizations in Gaza. The spring 2022 wave shared many of these characteristics, although it is notable that several of the attacks took place before the Ramadan religious holiday and the surge in inflammatory rhetoric by extremist voices.

### The Media Angle

The recent terrorist attacks brought about a surge of internal criticism in Israel about the media coverage (in particular, the shooting on Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv). The majority of these attacks, taken alone, were nothing more than a tactical violent incident that led to a small number of casualties. However, emotional Israeli media coverage triggered existential anxiety that affected not only thousands of residents of the center of the country, but in the case of the Tel Aviv shooting, inspired profound fear among hundreds of thousands of TV viewers who had friends or family members in the area where the attack took place and who sat at home glued to their screens. This, of course, is a strategic achievement for terrorism. Terrorism is intended to sow anxiety.<sup>40</sup> Killing people is not the goal in and of itself, but merely a means of spreading fear and anxiety.

In order for a tactical terrorist attack to become a strategic success, terrorists must be assisted by sensationalist and unfiltered coverage on the part of the media and sometimes also by security forces' poor communication with the public during an emergency situation. Both of these dynamics occurred during the spring 2022 wave of attacks. Reporters from various TV channels on the ground competed with each other for air time, searching for the most sensational and frightening news and images they could find. This included footage of policemen and armed citizens' panicked running whenever a dubious report arose of suspects being in various places (these reports largely being a natural result of the anxiety created among the public by the media coverage itself) as well as close-up photos showing large groups of policemen, soldiers, and armed civilians whipped into a hysteria, pointing their loaded weapons at a deserted balcony and stairwells in the heart of Tel Aviv.<sup>41</sup> And, if that was not bad enough, the eager reporters, cameras in hand, joined the police forces as they searched homes and yards, giving the viewers a rare opportunity to take part in a 'special forces patrol,' bringing to mind an episode of *Fauda*, the hit fictional Israeli TV show about the IDF. No camera angle or abrasive statement was missed. The media took advantage of the Israeli law enforcement agencies' poor communication skills to increase ratings, to the detriment of the Israeli public's resilience.

On April 8, 2022, spokespeople for the three main security forces in Israel—the IDF, the Israel Police, and the Shin Bet—issued a joint open letter addressed to “all Israeli media outlets,” criticizing the media's conduct during the shooting attack on Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv the night before.<sup>42</sup> In their letter, the three wrote:

*The difficult terror attack that occurred on Dizengoff Street and the fact that the scene of the attack was not immediately sealed led, to our disappointment, to media behavior that brought to mind scenes from a television program to which there is no connection to media coverage of a security situation. Some of the TV channels turned the hunt for the terrorist into actual reality TV, without any censorship or self-criticism. The media broadcast what was happening live; the footage of the pursuit of the despicable terrorist was broadcast without any filter, to every home in Israel, and*

*unfortunately also to the enemy.*

In response, Israel's leading TV channel, Channel 12, through its chief political analyst and anchor Dana Weiss, made the following statement on April 9, 2022:<sup>43</sup>

*Our goal is to always bring to the public what happens on the ground. We hear the responses, attuned to criticism, and check ourselves to be better. We, as well as journalists from all over the world, together with the security forces, have been in an event unbeknown to us, under the fog of war when there was a real scare at times—and all of it happening in the middle of Tel Aviv. Our reporters also risked their lives fearing they may be fired upon at any given moment. It is important for us to say that our broadcast was accompanied, as always, by IDF censorship that in nights like this are present in our studios. At no point during the broadcast has any image been censored by the military censorship; and when requested by the police to stay away from the scene, we complied. That said, we at Channel 12 News conducted long discussions to draw conclusions from the broadcast. We are not going to make it easy on ourselves. We know that mistakes have been made, however they came from one place—our desire to bring our viewers the whole picture. We will learn our lessons to be better going forward.*

In 1997, following the first wave of suicide bombings in Israel, the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at Reichman University convened all the editors-in-chief of the Israeli media for a joint discussion on the media coverage of those attacks.<sup>44</sup> The institute's experts, including this author, suggested establishing a number of voluntary rules whose adoption by the media could reduce the deep anxiety that the coverage of the attacks caused among the public. These included avoiding close-ups of dead bodies and the wounded, preventing broadcasts of scenes of extreme panic, and more. These rules were intended to help find the delicate balance between recognizing the right and need of the public to know in real-time what is happening on the ground, while at the same time not playing into the hands of terrorists, intensifying public anxiety, and turning a tactical event into a strategic attack. The editors-in-chief of the country's media outlets listened to the analyses and recommendations but rejected them outright on the grounds that they allegedly constituted an interference with their professional work.<sup>45</sup> It is the view of this author that the editors' considerations at the time were about nothing more than ratings.

Some have argued that the role of the traditional media in covering terrorist attacks has eroded and become irrelevant in light of the flourishing of social networks and the change in the information consumption habits of young people around the world.<sup>46</sup> However, the recent wave of terrorist attacks in Israel once again illustrates the extent to which the traditional media, and especially television channels, still play a central and important role in shaping public opinion and in reducing (or intensifying) the public's fear and anxiety when terrorist attacks occur, especially in dense, urban populations. Twenty-five years after the meeting with Israeli media chiefs at ICT, it is still appropriate to call on the media to adopt baseline editorial standards for the coverage of terrorist attacks to ensure that it is professional, reliable, and responsible, without playing into the hands of terrorists. This should, and can, be done while preserving the public's right to know and the professional considerations of the media outlets themselves. **CTC**

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# A Trickle, Not a Flood: The Limited 2022 Far-Right Foreign Fighter Mobilization to Ukraine

By Kacper Rekawek

Given the significant presence of far-right fighting units and far-right foreign fighters on both sides of the conflict in Ukraine since 2014, there was concern that the February 2022 Russian invasion might result in large flows of foreign fighters (including right-wing extremists) to far-right-linked units on both sides of the conflict. The worry was that this would in turn lead to long-term security headaches for Western countries because of the opportunities for right-wing extremists to build networks and military skills. But four months into the conflict and despite the continued linkages between the far-right in Ukraine and Western countries, these concerns have not materialized. The flow of foreign fighters into Ukraine has been much smaller than anticipated. Despite the efforts of some extreme-right ‘influencers,’ the 2022 conflict has, for the most part, not energized Western right-wing extremists, nor persuaded them to travel. In what is for Ukrainians a war for national survival and a fight to secure a Western democratic future for the country, the allure of the far-right in Ukraine has dimmed. Ukrainian units with far-right histories are now deeply integrated into Ukraine’s armed forces and eschew foreign recruitment, and one of those units, the Azov Regiment, was decimated during the siege of Mariupol. Very few foreign right-wing extremists have been recruited into Ukraine’s International Legion. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests most of the foreign fighters who have traveled this year to fight on the Ukrainian side are fighting to safeguard Ukraine’s future as a Western democracy. All this means that while Western governments should keep a watchful eye on foreign fighter flows to Ukraine, they must also counter Russian disinformation efforts that massively inflate the presence of right-wing extremists on the Ukrainian side.

One of the most enduring legacies from the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian war is that of Ukraine as a “field of dreams ... [for] various brands of far-right nationalism”<sup>1</sup> and as “a hub in the broader network of transnational white supremacy extremism, attracting foreign recruits from all over the world.”<sup>2</sup> As reported by the Soufan Center, between 2014 and 2019 approximately 17,000 foreign fighters from over 50 countries traveled to the battlefield, “nearly 90% of whom came from Russia to fight with the pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas, attracting foreigners

supporting violent far-right ideologies.”<sup>3</sup> Excluding Russian foreign fighters, up to around 900 foreign fighters joined the Ukrainian side, including a significant but difficult to quantify number of right-wing extremists.<sup>4</sup> Ukrainian units with far-right leanings such as the Azov Battalion/Regiment became *causes célèbres* in transnational extreme or far-right and white supremacy circles.<sup>5</sup> Right-wing extremists spoke at conferences organized by Ukraine’s nationalists, attended their MMA (mixed martial arts) clubs, and rubbed shoulders with local far-right leaders.<sup>6</sup> Analysts worried about the long-term security implications of Western right-wing extremists networking, training, and fighting inside Ukraine. In 2020, Max Rose and Ali Soufan assessed that “just as jihadists exploited conflicts in Afghanistan, the Balkans and Syria, so too are white supremacists using the conflict in Ukraine as a laboratory and training ground.”<sup>7</sup>

Fast forward to Russia’s February 24, 2022, invasion of Ukraine, and it seemed possible that intensified conflict in Ukraine would make the country even more fertile ground for right-wing extremists, especially because of Azov’s associations to “white racism” and Nazism, which are strenuously contested by the unit’s representatives.<sup>8</sup> Russia’s pivot from so-called “hybrid warfare”<sup>9</sup> toward naked aggression seemed poised to generate a huge surge in foreign fighters sympathetic to the underdog. In early March 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky asserted that the first 16,000 foreign volunteers were already on their way.<sup>10</sup> Days later, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense stated that more than 20,000 volunteers from 52 countries had expressed a desire to join a newly

a Different scholars use different terms to describe the various elements that make up the far-right. This article follows the terminology suggested by Cas Mudde, adjunct professor at the Center for Research on Extremism at the University of Oslo (C-Rex). He writes: “The far right encompasses both the extreme right and the radical right. While the extreme right rejects democracy as such, i.e., popular sovereignty and majority rule, the radical right accepts democracy, but challenges fundamental institutions and values of liberal democracy, such as minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers.” Gian-Paolo Accardo, “‘We are now in a fourth wave of postwar far-right politics,’” Voxeurop, October 22, 2020. For more on the issue, see Anders Ravik Jupskås and Iris Beau Segers, “What is right-wing extremism?” C-REX, University of Oslo, last modified November 7, 2020, and Anders Ravik Jupskås, “What is right-wing radicalism?” C-REX, University of Oslo, last modified November 7, 2020.

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## “Concerns about a potential flood of far-right foreign fighters to Ukraine in the wake of the 2022 Russian invasion have not to date materialized.”

created entity called the International Legion.<sup>11</sup> Given the large foreign volunteer numbers being claimed by officials in Kyiv and given the far-right history of groups like Azov, there were legitimate concerns that a significant number of pro-Ukraine foreign fighters would seek or end up with far-right groups inside the country.

This article examines the extent and nature of the nexus between right-wing extremism and pro-Kyiv foreign fighter mobilization in the 2022 conflict in Ukraine. The first part of the article examines the size of the issue, and the second part of the article digs deeper into the problem set by examining the role of key actors and entities in the foreign fighter<sup>b</sup> space.

### The Extent of the Nexus

Concerns about a potential flood of far-right foreign fighters to Ukraine in the wake of the 2022 Russian invasion have not to date materialized. According to a May 2022 Counter Extremism Project (CEP) study led by this author and on which this article draws and builds, “only a fraction of those who indicated an interest in traveling to Ukraine after February 2022 actually did so,” with the number of foreign fighters traveling to Ukraine ranging from several hundred to a few thousand.<sup>12</sup> These numbers are comparable to the foreign fighter mobilization that followed Russia’s 2014 invasion, which saw up to around 2,200 non-Russians join the conflict on both sides.<sup>13</sup> Back then, foreign fighters arriving to help Ukraine joined sub-state units—Ukrainian “volunteer battalions”<sup>14</sup> or the “separatist” pro-Russian “popular militias.”<sup>15</sup> By contrast, the class of 2022 foreign fighters have mostly joined the Ukrainian Territorial Defence Forces (TDF), an element of the country’s armed forces.

It is important to underline the very significant longstanding and continuing far-right nexus when it comes to foreign fighters on the pro-Russian separatist side in Ukraine. In May 2022, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* reported that according to German intelligence, the extreme-right Russian Imperial Movement

(RIM)<sup>d</sup> and the Wagner Group’s Rusich<sup>e</sup> cadre were engaged in combat operations against Ukrainian forces.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, the analyst Alexander Ritzmann noted in the CEP May 2022 report that:

*The Russian private security contractor Wagner PMC, which has a history of displaying Nazi-insignia as well as being antisemitic and against LGBTQ rights, is also accepting applications [to fight in Ukraine] via Telegram. The founders of Rusich task force, which is part of Wagner PMC, were trained by the Russian Imperial Legion, the militia arm of RIM. Since 2016, foreigners have received weapons training by the Russian Imperial Legion, amongst them Germans, Americans, Swedes, and others. Pro-Russian separatist groups, such as “The Defenders of Donbass,” share extreme right-wing slogans and antisemitic, anti-feminist, and anti-LGBTQ memes and stereotypes on their Telegram channels and call for volunteers to arrive at an address in the Russian city of Rostov, which is close to the eastern border of Ukraine.*<sup>17</sup>

For those foreign fighters who have traveled to join the Ukrainian side so far in 2022, the integration of the Azov Regiment and other far-right extremist units into the Ukrainian armed forces has made these units much more difficult to join. And as noted by the Soufan Center, the Azov Regiment has “become more distanced from right-wing narratives” with the Ukrainian armed forces working to rein in such extremism.<sup>18</sup> In this author’s assessment, the large majority of Ukrainians joining Azov-linked brigades within the Ukrainian military are doing so not because of right-wing extremism, but because they want to join an effective fighting force to defend their country.

Furthermore, the 2022 Russian invasion does not appear to have provoked a surge in desire among right-wing extremists around the world to travel to Ukraine. The conflict has always divided the movement, with some groups and individuals siding with Russia and some with Ukraine.<sup>19</sup> In Germany, “the first days following the Russian invasion were initially marked by confusion and controversial discussions about how to deal with this ‘White Brotherhood War.’”<sup>20</sup> In France, the majority of far-right extremist groups have historically sided with Russia.<sup>21</sup> In Italy, opinions are more divided. The neo-fascist group Forza Nuova has sided more

b Some observers make a distinction between the terms “foreign fighters” and “foreign volunteers.” According to their categorization, foreign fighters in the Ukrainian context are defined as foreigners who joined either the pro-Russian separatist popular militias or Ukraine’s volunteer battalions before they were integrated into Ukraine’s armed forces. And foreign volunteers are foreigners who joined the Ukrainian Territorial Defence Forces, as has been the case in 2022. For simplicity, this article does not make such a distinction and uses these terms interchangeably.

c Others have had similar estimates. *The New Yorker’s* Robin Wright reported that by mid-March 2022, “hundreds of foreigners showed up to fight for Ukraine, not thousands.” Robin Wright, “Will Mercenaries and Foreign Fighters Change the Course of Ukraine’s War?” *New Yorker*, April 5, 2022.

d “The Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) is an extreme-right, white supremacist militant organization based in St. Petersburg, Russia. Founded in 2002, the group promotes ethnic Russian nationalism, advocates the restoration of Russia’s tsarist regime, and seeks to fuel white supremacy extremism in the West. RIM maintains contacts with neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups across Europe and the United States. The group has provided paramilitary training to Russian nationals and members of like-minded organizations from other countries at its facilities in St. Petersburg. Members of RIM’s armed wing, the Imperial Legion, have fought alongside pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine and been involved in conflicts in Libya and Syria ... The U.S. State Department listed RIM as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) in April 2020. It is the first white supremacist group to be designated as a SDGT.” “Russian Imperial Movement,” Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, last updated in 2021.

e Task Force Rusich, an element of the Russian mercenary Wagner Group, “earned a reputation for its self-declared neo-Nazi ideology and brutality when it first deployed to eastern Ukraine during peak fighting between Russian separatist forces and the Ukrainian military in the summer of 2014.” Candace Rondeaux, Ben Dalton, and Jonathan Deer, “Wagner Group Contingent Rusich on the Move Again,” *New America*, January 26, 2022.



*A Ukrainian national flag hangs from a balcony of a destroyed building in Irpin, outside Kyiv, Ukraine, on June 16, 2022.  
(Ludovic Marin, pool via AP Images)*

intensely with Vladimir Putin and the separatist forces since the February 2022 invasion, while the far-right group CasaPound Italia has softened its support for the Ukrainian side. And overall, there has been very little appetite among Italian far-right extremists since February 2022 to travel to Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> This is also the case farther north in Europe. As the Expo Foundation has noted, the leader of the largest Scandinavian extreme right organization, the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), stated that “neither side is worth fighting for and dying for.”<sup>23</sup>

According to the May 2022 CEP report that analyzed the far-right and right-wing extremist scenes in seven countries—the United States, Canada, Spain, Italy, France, Germany, and Poland—“the current conflict has not led to a significant flow of extremists to the war zone. There is a lot of discussion and debate among extremists, but very few have traveled to Ukraine.”<sup>24</sup> In the United States, there was “no evidence that anyone currently affiliated with the neo-Nazi accelerationist milieu traveled to Ukraine after the February [2022] invasion.”<sup>25</sup> In Canada, not a single far-right extremist was known as of May 2022 to have traveled to join the 2022 conflict in Ukraine.<sup>26</sup> French security authorities estimate that

only 20-30 right-wing extremists are currently in Ukraine.<sup>27</sup> In Poland, while the “young generation of Polish neo-fascists generally sympathize with Ukrainian nationalists, including, in particular, the Azov Movement,” very few have traveled.<sup>28</sup> In mid-March 2022, German authorities stated that 27 right-wing extremists had left or had credibly announced that they were planning to leave for Ukraine, but only a few were supposedly involved in conflict and 13 were said to have already returned to Germany.<sup>29</sup> As the German case makes clear, it is currently unknown how many right-wing extremists who traveled have joined the fighting. Overall, “foreigners in Ukraine have not yet coalesced into recognizable highly ideological fighting units and, as individuals, have been largely unsuccessful in acting as recruiting multipliers for sympathizers in their home countries.”<sup>30</sup>

Overall, the far-right movement’s allure has dimmed in Ukraine, at least for the time being. For all but the most hardened extremists, ideology has taken a backseat in a war for national survival. It is Western democracies with liberal values that are largely arming the Ukrainians. President Zelensky has rallied tens of millions of Ukrainians around a Western-democratic vision for his country, including membership in the European Union, whose liberal and

f On June 2, 2022, far-right Telegram channels eulogized a French fighter, Wilfried Bleriot, who was killed in Ukraine and claimed him as a member of the extreme right organization Misanthropic Division.

democratic values the far-right abhors. Foreign volunteers that have been flowing in are almost exclusively apolitical and often have little in common with each other beyond being “concerned citizens of the world,” as described by one veteran foreign fighter.<sup>31</sup>

### Key Actors and Entities in the Foreign Fighter Space

Having outlined the limited nature of the nexus between right-wing extremism and foreign fighter flows to Ukraine during the 2022 conflict, it is useful to examine the role of four different types of entities whose actions are relevant to foreign fighter flows to the conflict zone:

1. Ukraine-based entities (extremist and non-extremist) with a history of foreign fighter recruitment;
2. Extreme-right online influencers who can frame the conflict and thus mobilize potential volunteers for Ukraine;
3. Veteran extreme or far-right foreign fighters who have the access and credibility to open doors for arriving recruits;
4. Western far-right helpers who, although not present on the frontlines, can donate and send aid to their Western extremist contacts fighting in Ukraine.

### *Ukraine-based Entities with a History of Foreign Fighter Recruitment*

#### *The Azov Regiment and the Azov Movement*

The Azov Movement is derived from (but should not be conflated with) the original Azov Battalion, a far-right “volunteer battalion” (one of 40-50 such formations) that several months into the 2014 conflict (in November 2014) was integrated into the National Guard of Ukraine.<sup>32</sup> In 2016, Azov Battalion veterans formed the National Corps, a far-right political party that is now a bedrock of the Azov Movement. Notwithstanding the fact that the Azov Battalion, subsequently known as the Azov Regiment, maintains connections to the National Corps<sup>33</sup> and has been viewed by the National Corps as its “own” military force,<sup>34</sup> it is not commanded by National Corps figures. It is also important to note that given the Azov Regiment is integrated into the Ukrainian military command structure, it should not be seen as a militia.

In the war that started in 2014, the Azov Battalion/Regiment featured “a few dozen foreigners” in its ranks<sup>35</sup> but never considered foreign recruitment key to its survival or growth. Indeed one of the foreign fighters who joined the Azov Battalion subsequently told the author that the foreign fighters were “backpacks,” i.e., a burden that needed help from an English-speaking Ukrainian soldier in order to function.<sup>36</sup> After the Azov Regiment was integrated into the Ukrainian military command, foreign recruits mostly left the unit as the National Guard does not allow for recruitment of foreigners.<sup>37</sup> A few 2014 veteran foreigners, some with far-right backgrounds, were, however, retained in its ranks.<sup>38</sup>

When Russian forces invaded on February 24, 2022, the approximately 1,000 men-strong Azov Regiment<sup>39</sup> found itself in Mariupol, in the south of Ukraine, where its members were holding combat trainings for civilians and preparing for the defense of the city.<sup>40</sup> The regiment fought in nearby Berdiansk, attempting to repel the Russian breakout from Crimea toward the borders of the “separatist” Russian puppet “People’s Republics” (of Donetsk and Luhansk) in the east of Ukraine.<sup>41</sup> In early March, the regiment, along with other Ukrainian forces, found itself

encircled in Mariupol. It then played a significant role in the fighting, including famously holding out for over two months against Russian forces at a steel plant (Azovstal) in Mariupol.<sup>42</sup> Its fighters called on the government, Ukraine armed forces, and the international community to do more to “save Mariupol.”<sup>43</sup> By May 20, the Azov Regiment’s remaining members found themselves among 2,000-plus fighters who surrendered in Mariupol and were later transferred to the territory of the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic,” apparently so that they could later be exchanged for Russian POWs in Ukrainian hands.<sup>43</sup> Three weeks later, a former commander of the Azov Regiment confirmed that remains of 220 Azovstal defenders, a third of which belonged to the Regiment, had arrived in Kyiv.<sup>44</sup> These losses mean that the Azov Regiment has been decimated as a fighting force. There will likely eventually be an attempt to build it back up, but it is not clear whether that will happen during the current conflict and what form it might take.<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile, in Kyiv, Azov veterans organized their ‘own’ all-volunteer TDF units in and around the capital. Azov’s fighting prowess acted as a perfect recruiting tool as many Ukrainians, impressed by the connection to the besieged Azov Regiment, rushed to join these TDF units. Consequently, the Azov veteran-dominated TDF forces from around Kyiv grew to three infantry battalions.<sup>46</sup>

More broadly, many National Corps/Azov Movement members from all around the country joined Ukraine’s nascent TDF forces and in some localities copied the Kyiv experience, effectively taking over some of the freshly minted TDF battalions.<sup>45</sup> These Azov Movement-dominated units (which should not be confused with the Azov Regiment) recruited Ukrainians rather than foreigners. After the battle of Kyiv, these units were keen on joining the fight around Kharkiv and Mariupol, and their members were formally incorporated into the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces (SSO, or *Syly spetsial nykh operatsiy Zbroynykh Syl Ukrayiny*) so that they would be guaranteed a chance to fight in the east and the south of Ukraine.<sup>46</sup> This bureaucratic move further complicated the path for foreigners to join Azov Movement-dominated TDF battalions as only Ukrainians were allowed to be recruited into the SSO. In any case, Azov Movement-dominated TDF battalions were said to be reluctant, for operational reasons, to deploy non-Ukrainian/non-Russian speakers.<sup>47</sup>

Meanwhile, adherents of the Azov Movement attempted to facilitate the recruitment of foreigners into the International Legion, the new entity set up within the TDF to accommodate arriving foreign volunteers.<sup>48</sup> The Legion was slow to take off due to initial issues with the legal status of the fighters, their contracts while in Ukraine, and some waning of enthusiasm from the initial

g Azov Regiment Telegram channels and channels associated with the Azov Movement were beaming such messages from early March 2022 onward.

h On June 17, 2022, the reputable RFE/RL outlet broadcast an interview with Azov Regiment’s temporary commander, Mykyta Nadochchiy. He led one of the regiment’s battalions and after being wounded was evacuated from Mariupol. He was entrusted with rebuilding the Azov Regiment by Denys Prokopenko, Azov Regiment’s commander, who is now in Russian captivity. “Otrymav povidomlennya, shcho maye ocholyty ‘Azov’ | Eksklyuzyivne interv’yu z t.v.o. komandyra polku,” RFE/RL, June 17, 2022.

i The term ‘battalion’ is somewhat misleading here as these units are in fact smaller than a typical military battalion. But the fact that this mobilization produced three such units is still significant. See posts on Azov Movement Telegram channels from March 2022 to present.

volunteers. Only in late May 2022 did it announce deployment of its “first battalion” to the frontlines, shortly followed by the first casualties sustained in eastern Ukraine.<sup>49</sup> Prior to that, many of its prospective members chose to find a TDF unit themselves or even a regular army unit that would take them, instead of waiting to be deployed within the ranks of the nascent International Legion.<sup>50</sup>

The Azov Movement’s activities on this front amounted to bringing 20-30 foreign recruits to the International Legion.<sup>51</sup> But hardly any of these were far-right extremists.<sup>j</sup> Instead, most of these 20-30 foreign recruits had been drawn into the orbit of the Azov Movement before joining the International Legion because they were impressed by the professed and alleged professionalism of Azov Movement-dominated units or the original Azov Battalion/Regiment.<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, some of the very few ideological brethren of the Azov Movement who arrived in Ukraine after February 24, 2022, missed their rendezvous with the recruiters, and in the chaos of the war ended up joining a non-Azov-led TDF unit.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, the Azov Movement’s foreign recruitment efforts largely stalled. Their adherents quickly grew frustrated with the bureaucratic hurdles in recruiting International Legion volunteers and openly complained about what they perceived to be Ukraine’s shortcomings in recruiting and integrating the arriving foreign volunteers into the TDF.<sup>54</sup>

#### *Other Entities with Far-Right Linkages*

Some Ukrainians with linkages to the far-right who have joined the TDF have marketed themselves as belonging to separate “battalions” within the ranks. And these battalions have attempted to capitalize on the global interest in volunteering for Ukraine. This was the case for the so-called Battalion Revenge of the Tradition and Order groupuscule, loosely affiliated with the Azov Movement.<sup>55</sup> It features a handful of far-right Czech and Polish<sup>56</sup> individuals and is apparently ready to accept any arriving foreigner who can get himself to Kyiv.<sup>57</sup> Another such far-right entity is the so-called Brotherhood (Bratstvo) “battalion,” which includes Belarusian, Danish, Irish, and Canadian members.<sup>58</sup> In this case, however, it is possible that some of these individuals ended up with Bratstvo by accident. As certain TDF units reportedly deploy their recruiters on Ukraine’s western border, Bratstvo might have intercepted impressionable foreign volunteers right after their crossing into Ukraine.<sup>59</sup>

Interestingly, these small units seemed to have out-recruited, as far as foreign volunteers are concerned, the Right Sector (*Pravyi Sektor*), another far-right grouping that emerged from the 2014 “volunteer battalions,” and that had a track record of fielding foreigners in its ranks.<sup>60</sup> Right Sector was eventually integrated into the Ukrainian Army in late April 2022 and, just as was the case with Azov Movement-dominated TDF forces, it now falls under the auspices of the SSO (Special Operations Forces), which bars foreigners from joining. Right Sector’s recruiters have confirmed to the author that the group does not accept foreigners in its ranks.<sup>61</sup> It is possible, however, just as in the case of the Azov Regiment, that a handful of pre-February 24, 2022, foreign volunteers were retained

in its ranks. It should also be noted that far-right Telegram channels recently showcased a purported American member of Right Sector on the frontlines.<sup>62</sup>

#### *Belarussian and Russian Formations*

Other foreigner-centered units on the Ukrainian side, such as Belarussian and Russian formations, are purely mono-national entities that stress their dedication to a regime change in Belarus or Russia as a result of this war. The Belarussian contingent features volunteers who fought in Ukraine since 2014, and some of them went through the Azov Battalion/Regiment and Right Sector as these were the only formations open to accepting them at the time.<sup>k</sup> Moreover, some of the most well-known Belarussian volunteers of 2022 are well-known football hooligans, a milieu known to attract radicals.<sup>63</sup> It is key to stress that the majority of the Belarussian volunteers have nothing to do with the far right, with many of them political refugees forced to flee Belarus after the rigged 2020 presidential election there.<sup>64</sup>

#### *The Georgian Foreign Legion*

Finally, it is worth discussing the Georgian Foreign Legion (previously the Georgian National Legion), a Georgian-led entity that is one of the main channels by which foreigners can get to the frontlines. It is important to stress that the Georgian Legion is itself not at all extremist, but in the 2014 phase of the conflict attracted some far-right fighters from, for example, Australia and the United States.<sup>65</sup> The Georgian Legion does not fight as a single force but rather distributes its members among different TDF formations.<sup>66</sup> Of all entities based in Ukraine, the Georgian Legion has been the most successful in recruiting Western fighters into its ranks. That was the case after 2014<sup>67</sup> and has also been the case in 2022.<sup>68</sup> By the end of March 2022, the Georgian Legion appears to have enlisted a few hundred foreigners into its ranks.<sup>69</sup> Its recruitment has been enabled by its significant social media presence,<sup>70</sup> its targeting its recruitment efforts at military veterans from Georgia and countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, its accessibility, and its leaders’ language skills.<sup>71</sup> During the 2022 conflict, the Georgian Legion grew into a battalion-sized force full of experienced soldiers from different countries.<sup>72</sup> The Georgian Legion’s commander, Mamuka Mamulashvili, told the author in April 2022 that the Georgian Legion has deployed squads to different locations around Ukraine to which it distributes its volunteers.<sup>73</sup>

#### *Extreme-Right Online Influencers*

On February 26, 2022, two days after Russia invaded Ukraine, Denis “Nikitin” Kapustin, the neo-Nazi founder of the White Rex clothing brand, who despite being Russian is sympathetic to and highly networked within the Ukrainian far-right milieu, stated on his Telegram channel:

*I know there are a lot of Putin’s sympathizers in the Western Hemisphere. You hate your governments because they force feed you with LGBT, diversity, migration, gender politics*

j It is possible to make this determination because Azov social media platforms and channels tended to profile their foreign recruits and specifically discuss if a given individual was ideologically aligned with the far-right vision of the movement. Such cases were rare from among the small group of fighters whose travel to Ukraine was assisted by the Azov Movement.

k Ukraine wished not to cause a rift in its relations with Belarus at the time and often denied the Belarussian fighters the chance to serve in the army. Author interview, individuals involved in the recruitment effort for the Belarussian Kastus Kalinouski Battalion, March 2022.

l An alias that he uses.

*and all that s&#233;\* ... You hate your governments and expect Putin's tanks to come and free you. Bad news for you guys: he will NOT bring white Christian freedom to you, but GULAG and death! ... Pick your side.<sup>74</sup>*

Consequently, “Nikitin” announced his intention to recruit individuals for the TDF and assist in their travel to Ukraine. So far, it has brought paltry results, with only a handful of individuals showcased by “Nikitin” as recruits.<sup>75</sup>

Furthermore, “Nikitin” and other extreme right online influencers (or “entrepreneurs”<sup>76</sup>) attempted to sway the significant numbers in their audience sympathetic to Russia.<sup>77</sup> They portrayed Russia not only as a dictatorial kleptocracy but also as a pro-Muslim country fielding Chechen units to fight Ukraine.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, according to these extreme-right influencers, the 2022 invasion had “exposed” Russia as being more Asian than European as it used Asian-looking troops from the Eastern Military District to attack Kyiv.<sup>79</sup> Given pictures that emerged of some Russian troops in Ukraine flying the Soviet flag,<sup>80</sup> they also branded Russia as communist.<sup>81</sup> Its army was compared to a “horde” (in reference to the Mongolian, i.e., Asian, Golden Horde) and its troops dubbed “orcs” (humanoid monsters).<sup>82</sup> The extreme right-wing entrepreneurs argued that these factors outweighed the fact that the Western democracies they abhorred were supporting Ukraine.<sup>83</sup> And they similarly chose to overlook President Zelensky’s Jewish heritage.<sup>84</sup>

### **Veteran Far-Right Foreign Fighters**

The 2014 Ukraine conflict featured foreign fighters from far-right organizations such as the Svenskarnas parti (Party of the Swedes, or SvP)<sup>85</sup> and the Croat football hooligans<sup>86</sup> for the Ukrainian side and Italian Forza Nuova,<sup>87</sup> the French Jeunesses Identitaires, Jeunesses Nationalistes, Lys Noir,<sup>88</sup> the Serbian nationalist “chetnik” movement,<sup>89</sup> and Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserve<sup>90</sup> for the “separatists.” Some of these foreign fighters from 2014 are now back in Ukraine, with some fighting on its side<sup>91</sup> and some for Russia.<sup>92</sup> Some other foreign fighter veterans stayed in Ukraine<sup>93</sup> or the “separatist” territories after 2014.<sup>94</sup>

Due to their experience, multitude of contacts on the ground, and ability to offer quick and pointed advice to the new foreign volunteers, these far-right veterans sometimes evolved into gatekeepers for likeminded individuals from abroad. Some became propagandists of a given side in the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war.<sup>95</sup>

The most prominent cases on the Ukrainian side in 2022 are veterans of the original Azov Battalion/Regiment from the 2014 conflict, including Mikael Skillt, a well-known Swedish foreign fighter and a former member of the aforementioned far-right SvP.<sup>96</sup> In 2022, Skillt was meant to lead a larger Azov Movement-recruited contingent for the so-called Ukraine International Legion.<sup>97</sup> As described above, this recruitment effort, quickly came to nothing (it garnered only 20-30 foreigners). Thanks to the fact he has resided in Ukraine since 2014 and his broad contacts in the country’s military, Skillt was able to link up with the Ukrainian SSO in the east of the country despite the ban on foreign recruitment. At the same time, his small number of foreign followers joined the International Legion.<sup>98</sup>

There are other foreign veterans in a position to play gatekeeper roles. Denis Šeler, a far-right Croat and another alumni of 2014, reportedly organized and then led a group of Croat fighters adjacent to a TDF unit in the battle of Kyiv.<sup>99</sup> A British foreign fighter with no clear-cut ideology who fought with Azov in 2014 has also been mentioned as a key individual for interested foreign volunteers to

reach out to by members of a social media group recruiting such individuals for Ukraine in the 2022 conflict.<sup>100</sup> Additionally, a handful of other foreign veterans of Azov were also said to have been fighting as part of the TDF around Kyiv.<sup>101</sup>

It is worth noting that “separatist” forces fighting on the Russian side also feature foreign alumni of 2014. Three of them, including an Italian extreme leftist,<sup>102</sup> a Serbian nationalist,<sup>103</sup> and an Irish fighter,<sup>104</sup> were killed in the renewed conflict. Other notable alumni of 2014 fighting for Russia include a self-declared leader of a nationalist “chetnik” movement in Serbia and his compatriot (who fought in the war since 2014 and then stayed in the “People’s Republics” and is now referred to as a “captain” in the latter’s forces,<sup>105</sup>) a far-right French army veteran,<sup>106</sup> and a Slovak right-wing extremist.<sup>107</sup>

### **Far-Right Helpers**

In the years since the 2014 conflict in Ukraine, Western far-right organizations have built up contacts with their Ukrainian counterparts. Since the Russian invasion in February 2022, some of these far-right organizations have sought to provide assistance to these contacts in Ukraine. These efforts are relevant to the foreign fighter issue because they may result in funds and/or equipment being directly supplied to Western far-right foreign fighters inside Ukraine. More broadly, such assistance efforts may facilitate far-right foreign fighter mobilization because they deepen the connectivity and communication between far-right groups in the West and Ukraine.

The assistance efforts from Western far-right groups have included tactical equipment provision to ‘friendly’ Azov Movement-connected TDF units. For example, activists of the French Identitarian L’Alvarium, which was proscribed by the French government in November 2021 for incitement of racial hatred and alleged participation in violent actions,<sup>108</sup> managed in recent months to link up with the Azov Movement in Kyiv<sup>109</sup> and donated tactical equipment for its TDF “Kraken” unit, which is now fighting around Kharkiv.<sup>110</sup> The Azov Movement has showcased material assistance its TDF forces received from Finland and Norway (via anonymous donors)<sup>111</sup> as well as “Polish allies.”<sup>112</sup> The extreme-right German *Der III. Weg* (Third Way) party, which has longstanding relations with the Azov Movement, also donated equipment to Azov Movement-linked forces fighting in the east of Ukraine<sup>113</sup> and offered to accommodate the refugee wives and children of their Ukrainian brethren who remained behind to fight in Ukraine.<sup>114</sup>

Several Western far-right groups have also provided humanitarian assistance. For example, Spanish Autonomous Nationalists have in recent months been involved in food and medicine collection campaigns for Ukraine.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, French far-right groups such as Lyon Populaire, Auxilium Europae, Helix Dijon, Luminis Paris, Les Braves, and Bordeaux Nationaliste have also organized humanitarian convoys and sent medical aid to Ukraine.<sup>116</sup> Polish nationalists from the *Szturm* magazine milieu traveled to Kyiv with humanitarian assistance where they met with representatives of the Azov Movement.<sup>117</sup> And finally, the youth wing of the CasaPound Italia sent some of its activists on a “humanitarian mission” to Ukraine.<sup>118</sup>

Some Western far-right groups have sought to fundraise for Ukrainian far-right groups involved in the conflict. For example, some American supporters of James Mason and the group National Socialist Order “encouraged purchasing merchandise from Ukrainian online far-right stores and donating cryptocurrency to

the Azov Movement.”<sup>119</sup>

## Conclusion

Ukrainian efforts against Russia have been called a “crowdsourced war” in which a “people’s army” is mobilized in a bottom-up fashion to repel a foreign invasion via an “open call” put forward by the Ukrainian government.<sup>120</sup> This was the initial idea behind the creation of the “volunteer battalions” in 2014. These efforts tapped the energy of Ukrainian civil society, which prides itself on its ability to bypass bureaucratic obstacles and the inertia of state institutions.<sup>121</sup> Eight years later, the call by President Zelensky for foreign volunteers to join the nascent International Legion continued this crowdsourcing strategy.<sup>122</sup> Not only did this approach allow foreign volunteers to join or attempt to join Ukrainian TDF units, but it also encouraged other forms of foreign support to arrive in Ukraine. Alongside official channels, other sub-state actors, including the transnational far-right, also mobilized assistance to Ukraine. While the latter’s efforts constitute a proverbial drop in the ocean as far as the totality of pro-Ukraine assistance efforts are concerned, their presence testifies to the existence of relatively robust connections between different Western and Ukrainian far-right actors.

Although Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine for the most part did not energize the transnational far-right, extreme-right online

influencers attempted to encourage their followers to support Ukraine and some Western right-wing extremist organizations provided assistance to their Ukrainian counterparts engaged in the fight. Radical veterans from 2014 also resurfaced, and some of them have acted or attempted to act as gatekeepers for the arriving foreigners. Simultaneously, however, the units that in 2014 fielded far-right foreign fighters are generally not keen on recruiting new ones. While new entities interested in doing so emerged, their haphazard recruitment efforts have so far netted few extreme right-wing foreign volunteers for Ukraine. While the 2014 foreign fighter mobilization on the Ukrainian side had a significant nexus to far-right extremism, this has not so far been the case for the 2022 foreign fighter contingent.

All this means it is important for Western governments to keep track of foreign nationals fighting on both sides of the conflict in Ukraine, especially those with right-wing extremist views as some may pose security threats in the future because of the military skills they are acquiring and the networks they are developing. But it is also vital for Western governments to counter Russian disinformation efforts that massively inflate the presence of right-wing extremists on the Ukrainian side. In 2022, Zelensky’s Ukraine is a laboratory not for right-wing extremism but for democratic freedom. **CTC**

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# External Impacts and the Extremism Question in the War in Ukraine: Considerations for Practitioners

By Don Rassler

After more than 100 days, it remains unclear how the war in Ukraine will evolve, how it will end, and the broader impacts it may have. This article examines key concerns and questions about the conflict that are relevant to counterterrorism practitioners through the lens of three impact areas. These include how the war may influence, or shape, inter-state competition; the trajectory of key organizations and networks, such as the Azov Regiment and Russian paramilitary entities; and the journey of individuals, especially far-right extremists. At the inter-state level, the war has already shaped alliance and proxy dynamics, and it is likely to influence them even more, a dynamic that could create opportunities, challenges, and risks, to include terrorism, for key parties. Substantive concerns about extremism and terror spillover existed across organizational, network, and individual levels prior to Russia's invasion in February. Many of those same concerns remain, but the scale and organizational forms of that nuanced threat stream have shifted. The counterterrorism community will need to continue to monitor developments to see if observed changes hold—and be on the look-out for new war impacts. To gain efficiencies in studying how the Ukraine conflict intersects with extremism and evolves in that regard, it should also consider developing or investing in two foundational research datasets.

It is hard to look at the ongoing war in Ukraine and not be focused on the here and now, as even though the conflict has evolved considerably since it began in February, the Ukrainian people are still locked in a bloody fight to protect their nation, lives, territory, and desired way of life.

The war in Ukraine though, like all wars, has been—and will continue to be—shaped by multiple parts: the history that preceded the war, including Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the long-simmering conflict in eastern Ukraine; the lead-up to and dynamics of the current war; and what the war and its aftermath will look like in the future.

At this time, the future trajectory of the conflict is unclear. But after more than 100 days of conflict, it certainly appears that the war has staying power, as both Russia and Ukraine have both demonstrated that they are not ready, despite suffering large losses, to end the war anytime soon. There are also other complicating factors, such as the interests and actions of external actors, that are likely to prolong and further complicate the war—to include how it will evolve and end.

This article examines the war through the lens of three key impact areas that are relevant to the counterterrorism community. It first examines the potential impact of the war on inter-state competition. It then examines the war's impact on the organizational trajectories of key networks and organizations taking part in the conflict, especially those with extremist ties, before similarly assessing the impact on individuals. In each of these three impact areas, attention is placed on highlighting key questions, concerns, points of complexity, and debate. It concludes with a short discussion about data, and two foundational data resources that would make sense for the counterterrorism community to develop or invest in.

## Impact on Inter-State Competitive Dynamics, and Potential Spillover Effects

At this point in the war, it is hard to predict how the war will end and what that ending will look like. Will, and the battle of wills between contestants, plays an important role in war—and in shaping a war's outcome. After more than 100 days, one of the key lessons that has emerged from the conflict is that Russian planners strategically underestimated the capabilities of the Ukrainian armed forces and the grit, will, and resolve of the Ukrainian people. Instead of dividing the Ukrainian people, Russia's invasion has brought the Ukrainian people closer together. The determination of the Ukrainian military has been critical to the successes that it has had on the battlefield, and looking forward, it appears the Ukrainian armed forces' will to fight has strong staying power and will endure.

But wars are costly. The Ukrainian government and armed forces have benefited from billions of dollars in support, equipment, and materiel—including tactical armed drones, such as the Turkish Bayraktar TB2; portable anti-armor and anti-aircraft weapons; artillery; helicopters; and radar systems—from the United States and other NATO partners.<sup>1</sup> The military equipment, systems, and support that Ukraine has received has had an immediate and important impact on the war,<sup>2</sup> as it has meaningfully shaped tactical battlefield outcomes *and* arguably the direction of the conflict itself.

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The West's provision of military hardware has been bolstered by NATO alliance unity, a strong diplomatic front, and complementary steps and actions, such as economic sanctions, that Western governments have taken to punish Russia and to pressure, dissuade, or deter the Kremlin from continuing its actions in Ukraine or from engaging in similar activity elsewhere.

Wars evolve, however, and both parties—Ukraine and Russia—have already suffered and lost much. As the war grinds on in the months and potentially years ahead, both nations are incentivized to identify ways to shift the trajectory and balance of power of the war so they can strengthen their respective positions and accomplish their goals (or whatever components of those goals they can).

For the Russian government, one key target will be to try to continue to attrit Ukrainian manpower—to lessen Ukrainian capabilities and diminish the resolve and will of the Ukrainian people. This is because mass matters,<sup>a</sup> and the Russian government knows that it has more manpower and more resources to wear down the capabilities of the Ukrainian armed forces over time. Given Russia's embarrassing losses in Ukraine and the critical role Western military support has played in the conflict (and the open nature of that support), it seems likely that the Russian government—motivated by pride, redemption, or the vision it has for its own future—will also aim to complicate or erode Western will and make Western government support for the war and the Ukrainian government more costly.

This is how the war may end up having a more complicated and longer strategic tail, as if the Russian government decides to impose new or additional costs on Western governments it could lead to impacts and direct or asymmetric activity that extend beyond the borders of Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> For example, Russia could provide more military support, including weapons like the anti-aircraft or anti-armor weapons that the West has provided to Ukraine, to regimes less friendly to Western interests or to armed proxies that could target Western governments and/or their interests. The threat of future costs should not deter the West, but policymakers in Western capitals should anticipate that the support they are providing to Ukraine may come with, or lead to, added costs inflicted by Russia and/or its agents at some point in the not-so-distant future.

The war has already impacted alliance dynamics, and it is likely that it will impact and shape them even further. On the Western side, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has helped to bolster NATO alliance solidarity,<sup>b</sup> led to a huge "revolutionary" strategic pivot in German defense policy and posture,<sup>4</sup> and pushed Finland and Sweden to apply for NATO membership. For Russia and its strategic partnership with China, the war has proved to be more complicated, as it "has highlighted both the resilience of the Sino-Russian partnership and its limitations."<sup>5</sup> And as the war progresses, it is believed "that the balance of power within the bilateral relationship will tilt radically towards Beijing."<sup>6</sup> This, as noted by Bobo Lo, is because "Moscow's escalating confrontation with the West means that Russia is now more reliant on China, geopolitically and economically, than at any time in the two countries' history."<sup>7</sup>

a This "mass matters" point was made by Ulrike Franke on Twitter. See Ulrike Franke, "This is a \*super important\* article. In war, mass matters ...," Twitter, June 18, 2022.

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Given the strategic role that the Russian government, its armed forces, and elements like the Wagner Group have played in Syria,<sup>8</sup> a key ally of Iran, there have been concerns that Russia may lean on Iran to provide more support to the war in Ukraine. Numerous commentators have pointed out how the war in Ukraine has put the Iranian government in a difficult position.<sup>9</sup> For Iran, the war comes at a bad time, as it has occurred against the backdrop of negotiations to restore the Iranian nuclear deal,<sup>10</sup> a reduction in political support for Hezbollah in Lebanon,<sup>11</sup> and ongoing influence obstacles in Iraq,<sup>12</sup> among other challenges. And domestically, "Russia's war in Ukraine is a political flashpoint ... [as] among ordinary Iranians, there is a great deal of sympathy for Ukraine."<sup>13</sup> These dynamics have boxed-in how Iran can respond: It needs to provide some support for the war, which it has, but due to its interests and internal pressures, it also can only publicly support the war or get involved so much. But that does not mean there is not space for Iran to do more, as if the Iranian government wanted to support the war in meaningful ways it could do so covertly, or through proxies. And as the conflict evolves, it will be important for Western governments to remain on the look-out for any masked signs, or tells, of potential Iranian support for the conflict.

When viewed at a broader level, the war in Ukraine and its demands has already led to Russian resourcing and manpower changes elsewhere, changes that could impact the Russian government's ability to influence and compete in other areas over time.<sup>c</sup> For example, it has been widely reported that "the invasion of Ukraine is straining Moscow's foreign deployments"<sup>14</sup> and that some Wagner Group personnel have been shifted from Libya, the Central African Republic, and Syria to help bolster Russian activity in Ukraine.<sup>15</sup> These Wagner redeployments may end up being temporary, but if the conflict persists, the war in Ukraine may end up constraining Moscow's ability to compete further afield, which could create opportunities for Western governments and their local partners. It could also, as Christopher Faulkner argues in this issue, make the presence of remaining Wagner personnel deployed in countries around the globe even more vital to the Kremlin.<sup>16</sup>

The war also raises other concerns and questions that are relevant to terrorism. For example, will the war and its brutal nature motivate individuals or groups involved in it to conduct terror attacks in Russia, areas of Ukraine, or Crimea, or against NATO or Western government targets?<sup>17</sup> While the conflict in Ukraine is unique, Russia's experience in Chechnya—and the terrorism spillover effects from that conflict, such as the Beslan school siege<sup>18</sup> and the Moscow theater hostage incident<sup>19</sup>—demonstrates how the longer-term aftereffects of the war could in part manifest as terrorism.

There is also the issue of what happens to all the weapons that have been flowing into Ukraine—"a longtime hub of arms trafficking," and where and with whom some of those weapons might end up.<sup>20</sup> The case of Libya is a cautionary tale in this regard, as the "transfer of weapons from Libya"—which was awash with weapons as a result of its 2011 civil war—was found to have "armed rebel movements in Mali in 2012," to include the "acquisition of arms by terror groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,

c The war in Ukraine has also had other economic and security impacts. For an example, see Saeed Ghasseminejad, "War in Ukraine Is Destabilizing the Middle East and North Africa," *National Interest*, June 13, 2022.



*A Ukrainian flag is seen on top of a checkpoint as black smoke rises from a fuel storage of the Ukrainian army following a Russian attack, on the outskirts of Kyiv, Ukraine, on March 25, 2022. (Rodrigo Abd/AP Images)*

Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, and non-state groups operating in the Sahel region.”<sup>21</sup> The war in Ukraine is unique and different from the conflict that erupted in Libya, but the flow of weapons into the country is still an important over-the-horizon watch-out.

### **Impact on Network and Organizational Trajectories, Especially Those with Known Extremist Ties**

Wars shape and alter the organizations and individuals who take part in them, and the war in Ukraine is being fought by a diverse mix of actors (individuals, networks, and groups) supporting activity on both sides of the conflict. And even though the war is primarily a contest between Russia and Ukraine, with each state pursuing military and strategic objectives on the battlefield, the war is not without its share of undercurrents—dimensions of the war that exist under the surface that are being overshadowed by the immense and gruesome character of the war itself. One of those undercurrents is that there “is a far-right extremist problem on both sides in the conflict.”<sup>22</sup> (Far-left extremists have been drawn to the conflict, too.<sup>d</sup>) The extremist undercurrent is not broadly pervasive, but it does appear in various organizational, individual, and informational forms. For example, the Russian government has

leveraged the “need” to denazify Ukraine<sup>23</sup> as a foil and blatant form of misinformation to help the Kremlin justify, and domestically sell, its invasion of the country; a country that has a democratically elected government and is led by a Jewish president.

While Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has kicked off a new phase of the conflict, the extremist undercurrent in Ukraine is not new: It has a much longer history and has manifested in different ways since at least 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and conflict erupted.

Given the complex array of actors taking part in the Ukraine conflict and the presence of units on both sides that have known extremist ties, have been associated with extremist beliefs, and have hosted extremists, there is already cause to be concerned that the war could elevate the status, capabilities, or power of controversial armed groups—and by extension, the broader networks with which they are associated. Two cases from opposite sides of the war highlight the concern terrorism researchers and governments have about the war’s potential extremist spillover effects, and some of the complexities associated with tracking how the war may influence the trajectory of key organizations taking part in it.

#### ***Ukrainian Dimensions: The Azov Brigade and Movement***

Most Ukrainians have joined traditional Ukrainian military units to defend their country. A smaller subset of Ukrainians, however, has also joined the Azov Regiment, a controversial armed group that has operated as a formal part of the Ukrainian National Guard since 2014.<sup>24</sup> The regiment, which used to be referred to as the Azov Battalion, shares history and connections with the Azov Movement,

d While much less pervasive, some individuals motivated by far-left extremist motivations have also been drawn to and active in the conflict in Ukraine. See Kacper Rekawek, “Western Extremists and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022: All Talk, But Not a Lot of Walk,” Counter Extremism Project, May 2022, p. 15. See also Christopher Miller, “Soldier of Misfortune,” BuzzFeed, April 9, 2021.

“a multi-pronged, heterogeneous far-right social movement that grew out of its namesake military unit.”<sup>25 e</sup> While the movement is involved in a range of activities,<sup>26</sup> it is “structured around the National Corps ..., a political party”<sup>27</sup> that the U.S. State Department identified as a nationalist hate group in 2018.<sup>28</sup>

While there is a line and distinction between the regiment and movement, the two entities are “often confused” as key members of the movement like to “speak of the Regiment as ‘its own.’”<sup>29</sup> The association that Azov Regiment veterans and Azov Movement members have had with military activity since Russia’s invasion in February, including attempts to create organizational structures, has clouded the dynamics of the relationship between the two entities even further.<sup>30</sup> As noted by Kacper Rekawek, “how the precise relationship between the party and the Regiment is structured is a complex issue. Some observers stress that the party and the Regiment are still connected whereas others maintain that the Regiment had undergone a ‘depoliticization.’”<sup>31</sup> It is believed that the “party [National Corps] does not exercise operational control over the Regiment.”<sup>32</sup>

Given the ongoing war, all Ukrainian military units are currently guided by the moment, and have prioritized survival, the fight against Russia, and protection of the Ukrainian state. This includes the Azov Regiment and military activity associated with the Azov Movement. But despite Azov’s contributions to the current war and its prior manifestations, especially the regiment’s recent stand in Mariupol, which decimated it,<sup>33</sup> the regiment and movement typify some of the concerns extremism researchers have about the war and its potential aftereffects. This is due to Azov’s history, its far-right nationalist orientation, the symbology it has used, its associations, and the role it has played as a “dangerous key player of the transnational extreme-right.”<sup>34</sup>

In 2014, and for a period after, the Azov Regiment served as a desired pro-Ukrainian military unit-of-choice that some local and foreign extremists, including those with white supremacist and neo-Nazi views, sought out and tried to join.<sup>35</sup> As a result, the broader Azov Movement has been described as having “served as a network hub for several years ... with strong ties to far-right extremists in many European Union countries and the United States.”<sup>36</sup> Azov Movement figures, for example, have had personal ties with members of Atomwaffen Division,<sup>37</sup> The Base, Rise Above Movement, and other extremist networks.<sup>38</sup> Those connections are real.

The Azov Regiment and other Ukrainian units with extremist links are believed to still be a destination for some foreign extremists today.<sup>39</sup> That is, if those foreign extremists can join the Azov Regiment or other controversial armed groups. Indeed, as noted by Christopher Miller, “Something that often goes unmentioned in reports about foreign extremists trying to join Azov is the fact they actually can’t join the regiment,<sup>40</sup> which is part of Ukraine’s Nat[ional] Guard. But what extremists do is go & link up with Azov Battalion vets & members of the broader movement.”<sup>42</sup> It is not clear how many foreign extremists have pursued such an approach, or have been successful in doing so. The limited ability of Azov Movement members to help personally ‘place’ foreign volunteers in a collection of Ukrainian units, which Kacper Rekawek describes

in this issue, strongly suggests that not many foreign extremists have succeeded.<sup>42</sup>

The general opportunity, though, has led to the principal and immediate concern, as highlighted by Colin Clarke, that “far-right extremists in Europe” and elsewhere could gain “combat experience and training in the Ukrainian theater and then use that for terrorist attacks in Europe proper,” in the United States, or even elsewhere.<sup>43</sup> There is some evidence to support this concern. For example, interviews a *Die Zeit* reporting team led by Yassin Musharbash conducted with former right-wing extremists suggest that some neo-Nazis primarily had joined the Azov Regiment to receive training in the use of weapons.<sup>f</sup>

The Azov Regiment and Movement have both had a troubling closeness to extremism, and international extremist networks, a closeness that some believe is still a core component of each entity today.<sup>44</sup> But just how much of a direct threat the Azov Regiment and Azov Movement present as a potential incubator or operational enabler of terrorism—through the military training, combat, and networking opportunities they have provided—has been arguably overblown.<sup>45</sup> Two points bring the issue into focus. First, it is still not clear how many foreigners, and as a subset how many foreign extremists, have been able to embed with, join, or receive direct training from the Azov Regiment or other units affiliated with the Azov Movement since 2014. The estimates that do exist are not high. For example, one report estimates that between 2014 to mid-2019 at most 3,879 foreigners joined units on the pro-Ukrainian side of the conflict, with those numbers falling to at most 879 if Russians are excluded.<sup>46</sup> And another more specific estimate suggests that “there may have been up to 100 foreign fighters in the [Azov] Regiment between 2014 and 2015—although not all at the same time—and the vast majority of them were Russians.”<sup>47</sup> Second, and more importantly, there has not been a clear-cut, credible public case of a foreign war volunteer or local that was a member of the Azov Regiment who has been directly associated with the Azov Movement, or has received military or weapons training from either entity that has conducted a terror attack. There have been cases of foreign extremists linked to or charged with terrorism who have tried to join the Azov Regiment or who

f In the Musharbash article, the individuals interviewed specified the Azov Battalion. The reference here—since the unit name has changed to Azov Regiment—has been changed to the latter for simplicity. See Yassin Musharbash, “The Globalization of Far-Right Extremism: An Investigative Report,” *CTC Sentinel* 14:6 (2021). There are also some interesting and potentially useful historical parallels. For example, during “the 1990s, German neo-Nazis who fought in the former Yugoslavia alongside Croatia later set up paramilitary training camps, remained influential figures within the far-right scene, and smuggled weapons and explosives from the conflict theatre back to Germany.” See Teun van Dongen, Gijss Weijenberg, Martijn Vugteveen, and Joshua Farrell-Molloy, “Foreign Volunteers in Ukraine: Security Considerations for Europe,” International Centre for Counter-terrorism, May 4, 2022.

e The Azov Movement has also been described as a “socio-political paramilitary entity.” See Rekawek, “Western Extremists and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022,” pp. 16-18.

have interacted with regiment or Azov Movement members,<sup>g</sup> but to the author's knowledge, none of those cases have been connected to an actual terror attack. And the number of foreign extremists who have *actually* received military training from, or been able to embed with, the Azov Regiment, who have later been charged with a terror offense or a *planned* act of terrorism is either very low,<sup>48</sup> or potentially even zero.<sup>h</sup> That is a significant statement for a unit and movement that has been operationally active in Ukraine since 2014 *and* that has had considerable intersections with transnational extremist networks. As a point of comparison, it is worth remembering that 2014 was the same year the Islamic State announced its caliphate.

This does not mean the Azov Regiment and the broader Azov Movement are not a concern when it comes to terrorism. Both have had, and likely still have, direct extremist ties. And there are credible reports that members of the Azov Regiment have perpetrated war crimes and human rights violations.<sup>49</sup> There is also evidence that Azov Regiment members have engaged in weapons trafficking. For example, in "the unified state register of judicial rulings," the Ukrainian news outlet "Hromadske found more than a dozen sentences against soldiers from the Azov regiment who attempted to take arms out of the warzone."<sup>50</sup> These three issues are of serious concern. But, when it comes to terrorism, the Azov Regiment and

Movement have thus far been tangential to terrorism, or terrorism adjacent.

How the U.S. government and technology companies have approached the Azov problem set is also emblematic of the concern that surrounds it. The 2018 version of the National Defense Authorization Act, for example, included language that prevented the United States from "providing arms and training assistance" to the Azov Battalion.<sup>51</sup> In 2019 and 2021, there were also two separate efforts by members of the U.S. Congress to designate the Azov Battalion a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Both failed.<sup>52</sup>

Meta's approach to the group highlights how responses to Azov have been shifting since the start of the 2022 war. In 2016, Facebook identified the Azov Battalion as a dangerous organization.<sup>53</sup> Then, three years later in 2019, Facebook banned the group from its platform in a Tier 1 status alongside groups like the Islamic State and the Ku Klux Klan. But "on February 24 [2022], the day Russia launched its invasion, Facebook reversed its ban, saying it would allow praise for Azov." A statement released by Meta justified the reversal stating: "For the time being, we are making a narrow exception for praise of the Azov regiment strictly in the context of defending Ukraine, or in their role as part of the Ukraine national guard."<sup>54</sup>

The Azov Regiment and Movement have both been trying to rehabilitate their images, and part of what makes assessments of the two entities challenging is that both have aspects of their histories and make-up that—given the current war with Russia and the need for external support—would be convenient to obscure or hide. Both entities have evolved since 2014, but just how much the character and make-up of each has changed, and the meaningfulness of that change, remains a point of debate. As bluntly stated by *The Washington Post*: "The Azov battalion is ... not what it was in 2014."<sup>55</sup> Researchers who follow the regiment still harbor concerns about the unit's affiliations and the presence of extremists in its ranks, but there is also a belief among some that the number of extremists active in the regiment are not as widespread as in the past. For example, as noted by Alexander Vindmann, back "in 2015, the Azov Regiment itself claimed to have between 10% and 20% far-right extremists in their ranks,' but those figures are possibly smaller today."<sup>56</sup>

It is believed that multiple factors associated with the regiment's integration into the Ukrainian National Guard, such as vetting practices, efforts to purge extremists,<sup>57</sup> observation during training, restrictions placed on foreign membership—which have made it harder for foreigners to join<sup>58</sup>—and shifts in recruitment practices and the type of person who is attracted to the Azov regiment,<sup>59</sup> are helping to drive change within the unit. In May 2022, the regiment also dropped a neo-Nazi symbol it had been using, another sign that the regiment and the Ukrainian government are trying to de-problematize the unit's image and/or that the unit is actually changing.<sup>60</sup> These steps are important, but there are still questions, and not much detail, about just how effective these efforts have been, and how many extremists still operate within the regiment's

g Several cases are instructive here. One important case is the controversial one involving Gregoire Moutaux, a French citizen who was charged and convicted by a Ukrainian court for "planning a terrorist attack and attempted weapons smuggling." According to the Ukrainian allegations, he planned to carry out a terror attack in France during its hosting of the Euro 2016 soccer championship. As part of its case, Ukrainian authorities "revealed that Moutaux reached out to servicemen from the Azov regiment of Ukraine's national guard ... offering money in exchange for obtaining weapons and ammunition. The Frenchman purchased these weapons from SBU agent and former Azov battalion soldier Mykhalo Zubov, who he met in Donbas in 2015." Some of the weapons were fakes. The case is controversial because the "Anti-terrorist Department in Paris deemed the information provided by the Ukrainian authorities 'insufficient.'" French authorities reportedly did not believe there was strong evidence to indicate that Moutaux was planning serious attacks and that he did not have substantive connections with extremists. The case is reportedly understood from the French side as being more about weapons smuggling. See Ihor Burdyha, "A Hello to Arms: Is There a Black Market for Guns in Ukraine?" Hromadske International, May 23, 2018, and "Sebastien Gobert on Gregoire Moutaux's Case." Hromadske International, n.d. for quotes and background. There is also the case of two American Atomwaffen members who were deported from Ukraine after they attempted to join the Azov Regiment in 2020. According to the Security Service of Ukraine, the two men "produced a video promoting neo-Nazism and urging citizens to commit particularly serious crimes, including murder and terrorist attacks in Ukraine." See Christopher Miller, "Ukraine Deported Two American Members Of A Neo-Nazi Group Who Tried To Join A Far-Right Military Unit For 'Combat Experience,'" BuzzFeed, October 8, 2020. There is also the case of Devon Arthurs, an Atomwaffen co-founder, who reportedly was trying to receive training from Azov. For background, see Alex Newhouse, "The Threat is the Network: The Multi-Node Structure of Neo-Fascist Accelerationism," *CTC Sentinel* 14:5 (2021). And there is also the case of Andrew Dymock, tied to Sonnenkreig Division and who has been convicted on terrorism charges in the United Kingdom, who showed support for the Azov Regiment prior to his arrest. See Jake Hanrahan, "Here's a photo of 'Blitz' (Andrew Dymock), the leader of Sonnenkrieg Division (Atomwaffen's UK wing) on the left and 'Soldat' (Oskar Koczorowski) ...." Twitter, February 28, 2019.

h One important caveat to this point is that not much is known about the backgrounds, histories, and views of Russian nationals who have joined the Azov Regiment. The author would like thank Kacper Rekawek for highlighting this issue.

i Kacper Rekawek, in his article published in this issue of *CTC Sentinel*, assesses that "the large majority of Ukrainians joining Azov-linked brigades within the Ukrainian military are doing so not because of right-wing extremism, but because they want to join an effective fighting force to defend their country." See Kacper Rekawek, "A Trickle, Not a Flood: The Limited 2022 Far-Right Foreign Fighter Mobilization to Ukraine," *CTC Sentinel* 15:6 (2022).

ranks.

The mixed and evolving make-up of the Azov Movement, combined with its public relations savviness, also makes it hard to decipher how deep the movement's extremist current runs, whether that current—or component of the movement's identity—is being masked or whitewashed, and how much the movement has meaningfully changed. Statements made by movement figures highlight how it is conscious of its image, and how it is trying to distance itself from specific extremist views while also acknowledging that Azov has been a home for some extremists. In an interview with *The Washington Post* in April 2022, for example, Andriy Biletskiy—the founding commander of the Azov Battalion who left the group in 2014 to serve in Ukraine's parliament until 2019—“rejected allegations of Nazism and white supremacist views” but also acknowledged that extremists operate “in his units.”<sup>61j</sup>

The movement, as noted by Michael Colborne, has been able to “exert at least some influence on Ukrainian politics and society despite its small numbers (e.g., at most 20,000 members estimated at some points in the past).”<sup>62</sup> But, he cautions, “it's not some invincible far-right force.”<sup>63</sup>

The performance of the political wing of the Azov Movement, the National Corps, during Ukraine's 2019 parliamentary elections speaks to how the Corps and other far-right groups do not enjoy significant public political support in Ukraine. During that election, the National Corps along with several other far-right entities ran as part of a “united nationalist bloc,”<sup>64</sup> but this bloc “could muster barely 2 percent of the vote, nowhere near the 5 percent threshold needed to enter Ukraine's Parliament.”<sup>65</sup> Put simply, “as a political party, National Corps has been an absolute dud at the ballot box.”<sup>66</sup>

But that does not mean that the group lacks influence or does not hold other forms of power—including on the street, at a grassroots level,<sup>67</sup> or through the threat of violence,<sup>68</sup> as some have indicated. It is possible the dynamics of the war may help to strengthen popular support for the Azov Movement over time<sup>69</sup> or push the Azov Movement, or elements of it, in new directions.

Despite the changes that have been reported, questions and concerns about the regiment and movement persist. And it remains unclear how the dynamics of the war are going to impact the organizational trajectory of both entities. One, the Azov Regiment “has not entirely rid itself of its toxic legacy,”<sup>70</sup> but it appears to be on a path of reform or at least to manage its most problematic elements. And in that way, it has “somewhat moved on from its hateful past.”<sup>71</sup> The other, the Azov Movement, appears to be more a wildcard. As a result, the counterterrorism community will need to maintain a watchful eye on the regiment and movement, and pay close attention to how each entity, and their respective spheres of influence, evolve. Given the remaining presence of extremists associated with each entity, attention should also be placed on the impact each may end up having on the personal trajectory of locals—and to a lesser extent foreigners—who embed in their ranks, and for any signs of organizational splintering at any point in the future.

j As noted by Kacper Rekawek, “The party regularly refers to the now renamed Azov Regiment as ‘its own,’ despite the fact that the party does not exercise operational control over the Regiment.” See Rekawek, “Western Extremists and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022,” p. 16.

**“The mixed and evolving make-up of the Azov Movement, combined with its public relations savviness, also make it hard to also decipher how deep the movement's extremist current runs, whether that current—or component of the movement's identity—is being masked or whitewashed, and how much the movement has meaningfully changed.”**

### *Russia's Paramilitary Hydra: The Wagner Enterprise and the Russian Imperial Movement*

The extremism challenges that the Azov Regiment and movement present are not limited to the Ukrainian side of the war. They exist on the Russian side, too, and manifest in more blatant ways.

What has caused the greatest concern is the ties that Russian paramilitary entities—the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM)<sup>k</sup> and Wagner group elements,<sup>l</sup> including Rusich<sup>m</sup>—have with extremism. On the Russian side, evidence of extremism is not limited to these entities, for as noted by Michael Colborne, “There's certainly a degree of Neo-Nazism and far-right views among Russian soldiers,” but he adds “it's difficult to say to what degree.”<sup>72</sup>

These controversial Russian paramilitary entities have their own identities and connections to the Russian government. And even though they engage in similar types of paramilitary activities, and all have played roles in foreign conflict zones including Syria that are of strategic import to Moscow,<sup>73</sup> each entity is believed to provide their own type of value to the Russian government. Despite their individual “uniqueness,” researchers have also observed a level of interconnectivity and personnel crossover between them that they can be understood as operating as a paramilitary network.<sup>74n</sup> For example, many “founding members of Wagner also belong to ... the Russian Imperial Movement.”<sup>75</sup>

k “Founded in 2002 in St. Petersburg by Stanislav Vorobyov, the Russian Imperial Movement subscribes to a monarchist ideology, partly derived from a belief that Russia should be led by a descendent of the Romanov dynasty, the family of the last Russian tsar.” Dmitry Kozhurin, “Who Are the Neo-Nazis Fighting for Russians in Ukraine?” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 27, 2022.

l As Candace Rondeaux has noted, there is no legal entity/group called Wagner. The group commonly referred to as ‘Wagner’ is instead a collection of entities. See “Russia's Mercenary Army,” Vox podcast, April 21, 2022.

m “The Rusich group was formally founded as the Sabotage and Assault Reconnaissance Group Rusich in St. Petersburg in 2014.” See Kozhurin.

n Candace Rondeaux has also argued that Russian mercenaries, and Wagner, and the roles they play are misunderstood. For example, as noted by Rondeaux: “Wagner is not an official corporate entity, like Blackwater,” she said, referencing the American security firm founded by Erik Prince. “It is both a set of contingents, that work for Russia, and an online social movement. Wagner is propaganda. More than a paramilitary group, it is a meme.” See Brian Castner, “The White Power Mercenaries Fighting For the Lost Cause Around the World,” *Time*, June 1, 2022.

Open association with extremist symbols, beliefs, and activity is a common thread that binds them, too. “Nazi symbols are popular among the mercenaries”—and not just the rank-and-file, but among senior leaders as well. The cases of Dmitry Utkin, “who many consider [to be] Wagner’s operational commander,”<sup>76</sup> and Aleksei Milchakov, the head of Rusich, are illustrative of how Russian paramilitary leaders hold, and are guided by, racist views. Utkin, for example, “has tattoos of Nazi ‘SS’ epaulets along his collar bones.”<sup>77</sup> And in a video that was published on YouTube in December 2020, Milchakov stated, “I’m a Nazi. I’m a Nazi ... I’m not going to go deep and say, I’m a nationalist, a patriot, an imperialist, and so forth. I’ll say it outright: I’m a Nazi.”<sup>78</sup> Association with Nazi symbols and beliefs has been reported to be an issue at lower levels, too; in Libya, Wagner mercenaries reportedly “spray-painted swastikas and SS lightning bolts as graffiti wherever they went.”<sup>79</sup>

Even more concerning has been RIM’s direct connections to terrorism. In 2020, the U.S. State Department formally designated RIM and its leaders as Specially Designated Global Terrorists.<sup>o</sup> The move was significant as it was “the first time in history the Department has designated a white supremacist terrorist group.”<sup>80</sup> The State Department made the decision due to evidence that RIM was “providing paramilitary-style training to white supremacists and neo-Nazis in Europe” for acts of terrorism.<sup>81</sup> U.S. concerns about RIM were heightened after two Swedish members of the Nordic Resistance Movement, a transnational neo-Nazi group,<sup>82</sup> who received training at a RIM paramilitary facility in St. Petersburg, Russia, “committed a series of bombings in Gothenburg, Sweden, targeting a refugee shelter, a shelter for asylum seekers, and a café.”<sup>83</sup> In June 2022, the U.S. government sanctioned Anton Thulin, one of the Swedes who was convicted for the role he played in the above activity, and two RIM members.<sup>84</sup> Thulin was designated due to “his continued pursuit of terrorist training, even after serving his prison sentence for his 2017 attacks in Sweden.”<sup>85</sup>

Wagner operatives have also been accused by U.N. components and human rights groups of a growing pile of war crimes, incidents of torture, and the murder of civilians in locations where they have operated, including Syria,<sup>86</sup> the Central Africa Republic,<sup>87</sup> Mali,<sup>88</sup> and Ukraine.<sup>89</sup> For example, as noted by Christopher Faulkner in this issue of *CTC Sentinel*, in “early March 2022, accusations emerged from the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali ... that Wagner personnel were likely complicit in the massacre of upwards of 30 civilians in the town of Niono.”<sup>90</sup> The accusations leveled against Wagner operatives heighten concerns about how the influence of Russian paramilitary units may grow, and how this type of activity may become more frequent and widespread if Moscow continues to rely on them.

Russian paramilitary entities, including Wagner elements like Rusich, fought and played roles in eastern Ukraine in 2014–2015 after Russia seized Crimea.<sup>p</sup> Shortly before Russia invaded Ukraine in late February 2022, observers noticed how Rusich was sending signals that some of its members would be heading back to the

country to fight.<sup>91</sup> Denis Gariyev, the head of the Russian Imperial Legion—RIM’s paramilitary wing—sent similar suggestive signals via Telegram as well.<sup>92</sup> Since then, signs of the physical presence of Wagner and RIM elements in Ukraine have grown.<sup>93</sup> For example, according to a German intelligence report leaked to the press, members of Rusich have been in the country since early April 2022.<sup>94</sup> According to *Der Spiegel*, the German intelligence report also stated that Russian Imperial Legion leader Gariyev was wounded fighting in Ukraine, and that his deputy had been killed in the country. Gariyev was reportedly injured in mid-April.<sup>95</sup>

The scale of Russian paramilitary activity in Ukraine can be difficult to track, and discerning the percentage of Russian mercenaries who have extremist views who are active there is even harder. Estimates of the number of Wagner operatives active in Ukraine vary widely,<sup>96</sup> but the U.S. Defense Department has repeatedly stated it believes the number of Wagner personnel active in the Donbas to be approximately 1,000, and that over the past several months, the Russian military and Wagner Group have both shifted personnel from other countries to Ukraine.<sup>97</sup> In terms of the number of Russian extremist fighters active in Ukraine, researcher Aleksandr Verkhovsky suggests that “there were likely far fewer ... in Ukraine now than there were in the early years of the Donbas war.”<sup>98</sup> It is hard to know if that view is true.

While the Azov Regiment and Movement, RIM, Wagner, and Rusich are key entities for extremism and counterterrorism practitioners to watch, they are not the only actors playing active roles in the conflict that are of concern.<sup>r</sup> As the war evolves, attention will need to remain focused on how the war impacts the capabilities, influence, and operational reach of organizations that are already of concern, and how it might lead to the development of new entities of concern, too.

### Impact on Individuals Playing Roles in the War

In addition to organizations and networks, the war in Ukraine raises questions about how the conflict may influence or impact the lives and views of individuals taking part in hostilities, or those who have personally suffered. Like its prior manifestations, the current war in Ukraine has attracted a diverse mix of individuals from different backgrounds, motivated by varied causes. The overwhelming majority of individuals taking part in the war are local Ukrainians who have taken up arms to defend their homeland and Russian citizens supporting Moscow’s war aims.

A much smaller subset of individuals who have been drawn to the conflict, and are playing different roles in it, is a mix of foreigners that includes foreign war volunteers, legionaries, mercenaries, and those operating behind the scenes in non-combat support functions. Given the extremist linkages of some of the actors in the war and the role Islamic State foreign fighters played in acts of terrorism conducted in the Levant (and around the world), the security community has concerns about the contingent of foreign war volunteers—especially those with extremist ties—who have traveled to Ukraine to play military roles in the conflict.

o The U.S. State Department did so by leveraging Executive Order 13224. See “United States Designates Russian Imperial Movement and Leaders as Global Terrorists,” U.S. Department of State, April 7, 2020.

p Rusich reportedly left Ukraine in 2015 for Syria. See Candace Rondeaux, Ben Dalton, and Jonathan Deer, “Wagner Group Contingent Rusich on the Move Again,” New America Foundation blog, January 26, 2022.

q Similarly, British military intelligence estimates that 1,000 Wagner mercenaries are active in Ukraine. See “What is Russia’s Wagner Group of mercenaries in Ukraine?” BBC, April 5, 2022.

r Right Sector is another controversial entity that deserves close attention. For background, see Aris Roussinos, “On the frontline with the Right Sector militia,” Unherd, June 18, 2022, and Rekawek, “A Trickle, Not a Flood.”

As has been noted by Kacper Rekawek, the foreign war volunteer continent is “extremely heterogeneous.”<sup>99</sup> And there is still a lot that remains unknown about the collection of foreign war volunteers who have been drawn to the conflict, as “systematic research into the backgrounds and motives of these foreign fighters is relatively scarce.”<sup>100</sup>

So far, the evidence suggests that the largest and most general group of foreign war volunteers are “concerned citizens of the world”<sup>101</sup>—foreigners not involved with extremist causes who have recently made their way to Ukraine because they believe that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is unjust and/or because they have important skills that they can offer to support the Ukrainian people. It is possible that there may end up being a much smaller category of foreign volunteers who initially decided to join the conflict for less ideological reasons, whose motivations evolve in more ideologically oriented directions based on the experiences they have in the country. For example, during the early part of the conflict in Syria, there was a subset of foreign volunteers who initially traveled to the country to defend “the Syrian people against the regime’s brutality”<sup>102</sup> and “not necessarily because of animosity towards the West”<sup>103</sup> who ended up joining extremist groups. It is not known if the same phenomenon is taking place in the war in Ukraine, and it might be too early to tell.

The sub-category of foreign war volunteers that represents more of a concern to security practitioners are individuals who already harbor, or are showing signs of, extremist views or beliefs who are attracted to the war because it represents an opportunity to receive training and combat experience, or to network with other extremists in an operational setting. This includes individuals with extremist associations who: 1) traveled to and embedded with or joined a local military unit in Ukraine prior to Russia’s 2022 invasion and never left the country; 2) spent operational time in the country previously, left, and have since returned; and 3) recently joined a unit for the first time.<sup>104</sup>

To situate the threat that some foreign war volunteers could pose, it is important to contextualize the new mobilization of foreigners; examine what is known about the scale and scope of the issue; and briefly review two cases that demonstrate how foreign war volunteer dynamics, extremism, and concerns about terrorism intersect.

### ***Foreign War Volunteer Dynamics – Context, Scale, and Intersectional Cases***

During the beginning phases of the 2022 war, the Ukrainian and Russian governments leveraged the idea of foreign war volunteers/recruits for various purposes. For example, shortly after Russia’s invasion in February 2022, Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky publicly appealed for foreign volunteers to join the country’s International Legion so it could bolster its fight against Russia.<sup>105</sup> There was broad initial interest in Zelensky’s appeal, as according to Ukraine’s foreign ministry by early March 2022 over 20,000 foreign volunteers had applied to join the International Legion.<sup>106</sup> Zelensky’s foreign volunteer call had a clear ‘we need help’ message, but one could argue that in making the call, the Ukrainian government also sought to further internationalize the conflict (i.e., foreigners fighting in Ukraine would help to make the war more ‘real’ for others back home) and to send a deterrent signal to Russia (i.e., you might be okay shelling Ukrainians, but in the future, you will be shelling foreigners, too, and we will have more manpower).

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When viewed in that way, Zelensky’s call for foreigners was a form of signaling.

Russia has leveraged foreign recruits to signal as well. In early March 2022, not long after Zelensky made his call, the Russian government publicly claimed that it would recruit and deploy up to 16,000 foreign recruits from the Middle East and North Africa—principally from Syria and Libya, and potentially elsewhere—to support Russian-backed elements in Ukraine.<sup>107</sup> Given the timing, one way to read the Kremlin’s similar stated plan to recruit thousands of foreigners is that it also functioned as a form of signaling—directed at the Ukrainian government and its supporters to convey the principal message: ‘We can recruit a lot of foreigners to take part in the war, too.’

But researchers who have been examining the recent flow and scale of foreign war volunteers who have traveled to Ukraine and been able to join or embed with units affiliated with either side have seen enough evidence that they are cautioning others—like that famous Public Enemy song—to not believe the hype.<sup>108</sup> For example, in the Ukraine case, it is believed that out of the 20,000 potential foreign war volunteers who expressed an interest in joining Ukraine’s International Legion, the number of foreigners who have since arrived in Ukraine are in the hundreds to low thousands.<sup>109</sup> And the number of those foreign volunteers who have successfully embedded with or joined a Ukrainian military or paramilitary unit, and seen combat, is likely on the lower end of those estimates.

Multiple factors explain the ‘high number of foreigners pledging’ versus the ‘lower number who decide to join’ disconnect. The reality of the decision, and risks involved, likely dissuaded some. There is also a category of prospective volunteers who made it to Ukraine, but who were deterred from joining, or decided to support the Ukrainian government’s war effort in other ways, due to the “disorganization on the Ukrainian side,”<sup>110</sup> contract terms (including length of service requirements), vetting controls, or not having prior military or combat experience, which emerged, at least for most, as a requirement and/or strong Ukrainian government preference. And the population of foreigners who did end up joining is also mixed, as while there are plenty of stories of foreign war volunteers



engaging in combat,<sup>8</sup> there are also various stories about a subset of foreigners who left after joining due to tough conditions on the ground, a change of heart, or frustrations with the type of support they received.<sup>111</sup>

Thus, the subset of foreign extremists who have made it to Ukraine so far is much smaller than many had suggested or feared. A recent study, led by Rekawek, that examined the phenomenon came to the following conclusion:

*An analysis of the far-right and right-wing extremist scenes in seven countries—the United States, Canada, Spain, Italy, France, Germany, and Poland—reveals that the current conflict has not led to a significant flow of extremists to the war zone. There is a lot of discussion and debate among extremists, but very few have traveled to Ukraine.*<sup>112</sup>

The report went on to add that, for example, “about 30 from Germany and France seem to have traveled. In other cases, such as with Canada, hardly anyone from the local far-right and right-wing extremist milieus appears to have made the trip.”<sup>113</sup> The same applied to individuals from the United States, as the report found “very little evidence indicating that more than a handful of U.S. extremist volunteers have traveled to Ukraine since the invasion.”<sup>114</sup>

Part of the reason is that when compared to the 2014-2016 period, the process foreigners have had to follow in 2022 to join a local Ukrainian military unit is more formulated and structured, and there are also fewer non-state, and less regulated, paramilitary entities to join.<sup>115</sup> There is also the emerging view “that the 2014 foreign fighter mobilization was more ideological in nature than that of 2022,” which is believed to be having an impact on the type and number of foreign extremists who want to join.<sup>116</sup> For example, a review of “publicly available information on more than 200 foreign volunteers who traveled to fight in Ukraine between February and May 2022” conducted by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and his co-authors “did not point to a significant ideologically motivated or extremist contingent.”<sup>117</sup>

As for Russian efforts, since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, there have been mixed and murky reports about Moscow’s attempts to operationalize its plan to recruit foreigners at scale.<sup>118</sup> And there has not been any clear evidence that Russia has been able to mobilize or integrate thousands of foreign recruits from Syria or Libya into its battle plans in Ukraine, at least not yet. That is not to say that Russia has not been trying,<sup>119</sup> and it is possible that the effort is still a work in progress, as in early March Martin Chulov at *The Guardian* reported that a contingent of 150 Syrian troops had arrived in Russia as part of an effort to support the war.<sup>120</sup> This was followed by reporting in late March by *The New York Times* that a contingent of “at least 300 soldiers from a Syrian Army division” had arrived in Russia for military training before being sent to Ukraine.<sup>121</sup> But unlike the foreign volunteers who have traveled to join the Ukrainian side of the conflict, reports suggest that Russia’s recruitment of foreign “volunteers” also involves financial compensation,<sup>122</sup> which if true and broad in scale will increase the total cost of the war for Moscow over time.

At an individual level, every foreign war volunteer or recruit who

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travels to Ukraine has their own set of motivations and goals for being there. And from a security perspective, the overwhelming majority of foreign war volunteers participating in the conflict do not represent a security concern or threat. But wars also attract all types, and even though the number the foreign war volunteers is not believed to be high, there are destined to be some ‘bad apples in the bunch,’ a subset of individuals who already pose some type of security concern or who may present one at some point in the future.

The complicated case of Craig Lang, a former U.S. Army soldier who in 2019 was charged by the Justice Department for homicide and armed robbery<sup>123</sup> in relation to a double murder in Florida, “with conspiring to kill, kidnap, or maim persons” in Venezuela,<sup>124</sup> and with a violation of the Neutrality Act (for his alleged role in a plot to “overthrow the government of Venezuela”), is illustrative.<sup>125</sup> After a difficult childhood, Lang joined the U.S. Army, where he served in the infantry from 2008 to 2014, “completing tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.”<sup>126</sup> During one of his deployments, his “Humvee struck a roadside bomb.”<sup>127</sup> Lang has also claimed that while on deployment, he suffered a brain injury, and his father has reported that his son has struggled with PTSD as a result of his time in the Army.<sup>128</sup> In 2013, Lang’s marriage started to unravel, and in 2014, he was dishonorably discharged from the Army.<sup>129</sup>

Not long after, in 2015, Lang arrived in Ukraine and—along with several other Americans—allegedly embedded with Right Sector, an ultranationalist Ukrainian group with extremist links that has operated in a paramilitary capacity.<sup>1</sup> And in 2021, news broke that

s One example is that of American veteran James Vasquez who chronicled his experience fighting in Ukraine on his Twitter account (@jmvasquez1974). See also Peter Yankowski, “Norwalk veteran says he’s heading back to Ukraine,” *The Hour*, June 20, 2022.

t As noted by Tim Lister: “Lang arrived in Ukraine in 2014 and was one of several foreigners to join the Georgia National Legion, a volunteer group prohibited by Ukrainian authorities from taking part in combat operations. Lang later joined the Right Sector but by 2016 had returned to the United States because—in his words—the conflict had ‘got too slow’ and ‘became trench warfare.’” Tim Lister, “The Nexus Between Far-Right Extremists in the United States and Ukraine,” *CTC Sentinel* 13:4 (2020). See also Betsy Woodruff Swan and Christopher Miller, “Customs and Border Protection bulletin: American fighters headed to Ukraine questioned at U.S. airports,” *Politico*, May 24, 2022. For background on Right Sector, see “Profile: Ukraine’s ultra-nationalist Right Sector,” *BBC*, April 28, 2014.

the Justice Department was also investigating Lang, and six other Americans, for alleged involvement in war crimes that occurred on the battlefield in Ukraine.<sup>130</sup> Reporting by Christopher Miller in May 2022 has highlighted how Lang, who has been fighting extradition to the United States, is “again fighting on the Ukrainian battlefield” and how he recently posted a picture of himself with an anti-tank weapon.<sup>131</sup>

Lang has denied holding “any extremist political views,” but “Damien Rodriguez, a Bronx native who previously fought with a far-right Ukrainian unit and crossed paths with Lang on the battlefield, recalled it very differently. ‘Some of the things he said made me think, *Dude, I don’t wanna be next to you right now, he said. He was telling me about starting a revolution in the US. It was crazy.*’ Lang, he said, wanted to ‘watch the world burn.’”<sup>132</sup>

The concern about spillover is not just limited to foreigners who have traveled to, fought with, or received training from entities like the Azov Regiment or Right Sector in the past. It involves foreign war volunteer aspirants as well. In 2019, for example, U.S. Army Specialist Jarrett William Smith was charged with, and later convicted of, “distributing bomb-making information over social media.”<sup>133</sup> Investigators “said he sent recipes for homemade napalm on the social networking site Telegram and discussed plans to assassinate former House representative Beto O’Rourke and blow up the offices of CNN.”<sup>134</sup> Prior to Smith’s arrest, he was reported to have been in contact with Lang, and was in talks with other individuals “about traveling to Ukraine, where he wanted to fight alongside ... [the] Azov Battalion.”<sup>135</sup>

The cases of Lang and Smith are cautionary tales, as they speak to the intersectional nature of the war and how the conflict, thankfully in rare cases thus far, holds the power to motivate or enable individuals to engage in political violence or terrorism elsewhere.

## Conclusion

By looking at the war in Ukraine through the lens of three different impact areas, this article has highlighted several concerns, questions, and debates that are important for extremism researchers and the counterterrorism community to continue to pay attention to and evaluate as the conflict evolves.

The academic and open-source research communities have done important data-driven work to help situate, parse, and contextualize how the current war in Ukraine and its prior manifestations have intersected with extremism and other interrelated concerns. Security practitioners from Western governments charged with keeping their publics safe have also been closely following developments and have engaged in a tremendous amount of collaboration, information sharing, and investigative work behind the scenes to try to understand, and stay ahead of, how the conflict in Ukraine has (and may) spill over into other threat areas. There has also been crosstalk and knowledge sharing between these two communities—the academic and open-source research community and government specialists—to better understand the intersectional nature of the Ukraine conflict, and how those dynamics have been evolving. But, as with any multi-layered, evolving, and hard-to-track issue, there are ways for both communities to gain efficiencies and more effectively help one another.

One way to do this would be by investing in and/or enhancing

common, foundational data resources to help all parties better identify, track, and evaluate change across strategic, organizational, network, and individual dimensions of the war in Ukraine. While these types of efforts could take various forms, two examples highlight what those type of efforts could look like, and the value they could provide.

The first suggestion, which is broad in focus, would be to invest in and develop a structured global dataset of criminal cases that have a demonstrated nexus to the conflict in Ukraine. Such a dataset, which would be ‘historical’ in orientation and include data on cases that reach back to at least 2014, could be constructed with public, open sources as a way to help baseline how the conflict in Ukraine has intersected with criminal activity, extremism/terrorism considerations, and/or other national security concerns (e.g., weapons smuggling). This type of baseline dataset could be leveraged to identify patterns across countries, networks, or time; spot data anomalies or new leading-edge activities of concern; inform threat assessments; and refine mobilization indicators that help government agencies “determine whether individuals or groups are preparing to engage in violent extremist activities.”<sup>136</sup> The dataset could also be enriched with other types of open-source or sensitive data depending on a researcher’s or investigating entity’s interests or mandate.

The second data-driven effort would aim to provide greater empirical insight into a set of foreign war volunteer questions that are of deep interest to academic researchers, government analysts, and policymakers, and that will help each community to assess and better understand extremist, and potential terrorism, risks associated with the war in Ukraine. Important research work has been done on Ukraine foreign war volunteer dynamics and how that issue does, and does not, intersect with extremism, but the public approaches that have been taken thus far have been scattered and pursued on an ad hoc basis. Given that academic researchers and practitioners continue to ask similar research questions related to this issue, the governmental counterterrorism community should seriously consider seeding the development of an empirical, open-source Ukraine foreign war volunteer dataset so that the phenomenon, and how it has evolved, can be traced across time in a more systematic and deeper way. Such a dataset, for example, would gather evidence to inform key questions such as: what does the flow of foreign war volunteers (and potentially other foreign participants) on both sides of the conflict in Ukraine look like; what is its scale; and how has it, and the character of who is attracted to the conflict, evolved since 2014? The two proposed datasets—the Ukraine global crime dataset and the Ukraine foreign war volunteer dataset—could also be analyzed in relation to one another to inform other important questions that are of interest to academia and government, such as what type of threat do Ukraine foreign war volunteer returnees pose.

If anything, the questions, concerns, and debates discussed in this article highlight how the war in Ukraine is riddled with complexity; how the groups taking part in conflict and the foreign individuals attracted to the war are evolving; and how there remain a number of important issues that at present are still not well understood. Data, collaboration, and what to do with the data are all a key, central part of the path that will help the counterterrorism community to gain more clarity. **CTC**

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# Undermining Democracy and Exploiting Clients: The Wagner Group's Nefarious Activities in Africa

By Christopher Faulkner

Over the past several years, the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company (PMC), has become an increasingly important instrument in Russia's foreign policy toolkit, especially in Africa where Moscow has sought to expand its influence and challenge the West. To do so, Wagner has cultivated exploitative relationships with multiple African governments—trading military and security services for mining concessions and political access. Yet, the group has little interest in genuine capacity building and instead seeks to capitalize and profit on insecurity. This article traces the Wagner Group's engagement across Africa, illuminating its nefarious practices, including opaque and manipulative contracts, disinformation campaigns, election meddling, and severe human rights abuses. Wagner's role in Africa poses a severe threat to the security and stability of African states as well as the strategic interests of the United States and allied nations. It is vital that the United States and partner states not only continue to monitor the Wagner Group's activities across the continent, but pursue efforts to undermine its legitimacy with current and potential clients.

National security professionals are quite familiar with the multidimensional nature of today's international security environment and modern conflict zones, which include a multiplicity of actors, both state and non-state alike. Perhaps most visible in recent years has been the prevalence of private military companies (PMCs), also regularly referred to as private military and security companies (PMSCs). PMCs have become frequent suppliers of a host of military and security-related services for a wide range of clients, including states, rebel groups, multinational corporations, and even international organizations like the United Nations.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the "market for force" has swelled since the end of the Cold War, and demand is only increasing.<sup>2</sup>

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Yet, as the private security sector has matured, so too has the diversity of PMCs available for hire. Of particular relevance is the increased visibility and activity of the Russian PMC known as the Wagner Group, which has developed a notorious reputation for its activities in a host of theaters. Though far from the only Russian PMC active both in and outside of conflict zones, it has become a predominant feature of Russia's modern foreign policy toolkit—especially for Moscow's efforts to expand influence across the African continent. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Kremlin's use of Wagner serves as part of its broader irregular warfare and gray zone strategy to challenge the West, particularly in states where neither Russia nor the United States has sought to maintain a sizable footprint.<sup>3</sup>

This article focuses on the evolution of the Wagner Group and its engagement in several African countries since at least 2015. Though regarded as a private firm, the Wagner Group exhibits features that all but conclusively point to its position as a semi-state security force, and one that Moscow has welcomed as the 'tip of the spear' in its repertoire of foreign policy tools for its Africa strategy. To date, it has used Wagner to challenge and undermine democracy, exploit fragile security environments, prop up and insulate illiberal regimes, ink deals to exploit clients' resources for the benefit of the Russian state and oligarchs, and generally expand Russia's opportunities to discredit the West on the continent.

The article first provides a brief overview of PMCs and discusses relevant academic findings on the implications of governments contracting PMCs. Second, it offers a succinct background on the history and rise of the Wagner Group, illustrating the complexity of its organizational structure and the diversity of its operations. The third section surveys Wagner's engagement across the African continent with short vignettes describing its activities in Libya, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Mozambique, and Mali. The final section considers how Wagner's African strategy impacts U.S. interests on the continent.

## A Snapshot on Private Military Companies

While mercenaries, or soldiers of fortune, have been around for centuries, private military companies are typically viewed as a post-Cold War phenomenon. The modern-day mercenary, PMCs are often distinguished by their corporate organizational structure and boardroom mentality.<sup>4</sup> These military and security providers found no shortage of clients after the fall of the Soviet Union as the changing international system led patron states to make dramatic revisions in their foreign policy strategies. As a result, many recipient governments saw a significant decline in the level of military assistance they had received throughout the Cold War and subsequently struggled to combat threats, both internal and external. In short, "as state power decline[d], private force [rose]."<sup>5</sup>

Early examples of PMCs ushered in to fill the security vacuum left after the Cold War include firms like the Gurkha Security

Guards (GSG), which was one of the first to arrive in Sierra Leone during its civil war; Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MPRI), a U.S.-based PMC that trained the Croatian Army during the Croatian War of Independence;<sup>6</sup> the South African PMC Executive Outcomes (EO), which gained notoriety for its direct military involvement in civil wars in Sierra Leone and Angola; and the latter's British counterpart, Sandline International, which took over several of EO's missions when that group disbanded in the aftermath of South African legislation outlawing PMCs.<sup>7</sup>

Since the emergence of these early arrivers, the PMC market has grown in both scale and sophistication. Weak states have contracted PMCs to augment security deficiencies, even using PMCs to participate in kinetic frontline operations. For instance, Nigeria contracted at least three private military companies to train, support, and even directly participate in counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram between 2014 and 2015.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, though countries like the United States have typically contracted PMCs to serve exclusively in support or logistical roles, the notorious Nisour Square incident in 2007, where Blackwater employees killed over two dozen Iraqi civilians, highlights the complexities of the PMC landscape.<sup>9</sup>

While controversial groups like Blackwater and its successive iterations are well known, U.S. and Western-registered PMCs are not the only game in town when it comes to PMC options. Today, governments can solicit military and security services from PMCs from a multitude of countries, with Russian PMCs making a concerted effort to increase their market share. Moreover, African states have consistently been important clients for the PMC industry with recent data-gathering showing that the continent accounts for nearly half of all verified incidents of PMC activity between 1980 and 2016.<sup>10</sup>

Given the rise of the industry, there continues to be significant academic attention on the consequences of governments contracting PMCs. The vast majority of recent scholarship considers how the involvement of PMCs during times of armed conflict can impact conflict dynamics (e.g., severity and duration).<sup>11</sup> Generally, the findings suggest that the PMCs can improve clients' military capacity, though for how long and in what ways largely depends on the services provided. Some evidence even suggests that hiring PMCs can decrease the duration of a conflict, though it is important to consider how conflict termination is measured.<sup>12</sup>

Along these lines, several recent empirical investigations emphasize how hiring a PMC can unleash a series of principal-agent problems for clients. These problems can manifest in several forms, but the impacts of contracting a firm that is more interested in pursuing their own interests (adverse selection) or one that pursues actions that misalign with the goals of the client and subsequently make situations worse (moral hazard) are especially pertinent.<sup>13</sup> In fact, researchers have shown that in certain instances, PMCs may have few incentives to ensure conflict ceases entirely, as a manageable level of conflict can ensure contract continuity.<sup>14</sup> This, of course, can have reputational consequences and potentially impact a company's ability to solidify future contracts, but it illustrates the complexity of the private military landscape.

One emerging and particularly relevant area of research to better understand how these firms will behave once the ink on a contract dries is to look at where PMCs are headquartered/registered. Unsurprisingly, preliminary findings suggest that PMCs that come from democratic states are associated with a lower probability of

engaging in human rights abuses while the opposite holds for those registered in non-democracies with poor human rights records.<sup>15</sup> For the Russian-based Wagner Group, this is an especially relevant consideration when examining its growing role in Africa. While all PMCs by nature are self-interested and profit-oriented, Wagner epitomizes these characteristics—caring little about cultivating genuine stability, respect for the rule of law, or democracy, and instead propping up clients in an exploitative fashion.

## The Rise of the Wagner Group

It is worth briefly reviewing the Wagner Group's origins, formation, and evolution to situate its growing role as a tool in Russia's modern foreign policy toolkit. Despite Moscow's constitutional ban on PMCs, Russia has a history of using these firms to do its bidding and, in recent years, has maintained a cadre of PMCs that function as part of its broader irregular warfare strategy.<sup>16</sup> Yet, the Wagner Group clearly operates as Russia's premier firm, illustrated most directly by the breadth of its engagement around the globe and its proximity to the Kremlin—leading some to refer to it as "Putin's private army."<sup>17</sup> In many ways, the group's status as an independent contractor gives it a degree of "unpredictability" and, most importantly, simultaneously offers Moscow the façade of "plausible deniability."<sup>18</sup>

The idea of the Wagner Group is believed to have originated around 2010 in a Russian General Staff meeting.<sup>19</sup> Though details of that event are sparse, some evidence suggests that present at the meeting was Eeben Barlow, founder of the South African PMC Executive Outcomes.<sup>20</sup> a Wagner officially emerged on the scene circa 2014 from a tangled web of PMC predecessors. These included the Moran Security Group, a Russian firm specializing in maritime and shipping security, and the Slavonic Corps, which first deployed to fight in Syria.<sup>21</sup>

The Wagner Group was founded by Dmitry Utkin and bankrolled by Yevgeny Prigozhin, better known as "Putin's cook" (or chef). Utkin is a retired veteran of Russia's intelligence agency, the GRU, where he served from approximately 1988 to 2013.<sup>22</sup> A staunch admirer of Hitler and Nazi Germany, it is believed that Utkin chose the name Wagner in honor of Hitler's favorite composer, Richard Wagner.<sup>23</sup> Prigozhin, meanwhile, is a Russian oligarch with past connections to organized crime, deep ties to Vladimir Putin, and a diverse portfolio of business interests—many of which are connected to the mining sector.<sup>24</sup> Prigozhin was also identified as the funding source behind the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a Russian troll farm implicated for election meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.<sup>25</sup>

The Wagner Group's first recorded activities can be traced back to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 before popping up shortly thereafter in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.<sup>26</sup> Like its predecessor, the Slavonic Corps, it has also been active in Syria, having operated there since at least October 2015.<sup>27</sup> In Syria, the

a Executive Outcomes (EO) was a South African private military company that was involved in several African civil wars in the early 1990s—most notably, Sierra Leone and Angola. EO was part of a tangled web of private companies including partner PMCs, geological/mining companies, and engineering firms. The Wagner Group is similarly designed as an intricate network of shell companies. For more on Executive Outcomes, see William Reno, "African Weak States and Commercial Alliances," *African Affairs* 96:383 (1997).

**“While generally classified as a PMC, several analysts rightly note that the Wagner Group might be better categorized as a quasi-state actor given its proximity to Russia’s political elite and the ways the Kremlin has used the firm as a direct foreign policy instrument. It is intentionally baked into a complex network of business entities and shell companies ... and is intricately entangled with an equally complex web of government entities.”**

group made headlines when it attempted to assault the Conoco gas plant in the Deir ez-Zor province in early 2018, which ultimately led to direct confrontation with U.S. Special Operations forces.<sup>28</sup>

While generally classified as a PMC, several analysts rightly note that the Wagner Group might be better categorized as a quasi-state actor given its proximity to Russia’s political elite and the ways the Kremlin has used the firm as a direct foreign policy instrument.<sup>29</sup> It is intentionally baked into a complex network of business entities and shell companies—part of Prigozhin’s commercial empire—and is intricately entangled with an equally complex web of government entities.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, compared to most modern-day PMCs, the group is acutely different from its Western counterparts, which generally refrain from signing deals to partake in direct combat (or ‘tip of the spear’) operations. Instead, Wagner has frequently engaged in direct hostilities, most notably in Syria and Ukraine, but also in the Central African Republic, Mozambique, and Mali.<sup>31</sup> However, ‘tip of the spear’ operations are only part of its repertoire of services, which includes information operations, training, logistical support, weapons transfers, and so on. The diversity of services offered by the Wagner Group has led to its labeling as Russia’s “Swiss Army Knife.”<sup>32</sup>

### **Why (and Where) Is Wagner in Africa?**

While the Wagner Group has operated in as many as 28 countries across the globe, including in Eastern Europe (i.e., Ukraine), the Middle East (i.e., Syria), and South America (i.e., Venezuela), it has become most visible on the African continent, having deployed to at least 18 African states since 2016.<sup>33</sup> The Wagner Group’s engagement across Africa stands in stark contrast to Russia’s role on the continent in the immediate period after the Cold War. While the Soviet Union and the West often competed for influence across Africa throughout much of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to Russia’s rapid disengagement with African countries, including the closure of at least nine embassies.<sup>34</sup> Some labeled this Russia’s “Embassy Identity Crisis”<sup>35</sup> as it tried to reconcile its foreign policy strategy following the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Yet, as scholar Kimberly Marten notes, over the past decade Russia has come “roaring back” to the continent, aiming to revitalize relations with African nations and seeking alternative

markets to offset Western sanctions in the aftermath of its 2014 invasion of Ukraine.<sup>36</sup> Between 2015 and 2019, for instance, Russia signed at least 19 military collaboration agreements with African governments, most related to weapons sales.<sup>37</sup> Putin also hosted the first-ever Russian-African summit in Sochi in 2019, and a second one remains scheduled for October/November 2022, despite the ongoing war in Ukraine.<sup>38</sup>

Rather than genuine investment from the Kremlin directly, however, Russia has used irregular means to carry out its foreign policy agenda in Africa “on the cheap,” looking to exploit relationships where the West is absent or retreating.<sup>39</sup> The Wagner Group has been an essential vehicle to do just that.<sup>40</sup> It has also simultaneously been a crucial instrument for Prigozhin to pursue his personal and economic ambitions alongside Russia’s geopolitical ones.<sup>41</sup> As outlined in the sections that follow, the vast majority of Wagner’s contracts have included provisions for training military forces, providing security for political elites and Russian businesses, and engaging in disinformation campaigns and election meddling, often in exchange for access to natural resources.<sup>42</sup> In several cases, Wagner’s role either started or later morphed into offensive military action.

### **Libya**

In Libya, the Wagner Group’s engagement has closely aligned with the Kremlin’s support of General Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) (later known as the Libyan Arab Armed Forces, or LAAF) and Moscow’s broader geopolitical ambitions of expanding influence and access in the southern Mediterranean, which could jeopardize NATO’s southern flank. Conflicting reports make it difficult to confirm its initial arrival in Libya, but some analysts suggest that Russian-linked PMCs showed up alongside Russian special forces as early as 2015.<sup>43</sup> Most agree that by mid-2019, Wagner was a fully engaged combat participant in the LNA’s assault on Tripoli against the U.N.-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA).<sup>44</sup>

Along with its direct combat engagement with Haftar’s frontline offensive, Wagner opened bases, facilitated weapons transfers, and engaged in military training of LNA forces.<sup>45</sup> The group also deployed snipers that were considered to be a significant force multiplier in urban combat.<sup>46</sup> Throughout 2020, when LNA forces attempted to take Tripoli, Wagner was also implicated in recruiting Syrians to join the fighting.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, the group was recently accused of using booby traps and land mines in violation of international law during the Tripoli offensive.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, though details of Wagner’s contract with General Haftar are sparse, some reports indicate friction between Haftar and the Wagner Group as he failed to pay substantial portions of the contract.<sup>49</sup>

Part of Wagner’s Libyan strategy included occupying key oil fields to block the sale of oil that could help finance the GNA. While the group did not get a cut of Libyan oil sales via this occupation, it seems clear that Wagner is keenly aware of the potential future benefits in gaining a stake in the oil sector, possibly replicating a similar model in Syria.<sup>50</sup> In that case, Evro Polis, a firm controlled and owned by Prigozhin, signed a deal with the Syrian government that granted the firm 25 percent of any “oil and gas field revenues liberated from Islamic State control.”<sup>51</sup> More recently, there have been credible reports suggesting that the United Arab Emirates had provided support and financing to Wagner in Libya, including facilitating the transfer of Russian-made surface-to-air missiles





*This undated photograph handed out by French military shows Russian mercenaries in northern Mali. A white skull, a feature of the Wagner Group's insignia, appears to be visible on a vest. (French Army via AP Images)*

that were instrumental in the Wagner Group's early success in its Tripoli offensive.<sup>52</sup> At the time of publication, analysts suspect Wagner maintains a substantial presence in Libya with estimates of several hundred to as many as 2,000 Wagner operatives remaining in-country. There is a growing sense that the group may meddle in Libya's delayed presidential election, an election in which Haftar is a candidate.<sup>53</sup> There is also evidence of Wagner forces with combat experience in Libya recently traveling to fight in the current conflict in Ukraine in addition to the redeployment of air defense systems and artillery that the group relied on in Libya.<sup>54</sup>

### **Sudan**

Credible reports of the Wagner Group's arrival in Sudan started to emerge toward the end of 2017.<sup>55</sup> The Russian government confirmed meeting with then-President Omar al-Bashir in November 2017 in Sochi, a meeting that culminated with a portfolio of signed agreements related to mining concessions, geological explorations, oil and gas cooperation, and even plans to establish a Russian naval base in Port Sudan.<sup>56</sup> Of particular note was an agreement between the Sudanese Ministry of Minerals and M-Invest, a company owned and operated by Prigozhin, according to the U.S. Treasury Department.<sup>57</sup> That agreement granted concessions to M-Invest (and its subsidiaries) to explore gold mining sites in Sudan—a tactic that has become a consistent contracting strategy for Wagner in other African states and one that

illustrates the exploitative nature of the firm. Members of Wagner began arriving in Khartoum shortly thereafter.<sup>58</sup>

In exchange for resource concessions, Wagner provided al-Bashir a portfolio of services, including information operations, military and police training, and the transport of weapons.<sup>59</sup> In early 2019, the Kremlin confirmed the presence of Russian contractors in Sudan, claiming they were there to train the country's military and law enforcement officers.<sup>60</sup> Evidence would later implicate Prigozhin and the Wagner Group in cultivating plans to discredit and suppress anti-government protestors, including plans for lethal violence against civilians.<sup>61</sup> Despite these efforts, al-Bashir was deposed in a military coup in April 2019, leading to uncertainty about Russia's future in Sudan along with the role of Wagner and Prigozhin's business interests there.

Since the 2019 coup, it appears Wagner has remained in Sudan, though until recently it has flown under the radar, protecting Prigozhin's corporate interests in the gold mining sector while continuing to spread disinformation.<sup>62</sup> Sudan's interim government has denied that Wagner is still operating in Sudan, despite accusations from a host of Western states including the United States that General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, one of the coup leaders and deputy head of the Sudan Transitional Military Council, has signed off on Wagner's continued operations.<sup>63</sup>

Wagner's persistence in Sudan is important for Russia now more than ever given the ongoing war in Ukraine. The Kremlin

has continued its direct efforts to court General Dagalo who was in Moscow during Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and Dagalo has since signaled his willingness to support the establishment of a Russian naval base on the Red Sea. Wagner has been a key feature in efforts to support this project.<sup>64</sup> In addition to Moscow's geopolitical pursuits, the Wagner Group has also ensured the continuity of access to Sudanese gold. This has been critical for Russia as the Kremlin steadily increased its gold reserves from 2014 when it faced U.S. sanctions in the aftermath of its invasion of Crimea.<sup>65</sup> In total, Russia has amassed upwards of \$130 billion in gold, which has raised serious concerns that the Kremlin may be able to blunt some of the impact of ongoing sanctions.<sup>66</sup>

### *Central African Republic*

Wagner officially arrived in the Central African Republic (CAR) in late 2017 on the heels of a U.N. exemption to an ongoing arms embargo.<sup>67</sup> Wagner's activities in CAR reflect the similar "resource concessions for protection and training" strategy that has become its moniker.<sup>68</sup> The group initially arrived under the guise of military advisors for President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, but its activities have been far from purely advisory. Some have likened Wagner's engagement in CAR to a sort of "coup-proofing" and racketeering campaign, given it provides security to President Touadéra, facilitates weapons shipments, and engages in military training, all in exchange for diamond and gold mining rights and broader geological exploration.<sup>69</sup>

If the Wagner Group's goals are to ensure Touadéra's security, one can argue it has been fairly successful but at a serious cost to human rights. For instance, in the lead-up to and following the disputed December 2020 elections, Wagner engaged in violent counteroffensives against anti-Touadéra rebels who had launched a series of nationwide attacks in protests against his regime and an election that was seen as fraudulent and riddled with irregularities.<sup>70</sup> Wagner's success in carving out influence in CAR and its ability to insulate Touadéra have likely made for useful advertising, particularly for other regimes looking to exchange resources for security (e.g., Mali).<sup>71</sup>

Meanwhile, the profitability of Wagner's access to mining sites in CAR has drawn scrutiny, with analysts arguing that rather than any serious economic benefits for the Russian economy, mining concessions function more like "payoffs to Prigozhin, helping him to finance and profit from Wagner in return for aiding the Kremlin's foreign policy ambitions."<sup>72</sup> Others have accurately argued that Wagner's presence in CAR is not strictly resource-oriented, but

rather is illustrative of Moscow's broader geopolitical push to challenge France on the continent.<sup>73</sup> Illustrative of the depth of Russian engagement in CAR, President Touadéra even installed a former GRU official, Valery Zakharov, to serve as his national security advisor.<sup>74</sup>

Wagner's activities in CAR also raise serious concerns about human rights abuses.<sup>75</sup> In July 2018, three Russian journalists were mysteriously gunned down while on assignment to investigate the Wagner Group's activities in CAR.<sup>76</sup> Though the official investigation by authorities in CAR concluded that the murder was the result of a robbery gone wrong, a plethora of evidence underscores the likely involvement of Wagner.<sup>77</sup> In 2019, a team of CNN journalists was similarly monitored by a team of Russian operatives in an intimidation and defamation scheme.<sup>78</sup> More recently, the United Nations' working group on mercenaries reported that the Wagner Group has been both responsible for and an accomplice to various other human rights atrocities in CAR, including rape, extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, looting, and torture.<sup>79</sup> Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine also has important implications for CAR, as anti-Touadéra rebels are closely monitoring the potential withdrawal of Wagner contractors. This highlights an important dynamic as some of the rebels reportedly feel that they stand a chance in challenging the regime should Wagner draw down its force posture, and academic literature has shown how PMCs vacating client states can embolden rebel groups.<sup>80</sup>

### *Mozambique*

Wagner's arrival in Mozambique in September 2019 came on the heels of Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi's visit to Moscow in August of that year. That trip led to several bilateral agreements between Russia and Mozambique related to mining and mineral resources, energy, and defense and security.<sup>81</sup> Mozambique's subsequent deal with the PMC revealed Wagner's market strategy of severely underbidding other PMCs to increase its attractiveness from a strictly monetary cost standpoint.<sup>82</sup> Yet, Wagner's military footprint in Mozambique peaked at some 160 to 200 members deployed originally to serve as presidential security for the October 2019 election.<sup>83</sup> Their mission soon expanded as they began to undertake counterinsurgency operations against the growing Islamist insurgent threat posed by Ahl al-Sunnah wa al Jamma'ah (ASWJ).<sup>84</sup>

The group's stint in Mozambique was short-lived, attributed in large part to their under-preparedness, lack of aerial surveillance, and deteriorating relationship with local forces.<sup>85</sup> They quickly faced casualties and withdrew before the end of 2019, replaced by the Dyck Advisory Group (DAG), a South African PMC.<sup>86</sup> Of all Wagner's engagements, its contract in Mozambique stands out as a significant failure and illustrates how quickly the group will exit an environment that it sees as more costly than it is worth.

### *Mali*

Mali is the site of Wagner's most recent engagement in Africa. The group's confirmed arrival in December 2021 came after a period of extremely volatile civil-military relations for the country, which experienced two coups in less than 10 months.<sup>87</sup> Mali's political turmoil and the deal its government brokered with Wagner can be understood as a consequence, in part, of the political elite's inability to address increasing levels of Islamist violence and swelling anti-French sentiment across Mali and the Sahel more generally.<sup>88</sup> An ill-equipped security sector and France's strategic drawdown

b In the case of CAR, since 2017 the United Nations has granted exemptions to arms embargoes on a case-by-case basis. Russia received an exemption in December 2017 that allowed it to send small arms and light weapons to CAR. Along with this shipment, Russia also sent approximately 175 trainers. Among these trainers were Wagner forces. For more, see Paul Stronski, "Journalist Killed in Central African Republic Amid Growing Russian Presence," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 2, 2018.

c It is important to note that Prigozhin and the Russian Ministry of Defense have had their fair share of conflicts. For instance, Prigozhin sued the Russian Ministry of Defense for failing to pay outstanding invoices to Prigozhin—suits that he won. Thus, while it is likely that the Defense Ministry aids in negotiating Wagner's contracts with client states, Prigozhin is believed to take substantial cuts for himself. For more, see Kimberly Marten, "The GRU, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and Russia's Wagner Group: Malign Russian Actors and Possible U.S. Responses," Testimony before the Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment United States House, July 7, 2020.

further help explain the ruling junta's attraction to alternative security actors like the Wagner Group. In particular, the country has suffered most acutely in recent years from increasing levels of violence perpetrated by Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (or JNIM), a coalition of four jihadi groups with allegiance to al-Qa`ida, and that violence has spilled over into neighboring states including Burkina Faso, but also Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>89</sup>

Wagner's entrance into Mali also provides a clear example of Russia's efforts at geopolitical competition with the West. With France announcing its official withdrawal on February 17, 2022, alongside over a dozen European and Sahelian partner states, Wagner welcomed the chance to fill the void.<sup>90</sup> Colonel Assimi Goïta, the coup leader and current president of Mali's transitional government, likely sees Wagner as a crucial alternative given the West's broad condemnation of Mali's coups.<sup>91</sup> Since arriving, Wagner has engaged in a relentless pro-Russian propaganda campaign.<sup>92</sup>

At the time of publication, estimates from the United States and France put the number of Wagner mercenaries in Mali around 800 to 1,000.<sup>93</sup> The group has embedded with the Malian Armed Forces, engaged jihadi forces, and has reportedly taken casualties.<sup>94</sup> For its \$10 million a month fee, Wagner is also expected to be involved in providing security for political elites and training the army; in return, it will gain access to geological exploration and mining rights, echoing contractual terms from the group's other ventures.<sup>95</sup> Bolstered by the perception of increased security from contracting Wagner, the junta, with support from the military-dominated interim parliament, has delayed elections originally scheduled for February 2022 until at least 2026.<sup>96</sup>

Yet, unsurprisingly given Wagner's track record, and mirroring its activities in CAR, the group has been accused of various human rights violations since its arrival in Mali. In early March 2022, accusations emerged from the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) that Wagner personnel were likely complicit in the massacre of upwards of 30 civilians in the town of Niono.<sup>97</sup> Just weeks later, the Malian Armed Forces claimed that it killed some 203 militants between March 23 and April 1, 2022, in the town of Moura.<sup>98</sup> Conflicting reports paint a very different picture, however, suggesting that the military along with Wagner mercenaries held the village under siege for four days and indiscriminately executed civilians, killing at least 300 people with some eyewitnesses estimating the total number to be closer to 600.<sup>99</sup> Despite claims to the contrary from Mali's ruling junta, the pace of militant violence and civilian fatalities since Wagner's arrival has continued to increase and any meaningful efforts to distinguish between terrorists and civilians has vanished.<sup>100</sup> According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, there were more Malian civilians killed in the first quarter of 2022 than in all of 2021.<sup>101</sup>

On April 22, 2022, the French military released documented evidence of Wagner forces staging evidence of mass killings in an effort to frame French forces.<sup>102</sup> The evidence, obtained via satellite imagery and drone footage, depicted corpses in shallow mass graves near a former French military base, an installation that had been

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transferred to the Malian Armed Forces just days earlier.<sup>103</sup> Such practices illustrate the depths to which the Wagner Group, and Russia more generally, is willing to stoop in an effort to undermine and exploit Bamako's deteriorating relationship with Paris and consolidate popular support for their presence in Mali. There is also speculation that Wagner has its sights set on neighboring Burkina Faso, which has experienced its own civil-military crisis and increasingly dire security challenges.<sup>104</sup> This certainly aligns with the Kremlin's desire to exploit democratic recession and disrupt democracy on the continent.

### **Challenges for U.S. (and Allies') Security Interests in Africa**

The above survey of Wagner's activities across several African states is illustrative of Moscow's broader efforts to strategically challenge Western interests and exploit an international system marked by years of democratic decline and authoritarian entrenchment.<sup>105</sup> As the United States continues to maintain a light force posture in Africa and France backpedals there, particularly in the Sahel, Russia has made a concerted effort to utilize irregular means via its “mercenary diplomacy” in order to carve out and expand its influence.<sup>106</sup>

While the fallout from Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine remains uncertain, it is clear that for the past several years, closer relations with Moscow have become an attractive prospect for several African governments. The absence of pressure from the Kremlin to meet some democratic threshold or standard to ensure continuity of support only bolstered that attractiveness for many of the aforementioned regimes that have challenged or come to power via unconstitutional means. And for the Wagner Group, these are exactly the types of client governments it has intentionally targeted and signed deals with.

Yet, for African governments, deepening relationships with the Kremlin is always a gamble, and Russia's current war may directly impact Wagner-Africa dynamics. On one hand, it might lead to redeployment away from Africa given Putin's existential need to demonstrate some degree of progress in Ukraine. As noted previously, some Wagner mercenaries have exited other theaters (e.g., Libya) to join the fight in Ukraine. A significant redeployment of Wagner mercenaries would be especially costly for several African states that have become increasingly reliant on the Wagner Group as a security partner. On the other hand, the war has only intensified Russia's adversarial relationship with the West. This may make it even more pressing for Russia to dig in and maintain ties with current African partners, possibly courting new ones to compensate

d In their joint declaration, French President Emmanuel Macron noted the withdrawal would take several months, and despite demands from Bamako that France completely exit the scene, it is unlikely that this spells the end of the West's counterterrorism efforts across the Sahel. For more, see Marielle Harris, Catrina Doxsee, and Jared Thompson, “The End of Operation Barkhane and the Future of Counterterrorism in Mali,” Center for Strategic and International Security, March 2, 2022.

for its greater international isolation. For now at least, despite its early struggles in Ukraine, Russia appears focused on preserving its interests in Africa, though this could change quickly.<sup>107</sup>

These dynamics all matter for the United States and its allies as Russia's predominant foreign policy goal in Africa is to "undermine the democratic process through elite capture."<sup>108</sup> As Joseph Siegel, the outgoing director of research at the African Center for Strategic Studies, succinctly put it, the "partnerships that Russia seeks in Africa are not state- but elite-based;" Russia has used Wagner to make inroads in cultivating such relationships.<sup>109</sup> This poses a unique challenge for the United States and Western allies as Wagner has successfully propped up illiberal regimes via "arms for resource deals, opaque contracts, and disinformation campaigns"<sup>110</sup> that delegitimize the West and make it that much more difficult for African states to see the United States as the preferred partner of choice.<sup>111</sup>

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 15, 2022, General Townsend, head of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), argued, "Our African partners face choices to strengthen the U.S. and allied-led open, rules-based international order or succumb to raw power transactional pressure campaigns of global competitors. How African governments choose partners may determine the future of U.S. values-based influence in international political fora."<sup>112</sup> In several places on the continent, as this article has made clear, the United States is losing this battle to Wagner.

General Townsend went on to say, "We see a lot of Russian activity in Africa ... namely Wagner Group ... They don't follow any rules, they do what they want, they commit gross violations of human rights ... I think it's bad for Africa's security and prosperity in the future."<sup>113 e</sup>

Despite Wagner's assertiveness on the continent, it is also important to step back and note that Russia is still a relative latecomer in efforts to revitalize relationships with African partners.<sup>114</sup> But the pace at which it has carved out influence via the Wagner Group is demonstrative of the importance of Africa for Moscow's broader foreign policy objectives and illustrative of the havoc and instability it can create for a relatively small investment. Additionally, outside of the extractive economic opportunities for Prigozhin and Moscow and the ability to undermine support for democracy, both of which are quite pertinent to U.S. interests, Russia's efforts to use Wagner for relationship-building with African partners are consequential in other areas like U.N. voting and durable security partnerships.<sup>115</sup> It is likely that Africa will only continue to grow in importance for the Kremlin, given its ongoing war efforts in Ukraine. This only heightens the likelihood that it will continue to rely on quasi-state forces like the Wagner Group to do its bidding on the continent.

Wagner's efforts have already paid dividends for the Kremlin as Africa has arguably become increasingly segmented.<sup>116</sup> During the U.N. General Assembly's March 2, 2022, vote to condemn Russian

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aggression in Ukraine, for example, though a majority of African countries (28) voted in the affirmative, 16 abstained and nine did not vote.<sup>117</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, Sudan, CAR, and Mali—countries that have established ties with Wagner—were among the abstentions.<sup>118</sup> More recently, President Zelensky's virtual speech to the African Union on June 20, saw only four of the 55 African heads of state attend.<sup>119</sup>

While autocratic leaders and military juntas may see value in pursuing contracts with Wagner, other African states need to recognize the alarming consequences of pursuing relationships with PMCs like Wagner and cultivating relationships with Russia more generally. Though frustrations with the West have increased local support for enhanced relations with Russia, the Kremlin's strategy via outsourcing through Wagner is one that reeks of exploitation. One could argue that the West's track record on the continent is also poor, but, as noted, Wagner has no genuine interest in actually addressing issues of instability for clients. Ironically, and as researchers have shown, it will benefit from a manageable level of instability that ensures continuity of a contract while enabling its network of businesses to continue their extractive onslaught on African economies.<sup>120</sup> Along these lines, some analysts have recommended that African states revisit the Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa, passed in 1977 by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and which entered into force in 1985.<sup>121</sup> The convention essentially bans African states from entering into agreements with mercenaries and its reconsideration and application could help thwart the threats to sovereignty and stability that Wagner will surely continue to bring.<sup>122</sup>

The Wagner Group will almost certainly continue to spearhead Moscow's efforts to win influence in Africa. The United States and allied nations must be prepared to counter Wagner's sustained efforts to undermine the rules-based international order and capitalize on democratic recession and state fragility/insecurity on the continent. They can do so by highlighting Wagner's failings in places like Mozambique, countering Russian disinformation in places like Mali, sanctioning countries that partner with the Wagner Group, sustaining multilateral sanctions against the Russian Federation, tracking and advertising Wagner's human rights violations, declassifying and releasing intelligence where helpful as the French recently did in Mali,<sup>123</sup> investing in security force capacity-building to decrease the apparent allure of PMCs like Wagner, considering legal options for holding Wagner forces accountable for atrocities, and taking a whole-of-government approach to provide support and resources to civil-society partners across the region.<sup>124</sup>

e These are not entirely new concerns. Former AFRICOM head General Waldhauser reiterated on multiple occasions via congressional testimony and written correspondence that both Beijing and Moscow are keen on continued expansion and influence across Africa. Nick Turse, "U.S. General Worry About Rising Russian and Chinese Influence in Africa, Documents Show," Intercept, August 13, 2019; "Statement of General Thomas D. Waldhauser, United States Marine Corps Commander, United States Africa Command Before the Senate Committee on Armed Services," February 7, 2019.

Several of these approaches are not without risks. For instance, sanctioning governments that contract with the Wagner Group runs the risk of pushing these states further into Russia's orbit. Additionally, with the growing sanctions regime against Russia deepening the Kremlin's isolation following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Moscow may need to put even greater emphasis on alternative markets.<sup>125</sup> At the same time, there are opportunities for a host of African states, particularly those with substantial oil and natural gas capacity, to benefit from Russia's economic ostracization as many European states continue to seek alternative energy markets to offset future energy crises.<sup>126</sup> The United States should work with African and European partners to facilitate efforts that are mutually beneficial while continuing to punish Russia economically. It should also emphasize, as President Zelensky did during his recent address to the African Union, that African governments run the risk of becoming "hostage" to Russia.<sup>127</sup> Though speaking about the Kremlin's blockade against Ukrainian grain exports that jeopardizes food security globally, the point should resonate for those governments that have partnered

with the Wagner Group as they are increasingly likely to become hostage to Russia for security and military support.

The United States, for its part, has already taken several measures to counter Wagner. In 2017, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) added the Wagner Group to the Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) list.<sup>128</sup> In December 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken applauded the European Union as it introduced new sanctions on the Wagner Group and several individuals connected to the firm.<sup>129</sup> Meanwhile, in March 2022, the U.S. Treasury Department announced an escalation of sanctions against Prigozhin, his immediate family, and several Prigozhin-linked businesses.<sup>130</sup> These efforts increase the roadblocks for Wagner and its efforts to court new clients, making it difficult for foreign governments and private corporations to do business with Prigozhin and Wagner-linked entities. With Moscow's ongoing military challenges in Ukraine, the United States must capitalize on the opportunity to show that a partnership with Wagner is bad business. **CTC**

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# The Rising Threat to Central Africa: The 2021 Transformation of the Islamic State's Congolese Branch

By Tara Candland, Ryan O'Farrell, Laren Poole, and Caleb Weiss

**The Congolese branch of the Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP-DRC), locally known as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), is a rising threat to the region. Not only did it inflict more fatalities than ever before in 2021, but last year was also the most operationally transformative for the group since it declared allegiance to the Islamic State around 2017. Thanks to its increased integration into the Islamic State, ISCAP-DRC's *modi operandi* evolved in seven key areas—from a surge in Islamic State-supported propaganda to its first use of suicide bombings—that have contributed to the group's escalating terror campaign in Congo and abroad. Together, these changes have enabled the ADF—already the deadliest group in eastern Congo—to become a bolder and more lethal terrorist organization, poised to further export its operations to the region.**

**O**n November 16, 2021, three suicide bombers detonated themselves in two locations in downtown Kampala, Uganda, killing at least four civilians and wounding 30 others.<sup>1</sup> While resulting in fewer casualties than the suicide bombings Kampala witnessed in the summer of 2010,<sup>a</sup> the November 2021 bombings had significant implications for regional security. First, the attacks were perpetrated by the Congolese branch of the Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP-DRC), more commonly known by its local name, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF).<sup>b</sup> Second, the blasts were the first suicide bombings claimed by the Islamic State on Ugandan soil and outside of the ADF's primary area of operation within the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, suggesting a desire by the Islamic State to project its power to new territories. And third, the bombings came on the heels of a coordinated—but ultimately unsuccessful—attempt by the ADF to bomb multiple civilian targets in Rwanda<sup>2</sup> and amid credible reports of the ADF's

a In July 2010, three suicide bombers from al-Shabaab, al-Qa'ida's branch in East Africa, detonated themselves in two neighborhoods of Kampala at large social gatherings of people watching the FIFA World Cup. Over 70 people were killed in those blasts.

b A note on language: While the group is officially the Islamic State's Central Africa Province, it is most commonly referred to by its old name, the Allied Democratic Forces, in Congolese and Ugandan media and by officials in both countries. This report uses both terms interchangeably and does not differentiate between the two names; they both refer to the Islamic State-loyal group led by Musa Baluku in eastern Congo, which maintains cells across East and Central Africa. The use of the name ADF, on occasion, by the authors is for convenience and is not meant to minimize the group's affiliation with the Islamic State.

efforts to establish cells in surrounding countries.<sup>3</sup>

This article seeks to unpack the ADF's transformation within the wider context of the overall operations of ISCAP-DRC last year. Specifically, this article argues that 2021 was the group's most operationally transformative year since joining the Islamic State around 2017, with the ADF both pushing and being pulled toward adopting the norms and practices of its adopted parent organization. As will be outlined below, in addition to newly implementing the tactic of suicide bombings, the group also began exporting its violence beyond the borders of the DRC to Uganda and Rwanda, deepened its recruitment of foreign fighters, began clashing with other armed groups in the Congo on a more regular basis, began publicly emphasizing proselytization within the DRC, began filming and releasing beheading videos, expanded its use and capabilities with improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and, by more deeply integrating its media efforts with the Islamic State, greatly expanded its propaganda production. Taken together, these changes, all explained and enabled to varying degrees by the group's deepening linkages to the Islamic State's transnational network, constitute a significant transformation in the group's *modi operandi*.

Based on primary source fieldwork and research conducted by the authors across the DRC, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, and Somaliland between November 2020 and April 2022 in addition to open-source research in French, English, Arabic, and Swahili, this article argues these operational transformations were the direct result of the ADF's integration into the Islamic State. With the support of the Islamic State, particularly in terms of financing

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and propaganda, ISCAP-DRC has fully transitioned from a group traditionally only focused on Uganda and eastern Congo, to a wider, more regional terrorist threat. And if its operations in 2021 are any indication, the group's propensity for exporting its violence across East and Central Africa will continue to deepen and expand if left unchecked.

Starting with a brief background of the ADF's history and transition into a so-called province of the Islamic State, this article then provides a chronology of key developments in 2021, including the group's operations across the DRC and the wider region and the joint military campaign launched against it by the DRC and Uganda in late 2021. It then examines significant changes across seven dimensions of the group's operations in 2021, with these shifts all explained to varying degrees by the group's deepening integration into the Islamic State's transnational network.

## How ADF Became ISCAP-DRC

Before outlining the ADF's operational transformation throughout 2021, it is first important to briefly touch on its history. The Congolese branch of the Islamic State's Central Africa Province started as the Allied Democratic Forces in Uganda in the mid-1990s, a radical, violent splinter group formed during intraclerical disputes over who would wield leadership of the state-recognized authority governing Uganda's Muslim community. Quickly routed by Ugandan security forces and forced across the border into Congo, the group found support from the former Zairian government under Mobutu Sese Seko, as well as from Sudan, both of which sought a proxy with which to counter Uganda. The group carried out a bloody cross-border insurgency into Uganda during and after Congo's cataclysmic wars between 1996 and 2003, until battlefield losses and geopolitical shifts in the early 2000s forced the group into a survival posture as one of the many foreign and Congolese militias that persisted in Congo's east. While the group increasingly integrated with local communities and pursued economic activities, military pressure by Congolese security forces led the ADF to retaliate by perpetrating a series of bloody attacks against Congolese civilians in 2013. These massacres in turn led to a much more devastating offensive by the Congolese army in 2014 and the flight of the group's longstanding leader, Jamil Mukulu, from Congo.<sup>4</sup>

While long espousing an Islamist outlook, the ADF had largely limited its goals to overthrowing the government of Uganda's longstanding ruler Yoweri Museveni, but in 2016, that began to change. The year before, the ADF's founder and its core ideological driver, Jamil Mukulu, was arrested in Tanzania. His successor, Musa Baluku, more radical and embracing a more global jihadi outlook, then set the group on its current trajectory. In 2016, the ADF began releasing rudimentary propaganda videos—its first ever—while also briefly publicly rebranding itself as *Madina at-Tauheed wa-Mujahideen (MTM)*.<sup>c</sup> It is unknown when exactly the ADF, led by Musa Baluku, swore bay`a (allegiance) to the Islamic State and its then-leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, but reportedly by late 2017, the group was receiving its first iteration of financing from

the Islamic State through Kenyan financier Waleed Ahmed Zein.<sup>5</sup> Around the same time, the ADF released a video, widely shared on Islamic State-supporter media, featuring an Arabic-speaking Tanzanian known as 'Jundi' or 'Abuwakas,' urging people to join the Islamic State in Congo. By early 2019, the Islamic State officially recognized the ADF as part of its global apparatus by designating it one-half of its Central Africa Province, with the other half being the Mozambican jihadi group known locally as "al-Shabaab" (no relation to the Somali group of the same name).<sup>6 d</sup> And while the central leadership of the Islamic State's Congolese branch remains predominantly Ugandan, the group has taken on more regional foreign recruits in recent years, including other nationalities represented in its upper echelons.<sup>7</sup>

## Key Developments in 2021

While the Islamic State has openly operated inside Congo since 2019, last year saw some significant operational trends that bear exploring. Relying on data from the Kivu Security Tracker (KST)<sup>e</sup> of all known or suspected ADF attacks since 2017, the authors identified several key trends in 2021 when compared to previous years.

Firstly, 2021 was the deadliest year on record for ISCAP-DRC. The group was responsible for at least 1,275 civilian deaths in DRC in 2021—almost three times the death toll of 2019 and more than a 50% increase over 2020's 782 killed.

Secondly, much of this violence was driven by a rapid rise in massacres of 10 people or more: ISCAP-DRC killed 378 people in 22 such massacres in 2020, while 2021 witnessed almost double the number of such massacres and deaths with 40 such massacres claiming 715 lives.<sup>8</sup> The highest concentration of these massacres was in the area around the town of Mamove, which spans the North Kivu-Ituri border to the west of Route Nationale 4 (RN4), where 12 ISCAP-DRC massacres of 10 people or more killed at least 220 people.<sup>f</sup>

And thirdly, both wings of ISCAP in DRC and Mozambique faced international interventions in 2021, though it remains unclear how effective the interventions will be at curbing ISCAP's violence in either country.<sup>g</sup>

d On May 9, 2022, the Islamic State began referring to the insurgency in northern Mozambique—which since June 2019 had been labeled as part of "Central Africa Province" alongside the ADF—as its own "Mozambique Province." "IS designates Mozambique as its own province following battle in Quiterajo," Zitamar News, May 13, 2022.

e The Kivu Security Tracker (KST) is a joint project of the Congo Research Group (CRG), Human Rights Watch (HRW), and the Bridgeway Foundation. CRG oversees the collection and triangulation of data for the KST, the Bridgeway Foundation provides technical and financial support to the KST, and HRW provides training and other support to KST researchers but does not independently verify all incidents reported. The KST uses a network of local researchers to monitor and map violence by state security forces and armed groups in Congo's North and South Kivu and Ituri provinces. Each incident is verified by multiple independent sources before being published.

f Combined with a series of other smaller attacks, this made Mamove the deadliest of ISCAP-DRC's six geographic clusters, even though it was not the most active; both the Rwenzoris and RN4 suffered more attacks in 2021, but their final death tolls remained lower than in Mamove.

g "Interventions" refers to the unilateral Rwandan intervention in Mozambique beginning in July 2021, the South African Development Community's Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) beginning in August 2021, and the Ugandan intervention in DRC beginning in November 2021.

c The use of MTM dates back to at least 2012, but it was unclear if the moniker referred specifically to the ADF's main camp, known simply as *Madina*, or if it referred to the group as a whole. By 2016, however, MTM was indeed being used publicly to refer to the group writ large.

This section seeks to place the highlights of ISCAP-DRC's broader operations in 2021 into context in the local, regional, and international theaters. Doing so creates a better backdrop in which to extrapolate the noticeable trends and evolutions with respect to the group that will be discussed throughout this article.

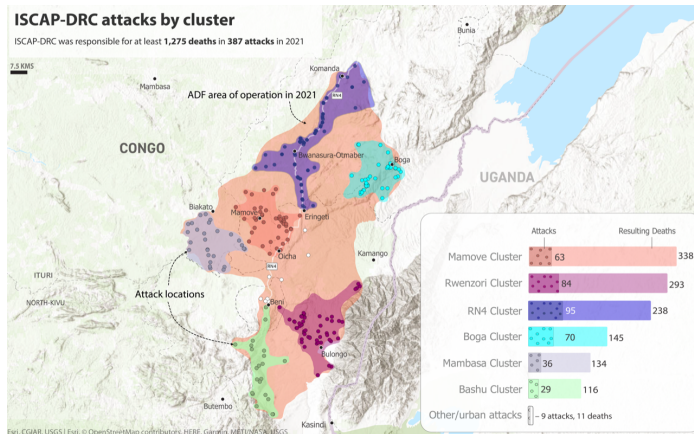


Figure 1: Map of the ADF's area of operations, various attack clusters, and inflicted civilian fatalities by cluster in 2021

### ADF Military Operations in 2021

The year 2021 started with significant bloodshed inflicted by ISCAP-DRC (also known as the ADF) with the continuation of its massacres in Rwenzori, an area southeast of Congo's Beni town, that had escalated throughout 2020. Following the group's expulsion from Loselose on January 1, 2021—the only populated town the ADF is confirmed to have ever occupied—ADF fighters retaliated, killing 22 people in nearby Mwenda.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, January 2021 provided the first hint that ADF forces were moving into the southern part of Ituri Province in northeast Congo. Although the group had committed a handful of smaller attacks in the area over the course of 2020, the January 14, 2021, massacre of 46 people near Ambebi, across the provincial border from Mamove, demonstrated that the ADF was establishing a much larger and more aggressive presence in southern Ituri than had previously been known.<sup>10</sup> Over the course of 2021, the ADF would go on to open a significant second front in Ituri in its campaign against the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) and the people of eastern Congo.

The Rwenzori region remained the group's main focus in February 2021, accounting for 16 of 21 incidents, but by March 2021, the majority of the violence had shifted north, first to Mamove and then eventually to Ituri's Irumu territory.<sup>11</sup> Mamove suffered 11 incidents affecting 13 villages that March, with the ADF killing 77 people.<sup>12</sup> Most of those deaths occurred in three days of coordinated attacks—March 19, 23, and 30—when the ADF hit multiple villages each day, killing 66 people total.<sup>13</sup> That same month, the group was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the U.S. State Department.<sup>14</sup> <sup>h</sup>

<sup>h</sup> The U.S. State Department's designation referred to the group as "ISIS-DRC," or the "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria - Democratic Republic of the Congo," in its official designation. This article does not use this terminology, but notes this is indeed the same group designated by the State Department.

A few weeks later in April 2021, as a response to the ADF's growing violence, the Congolese government announced a "state of siege" in North Kivu and Ituri provinces. Under this authority, Kinshasa replaced civilian government officials with military appointees tasked with ending the massacres and bringing peace to the region.<sup>15</sup> Both North Kivu and Ituri have remained in this state of siege ever since.

The ADF resurfaced powerfully but briefly in the Rwenzoris in May 2021, killing 60 people in 13 attacks, but by the end of that month, the ADF's campaign for southern Ituri had begun in earnest. Twin attacks around the towns of Boga and Tchabi on May 31, 2021, powerfully demonstrated this shift, with ADF fighters killing 55 people and making international headlines.<sup>16</sup>

By June 2021, the ADF began to shift its focus to elsewhere in Ituri province's Irumu territory, and more specifically, Route Nationale 4. RN4 is the main economic thoroughfare connecting North Kivu's Eringeti to Ituri's Komanda and on to the provincial capital of Bunia. The ADF's campaign along RN4 was the group's most sustained assault of the year. In total, ADF fighters attacked villages on or along the road 78 times—all but nine of which occurred between June and the end of the year—up to and past Komanda, the largest town in Irumu territory.<sup>17</sup> Based on the data compiled by the authors from KST incidents, the casualties during most of these operations remained relatively low, with the RN4 cluster having the second-lowest average death toll per operation, but the sustained nature of the attacks forced FARDC to close the road in September to try to reestablish control.<sup>1</sup> When it reopened a week later, civilians were encouraged to use the road only as part of FARDC- and MONUSCO-protected convoys.<sup>18</sup> The ADF launched at least three successful attacks against the convoys,<sup>19</sup> demonstrating security forces' inability to control the road. Moreover, this offensive represented the northernmost attacks ever perpetrated by the ADF inside Congo, further expanding the group's main area of operation.

At the same time as the RN4 offensive, the ADF also perpetrated its first-ever suicide bombing, targeting civilians inside Beni city, DRC,<sup>20</sup> and restarted its kinetic operations inside Uganda with an assassination attempt on a high-level Ugandan official<sup>21</sup> and a foiled suicide bombing plot.<sup>22</sup> All three dynamics will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

The next month, in July 2021, Rwanda intervened inside northern Mozambique to help that country combat the other wing of the Islamic State's Central Africa Province.<sup>23</sup> The combined Rwandan-Mozambican force succeeded in driving the Islamic State militants back from cities it took over, namely Palma district and Mocimboa da Praia, sparking widespread anger among Islamic State supporters and likely prompting the ADF's subsequent efforts (discussed later in the article) to attack Rwanda in September 2021.

Even as the ADF was fighting for control of RN4 in the north, the group also began to expand farther south in Beni territory. While attacks and casualties in Rwenzori remained low through

<sup>i</sup> In order to facilitate better analysis, the authors identified and distinguished between certain camps and the highly mobile sub-groups that comprise the fighting forces of ISCAP-DRC, assigning each an approximate geographic "cluster." The six clusters identified as part of ISCAP-DRC's operations are: Rwenzori, Bashu, Mamove, Mombasa, RN4, and Boga/Tchabi.

September 2021, the August 2021 joint FARDC-MONUSCO campaign targeting ADF camps south of Rwenzori—an area known as Mwalika—pushed the group out of what was its traditional area of operations. Its fighters retaliated with attacks in Bashu, a region to the east of Butembo that had historically been spared the ADF's violence. The sudden shift, with attacks occurring within nine kilometers of Beni territory's largest city, Butembo, caused significant distress among the local population. Although Bashu suffered relatively few attacks overall—only 20 during 2021—each incursion was fairly deadly, with an average of five civilians killed per attack (the highest average of any ADF cluster in 2021).<sup>24</sup> This number was driven in part by the ADF's most significant massacre in the region, when the group attacked Kisunga village on November 11, 2021. Operating with impunity for almost four hours in the middle of the night, ADF fighters killed 38 and abducted 59 others as they burned buildings, a health center, and a motorcycle before escaping with their stolen goods.<sup>25</sup>

With operations continuing in Bashu, the ADF began to reassert itself around Rwenzori in October 2021. That month, the group mounted a series of attacks in the region that appeared aimed at harassing security forces to draw them up into a defensive posture around towns north of the Beni-Kasindi road, the main road between Beni town and Uganda.

These attacks continued into November 2021, even as the ADF maintained pressure from Bashu up to RN4 and over to Ituri's Mambasa territory in the west and Boga in the east. With the ADF's return to the Rwenzori region, the group was now operating simultaneously across an area significantly larger than when 2021 began: The group's overall AO (area of operations) in 2020 accounted for roughly 3,523 square kilometers, whereas 2021 saw the group operating over more than 6,800 square kilometers, representing a 94% increase in territory.<sup>26</sup> This expansion becomes even more stark when compared to the group's overall AO for 2017, the first year of its integration into the Islamic State. Between 2020 and 2021 alone, the group's AO nearly doubled (Figure 2).<sup>k</sup>

At the same time that the ADF was pushing back into Rwenzori in Congo, its operatives in Uganda began their bombing campaign. In October 2021, the group detonated three bombs, including a failed suicide attack outside of Kampala that killed only the bomber. These operations represented the successful resumption of the ADF's offensive operations (discussed further in a later section) inside Uganda, which it had not conducted since at least 2017. As noted at the beginning of the article, in November 2021, the ADF conducted its largest international terrorist attack since the late 1990s when it perpetrated a triple suicide bombing attack against two targets in central Kampala.<sup>27</sup> The bombings were quickly claimed by the Islamic State.<sup>28</sup>

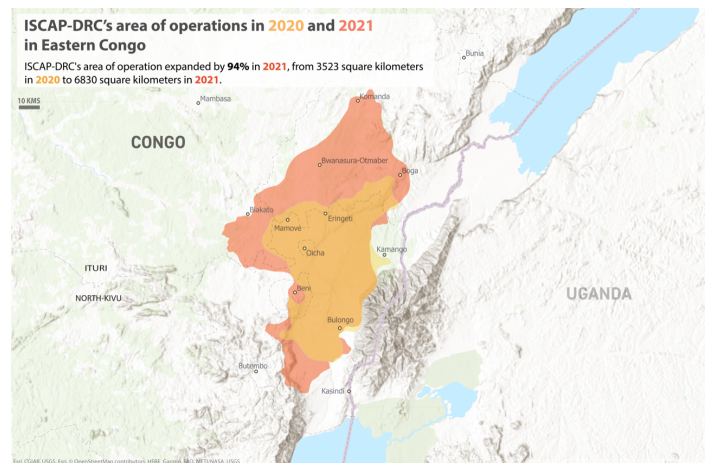


Figure 2: ISCAP-DRC's area of operations in 2020 and 2021. The light orange shaded area shows its area of operations in 2020. The dark orange shaded area shows the areas it expanded into in 2021.

### Operation Shuja: DRC and Uganda's Response

The ADF's major escalations and evolution inside Congo and its foreign operations were not without serious consequences. After years of fruitless negotiations between Uganda and Congo, the two countries finally agreed in November 2021 to joint military operations targeting the group. A memorandum of understanding to cooperate on intelligence sharing and fighting terrorism was reportedly signed on November 5, 2021, but it was not until November 28—following the triple suicide bombing in Kampala—that Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi reportedly authorized the Ugandan armed forces (UPDF)'s entry into Congo.<sup>29</sup>

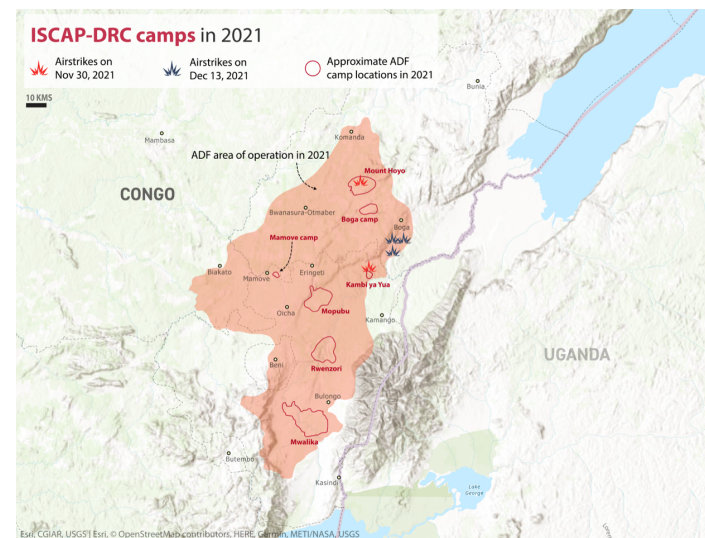


Figure 3: Map of approximate locations of known ADF camps and airstrikes against them in late 2021

j MONUSCO is the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

k Although there are various internal and external elements that undoubtedly contributed to this territorial push, including the 2019 FARDC offensive that drove the ADF out of some of its traditional areas of operation, the Islamic State's influence cannot be ignored here. The ADF's alliance with the international jihadi group has dramatically improved its propaganda efforts, increased its recruitment opportunities, and opened up significant new funding streams.

Cross-border operations began with Ugandan airstrikes on several ADF positions in Congo's North Kivu and Ituri two days later on November 30, 2021. The strikes were quickly announced in a press release, subsequently reported as having struck targets near the locale of Kambi ya Yua in Virunga National Park near the Mbau-Kamango road in Beni territory of North Kivu and the villages of Belu I, Belu II, and Tondoli in the southern Irumu territory of Ituri.<sup>30</sup>

The same day as the strikes, approximately 100 UPDF soldiers crossed into Congo at the Nobili border crossing, with their numbers growing over the next few days as a forward operating base was established at Mukakati village, approximately eight kilometers northwest from the Congolese town of Kamango on the road to Mbau near Beni town.<sup>31</sup> Early efforts of the joint operation, named “Operation *Shuja*,” or “courage” in Swahili, centered on rehabilitating the section of the Mbau-Kamango road between Kamango and the Semuliki river in order to facilitate troop and vehicle movements, an effort reported to have been completed by December 17, 2021.<sup>32</sup>

The FARDC and UPDF quickly claimed successes, including at one point suggesting that ADF leader Musa Baluku was killed or injured during the initial round of airstrikes.<sup>33</sup> Baluku has since been confirmed alive, although the question remains as to whether he suffered any injury. The UPDF claimed on December 15, 2021, that they entered Kambi ya Yua camp—previously bombed on November 30—after a two-day trek from the FARDC base at the bridge across the Semuliki bridge.<sup>34</sup> Despite official claims of a major victory, counter-claims that only two ADF fighters were killed and photos of the camp itself suggested that the position may have been smaller than previously stated.<sup>35</sup> However, sources report that ADF leader Musa Baluku was in Kambi ya Yua camp when it was hit, making it a strategically important target.<sup>36</sup>

UPDF air and artillery strikes continued in mid-December, 2021, with strikes on three villages south of Boga in Ituri reportedly killing 15 ADF fighters on December 13.<sup>37</sup> In addition, the joint forces announced ground operations along RN4 in Ituri and search-and-clear operations along RN44 in southeastern Mambasa, a significant expansion of the areas targeted during the first weeks of Operation *Shuja*.<sup>38</sup> These deployments, conducted by FARDC, were likely intended to respond to an escalation in ADF activity in both theaters during December, which itself was likely the result of ADF evacuations from previously held positions following air and artillery strikes. Previous offensives against the ADF have often resulted in significant escalations in ADF activity elsewhere in its area of operations, as the group has tried to both clear civilians from new areas it moves into and divert FARDC into a civilian protection posture.

While the number of ADF attacks and the overall death toll it inflicted in December 2021 was roughly on par for monthly ADF operations in 2021, the attacks were concentrated in ways that suggest a response to the joint operations. This is mainly evident from the amount of attacks concentrated inside Ituri's Mambasa territory, which also suggests the ADF has moved westward as the joint UPDF-FARDC operations have pushed it out of its more traditional strongholds in North Kivu and the southern part of Irumu territory in Ituri. At least 15 ADF attacks were recorded inside Mambasa in December 2021, as opposed to just four such operations in November 2021. As the joint operations continue, it is possible the jihadi group will continue to mount more such attacks inside Mambasa territory. And as witnessed in prior offensives against the ADF,<sup>39</sup> if the joint military forces of Congo and Uganda do not properly hold or maintain control over areas taken over, the

ADF will likely return to its former strongholds in the near future.

Despite a brief reprieve in January, the first five months of 2022 has demonstrated that the joint operations have failed to completely prevent the ADF from perpetrating attacks in any of its 2021 geographic clusters, though changes in the intensity and frequency of attacks in each cluster remain to be seen. Additionally, 2022 has seen the ADF expand into areas it has not operated in the previous several years. With the UPDF establishing bases along the Mbau-Kamango road, not far from the Ugandan border, the ADF has begun targeting villages near the border in Watalinga, indicating that the area—part of the ADF's infamous “triangle of death” from its 2014 operations—may once again become a target of sustained ADF operations.<sup>40</sup>

## Operational Trends: How 2021 Was a Year of Transformation

Having provided a chronology of ISCAP-DRC/ADF operations in 2021, this article now examines how the group's operations transformed in 2021, demonstrating both new capabilities and the intensification of other changes that began with the group's evolution into an Islamic State affiliate. There were seven dimensions to these changes that, as will be outlined, the authors argue were enabled or explained by the group's deepening integration into the Islamic State's transnational network; enabled in the sense that the Islamic State's central leadership had a direct impact on the change, or explained in the sense that the ADF itself adopted the norms and behaviors more typical of global Islamic State provinces. The first was the ADF's increased reliance on the Islamic State for media distribution and the corresponding surge in propaganda production. The second was that the group began filming and releasing beheading videos. The third was that the ADF for the first time adopted suicide bombings as a tactic. The fourth was the new emphasis placed by the ADF on proselytization within the DRC. The fifth was the deepening of ideologically motivated foreign fighter recruitment. The sixth was that the ADF began exporting its violence beyond the borders of the DRC to Uganda and Rwanda. And the seventh was that the ADF began clashing with other armed groups in Congo on a more regular basis as it expanded its operating space. These seven dimensions are now discussed in turn.

### *1. A Surge in Propaganda Production and Increased Reliance on the Islamic State for Media Distribution*

Over the course of 2021, the ADF's external propaganda, released primarily through the Islamic State's central media apparatus, greatly outpaced its media output of the previous two years combined. This includes both official claims of attacks and media, including photos and videos, released by the Islamic State. Conversely, the ADF's internal media and/or media produced for more local consumption was relatively low compared to 2020. This dynamic of the group's propaganda likely reflects greater integration into the Islamic State's global apparatus. This increase in propaganda output is the most observable illustration of the ADF's deepening relationship with the Islamic State, and it appears the ADF also follows clear Islamic State media diktats given its participation in coordinated media releases by Islamic State affiliates around the world.

The ADF claimed more attacks officially through the Islamic State in 2021 than the previous two years combined, suggesting the group is becoming more integrated within the global media

1 The FARDC military base at the Semuliki river bridge, also referred to as PK51, is the site of a former MONUSCO base attacked by the ADF on December 7, 2017, resulting in the deaths of 15 Tanzanian peacekeepers. The position was later transferred to the FARDC.

apparatus of the Islamic State: The Islamic State claimed 128 operations in DRC and Uganda in 2021, of which at least 68% correlated to confirmed or locally reported ADF attacks. The Islamic State had previously issued a total of only 94 communiqués from the DRC in 2019 and 2020 combined.<sup>41</sup>

While the Islamic State's 128 official claims by ISCAP-DRC only represent roughly 40% of the ADF's total operations, this claims-to-attacks ratio sits at the higher end of the Islamic State's global wings, or so-called 'provinces.'<sup>42</sup> For instance, official claims issued for the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)<sup>m</sup> between January and September 2021 only accounted for 16% of the group's overall activity according to data compiled by the authors.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, researchers Gregory Waters and Charlie Winter found that the Islamic State's claims in the central Syrian desert in 2020 only accounted for roughly 25% of the group's overall operations in the region.<sup>44</sup> The higher number for ISCAP may be the result of more consistent and accurate communications between field commanders and the Islamic State's central media apparatus especially compared to other African provinces and/or a desire by the Islamic State to highlight its Central Africa operations to continue its core ideological component of territorial and operational expansion.

On the ground, the Islamic State's official claims were largely based in DRC's North Kivu province (the 72 claims in Rwenzori, Mamove, Bashu, and Beni Town), followed by Ituri (the 53 claims in RN4, Boga/Tchabi, and Mambasa), and Uganda (three claims). The Islamic State's claims came from all six of the ADF's geographic operational clusters,<sup>n</sup> Beni town, and Uganda, demonstrating the continued integration of the group across camps and international borders (see Table 1).

*Table 1: ISCAP-DRC 2021 claims per geographical cluster*

Cluster	Number of Claims
Rwenzori	44
RN4	36
Boga/Tchabi	15
Mamove	14
Bashu	10
Beni Town	4
Uganda	3
Mambasa <sup>o</sup>	2

In comparing the proportion of claims that correlate to confirmed ADF attacks in each geographical cluster, it is clear

<sup>m</sup> Also known as the Islamic State West Africa Province-Greater Sahara (ISWAP-GS) following the Islamic State's organizational restructuring of its West African wings in 2019.

<sup>n</sup> The data relating to attack claims was categorized into geographic clusters by the authors' using KST attack data in an attempt to track where the ADF maintains its large semi-permanent and mobile camps across North Kivu and Ituri provinces.

<sup>o</sup> The border areas around Mamove between North Kivu's Beni territory and Ituri's Mambasa and Irumu territories are delineated slightly differently depending on the specific map employed. It is possible that attack claims for Mambasa are much higher but have been categorized as part of the ADF's 'Mamove' cluster.

there exists little variation between the clusters (see Table 2). The clusters with more operational output tended to have lower overall confirmation percentages compared to the clusters with fewer total operations. This may be because the Islamic State is keen to highlight attacks in areas in which attacks are rarer.

*Table 2: Percent of 2021 claims confirmed per geographical cluster*

Cluster	Percentage of Claims Confirmed <sup>p</sup>
Mambasa	100%
Uganda	100%
Beni Town	100%
Boga/Tchabi	80%
Bashu	80%
RN4	78%
Mamove	71%
Rwenzori	61%

The relatively high confirmation percentages between each geographical cluster suggest that each camp is able to maintain steady communication up the chain of command to report operations back to the Islamic State's central media apparatus. It should be noted that these percentages account for the total number of claims that have been confirmed by the KST's data. However, given the nature of the conflict—with civilians fleeing ADF territories and the ADF operating in very remote areas—it is possible that some attacks have gone unreported. Inconsistencies and mistakes in the Islamic State's central media apparatus' reporting of attacks may also skew this data.

In terms of stated targets of the attacks, ISCAP claims in 2021 predominantly focused on the FARDC, followed by civilians, referred to as 'Christians' (see Table 3). Many communiqués specified multiple targets in a single claim, thus resulting in the total number of targets being higher than the overall number of attack claims. It also bears noting here that in some instances, the stated target in a claim did not correspond to the actual targets reportedly struck on the ground, a practice seen within other Islamic State provinces. This is particularly true for some claimed raids against the FARDC that in actuality were perpetrated against civilians.

<sup>p</sup> 'Confirmed' meaning a particular claim matched an ADF attack confirmed by the Kivu Security Tracker.

Table 3: Target types struck according to ISCAP-DRC 2021 claims

Specified Target	Number of Instances <sup>q</sup>
FARDC	92
Christians	45
Mai Mai	7
U.N. Forces <sup>r</sup>	6
Ugandan Police	2
Population Centers	2
DRC Government	1
Ugandan Government	1

In terms of the methods of attacks specified by the Islamic State in its claims, assaults and/or ambushes were the most common (115), followed by arson (51). The Islamic State also claimed seven IEDs and three suicide bombing attacks—two in DRC and one in Uganda.<sup>s</sup> It also claimed two territorial occupations, one in North Kivu and one in Ituri, and two kidnapping/hostage-taking operations, both of which were against FARDC soldiers. One of the captured FARDC soldiers was later murdered, accounting for the Islamic State's only communique explicitly claiming an execution of a hostage in Congo in 2021.<sup>45</sup> The communiqués often specified multiple methods in a single claim.

Much like official claims of responsibility, media officially released by ISCAP through the Islamic State's central media apparatus greatly expanded in 2021. For instance, just 31 photos and one video were released in 2020. In 2021, however, the Islamic State on behalf of ISCAP released 277 photos and four videos, an increase of almost 800% over the previous year.<sup>t</sup> And whereas media released in both 2019 and 2020 were exclusively from Beni's Rwenzori sector, the geographical scope of ISCAP media also significantly expanded in 2021.

Organizing ISCAP media releases into the ADF's aforementioned clusters, it is evident that not only were the claims more geographically diverse than in 2020 but that every ADF cluster submitted media back to the Islamic State's central media apparatus. In total, 115 photos and all four videos were released from Ituri's Irumu territory (including RN4 and Boga/Tchabi clusters), 85 total photos from Beni territory in North Kivu (including Rwenzori, Bashu, and Mamove clusters), and two total photos from Ituri's Mambasa territory (see Table 4).

q 'Instances' meaning how many times this type of entity was targeted, according to the Islamic State's claims.

r Referring to peacekeepers who are part of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or MONUSCO.

s Referring to the June 27, 2021, and December 25, 2021, suicide bombings in the DRC and the November 16, 2021, suicide bombings in Uganda.

t Over half of the media products (51%) were released by the Islamic State's central media, 40% was released by the group's weekly Al Naba newsletter, and nine percent of all media was released through its Amaq News Agency.

Table 4: Number of media products released in 2021 per ISCAP-DRC geographical cluster

Cluster	Number of Photos	Number of Photosets <sup>u</sup>	Average Number of Photos per Photoset	Number of Videos
RN4	81	15	5.4	3
Unspecified jungle camps <sup>v</sup>	75	4	18.75	
Rwenzori	64	8	8	
Boga/Tchabi	34	2	17	1
Bashu	20	3	6.67	
Mambasa	2	2	1	
Mamove	1	1	1	

While all clusters produced media—demonstrating the ability of all ADF clusters to transmit media to the ADF's central media team, which then transmits such media to the Islamic State's media apparatus—there are clear disparities in media output between individual clusters. The volume and consistency of media generated by units operating along RN4 probably illustrates that this theater has been a priority for the group's propaganda since its activity escalated there in June 2021, possibly due to its strategic importance as a critical transportation artery and enabled by relatively reliable cell phone service along the road.<sup>46</sup> Conversely, the discrepancy between media output and the frequency of attacks by units operating around Mamove may be due to the lack of communications infrastructure in some of the more remote parts of the ADF's area of operation, which could limit propaganda output despite those areas being a high priority for the group. The relatively large amount of photos published in relatively fewer photoset releases from inside the ADF jungle camps and the Boga/Tchabi area, by contrast, may be due to the difficulty of transmitting media from more remote areas with limited cell phone coverage (reducing the numbers of photosets that can be sent), with the greater size of individual releases possibly an attempt to compensate for the relative infrequency of releasing media from those locations.

The group's media, while becoming more integrated than previously within the global Islamic State media apparatus, also featured clear evidence of the group's organizational and ideological affiliation with the Islamic State more broadly. For instance, all 75 photos emanating from the ADF's jungle camps were used as part of an Islamic State media campaign showing its members around the world celebrating both Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. The fact that the ADF participated in this campaign suggests that it specifically coordinated its media output in this regard with the Islamic State's

u Defined in which a particular media release had two or more photos at a time for the same incident.

v Referring to photos released from inside one of the ADF's many physical camps in the Congolese jungle; however, the exact location, camp name, etc. were not specified by the Islamic State. The authors thus grouped these media products into a single entity as "unspecified jungle camps."

central media apparatus, as the Islamic State presumably passed on a wish-list of photos it wanted for this campaign. One of the photos released from an unspecified jungle camp also featured ADF leader Musa Baluku, marking the second time he was explicitly featured in official Islamic State media.<sup>w</sup> One photo released from the group's Boga/Tchabi cluster featured an ADF member engaging in *dawa*, or proselytizing to locals in an effort to convert them to the Islamic State's version of Islam. As will be discussed later in the article, this was the first documented instance of the ADF engaging in such behavior for the Islamic State. Other photos also demonstrated clear homages to violent Islamic State motifs, such as a November 2021 photo showing ADF members dressed in black *kanzus*<sup>x</sup> holding the severed head of a killed FARDC soldier and a similar photo also showing men in black *kanzus* released the same month (see below). The latter photo was in the style of traditional Islamic State propaganda, particularly during the height of its territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria.



*ISCAP-DRC fighters posing after an attack in November 2021, mirroring traditional Islamic State imagery<sup>47</sup>*

Unlike official media released by the Islamic State, media internally produced by the ADF and intended for more local audiences suffered a decline in 2021. The group produced and directly released a long list of propaganda videos in 2020, many of which explicitly referenced its loyalty to the Islamic State. However, the small amount of media that was directly released by the group in 2021 continued to show the group's internal branding and identity as part of the Islamic State. For instance, videos released directly by the group, such as a November 2021 video from Komanda, Ituri, prominently featured the logo of the Islamic State's Central Africa Province.<sup>48</sup> Other videos, such as the internal ADF beheading videos described in the next section, included clear Islamic State rhetoric.

The relative paucity in 2021 in directly released ADF media is likely due to the group's further integration into the global Islamic State media apparatus. Given the substantial increase in ADF media released by official Islamic State channels in 2021, it is possible the group focused more on providing media to the Islamic State's central media apparatus than producing media itself for local consumption. This integration of media production into the

Islamic State's broader propaganda apparatus likely demonstrates the enthusiasm of the ADF's leadership for their membership within the Islamic State's global infrastructure. Moreover, it also demonstrates the ADF's adherence to the Islamic State's media requirements in that global provinces are to submit media back to the Islamic State's central media *diwan*, or department, for centralized releases.<sup>49</sup>

## **2. ADF Begins Producing Beheading Videos**

The second change is that the ADF began releasing beheading videos in the summer of 2021, a phenomenon best explained by the group's desire to align itself more clearly with the Islamic State's overall brand by imitating the global jihadi organization's infamous hyper-violence. The three beheading videos were distributed by the ADF's internal media apparatus and circulated on Congolese social media. The video's production and content falls in line with what Jason Warner, Ryan O'Farrell, Héni Nsaibia, and Ryan Cummings describe as the "normative adoption" of the Islamic State's practices by its affiliates around the world.<sup>50</sup> As stated by Warner and his co-authors, "[Islamic State] provinces' behaviors were often informed informally by the normative adoption of the IS brand as they sought to mimic what IS Central was doing."<sup>51</sup> So while the beheading videos may not have been the product of direct orders from Islamic State Central—especially given that the Islamic State did not distribute them through its official channels—their production nevertheless demonstrated that the ADF was taking it upon itself to become more Islamic State-like as part of its newfound identity.

All three videos consisted of ADF fighters giving speeches with clear references to the Islamic State, threats against the ADF's local and international opponents, and religious justifications for the beheadings themselves. The ADF had never before produced and released such videos, and they constitute a clear imitation of the Islamic State's own grisly releases similar to the series of infamous beheading videos featuring the Islamic State's 'Jihadi John.'<sup>52</sup>

The ADF released the first of the videos on June 5, 2021, featuring a light-skinned young man in a FARDC uniform who begins beheading a man in civilian clothes while others hold the victim down or watch.<sup>53</sup> The man who carried out the beheading is Kenyan national Salim Mohamed Rashid, who arrived in the ADF camps in late 2020, as discussed below.<sup>54</sup> Once the victim is no longer moving, the assailant pauses to deliver a speech in Swahili, proclaiming:

*Truly, this is the Islamic State that has come to slaughter, we have come to slaughter you, we have come for you infidels with machetes, O you infidels. O America, we have come for you to slaughter you! O spies, we have come for you to slaughter you! O Kenya, we have come for you to slaughter you! Tshisekedi [referring to Felix Tshisekedi, the current President of the DR Congo], we have come for you with machetes, Allah the Most High willing. Allah the Exalted willing, Islamic State: long live! Islamic State: long live! To our leader, know that you have soldiers within Congo that pledge allegiance to you that we shall hear and obey you ...*

Almost two weeks later, on June 18, the ADF released a second beheading video, this time showing 14 men in civilian clothes tied up and kneeling in a jungle setting.<sup>55</sup> A man off-screen explains that they are prisoners of war who have refused to convert to Islam and that the punishment for this is death. He then declares, speaking of those who are about to carry out the beheadings, "These are soldiers of Caliphate. These are soldiers of the Caliph to believers, yes, Abu

w The first time Musa Baluku appeared in an official Islamic State photo was in a similar photoset for Eid celebrations in the summer of 2019.

x Also known as thawb in Arabic, these are ankle-length garments traditionally worn by men across the Swahili Coast and much of East Africa, much like across the Arab world. Black *kanzus*, or *thawbs*, feature prominently in typical Islamic State media.

Ibrahim Al-Quraishi.<sup>y</sup> May Allah protect them. Allah willing, they are going to do an act of worship to fulfill Allah's command!" The video then shows young boys being brought in to help with the beheadings, and all 14 men are killed.

While most of the perpetrators in this video have not been individually identified, they refer to Boaz, a known ADF commander, and an ADF fighter named Isa can be briefly seen on-camera.<sup>56</sup> Isa, a Congolese fighter whose real name was Mbudi Abdallah and went by a *kunya* of Abu Khadija,<sup>57</sup> would later carry out a suicide bombing outside a bar in Beni town on June 27, 2021, the ADF's first such attack, as described above.<sup>58</sup>

The third beheading video, shared online on June 26, 2021, showed three men and a woman in civilian clothes tied up in a jungle setting.<sup>59</sup> A group of more than a dozen boys and men are gathered around them. A light-skinned man speaking Swahili with a Kenyan accent declares that, according to Allah, the only way to achieve victory is to cut off their enemies' heads. The four executioners do so to shouts of the Islamic State's battle cry: "Dawlat al-Islam! Baqiya!"

### 3. The Adoption of Suicide Bombings

The third change, and arguably one of the ADF's most significant new operational trends beginning in 2021, was its undertaking of suicide bombings as part of its campaign of terror. This change has come as a direct result of its integration into the Islamic State, as the ADF has enthusiastically implemented tactics more aligned with the Islamic State's operational toolkit. It is so far unknown if the Islamic State's central leadership has demanded this of its Central Africa affiliate, or if the ADF chose to adopt the tactic as part of its consistent enthusiasm for its adopted identity as part of the Islamic State's global hierarchy.

That said, the ADF took it upon itself to start laying the ideological and religious groundwork for suicide bombings as early as March 2021. In doing so, ADF's ideologues framed suicide bombings within the Islamic State's overall operational template and thus something in which the ADF should now undertake. That month, ISCAP-DRC senior ideologue Abu Qatada al-Muhajir (see photo) said in a widely shared sermon to the group that a "martyrdom vest [is what] a leader wears all the time for self-destruction and defense, this is worn by every [jihadi] commander."<sup>60</sup> He added, "they will soon get all of you those martyrdom vests, which you will be required to wear," urging the fighters to "pray that Allah makes it possible for you to die with a martyrdom vest that blows hundreds of infidels." Al-Muhajir also contended that ADF leader Musa Baluku himself "has to put on his martyrdom vests or belt on a daily basis as a defensive mechanism against being arrested and subsequently tortured by infidels," as according to al-Muhajir, "it is compulsory for all Islamic leaders to wear it [a martyrdom vest] daily." Among the 'Islamic leaders' explicitly mentioned by al-Muhajir as wearing the so-called martyrdom vests was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the former Islamic State leader, further showing that the ADF's ideologues explained undertaking suicide bombings to its rank-and-file within the framework of how the Islamic State operates more broadly.



*Abu Qatada al-Muhajir, one of the ADF's main ideologues, who has helped provide the ideological groundwork for the group's adoption of suicide operations. The image was sourced from an internal ADF video released by the group on Telegram in April 2020. The authors use the description 'internal' to differentiate it from media relating to ADF's operations published by the Islamic State's central media apparatus.*

Three months later, the ADF put these teachings into practice for the first time when on June 26 and 27, 2021, the group detonated three bombs in the northeastern DRC town of Beni, the third in the form of a suicide attack. Targeting a bar near the town center, the aforementioned ADF fighter known as Isa or Abu Khadija al-Answar (or al-Ansari) blew himself up. Two civilians were injured in the blast, and only the bomber was killed.<sup>61</sup> As with the bombing earlier that day, the IED appeared to be remote controlled and was reportedly not originally intended as a suicide bomb. Internal messages from the group, however, indicate that Isa chose to turn it into such when he was prevented from entering the bar. It is also possible a malfunction caused the bomb to explode early. Regardless, the Islamic State claimed the attack as a suicide bombing—the first by its Central Africa Province.<sup>62</sup>

Two months later, the ADF began trying to export this tactic to Uganda. As will be outlined in more detail below, in August 2021, a successful security operation prevented the first would-be suicide bombing by the group in that country,<sup>63</sup> while a second attempted suicide bombing, this time in October 2021, killed only the bomber himself.<sup>64</sup> The group's third attempt, however, resulted in three near-simultaneous blasts in downtown Kampala on November 16, 2021, that killed four people and injured dozens more.

The town of Beni in the DRC was also the location for the ADF's final and deadliest suicide bombing of 2021. On Christmas Day, as people congregated in a popular restaurant to celebrate the holiday, a suicide bomber detonated himself at the restaurant's entrance after being refused entry by local security.<sup>65</sup> The blast immediately killed six people, while another 20 civilians were injured. Hours later, two additional people succumbed to their wounds, raising the death toll to eight.<sup>66</sup> The relative effectiveness of the Christmas Day attack may reflect improvements in bomb-making or more effective target selection, as this bombing hit a packed restaurant while the November 16 bombers in Kampala had detonated their explosives in the middle of the street.

Through the adoption and continued use of suicide bombings, the

<sup>y</sup> This is a reference to then-Islamic State leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, born Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Salbi, who took on the role of the Islamic State's "caliph" after the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on October 27, 2019, and was himself killed in a U.S. special forces raid on a house in northwestern Syria on February 3, 2022.



ADF has shown a clear ideological and tactical shift since officially joining the Islamic State. The relatively quick operationalization of the tactic—insofar as the group perpetrated its first suicide bombing just a few months after the first known efforts to sensitize the tactic to its members—evidences the group’s implementation of the tactics of the Islamic State and its deepening commitment to the ideological justifications that underpin them. This dynamic again fits into the “normative adoption” model as mentioned above. It appears that the ADF has taken it upon itself to start implementing suicide attacks as a result of its newfound identity as part of the Islamic State.

#### 4. Outreach to the Banyabwisha

The fourth major shift in the ADF’s behavior in 2021 was its first publicized attempt at *dawa*, or proselytizing, to local communities. Though there is no clear evidence that these efforts were the result of direct orders from the Islamic State’s central leadership, the ADF’s documentation of these *dawa* attempts for publication by Islamic State media indicates that the relationship between the two groups played a role in the ADF’s actions.

During the summer of 2021, the ADF publicized its engagement with the predominantly Christian Congolese Hutu community in Irumu territory, locally referred to as *Banyabwisha*. The group’s engagement with the community represents the ADF’s first real foray into community outreach in over a decade—and the first time the engagements have been categorized as *dawa*, or proselytizing, by the group.

The ADF, as a primarily foreign militant group professing an extremist interpretation of Islam in a region with a very small Muslim community, has in recent years largely avoided attempting to foster legitimacy within neighboring communities. While significant intermarriage took place in the 2000s between ADF personnel and the Vuba ethnic minority in northern Beni,<sup>67</sup> the ADF since its 2015–2016 pivot toward the Islamic State has largely relied on recruits from outside its area of operation—recruited both from elsewhere in Congo and farther abroad—or resorted to kidnapping and forcibly recruiting locals.<sup>68</sup> Its engagement with the Banyabwisha community in Irumu suggests an attempt to change this dynamic and foster local community relations.

The Banyabwisha in Irumu are a relatively recent migrant community, with many immigrating to the territory to purchase, clear, and farm land after fleeing instability and hostility in Masisi territory farther south.<sup>69</sup> Their entry into Irumu territory, particularly the areas around Tchabi and Boga, has led to extreme hostility with longstanding communities—referred to as *autochtones*, or indigenous—from whose customary leaders Banyabwisha migrants often bought land.<sup>70</sup> In 2020, repeated episodes of violence erupted between Banyabwisha and ethnic Nyali over land rights. Nyali, Nande, and Hema communities often rejected the legitimacy of the Banyabwisha presence, a hostility reflected in official government statements pledging to remove the Banyabwisha.<sup>71</sup> Accusations against the Banyabwisha included assertions that they are Rwandans attempting to steal land and that they collaborated with the ADF in its attacks against neighboring communities.<sup>72</sup>

On May 31, 2021, a series of massacres took place in Tchabi and Boga in which ethnic Nyali communities were reportedly targeted by ADF fighters, Banyabwisha were reportedly spared, and Banyabwisha militia allegedly supported the ADF’s attacks.<sup>73</sup>

This was followed by nine ADF attacks in June 2021 and three attacks in July 2021 in which Banyabwisha fighters reportedly assisted the ADF.<sup>74</sup> On July 1, 2021, local residents massacred at least eight Banyabwisha civilians in Komanda, 90 kilometers northwest of Tchabi where the previous attacks took place, accusing the Banyabwisha of collaborating with the ADF.<sup>75</sup>

In early August 2021, a series of videos emerged on both the ADF’s internal media channels and wider Congolese social media in which approximately 15 men claiming to be Banyabwisha described to senior ADF leader Muhammed Lumwisa<sup>76</sup> their flight from Komanda and Bandinbese after the July 1 massacre and their rescue by the ADF.<sup>77</sup> Calling on other Banyabwisha in Masisi territory to join them with the ADF in Irumu, the men framed their relationship with the ADF as a move that would help them reclaim their Congolese citizenship, something often denied by rival communities accusing the Banyabwisha of being Rwandan. A few days later, the Islamic State’s central media apparatus released a statement and picture of the ADF reaching out to locals in the Tchabi area in an attempt to convert them to Islam, the first time the Islamic State—or the ADF—has publicly advertised attempts at *dawa*, or proselytizing, toward Christian communities in Congo.

While reported cooperation between the ADF and a Banyabwisha militia, and clear attempts by the ADF to recruit among the Banyabwisha, suggest that the ADF’s intentions were to foster a domestic recruitment base through capitalizing on pre-existing inter-communal tensions, the results appear mixed. In August 2021, at least two confrontations occurred between the ADF and the DRC military FARDC in which Banyabwisha fighters supported the FARDC, as well as a third incident in which the ADF attacked a Banyabwisha militia outright.<sup>78</sup> The FARDC had reportedly recruited Banyabwisha militia as proxies against the ADF, including some Banyabwisha militia members who had reportedly defected from the ADF.<sup>79</sup> As of early 2022, it appeared that some Banyabwisha individuals remained part of the ADF but are reportedly perceived by leadership as unreliable and likely to defect.<sup>80</sup>

This sequence of events—with the ADF reportedly cooperating with some Banyabwisha militia, publicly attempting to recruit among them, other Banyabwisha militia siding with FARDC against the ADF, and Banyabwisha recruits ultimately being seen as unreliable—leaves many questions. The ADF has clearly attempted to exploit intercommunal tensions between Banyabwisha and other communities in order to recruit locals and publicize their efforts themselves and through the Islamic State’s central media apparatus, but they appear to have incurred some level of backlash or rejection by other segments of the Banyabwisha community.

The degree to which the ADF have been successful in presenting themselves to the Banyabwisha community as allies or protectors remains uncertain, as does the degree to which the ADF may see these dynamics as a model to replicate elsewhere in its areas of operation. It is almost certainly no coincidence that the ADF’s foray into attempting to build local legitimacy—quickly publicized by both the group and the Islamic State itself, which frequently emphasizes *dawa* activities by its other affiliates<sup>81</sup>—has occurred since its 2016–present evolution into an Islamic State affiliate. As with other shifts in the ADF’s *modi operandi*, the ADF’s explicit framing of attempts at domestic recruitment as *dawa* may not be the result of directives from the Islamic State, but are clear indication of the Islamic State’s influence over the group’s trajectory.

### 5. Deepened Foreign Recruitment

The ADF's transformation into an Islamic State affiliate has also coincided with a large influx of foreign recruits from across the region. According to recent defectors, hundreds of foreign fighters from beyond the ADF's historical recruitment base in Uganda have reportedly journeyed to ADF camps in eastern Congo since October 2016, particularly from Tanzania, Burundi, Kenya, and South Africa. These recruits are reportedly far more ideological in their motivations, and many desired to join the ADF specifically because it is now part of the Islamic State.<sup>82</sup> This stands in sharp contrast to the narrative, common for many years among Ugandan and Congolese ADF defectors, of being tricked into joining the group with promises of employment.<sup>83z</sup>

While the ADF has historically included isolated fighters from several countries beyond Uganda and Congo, this large influx of regional recruits has resulted in some important shifts in the ADF's internal practices. Regional recruits from outside DRC have reportedly been given special treatment, taking on new levels of prominence and causing friction with other recruits or existing fighters.<sup>84</sup> By summer 2019, ADF leadership was reportedly instructing combatants and civilians within its camps to converse in Swahili in order to facilitate communication between members with diverse origins.<sup>85</sup> This regionalization in recruitment activities is similarly reflected by the emergence of numerous Telegram channels run by ADF personnel distributing Islamic State propaganda—with a focus on the ADF's activities—in regional languages like Swahili and English, in addition to longstanding propaganda efforts in Luganda. By early 2021, the flow of regional recruits had become important enough that a special camp for non-Ugandan foreign fighters was reportedly established in Ituri, a notable departure from the ADF's historical practice of filtering largely Ugandan foreign fighters and Congolese recruits through its camps in the Semuliki river valley in southern Beni territory.<sup>86</sup>

The trajectories of several individuals who joined the ADF in late 2020 and 2021 illustrate these shifts, and how the ADF's integration into the Islamic State has enabled the group to take advantage of and co-opt pre-existing jihadi networks that have historically funneled recruits elsewhere. At least two of the ADF's recent regional recruits have had prior experience with jihadi cells and presumably passed on some of their expertise to the group. One was Kenyan national Salim Mohamed Rashid, who joined the group in late 2020 and appeared in the ADF's first ever beheading video in June 2021<sup>87</sup>—the first time that a Kenyan national has been featured in an ADF propaganda video.<sup>88</sup> He had previously been arrested in Turkey in 2016 for attempting to join the Islamic State's ranks in Syria before he was deported back to Kenya.<sup>89</sup> Rashid was arrested again in early 2019 for what Kenyan officials said was his alleged role in a cell of the Somali militant group al-Shabaab near Mombasa, Kenya, and was further accused of having been in possession of explosive materials prior to his arrest.<sup>90aa</sup> Subsequent

information casts doubts on these accusations, indicating rather that Rashid remained an Islamic State supporter throughout this time and joined the ADF to further that cause.<sup>91</sup> Rashid's time in the ADF, however, was relatively short-lived as he was arrested by the FARDC in late January 2022.<sup>92</sup>

Another was Mahmoud Salim Mohamed (subsequently referred to as Mahmoud), who was also a Kenyan national and also joined the ADF in late 2020. Mahmoud had been initially arrested in Malindi, Kenya, in 2016 for his alleged involvement in a series of purported al-Shabaab attacks in and near Mombasa.<sup>93ab</sup> Mahmoud's current whereabouts are unknown, though he has been reported dead by local sources.<sup>94</sup>

Perhaps even more illustrative of this shift toward personnel from outside the ADF's historical recruitment base is the reported presence of a technical advisor sent by the Islamic State to the ADF's camps in eastern Congo. In September 2021, local Congolese officials arrested Jordanian national Hytham S.A. Alfar as he was leaving the ADF's camp in Mwalika in Beni territory, offering the first confirmed presence of an Arab member in the ADF's camps.<sup>95</sup> Also known as Abu Omar, Alfar was reportedly in the ADF camps to help the group improve its technological capacity,<sup>96</sup> although the exact nature of the instruction he provided is unknown. The FARDC claimed that he was helping the ADF operate its drones.<sup>97</sup> The use of technical advisors sent by the Islamic State's global command to its African branches is not a novel phenomenon, as the Islamic State repeatedly sent advisors to assist its West Africa Province in Nigeria.<sup>98ac</sup> If confirmed, the presence of technical advisors would indicate that the ADF has not only benefited from its integration into the Islamic State through the expansion of its recruitment pools, but also through the Islamic State's attempts to improve its tactical capabilities.

While the influx of foreign fighters from beyond the ADF's historical recruitment networks in Uganda began in 2016, the aforementioned events that took place throughout 2021—the creation of a special camp exclusively for foreign recruits, the enlistment of established jihadis, and the presence of an Arab trainer reportedly there on behalf of the Islamic State's global command—illustrate a critical transformation for the group's

ab While both Salim Rashid and Mahmoud were undoubtedly involved in extremist activity inside Kenya, the propensity for Kenyan media and government officials to label most terrorist activity as "al-Shabaab" makes it difficult to definitively ascertain if the two indeed had prior experience with al-Qa`ida's East African branch or if the two were already within the Islamic State's networks at the time of this activity and subsequent criminal charges regarding their alleged involvement in al-Shabaab. See Brian Ocharo, "Kenya: Terror Suspect Salim Mohamed Detained for 4 More Weeks," *Daily Nation*, June 11, 2019; Richard Kamau, "Police Foil Planned Terrorist Attack in Mombasa as 'Most Wanted' Suspects Flee," *Nairobi Wire*, January 6, 2016; and William Mwangi and Elkana Jacob, "Wanted terror suspect Mohamud Mohamed aka Gasere surrenders to police," *Star*, January 5, 2016.

ac The Islamic State's central leadership reportedly sent advisors to ISWAP in Nigeria at least two times between 2015 and 2017. However, more advisors were also rumored to be present with ISWAP in 2021. Thus, while the exact number of advisors is unknown, it is clear that Islamic State Central sent advisors to ISWAP on multiple occasions since the group pledged allegiance in 2015. See Vincent Foucher, "The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad," *International Crisis Group*, October 29, 2020, and Vincent Foucher, "Several sources (including former ISWAP associates who still have some connection) insist that ....," *Twitter*, February 9, 2022.

z It is worth pointing out that it is likely that some former members downplay their overall ideological affinity or commitment to the ADF or jihad in general after leaving the group.

aa Al-Shabaab here refers to al-Qa`ida's East African branch. It should not be confused with the Islamic State affiliate in northern Mozambique that is locally referred to as al-Shabaab and comprised the other wing of the Islamic State's Central African Province until being designated as its own province in May 2022.

relationship with foreign fighters. Foreigners joining the group in 2021 that were shown to be more ideological, experienced, and on the ground were afforded a degree of importance not seen with either Ugandan recruits or even with foreign fighters over previous years. The ADF is now clearly tapping into regional Islamic State recruitment networks and more clearly emphasizing the importance of foreign fighters. This bears tremendous importance for the ADF going forward, potentially bolstering both its numbers and its tactical proficiency.

### 6. The Move to Export Terror Outside the DRC

The sixth change seen in 2021—and already referenced in the suicide bombing section above—was the ADF’s efforts to export its new brand of terror to neighboring countries, which was both enabled by Islamic State funding and encouraged by Islamic State Central leadership. This encouragement is unsurprising given the transnational aims of that network. Indeed, Baluku stated in a May 2021 sermon that he had received orders to expand the group’s territory,<sup>99</sup> and a source close to the group indicated that Islamic State Central specifically encouraged operations in Uganda.<sup>100</sup> Additionally, money received through Islamic State-affiliated networks helped fund the ADF’s regional operations and bombing campaigns.<sup>101</sup>

Although the ADF conducted numerous operations from Congo into Uganda in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as well as mounting an urban bombing campaign in Uganda in 1998 and 1999 that killed dozens, its cross-border operations essentially ended by 2007 after several successive military operations by the UPDF.<sup>102</sup> Since then, the group has likely been responsible for as many as 14 targeted assassinations in Uganda between 2011 and 2017,<sup>103</sup> but had not attempted any mass-casualty attacks until August 2021. Overall, from June to December 2021, the ADF was responsible for at least one assassination attempt and a series of bombings and attempted bombings in Uganda and Rwanda, which represents a sudden and sustained escalation from the past 15 years. These renewed operations largely fall under the Islamic State’s core ideological component of *tatamadad*, or the ideological need to expand the territorial caliphate.<sup>104</sup>

The jihadi group’s renewed external operations began in June 2021 when ADF gunmen attempted to assassinate General Katumba Wamala, Uganda’s Minister of Works and Transport and former chief of defense forces, in Kampala.<sup>105</sup> While General Wamala survived the assassination attempt, his daughter and driver were killed in the attack. The attempt on General Wamala’s life marked the return of the ADF’s Ugandan-based offensive operations, which had been dormant since 2017 when the group killed Ugandan Police Force spokesman Andrew Kaweesi.<sup>106</sup>

As noted above, in August 2021, the ADF began a series of bombing attempts across Uganda. That month, on August 27, Ugandan officials reported that security forces thwarted a suicide bombing plot targeting the funeral of Paul Lokech, a Ugandan general who had played a prominent role in Somalia and in previous operations in eastern Congo against the ADF.<sup>107</sup> The bombing cell attempted to detonate a suicide vest during the funeral in Pader.<sup>108</sup> Despite being unsuccessful, the Pader plot represents the ADF’s first suicide bombing attempt inside Uganda and its second suicide operation overall.

On October 7, 2021, a small explosion occurred outside of the main police station in Kampala’s Kawempe neighborhood, causing

no injuries and minimal damage.<sup>109</sup> Ugandan authorities only acknowledged the bombing at the police station after another IED detonated in Kampala’s Komamboga neighborhood on October 23, which left one person dead at a pork joint.<sup>110</sup> Both bombings were claimed by the Islamic State.<sup>111</sup> Two days later, on October 25, a suicide bomber detonated his bomb on a bus in Uganda’s Mpigi District, killing himself and seriously wounding at least one other person.<sup>112</sup> The Islamic State did not comment on that explosion, but in all three bombings, Ugandan government officials publicly blamed the ADF.<sup>113</sup>

Finally, on November 16, 2021, came the triple suicide bombing in Kampala. At approximately 10:00 AM, a suicide bomber attacked Kampala’s Central Police Station, followed just minutes later by two suicide bombers detonating themselves near the parliament building.<sup>114</sup> The twin blasts killed four victims, and over 30 more were hospitalized for their wounds, including more than two dozen police officers.<sup>115</sup> In the hours following the bombings, the police shot a man they claimed was a fourth suicide bomber.<sup>116</sup> A search of his home allegedly revealed a suicide vest and other explosive materials.<sup>117</sup> The Islamic State’s central media apparatus was quick to claim the November 16 attacks, declaring that three of its “knights” attacked the “polytheistic” parliament and “Crusader” police.<sup>118</sup> The claim identified the bombers by their aliases of Abdul Rahman al-Ugandi, Abu Shahid al-Ugandi, and Abu Sabr al-Ugandi, while Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni reported that two of the bombers were named Mansoor Uthman and Wanjusi Abdallah and that both were Ugandan citizens.<sup>119</sup>

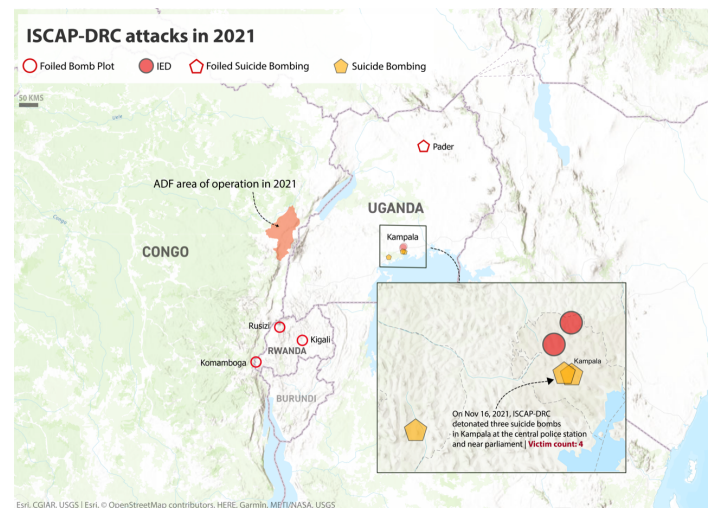


Figure 4: Map showing ADF/ISCAP-DRC’s regional attacks and foiled plots in 2021. Victim count refers to number of people killed excluding the bombers.

ISCAP’s external operations were not just contained to its native Uganda. The Rwandan government announced on October 1, 2021, that it had arrested 13 people who it said were connected to the ADF inside the capital Kigali and two other districts in the country’s north and southwest.<sup>120</sup> The Rwandan government elaborated further, stating that the 13 were arrested “with different improvised explosive device (IEDs) materials that include: wires, nails, phones, explosives and videos for radicalization.”<sup>121</sup> The arrests had taken place in both August and September 2021 but were only disclosed to the public in October 2021.<sup>122</sup> Despite anti-Rwandan motifs playing a large role in Islamic State-supporter propaganda since

August 2021—presumably because of Rwanda's role in routing the Islamic State affiliate in Mozambique—the Islamic State's central leadership has not officially mentioned any activity inside Rwanda.<sup>123</sup>

Ugandan officials, Rwandan sources, and detained individuals have identified senior ADF leader Meddie Nkalubo (see photo below) as the ringleader behind the aforementioned spate of bombings in Uganda since August 2021 and the foiled bombing plot inside Rwanda in September 2021.<sup>124</sup> Ugandan police released a statement on October 26, 2021, linking Nkalubo to the bombings earlier that month in Kampala and Mpigi.<sup>125</sup> Rwandan officials have also linked Nkalubo to the foiled plot in Kigali in September 2021.<sup>126</sup> Nkalubo joined the ADF after disappearing from Kampala in March 2016, quickly becoming a central figure in the group's adoption of jihadi imagery and propaganda techniques. He later became a key organizer in financial transfers to the ADF from the Islamic State through Kenyan intermediaries.<sup>127</sup>



*Meddie Nkalubo, from his now-deleted Facebook profile in March 2020*

These bombings and attempted plots in both Rwanda and Uganda suggest one facet of the ADF's new strategy is that it seeks to be a hub for regional attacks in Central and East Africa, even as the group expands its violence and reach inside eastern DRC. Where the ADF has the requisite networks, as seen with the plots and bombings in Rwanda and Uganda, it appears intent on organizing and undertaking terrorist activity. Sources close to the group indicate that these networks have continued to expand to other countries in the region,<sup>128</sup> likely helped by the Islamic State's frequent propaganda, as well as the ADF's own outreach on its numerous Telegram channels that emphasize its role as an official affiliate (see previous section for further details). As the ADF's recruitment networks expand, these recent plots suggest that the ADF may attempt to replicate such training and support for acts of terror across East Africa, potentially through the return of regional recruits to their home countries.<sup>129</sup>

### **7. Increased Clashes with Other Armed Groups**

The final operational change of note in 2021 was the ADF's increased clashes with other armed groups. Although it is likely that the decision to fight these groups was made locally, the opportunity and perhaps even the necessity of doing so appears to be the result of

the group's territorial expansion that was encouraged and partially funded by the Islamic State, as well as the ADF's increased military capacity stemming from its influx of fighters in recent years.

Though the ADF's overall emir Musa Baluku has implied he has received orders from the Islamic State's central leadership to expand inside Congo,<sup>130</sup> it is unclear whether this diktat included an order to be more aggressive with other armed groups, as likely occurred with the Islamic State affiliate in the Sahel.<sup>131</sup> Regardless, multiple defectors report that in 2017, the year the ADF joined the Islamic State, the group was out of money and on the verge of collapse as Jamil Mukulu's financing streams had dried up following his 2015 arrest.<sup>132</sup> Indeed, there was only a single recorded ADF-caused civilian death in the first eight months of 2017.<sup>133</sup> Access to new funding streams was reportedly one of the main considerations in propelling the ADF's alliance with the Islamic State, and since its inception, the latter has provided the ADF with a fairly steady flow of financial support.<sup>134 ad</sup> This funding, along with increased recruitment due to the ADF's notoriety as an Islamic State affiliate, has supported the ADF as it has pushed its operations into new territories inside Congo. This has in turn naturally brought it closer to other nearby armed groups, resulting in an increased rate of clashes between the militants.

While the ADF has clashed with other militant groups sporadically in the past, such clashes were exceedingly rare until 2021. The ADF's expansion has increased the overlap in its area of operations, resulting in several clashes over the course of the year. Between May and July 2021, the ADF launched at least four attacks against the Patriotic Union for the Liberation of Congo (*Union des patriotes pour la libération du Congo*, UPLC), a longstanding Mai Mai group operating in southern Beni territory and northern Lubero.<sup>135</sup> Then in September 2021, the ADF clashed with at least two Congolese militant groups in Irumu territory. The Islamic State claimed six of these eight attacks, specifically claiming that they were fighting members of an "apostate Christian militia" or militias allied with the "Crusader Congolese army" and releasing pictures showing their dead opponents.<sup>136</sup>

As the ADF continues to expand its areas of operation, both of its own volition and in response to the joint military operations, it is likely that clashes between it and other Congolese militant groups will continue to escalate. This may result in displacement of other militant groups weaker than the ADF and will likely exacerbate an already immensely complicated security environment for FARDC.

### **Conclusion**

This article has argued that not only is the ADF now truly part of the Islamic State's global apparatus as the Congolese branch of its Central Africa Province, but that the group's integration into the global jihadi organization has resulted in several distinct

ad Given the difficulties in tracing illicit money flows, it is highly likely that the current picture of Islamic State funding into the ADF is incomplete, but transfer receipts, as well as interviews with former ADF members and security services document money going to the ADF from Islamic State networks starting in November 2017. The evidence is relatively imprecise for 2018, with defectors reporting meetings in which Musa Baluku announced when the group had received money from the Islamic State, but specific amounts are unknown. From 2019 to 2021, receipts and testimony from former ADF members document electronic or physical cash transfers from Islamic State-affiliated individuals to the ADF and other Islamic State operatives in central and southern Africa every one to two months.

evolutions as reflected on the ground by its operations over the course of last year. Accompanied by persistent financing from the Islamic State, the group's (1) further integration into the Islamic State's media apparatus, (2) production of beheading videos, (3) adoption of suicide bombings, (4) attempts at *dawa*, (5) deepened its role as a hub for more ideological foreign fighters, (6) expansion of its operating space in Congo and abroad, and (7) increase in the number of clashes with other armed groups in Congo signal that the ADF is no longer just a local threat to eastern Congo and minor threat to Uganda. ISCAP-DRC is becoming a significant transnational terrorist threat across East and Central Africa.

To be clear, while the ADF is part of the Islamic State's global hierarchy, it has not lost its more localized agenda or strategy. Indeed,

this is common for the Islamic State's African provinces.<sup>137</sup> ISCAP-DRC's expanded area of operations in Congo and its proliferation of terrorist cells to neighboring countries has provoked a coordinated counter-offensive including intervention by the Uganda military, yet it remains to be seen whether these actions will sustainably erode the ADF's capacity for violence. Past offensives have forced the ADF to pivot toward new areas, typically with disastrous results for civilians, where it has managed to regroup and continue its operations. Ensuring that these experiences are not repeated will require improved intelligence, flexibility, cooperation, and stamina on the part of local and regional security forces, and failure risks the continued expansion of ISCAP-DRC's capabilities—now with far more severe implications for the entire region. **CTC**

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