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FEATURE ARTICLE

Global Jihad and the Threat to Israel and the Jewish Community

LORENA ATIYAS-LVOVSKY, EITAN AZANI, MICHAEL BARAK,
AND ASSAF MOGHADAM

FEATURE ANALYSIS

The Future of the Wagner Model in Africa

CHRISTOPHER FAULKNER, RAPHAEL PARENS, AND MARCEL PLICHTA

Contents

FEATURE ARTICLE

1 CTC-ICT Focus on Israel: In Word and Deed? Global Jihad and the Threat to Israel and the Jewish Community

LORENA ATIYAS-LVOVSKY, EITAN AZANI, MICHAEL BARAK, AND ASSAF MOGHADAM

FEATURE ANALYSIS

13 After Prigozhin: The Future of the Wagner Model in Africa

CHRISTOPHER FAULKNER, RAPHAEL PARENS, AND MARCEL PLICHTA

ANALYSIS

22 The Islamic State's Shadow Governance in Eastern Syria Since the Fall of Baghuz

AARON Y. ZELIN AND DEVORAH MARGOLIN

FROM THE EDITOR

In this month's feature article, Lorena Atiyas-Lvovsky, Eitan Azani, Michael Barak, and Assaf Moghadam find that "jihadi rhetoric is rarely translated into violent attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets ... The relative dearth of successful operations, however, has not deterred global jihadi organizations from regularly leveraging the Palestinian issue for political gain, and in order to reinforce their stature as powerful actors in the Middle Eastern and global arenas. Despite jihadi lip service to the Palestinian cause, support for global jihad among Arab Israelis and Palestinians has remained relatively low. Physical and ideological barriers erected by Israel and the Jewish community have so far limited the capacity of global jihadi actors to operate against Israel and the Jewish community."

Christopher Faulkner, Raphael Parens, and Marcel Plichta explore the future of the Wagner Group in Africa after the death of its founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin. They write: "Wagner personnel in Africa appear poised to carry on their original missions given the importance of the continent to Russia's broader strategic ambitions. Though the mercenary mutiny and Prigozhin's death may lead clients to raise questions about what a continued partnership with Wagner means for relations with the Kremlin, Moscow has signaled a tolerance, if not need, for Wagner or a Wagner-like entity in Africa. Abandoning Wagner clients would severely undermine Russia's influence on the continent."

Aaron Zelin and Devorah Margolin explore the Islamic State's shadow governance in eastern Syria since the group lost its last piece of territory in the country in 2019. They write: "While it is true that the organization's insurgency has been degraded in recent years, only focusing on the Islamic State's attack claims and propaganda misses an important trend happening at the local level: ... the Islamic State has continued attempts to govern as shadow actors in eastern Syria." They warn that thanks to these efforts, "even if it sounds far-fetched now, a reasonable worst-case scenario is that the Islamic State could rapidly take advantage of a changed local context to attempt to carve out a small statelet in eastern Syria again."

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Cover: *The Israeli flag is pictured in Tel Aviv, Israel, on May 8, 2008. (Ariel Schalit/AP Photo)*

CTC-ICT Focus on Israel: In Word and Deed? Global Jihad and the Threat to Israel and the Jewish Community

By Lorena Atiyas-Lvovsky, Eitan Azani, Michael Barak, and Assaf Moghadam

Since the emergence of the global jihad movement, global jihadis have expressed their enmity to “Zionists”—jihadi code for Israel and the Jewish community worldwide—through ideological declarations and operations on the ground. Examining the correlation between global jihadi rhetoric and operational activities against Israel and the Jewish community, the present study explores the degree to which the “Zionist cause” is important for global jihadis. In the process, it contributes to understanding why, how, and when extremist language is translated into violence. The study finds that the Palestinian issue and specific “trigger events” related to the Arab-Israeli conflict tend to generate favorable declarations on the part of both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, but that jihadi rhetoric is rarely translated into violent attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets. Of the two main jihadi organizations, the Islamic State has the better track record of striking Jewish and Israeli targets, although the Islamic State’s “anti-Zionist” campaign can hardly be deemed a success. The relative dearth of successful operations, however, has not deterred global jihadi organizations from regularly leveraging the Palestinian issue for political gain, and in order to reinforce their stature as powerful actors in the Middle Eastern and global arenas. Despite jihadi lip service to the Palestinian cause, support for global jihad among Arab Israelis and Palestinians has remained relatively low. Physical and ideological barriers erected by Israel and the Jewish community have so far limited the capacity of global jihadi actors to operate against Israel and the Jewish community.

From its early development in the 1980s to the present, the global jihad movement has exhibited a deep antagonism toward Jews and Israel. Global jihadis have expressed their enmity to “Zionists”—jihadi shorthand for the State of Israel and the Jewish community writ large—both in their ideological pronouncements and in operations on the ground.¹ While the anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli stance of global jihadis in both word and deed is well documented, the relationship between verbal denunciation of Israel and Jews and violent anti-Jewish and anti-Israel actions is less understood.

To address this gap, this article traces the correlation between “anti-Zionist” rhetoric on the part of global jihadis and their operations against Israeli and Jewish targets. Understanding the links between jihadi words and deeds in this context has important implications for policy: Not only can such insights help

practitioners better assess the threat of jihad against Israel and the Jewish community, but they can provide scholars with a better understanding of why, how, and when extremist language translates into physical violence, thereby shedding greater light on the drivers of terrorist violence more broadly.

To explore this question, the authors reviewed official publications of the two leading jihadi organizations, the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida. The analysis covers the period from 2014 to July 2023 in the case of the Islamic State, and from 1988 to July 2023 for al-Qa`ida. The authors reviewed published texts in four major jihadi outlets: the first two, As-Sahab Media and Al-Malahim Media Outlet, are affiliated with al-Qa`ida leadership and al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), respectively. The other two, Al-Furqan media outlet and Al Naba weekly magazine, are affiliated with the Islamic State. As official mouthpieces of the two leading global jihadi organizations today, these sources serve as an

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Authors’ Note: The authors dedicate this article to the memory of Shabtai Shavit, former director of the Mossad (1989-1996) and chairman of the board of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (1996-2023). Mr. Shavit passed away on September 5, 2023.

Editor’s Note: This article is the fourth in a series of articles and interviews 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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authoritative guide to global jihadi followers. These outlets help shape the policies of al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State, their affiliates and associates, and those of other jihadi entities. All four are also known to have prominently covered Jewish, Israeli, and Palestinian issues. Specifically, the authors compared the timing of the publication of relevant articles and statements with the timing and impact of global jihadi attacks in Israel, as well as attacks on Jewish and Israeli targets outside of Israel. The study also examines the impact of global jihadi attacks on statements of the organization's senior officials. The authors applied a timespan of six months since the date of the publication in order to assess the possible mutual effects between jihadi pronouncements and operations against Jewish and Israeli targets.

As far as the operational activities of the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida are concerned, this study examines various levels of militant activities, from recruitment and emigration to jihadi theaters to training. The examined operational activities also include the initiation of specific attacks and the planning and execution of attacks by jihadi operatives, including lone attackers inspired by these groups. Notably, the authors include both successful and unsuccessful attacks as well as thwarted plots in this empirical study. The study also covers arrests on Israeli soil of terrorist operatives, such as those who established a terrorist cell and planned attacks, and of individuals who have expressed support for global jihad, as they may harbor information that can be useful in generating a more complete picture of terrorist motivations and capabilities.^a For the purpose of this study, no differentiation is made between these different levels of involvement, despite the fact that they can represent different levels of organizational and operational capabilities and threats.

The study also examines the impact of key political and security-related events in Israel on the jihadi ideological climate and operations on the ground. Examples include the Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000-2005) and major military operations launched by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) against militant Palestinian groups. These include Operations Cast Lead (December 2008-January 2009), Pillar of Defense (November 2012), Protective Edge (July-August 2014), and Guardian of the Walls (May 2021). Additional major events covered in the study are the wave of knife attacks in Israel, sometimes referred to as the "Knives Intifada" (2015-2016); the Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital

of Israel in December 2017, and the subsequent move of the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (May 2018); the so-called "Deal of the Century" and the signing of the Abraham Accords between Israel and several Arab and Muslim states (2020); and other important dates, for example Israel's Independence Day (referred to by Palestinians as "al-Nakba," or "The Catastrophe") and anniversaries of major peace agreements.

This article begins with some observations on the gaps between jihadi pronouncements and violent actions with respect to Israel and the Jewish community. This will be followed by an in-depth analysis of al-Qa`ida's statements and operational activities, divided into three main periods: the foundational period (1988-2000); the "second decade" from the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000 to the 'Arab Spring' revolutions in 2011; and the post-Arab Spring period from 2011 to July 2023. The authors then conduct a similar analysis for the Islamic State, divided into two periods: an early period that spans the declaration of the Islamic Caliphate in 2014 to its collapse in 2017; and a later, post-Caliphate phase spanning the years from 2018 to July 2023. The final section presents the authors' conclusions.

Israel and the Jews First?

The global jihad and its constituent organizations such as al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State are no strangers to criticism for their apparent failure to prioritize Israel in their broader struggle against the 'unbelievers.' Both organizations tend to respond to these accusations apologetically, explaining that the Palestinian issue and the jihad against Israel have not been forgotten, but merely postponed to a later stage in the jihadi struggle. In March 2009, Usama bin Ladin explained that due to peace agreements in place between Israel and several of its Arab neighbors, Israeli borders have been difficult for the mujahideen to penetrate. Consequently, according to bin Ladin the jihadis were prioritizing the toppling of local regimes so that they could establish a staging ground for future attacks against Israel.² The idea to postpone the fight against Israel was also reflected in the "Seven Stage Plan" devised by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his cohort, initially published by Jordanian journalist Fuad Hussein in 2005. Envisioned by al-Qa`ida as a strategy to establish an Islamic caliphate, the Seven Stage Plan made numerous references to the struggle against Israel. In the third and fourth stages, for example, the plan referred to both direct operations against the State of Israel, as well as plans to strike at Israel indirectly, namely by harming the U.S. economy (i.e., striking Israel via its key ally).³

The Islamic State has felt similarly compelled to explain to the broader jihadi community its failure to stage high-profile attacks against its Zionist archenemy thus far. In a 2016 article posted by Al-Wafa, an Islamic State-supporting media outlet, the group cited two main reasons: First, difficulties penetrating Israeli territory due to a "defensive envelope" provided by the Syrian, Jordanian, Saudi, and Egyptian militaries, and even by the Lebanese Shi`a militia Hezbollah. The second excuse given by the Islamic State was its preoccupation with the fight against coalition forces, mainly in Iraq and Syria, which diverted resources away from the fight against the Jewish state. As a result, the Islamic State insinuated that it would be best to wait for it to build up a foothold on the ruins of the "near enemy" in order to be better prepared for the attack on Israel, even if this would take more than a decade.⁴

a This article covers successful attacks as well as unsuccessful attacks (i.e., attacks that were executed but that did not cause harm). It also covers cases where the attacker was unable to use his weapon, in which case the attack can be considered a failed attack. In addition, this article also includes attempted attacks (i.e., attacks that were thwarted before the execution). Based only on open-sources intelligence acknowledged by the Israeli government or in serious press accounts, the authors were able to gather data on such attacks by access to information about the arrest of a terrorist/cell that planned an attack. These attacks have not reached the final stage of execution and are therefore considered an attempt to carry out an attack (but not an actual attack that took place). Arrests on Israeli soil of individuals for activities linked to global jihad (i.e., al-Qa`ida- and Islamic State-related activity) reported by Israeli authorities were also included. There may be additional thwarted plots and arrests not included in this article. On the importance of including failed attacks in studies of terrorism, see, for example, Petter Nesser, "Introducing the Jihadi Plots in Europe Dataset (JPED)," *Journal of Peace Research*, January 31, 2023. See also Erik J. Dahl, "The Plots that Failed: Intelligence Lessons Learned from Unsuccessful Terrorist Attacks Against the United States," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34:8 (2011).

Al-Qa`ida

Al-Qa`ida in its First Decade: From its Formation (1988) until the Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000)

In the period between al-Qa`ida's 1988 formation up to the Al-Aqsa Intifada, the al-Qa`ida leadership touched upon the Israeli and Palestinian issues on several occasions. Generally speaking, the leadership highlighted the importance of waging jihad against Israel and liberating Palestine and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. It also criticized the establishment of ties between Israel and Arab countries (December 1994,⁵ January 1995,⁶ August 1998,⁷ November 1998).⁸ Bin Ladin's February 23, 1998, announcement of the formation of a "World Islamic front for jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders" is one of the more prominent examples of this expression.^{9b}

Prior to 9/11, activists who evidently agreed with these messages made relatively few attempts to conduct attacks on Israeli territory, and these were foiled by successful intelligence and counter terrorism activities. In 1997, for example, five young Jordanians of Palestinian descent were arrested for planning to enter Israel and perpetrate attacks on its soil.¹⁰ In 2000, several arrests were recorded, including those of three young men who, separately from one another, planned attacks on Israeli territory. All three had trained in jihadi training camps in Afghanistan.¹¹ The first decade after al-Qa`ida's formation also witnessed a number of attempts to

target Israeli and Jewish targets outside of Israel, including plots to target the Israeli embassy in Bangkok (March 1994), a synagogue (1994) and a Jewish school (1995) in France, and Israeli tourist destinations in Jordan (1995, 1999) and Egypt (1996), among others.¹²

Notwithstanding the occasional references to Israel and to Jews in general, the first period under review featured relatively few announcements directed specifically against the "Zionist enemy" when compared to later periods in al-Qa`ida's timeline. This relative dearth of attention to the Jewish and Israeli issue was most likely a result of the group's efforts to establish itself in Afghanistan and its decision to focus its activities on the United States. Furthermore, in the period before 9/11, al-Qa`ida decided to allocate resources for international attacks toward the establishment of terrorist cells in other countries and in the West. Another likely factor is that throughout most of the pre-9/11 period, Israel was engaged in the early stages of a peace process with the Palestinians, during which time there were relatively few significant security events that al-Qa`ida could exploit to benefit its brand. This would change with the Al-Aqsa Intifada that erupted in October 2000.

Al-Qa`ida in its Second Decade: From the Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000) to the Arab Spring (2011)

Between 2000 and 2011, a period roughly corresponding to al-Qa`ida's second decade of existence, the group's propaganda continued to be directed in part at Israel and the Jews. More often than during the founding period, these messages seemed to relate to important events associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

b It should be noted that in August 1996, bin Ladin declared jihad against the United States.

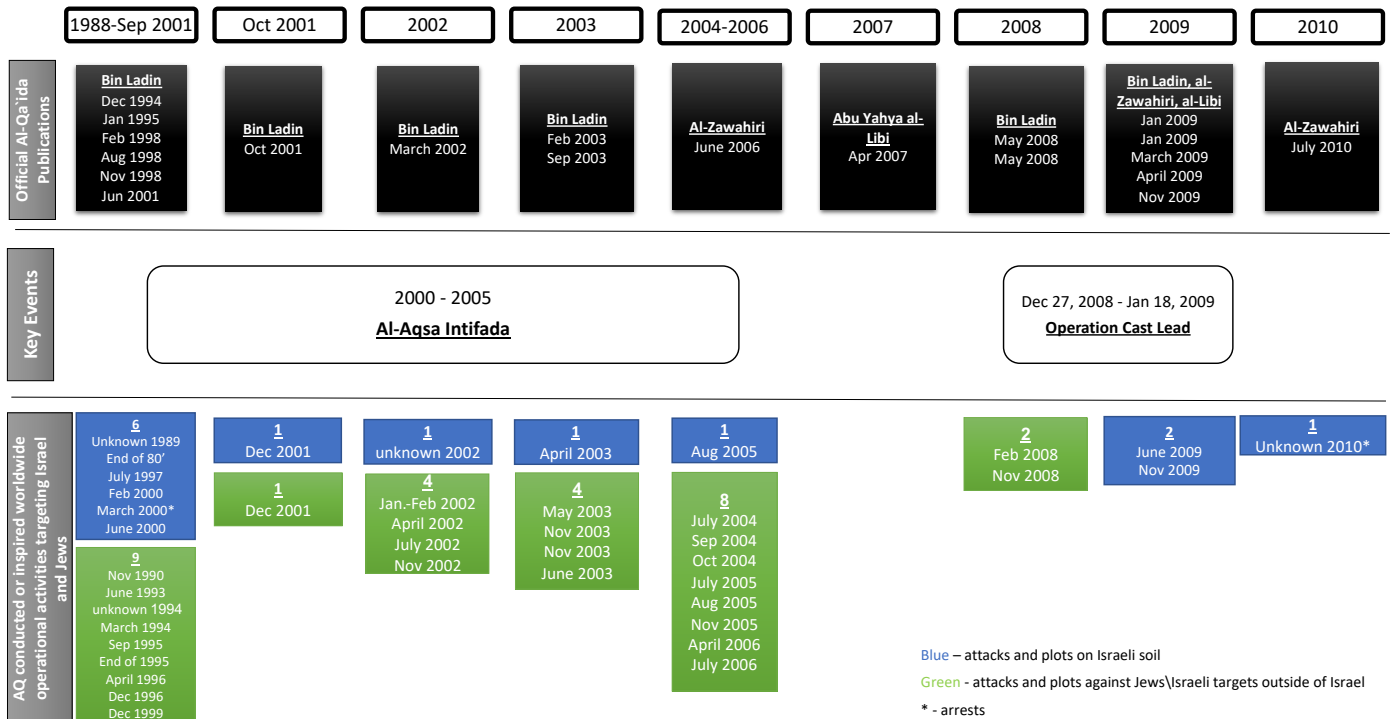


Figure 1: Al-Qa`ida's Words and Deeds Against Israel and the Jewish Community in its First Two Decades: For the period between al-Qa`ida's founding in 1988 and 2010, this graphic shows the dates of al-Qa`ida's official publications with relevance to Israel and the Jews (row 1), key relevant events such as the Al-Aqsa Intifada (row 2), and the dates of al-Qa`ida-conducted or -inspired worldwide operational activities targeting Israel and Jews (row 3). This last row encompasses (i) attacks and attempted attacks on Israeli soil; (ii) attacks and attempted attacks against Jews/Israeli targets outside of Israel; and (iii) arrests of operatives on Israeli soil for al-Qa`ida-related activity. Note: "Unknown" refers to arrests in which cases the authors were not able to identify a specific date.

Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000-2005)

Al-Qa`ida exploited the Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000-2005) as an opportunity to portray itself as a champion of the Palestinian cause. In October 2001, for example, bin Ladin pushed for the continuation of the intifada and clarified that jihad against Israel was a religious obligation for every Muslim.¹³ In March 2002¹⁴ and February 2003,¹⁵ he again praised the intifada and called for the deaths of Jews and Americans. On September 3, 2003, a few days before the second anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, his then-second in command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, addressed the importance of the Palestinian struggle and the jihad against Israel in a tape published by Al-Jazeera.¹⁶

However, the Palestinian issue, while prominent, was hardly the sole, or even the main, focus for the group in this period. Nevertheless, in the 2000s the group conducted more attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets than before, and in more diverse theaters. In December 2001, Richard Reid attempted to blow up an American Airlines plane (Flight 63 from Paris to Miami) using explosives that were placed in his shoes. The investigation revealed that Reid visited Israel on an al-Qa`ida casing mission intended to gather intelligence on potential targets.¹⁷ In January 2002, Jewish-American *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl was kidnapped by militants in Pakistan while investigating the Reid case. Pearl was beheaded on February 1, likely by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.¹⁸ In April 2002, a suicide attack was carried out near the Old Synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia. Another major suicide attack occurred in November 2002, when a car bomb exploded near Mombasa, Kenya, while other operatives attempted to shoot down an Israeli Arkia airliner using two surface-to-air missiles. Jihadi actors also tried striking inside Israel but were thwarted by Israeli, Jordanian, and Egyptian security services.¹⁹ Not all of these attacks were carried out directly by al-Qa`ida, but attacks were clearly inspired by the group. The July 2004 suicide bombings against the Israeli and American embassies in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, exemplify this point.²⁰

In the summer of 2006, the Second Lebanon War gave al-Qa`ida another reason to voice its opposition to Israel. Al-Zawahiri used the opportunity of Israel's confrontation with Hezbollah to condemn what he called "Israeli aggression" against Lebanon and the Palestinians and called on Muslims to attack Jewish targets around the world.²¹ Al-Qa`ida also inserted itself into the growing Palestinian rift between Fatah and Hamas, which led to Hamas' forceful rule of Gaza and rising tensions between the group and Israeli/Jewish interests. On April 27, 2007, Abu Yahya al-Libi, a senior al-Qa`ida member, reprimanded Hamas leadership for being a nationalist movement and called upon it to cling to its Islamic identity, to implement sharia law, and to wage jihad against Israel.²² Less than a year later, in March 2008, bin Ladin issued a call to break the siege that Israel had imposed on Gaza and clarified that the liberation of Iraq from the American occupation would help bring about the liberation of Palestine.²³ In May 2008, on the 60th anniversary of Israel's independence, bin Ladin called again to remove the siege from Gaza and stressed the need to defend Jerusalem, liberate Palestine from the Jews through jihad, and preserve unity within the Muslim ranks.²⁴

Following Operation Cast Lead (December 2008-January 2009), in January and April 2009 bin Ladin and Abu Yahya al-Libi condemned the Israeli attacks in Gaza and re-emphasized the need for a continued jihad against Israel.²⁵ In March 2009, some two months after the conclusion of Operation Cast Lead, bin Ladin

posted a strategic plan for the liberation of Palestine and the holy Islamic sites.²⁶ In July 2010, al-Zawahiri cautioned that Jerusalem was on its way to becoming Jewish. He further berated Israelis for allegedly scheming to destroy the al-Aqsa Mosque, criticized the Arab and Muslim regimes for remaining silent in the face of this supposed plot, and called upon Palestinian and other jihadis to actively counteract it.²⁷

Al-Qa`ida also commented on significant historic events related to Israel. In April 2009, on the 30th anniversary of the signing of the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement, al-Zawahiri renounced any agreement between Arab countries and Israel and called for the toppling of the Egyptian regime and the continuation of jihad against Israel. In November of the same year, on the anniversary of the famed Balfour Declaration, al-Zawahiri labeled Israel an illegitimate entity against which every Muslim has a religious duty to wage individual jihad.²⁸

Despite the repeated calls for a holy war against Israel, al-Qa`ida's attempts to stoke the flames did not translate into large-scale "anti-Zionist" activity, save for a few exceptions. One such exception was an attack in Israel in November 2009, when a small cell of Arab Israelis who identified with al-Qa`ida's ideology murdered Israeli citizen Yafim Weinstein and planned additional attacks.²⁹ Similarly, there were only a few, and largely non-lethal, attacks on Jewish and Israeli targets overseas. In February 2008, for example, three jihadis attacked the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott, Mauritania, wounding three local residents in the process but failing to injure any embassy personnel.³⁰ By far the most gruesome attack against a Jewish target was carried out by another jihadi group, Lashkar-e-Taiba, which stormed the Chabad House in Mumbai as part of the November 2008 Mumbai attacks, massacring a Jewish couple along with several other hostages.³¹

Al-Qa`ida in its Third Decade: From the Arab Spring to Present (2011- July 2023)

The third decade of al-Qa`ida's existence was accompanied by a rise in the number of statements by its leadership regarding Israel and the Jewish community. The period also coincided with a number of key events.

The "Arab Spring"

The dramatic events initially referred to as the "Arab Spring" prompted continued calls on the part of the al-Qa`ida leadership in support of the Palestinian cause. Upon his appointment as the leader of al-Qa`ida in July 2011, Ayman al-Zawahiri called for renewed efforts aimed at liberating Palestine. In February 2012, he encouraged jihadi attacks on the Israeli-Egyptian gas pipeline in the Sinai. In the same statement, he also called for the annulment of the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement and the waging of jihad against the Jewish state—a call that he repeated in June 2012.³² On September 13, 2012, in a statement timed to coincide with the 11th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, al-Zawahiri demanded that the United States stop supporting Israel, decried the Jewish settlement in Palestine and the destruction of the al-Aqsa Mosque, and called upon all jihadis to collaborate in the liberation of Palestine.³³ A month later, the al-Qa`ida leadership again called on Muslims around the globe to act against the United States and Israel,³⁴ followed by another statement in late October 2012, in which al-Zawahiri stressed that the liberation of Palestine and the return to Jerusalem leads through the gates of Cairo and Damascus.³⁵

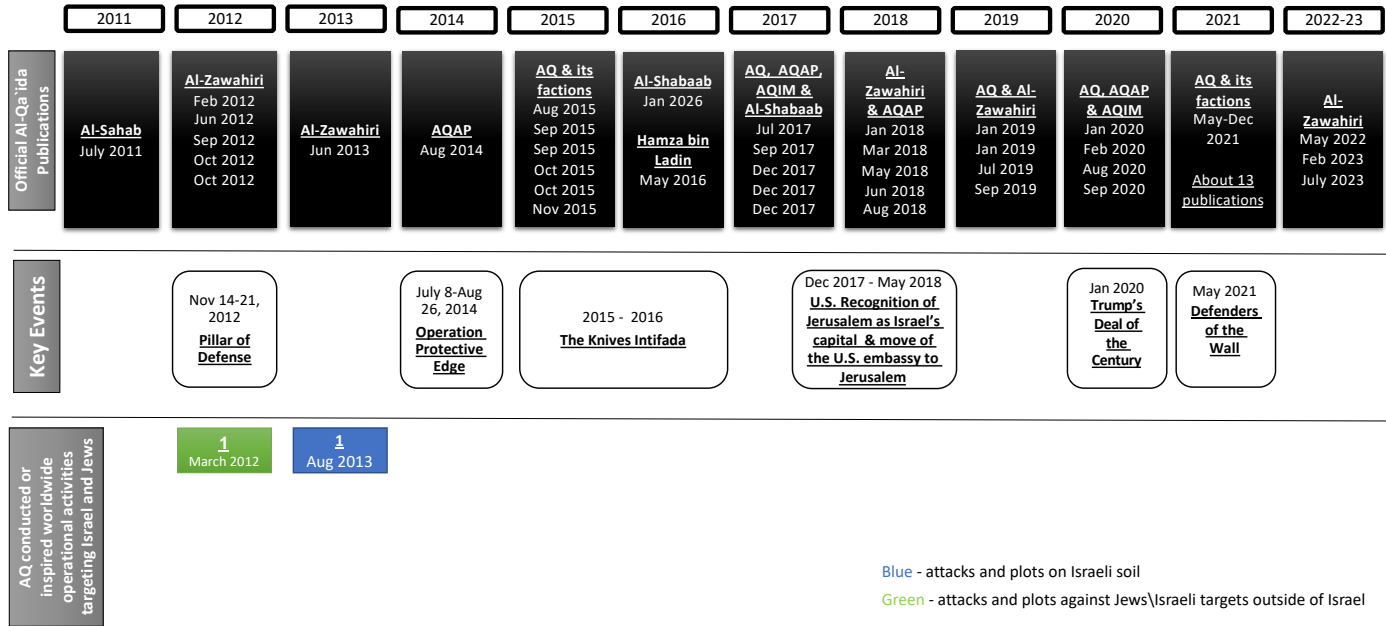


Figure 2: Al-Qa`ida's Words and Deeds Against Israel and the Jewish Community in its Third Decade: For the period between the 2011 and July 2023, this graphic shows the dates of al-Qa`ida's official publications with relevance to Israel and the Jews (row 1), key relevant events such as the Knives Intifada (row 2), and the dates of al-Qa`ida-conducted or -inspired worldwide operational activities targeting Israel and Jews (row 3). This last row encompasses (i) attacks and attempted attacks on Israeli soil; (ii) attacks and attempted attacks against Jews/Israeli targets outside of Israel; and (iii) arrests of operatives on Israeli soil for al-Qa`ida-related activity. Note that there were no such arrests during this period.

Al-Zawahiri reappeared in another message timed to coincide with Israel's 65th Independence Day, in which he advocated the construction of a jihadi military base on Syrian territory to assist in the destruction of the Jewish state.³⁶ In October 2015, AQAP's Sheikh Hamed al-Othman al-Tamimi stated that the conditions to attain the liberation of Palestine had not been fulfilled yet because the priority was to act against the Arab regimes.³⁷ In November of that year, al-Zawahiri stressed that the liberation of Palestine and al-Aqsa were conditional upon the success of the jihad in Syria, adding that the formation of an 'Islamic' regime in Syria would enable moving to the next step, (i.e., confronting Israel).³⁸ In the same year, Hamza bin Ladin, son of Usama bin Ladin, echoed the call to focus on the jihad in Syria and encouraged lone-wolf attacks on Israeli soil and the West, describing jihad as a useful platform for the liberation of Jerusalem and al-Aqsa.³⁹

During the Arab Spring, al-Qa`ida leaders failed to successfully translate their frequent calls for action into assaults against Israel and the Jewish community, with the exception of one fatal terrorist attack carried out in March 2012. In a shooting spree in Toulouse, France, Mohammed Merah attacked a Jewish school and killed seven people, including three Jewish schoolchildren and a rabbi.⁴⁰

Israeli Military Operations in Gaza

Operation Pillar of Defense (November 2012)^c did not generate

any comments in prominent official jihadi publications. On July 17, 2014, against the backdrop of Operation Protective Edge (July 8-August 26, 2014),^d AQAP voiced its solidarity with the inhabitants of Gaza and called upon Muslims to assist the Palestinians in their war against the Jewish state.⁴¹ On August 16, 2014, AQAP's Al-Malahim Media Outlet published a special English-language publication titled "Palestine" that included a condemnation of Israel's policy concerning the Palestinians and the alliance of Arab countries with Israel and culminated in a call to wage jihad against the Jewish state. The AQAP propagandists also used the platform to argue that jihadi operatives could not join the fight against Israel due to the American and Arab regimes' involvement in Palestine. It would be best to focus on fighting the United States, the AQAP propagandists opined, and take the fight to Israel only once the opportunity arose.⁴²

In August 2015, Hamza bin Ladin called upon Muslims around the world to strike at Jews in all countries in order to assist their Palestinian brothers in the struggle against Israel.⁴³ During this period and despite these calls, no attacks or attempted attacks were carried out directly by al-Qa`ida against Israel or Jews, with the exception of several rockets launched on northern Israel by the al-Qa`ida-affiliated "Abdullah Azzam Brigades" in August 22, 2013. These rockets, however, were not launched in the context of IDF military operations in Gaza.⁴⁴

c On November 14, 2012, the IDF launched Operation Pillar of Defense, beginning with the elimination of Ahmed Jabari, head of the Hamas military branch in the Gaza Strip. More than 1,500 rockets were fired at Israel by Gazan terrorists, with over 400 rockets intercepted by the Iron Dome Aerial Defense System. During the eight-day operation, six Israeli civilians were killed and 240 others were injured (civilians and soldiers). "Operation Pillar of Defense," Israel Defense Forces, October 30, 2017.

d On July 8, 2014, the IDF launched Operation Protective Edge with fighting that lasted nearly 50 days on land and in the air. Over 4,500 rockets were fired at Israel; 692 rockets were intercepted by the Iron Dome Aerial Defense System. Six civilians were killed, and over 1,600 civilians were injured. "Operation Protective Edge," Israel Defense Forces, October 30, 2017; "The 2014 Gaza Conflict: Factual and Legal Aspects," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.

Security Escalations Inside Israel and Political Events Concerning Jerusalem

The Knives Intifada (2015-2016): During the 2015-2016 period, Israel faced a wave of apparent “lone wolf” attacks that became known as the “Knives Intifada.” In its wake, al-Qa`ida published a relatively large number of publications referring to the Palestinian issue. On November 1, 2015, for example, al-Zawahiri called for defending the sanctity of al-Aqsa from Jewish aggression. The liberation of Palestine and al-Aqsa, he stated, would be made possible after the fulfillment of three main conditions: (1) striking Western, and especially U.S., interests and territories around the world; (2) establishing an ‘Islamic’ state in Egypt and the Levant; and (3) uniting the ranks of the *mujahideen*.⁴⁵ Several al-Qa`ida affiliates voiced their opinions in a similar vein. In September 2015, for example, senior AQAP member Khalid Batarfi called upon Palestinians to continue their jihad against Israel, warned Muslims about a supposed Israeli scheme to settle Palestine with Jews, and called upon the *umma* to assist the Palestinians.⁴⁶ In May 2016, AQAP continued to voice its support for the Palestinian knife attacks on Israelis.⁴⁷ Similarly, in October 2015, al-Shabaab, al-Qa`ida’s affiliate in Somalia, called upon Muslims to rise up, seize the initiative, and act to liberate al-Aqsa and other occupied territories in Palestine through an armed jihad against the Jews in Israel and around the world. On January 25, 2016, al-Shabaab again encouraged Palestinian attacks in Israel and called on Muslims to target Jews living in Israel.⁴⁸

The Temple Mount Events of 2017: In July 2017, the Israeli government temporarily closed the entrance to the Temple Mount to Muslims and made Muslim entry onto the Plaza conditional upon all visitors undergoing a scan with a metal detector. In the aftermath of that decision, violent anti-Jewish riots by Israeli Arabs erupted, with a noticeable impact on al-Qa`ida discourse on Israel. In his criticism of the closure of the al-Aqsa compound to Muslims, senior AQAP official Batarfi accused Arab regimes of encouraging Israel’s oppressive policy by remaining silent on the subject and encouraged Palestinians to keep attacking Jews either with knives, by car-ramming attacks, or by other means.⁴⁹

The December 2017 U.S. Recognition of Jerusalem as the Capital of Israel leading through to the May 2018 move of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem: The Trump administration’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel in December 2017 greatly affected the discourse of al-Qa`ida and its affiliates. The latter used this opportunity to reinforce the narrative that Israel’s aggressive policy against the Palestinians was enabled in large part by American support, which underscored the need to fight a jihad against both countries.

In March 2018, AQAP stressed that “one must not forget the role of the U.S., the head of the snake, that protects the Jews, as manifested by the American determination to make Jerusalem the capital of the Jews.”⁵⁰ It argued that to foil the U.S.-Israeli scheme, the killing spree against Jews, as had been recently exemplified by the killing of an Israeli rabbi by a Palestinian squad in January 2018, should continue.⁵¹ In April 2018, it was al-Shabaab leader Abu Ubaidah’s turn to address the Palestinians. Abu Ubaidah called upon the enemies of Israel to keep attacking the Jewish strongholds in Jerusalem and the Golan Heights.⁵² On May 13, 2018, al-Zawahiri stressed that Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are part of the Muslim lands, and therefore Muslims must act to liberate them.⁵³ On June 6, 2018, al-Shabaab emir Abu Ubaidah again encouraged Palestinians to

resist Israel and the Jews by perpetrating attacks in both Israel and around the world.⁵⁴ He made a similar call in December 2018 against the backdrop of the warming relationship between Israel and the Saudi government⁵⁵ and again in September 2019 on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. In a September 2019 statement, al-Zawahiri called for attacks against Israelis worldwide and on Israeli and American embassies and interests.⁵⁶

In January 2019, al-Qa`ida’s leadership launched a propaganda campaign titled “Jerusalem will Never be Jewish,” which was accompanied by some military operations by several al-Qa`ida affiliates. For example, when commenting on an attack perpetrated by al-Shabaab against a U.S. military base in Manda Bay, Kenya, on January 20, 2020, al-Qa`ida’s Somali affiliate said that the attack had been perpetrated partially in response to the American recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and Israel’s annexation of the Golan Heights.⁵⁷

The “Deal of the Century:” In May 2018 and February 2019, the United States published a partial draft for a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians that the Trump Administration later referred to as the “Deal of the Century,” the complete draft of which was published in January 2020. Reacting to the U.S.-led initiative and the promotion of the “deal” by the Trump Administration, al-Qa`ida’s leadership and its affiliates issued a number of releases. These included calls for armed struggle against American and Israeli interests as well as appeals to Muslims to embark on a jihad against Israel in order to foil the Deal of the Century and liberate Palestine from the grip of the Jews.⁵⁸ For example, in May 2020, in its magazine al-Umma al-Wahida,⁵⁹ which is mostly dedicated to the topics of Jerusalem and Palestine, the al-Qa`ida leadership called for a global Muslim uprising against the “Deal of the Century” and a tenacious struggle against Israel and its allies.

The Normalization between Israel and Arab Regimes: Beginning around 2015, several Arab and Muslim countries warmed their relationship with Israel. The normalization process culminated in the ceremonial signing of the so-called Abraham Accords in September 2020 and the execution of peace agreements with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. Unsurprisingly, the process was condemned by al-Qa`ida, which issued various statements denouncing these agreements.⁶⁰ In August 2020, Ibrahim al-Qusi, a senior AQAP member, called upon Muslims to assassinate the UAE’s then de-facto leader Mohammed bin Zayed and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for allowing a thaw in their respective countries’ relationships with Israel.⁶¹

Operation Guardian of the Walls^f (May 2021): Similar to other Israeli military operations, Operation Guardian of the Walls, which began in May 2021, led to a dramatic increase in the number of statements by al-Qa`ida and its affiliates. For example, during May and June 2021, the leadership of al-Qa`ida, AQAP, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and al-Shabaab posted multiple posts regarding their support of the Palestinians’ struggle against

e The attack perpetrated by al-Shabaab on January 15, 2019, against the Riverside Drive business complex in Nairobi, Kenya, was also dedicated to the above campaign. “The Blesses Manda Bay Raid,” Al-Kataib, January 29, 2021.

f Operation Guardian of the Walls started with rockets fired from the Gaza Strip toward Jerusalem on May 10, 2021. The operation lasted 12 days, in which the Gazan Terrorist organizations launched almost 4,400 rockets at Israel. “Operation Guardian of the Walls,” Israel Defense Forces, June 14, 2021.

Israel and called for a continued jihad against it.⁶² On September 11, 2021, al-Zawahiri posted a video on the Palestinian issue, in which he expressed support for a jihad against Israel and called for the preservation of the Islamic identity of al-Aqsa.⁶³ On November 23, 2021, he condemned what he viewed as U.N. support of Israeli crimes against Palestinians. He claimed that the United Nations exhibited partiality toward Israel by acknowledging its sovereignty while simultaneously legitimizing its occupation of Palestine. He further contended that the United Nations' military forces acted as a buffer zone between Israel and the *mujahideen* within the borders with Israel. This statement reflected his perspective on the role of the United Nations in the longstanding Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Al-Qa`ida continued to issue statements against Israel into 2023, a time of heightened tension that saw an increase in attacks by Palestinian militants against an Israel governed by an outspokenly right-wing government coalition. In January 23, 2023, a posthumous call by al-Zawahiri was published calling on Muslims to inflict pain on Israel and its allies and defend the holy sites in Palestine.⁶⁴ Al-Qa`ida's most recent speech on the subject was published in July 2023 by Sheikh Ibrahim al-Qusi, a senior member of AQAP, supporting what he viewed as the struggle of the Palestinians against the Jews, including the settlers. In the video, he encouraged the continuation of suicide attacks until the liberation of all Palestine and expressed criticism of Muslims for not helping the Palestinians and even normalizing relations with Israel. He portrayed the struggle of the Palestinians against the Jews as part of global efforts by jihadis to change the secular world order.⁶⁵

In sum, al-Qa`ida's statements and publications on the importance of jihad against Jews, Israel, and the liberation of

Palestine have in recent times been a regular item on its agenda, and they largely correspond with security escalations and key political developments. Such statements reflect an attempt by al-Qa`ida to maintain awareness of the Palestinian issue and to 'ride the wave' of attacks in Israel so as to position the organization as an actor supporting the Palestinians' struggle. The statements tend to emphasize the need for jihadis to provide support to Palestinians by attacking Israel, but at the same time tend to stress that at present, the conditions for a full-blown attack on Israel, or even a strategic focus on Israel, are not met.

The Islamic State

The authors' review of information posted by the Islamic State on the topic of Israel suggests that the Palestinian issue has not featured prominently in its propaganda, even though Israel and Jewish communities are mentioned regularly among the list of the group's enemies. Most Islamic State efforts to expand the caliphate concentrated on other theaters—particularly Syria and Iraq, and later Africa, likely because of the need to establish control within the caliphate's territory and the difficulties in carrying out attacks within Israel's borders. As explained in an article published by Al-Wafa Institute, an Islamic State-supporting media outlet, in many cases Islamic State statements corresponded with events that took place in Israel (e.g., the Knives Intifada). The authors' analysis suggests that in some cases, these statements seemed to be translated into attacks against specific targets in Israel, as well as Jewish targets abroad.

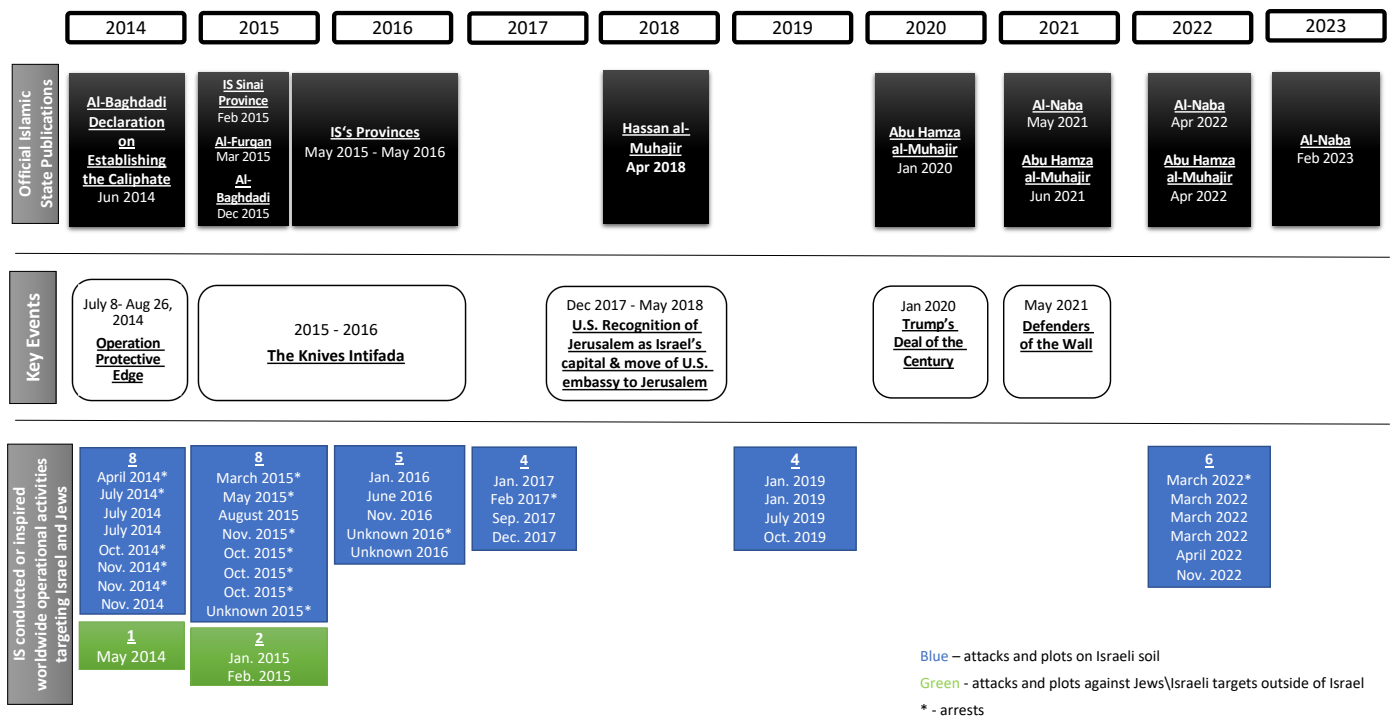


Figure 3: The Islamic State's Words and Deeds Against Israel and the Jewish Community: For the period between the 2014 and July 2023, this graphic shows the dates of Islamic State official publications with relevance to Israel and the Jews (row 1), key relevant events such as the Knives Intifada (row 2), and the dates of Islamic State-conducted or -inspired worldwide operational activities targeting Israel and Jews (row 3). This last row encompasses (i) attacks and attempted attacks on Israeli soil; (ii) attacks and attempted attacks against Jews/Israeli targets outside of Israel; and (iii) arrests of operatives on Israeli soil for Islamic State-related activity. Note: "Unknown" refers to arrests that the authors were not able to locate their specific date.

From the Announcement of the Establishment of the Caliphate (2014) until its Fall (2017)

The announcement of the establishment of the caliphate in June 2014 and the group's call to Muslims around the world to flock to jihadi "theaters of operations"⁶⁶ sparked a wave of immigration to Syria and Iraq that included tens of thousands of foreign fighters. Among these volunteers for jihad were dozens of Arab Israelis who made attempts to emigrate to active combat zones involving the Islamic State, although their number was small in comparison to the response rate from other Arab and Muslim communities. Still, by one assessment, some 40 Arab-Israelis went to fight in Syria in 2014 alone. Some were killed, and as far as is known, those who returned to Israel were arrested.⁶⁷ Supporters of global jihad acted against Israeli and Jewish targets prior to the establishment of the caliphate, with the May 2014 attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels being the most prominent example.⁶⁸ The caliphate announcement created an atmosphere that significantly increased the number of attacks and attempted attacks on Israel and Jews.

After the announcement of the establishment of the caliphate in June 2014, there was a noticeable increase in anti-Israel activity on the part of Islamic State supporters in Sinai and Gaza. For example, the Gazan group Jamaat Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Bait al-Maqdis took responsibility for a number of rockets launched from Gaza into civilian populations in Sderot, Beersheba, and Ashkelon at the beginning of July 2014.⁶⁹ Islamic State Sinai Province (formerly Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, or Supporters of Jerusalem)^g also launched rockets into Israel.⁷⁰ In February 2015, the organization posted a video showing the execution and beheading of more than 10 Sinai residents who were accused of espionage on behalf of Israel's national intelligence agency, Mossad, and the Egyptian army.⁷¹ A similar video was posted by Al-Furqan media outlet in March 2015, which serves as a platform for official messages by the Islamic State. That video focused on an alleged Arab Israeli "spy" working for Mossad. One of the operatives appearing in the video declared in French that the Islamic State managed to hit a Jewish stronghold in France (a reference to the attack on the kosher "Hyper Cacher" supermarket in Paris in January 2015)⁷² and promised that the group would liberate al-Aqsa and Jerusalem from the hands of the Jews.⁷³ In terms of the Islamic State record of anti-Israel attacks in 2015, the group's Sinai Province was second to none.⁷⁴ Its messages portrayed Sinai as the gateway to Jerusalem.

Alongside the above, Arab Israelis attempted to emigrate to various jihadi theaters and also planned attacks against Israel from within the country while disseminating Islamic State propaganda.⁷⁵

Security Escalations Inside Israel and Political Events Concerning Jerusalem

The Knives Intifada (2015-2016): From the mid-2010s, the Islamic State emphasized a *modus operandi* of recruiting local Westerners to perpetrate attacks in their countries of origin, while providing the required planning and logistics infrastructure. With the establishment of the Islamic State, the call for lone-wolf attacks intensified, and the Islamic State dedicated multiple magazine

articles to discussing and advocating for the use of this tactic. During that period, and against the backdrop of the eruption of the wave of knife attacks in Israel in September 2015, there was a marked uptick of Islamic State statements relating to Israel. For example, the group posted videos calling for lone-wolf attacks against Jews and Israelis, as it did in October 2015, when the Islamic State posted a video in Hebrew calling for the slaughter of Jews and the abolition of the Sykes-Picot border between Israel and Jordan, among other threats.⁷⁶ These messages culminated in December 2015, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi called "to turn Palestine into a graveyard for its Jewish residents."⁷⁷ The speech may have inspired the first Islamic State attack of an Arab Israeli operative within Israel when, in January 2016, Nashat Melhem opened fire on Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Street, killing two and injuring six others.⁷⁸

In May 2016, the threats of attacks on Israel and Jews continued. For example, the Islamic State's then-top spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, warned: "Beware Jews. Every time when you recovered, got stronger and acted tyrannically and promiscuously, Allah struck you when you didn't expect it, and God's slaves served you bitter anguish. That is what Allah promised us and he is not one to break his promises."⁷⁹ The following month, in light of successful attacks on Jewish targets outside Israel (e.g., the May 2014 attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels and the January 2015 attack in the Hyper Cacher kosher supermarket in Paris) the Islamic State released a video warning that these attacks were the harbinger of further strikes against the enemies of the caliphate.^h In the following months, two lethal attacks were perpetrated inside Israel: The first took place in June 2016 in the Sarona area of Tel Aviv,⁸⁰ and the second occurred in the Armon Hanatziv neighborhood of Jerusalem in January 2017.⁸¹ The same period, from 2015 to 2017, also saw continuing arrests of Arab Israelis interested in joining the Islamic State in various jihadi arenas and of others who planned attacks, purchased weapons, or spread jihadi propaganda.⁸²

The Islamic State's Posture Against Israel and the Jews in the Post-Caliphate Era to the Present (2018-July 2023)

The second, post-caliphate period of the Islamic State has been marked by a decrease in the volume of Islamic State statements concerning Israel and the Jews. Nevertheless, geopolitical events related to Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict kept these issues on the group's ideological agenda and contributed to isolated operational activities.

Security Escalations Inside Israel and Political Events Concerning Jerusalem

The December 2017 U.S. Recognition of Jerusalem as the Capital of Israel Leading Through to the May 2018 Move of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem: In April 2018, Islamic State spokesperson Hassan al-Muhajir sought to boost his comrades' fighting morale when he condemned the Trump administration's decision to move the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. He promised that the Islamic State intended to liberate

g When it was first established at the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Egyptian jihadi organization pledged allegiance to al-Qa'ida, but in November 2014, it pledged its allegiance to the Islamic State and its then leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. See Borzou Daragahi, "Sinai Jihadi Group Emerges at Forefront of Egypt Violence," *Financial Times*, January 31, 2014.

h It should be noted that this video does not address the shooting attack on a Copenhagen synagogue in February 2015, conducted by an Islamic State supporter. "2015 Annual Summary - Terrorism and CT Activity Data and Trends" (in Hebrew), Shabak, n.d.

Palestine only after defeating the local, corrupted Muslim regimes. He further called upon Islamic State supporters to target Jews wherever they are. Yet, in light of the Islamic State's difficult strategic position from 2017, there were no Islamic State-related attacks or plots in 2018 (see Figure 3). However, 2019 saw an uptick in Islamic State-related operational activity within Israel, including two attacks carried out by an Islamic State supporter in January 2019 in Jerusalem (see also figure 3).⁸³

The “Deal of the Century:” On January 27, 2020, after the Trump administration floated the “Deal of the Century,” then-Islamic State spokesperson Abu Hamza al-Muhajir announced a new phase of the jihad against Israel, which would now include efforts to derail the deal. Al-Muhajir called upon Islamic State provinces in Syria and Sinai as well as Palestinians to attack Israeli and Jewish settlements in Israel and overseas by every means possible, including with chemical weapons.ⁱ Similar statements by an Islamic State spokesperson were posted in October 2020 and June 2021.⁸⁴

Operation Guardian of the Walls (May 2021): In May 2021, the Islamic State stressed that the liberation of Jerusalem would be made possible with the fall of the regimes bordering Israel, and only through jihad.⁸⁵ On June 22, 2021, for example, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, a spokesperson for the Islamic State, expounded on the Palestinian protest against Israel, asserting that it signified the betrayal of the Palestinian people by Gulf countries that have normalized relations with the State of Israel. Consequently, he accused the regimes of Egypt and Jordan of safeguarding Israel's borders, while Turkey and Iraq displayed indifference to the Palestinian issue. Al-Muhajir urged the Palestinians to comprehend and embrace the fact that deliverance from their predicament would not emanate from Arab regimes or Hamas' collaboration with the Shi`a, but rather through a steadfast commitment to jihad against the Zionists.⁸⁶ The continuously high motivation to attack the Jewish state expressed during 2020-2021, however, was not translated into operational capabilities or actions on the ground, perhaps as a result of different Islamic State priorities.

The spring of 2022 saw a significant increase in the number and lethality of attacks in Israel.⁸⁷ On March 22, an Israeli Bedouin carried out an attack in Beersheba.⁸⁸ Five days later, two cousins, Arab Israelis from Umm al-Fahm, perpetrated a shooting attack in Hadera, for which the Islamic State formally claimed responsibility.⁸⁹ In light of the increase in attacks, the Islamic State posted an article on April 1, 2022, titled “Our Campaign Against the Jews Is Pure Islamic [Campaign]!” In the article, the group explained that it had never abandoned its campaign against Israel and the Jews and would continue to focus on the “Zionist enemy.”⁹⁰ On April 17, 2022, Islamic State spokesman Abu Umar al-Muhajir praised the attacks on Israel and encouraged followers to continue in this direction.⁹¹

In November 2022, a terrorist detonated two explosive devices in Jerusalem. The perpetrator subscribed to and acted according to salafi-jihadi ideology. He was identified with the Islamic State and

consumed its online content, although he was not directly activated by the group. The double attack in which two bombs were placed in two different bus stops in Jerusalem,⁹² led to a wave of arrests of terrorism suspects linked to the Islamic State, further attesting to the group's motivation and operational capabilities.

The most recent Islamic State address directed at Jews was posted on February 2, 2023, in its Al Naba magazine. It amounted to a call to Muslims worldwide to perpetrate terror attacks against Jews in synagogues, homes, and neighborhoods using all possible means. The publication stressed that the war against the Jews was not national or political in character, but rather religious. The calls were backed up by purported “evidence” from the Qur'an, Hadith, and Islamic theological interpretation as to why the Jews are considered untrustworthy infidels and why a holy war should be waged against them. The Al Naba article stated that any Muslim nation that executes an agreement or strikes an alliance with Israel, as Chad had recently done, was as vile as Israel. In the article, the Islamic State praised Islam Mafroukeh, the perpetrator of the November 2022 Jerusalem double explosive attack, and stressed that the Jews were afraid of a repeat of such attacks. Lastly the Islamic State article implored Muslims around the world to perpetrate terror attacks against Jews in their synagogues and neighborhoods in Europe and elsewhere using all possible means.⁹³

Conclusion

Despite numerous verbal attacks and threats by global jihadis against Israel and the Jewish community and their consistent rhetorical support of the Palestinian cause, this study has identified a noticeable gap between the jihadis' verbal declarations against their so-called “Zionist” enemy and their military and terrorist activities against “Zionist” targets on the ground. To be sure, global jihadi organizations have managed to carry out several acts of wanton violence, but these attacks have hardly amounted to a sustained or effective campaign. Of the successful operations, most have taken the form of terrorist attacks against Jewish communities outside Israel. The track record of global jihadi attacks against targets associated with the State of Israel is poor; it is even less impressive when global jihadi actors attempted to stage attacks in Israel proper.

It is evident that one reason for the variance between jihadi verbal expressions to strike at Israeli and Jewish targets and their ability to do so is the physical difficulty—one acknowledged by jihadi leaders themselves—in establishing control in Middle Eastern and North African theaters in the vicinity of Israel. Jihadi leaders willingly admit that establishing a foothold in countries that are neighboring the Jewish state, such as Syria, Jordan, or Egypt, is a prerequisite for striking the Jewish state proper.

Nevertheless, global jihadi organizations did have a modicum of success by inspiring several individuals to perpetrate terrorist attacks (or attempted attacks) against “Zionist” targets. In this respect, the Islamic State appears to have had a greater influence on Arab Israelis than al-Qa`ida—at least when judged by the higher number of attacks/thwarted attacks inside Israel conducted or inspired by the Islamic State, when compared to attacks carried out or inspired by al-Qa`ida. (See Figure 4.)

Another reason for the disparity between jihadi motivations and capabilities to strike at the “Zionist” enemy can be found in the tense strategic relationship between Hamas and global jihadi groups. Part of this tension is due to the fact that the Palestinian cause has not

i It should be noted that carrying out attacks on overseas targets (as opposed to attacking within Israel) is easier for global jihadi organizations. Eitan Azani, Michael Barak, and Lorena Atiyas-Lvovsky, “The Focus – The ISIS Threat to Israel – threat Assessment in Light of Its Spokesperson Call to Fail the Deal of the Century and Attack Israel,” International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, May 2020.

	AQ	IS
Attacks and plots on Israeli soil	12	20
Attacks and plots against Jews/Israeli targets outside of Israel	29	3
Arrests	2	15

Figure 4: Al-Qa`ida-related and Islamic State-related operational activities against Israel and Jews based on the data in Figures 1-3, spanning 1988 to July 2023. The data shows that individuals linked to or inspired by the Islamic State have carried out more operational activity within Israel than those linked to al-Qa`ida. The data also shows that al-Qa`ida-linked/inspired individuals have mainly acted against Israel and the Jews outside Israel.

played a central role in the global jihadi narrative, where the dream of the liberation of Palestine competes with several other causes.⁹⁴ The jihadi movement has been criticized extensively and repeatedly by Palestinian nationalists and mainstream Islamists for what they believe is insufficient involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Hamas, for its part, has been at the receiving end of jihadi criticism for its lack of global jihadi credentials.⁹⁵

Moreover, support for global jihad among Arab Israelis and Palestinians is relatively low in part because of the relative popularity of established local organizations that are already promoting anti-Israel resistance. In a poll conducted by Pew Research Center, as of spring 2015, 91 percent of Israeli Arabs expressed unfavorable opinions of the Islamic state. In addition, 84 percent of Palestinians (92 percent in the Gaza Strip and 79 percent in the West Bank) had a negative view of the Islamic State.⁹⁶

In sum, global jihadis appear to have failed to systematically translate their substantial “anti-Zionist” rhetoric to military operations on the ground. This disconnect between jihadi words and deeds is due to a combination of factors. First, global jihadis have contended with physical barriers, including defensive and offensive countermeasures by Israeli Security services as well as those of their partners. These measures prevented jihadi operatives from penetrating Israeli and Jewish targets. Second, these actors also face ideological barriers, such as the predominance of local Palestinian causes and groups that have prevented global jihadi actors from effectively inserting themselves into the Palestinian space. As a result of the global jihad’s difficulties to establish itself more prominently as a tangible and consequential actor engaged in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, global jihadi activities have been limited mostly to propaganda and influence campaigns, inspiration, and recruitment.

A comparison of Figure 2 and Figure 3 further reveals a low number of al-Qa`ida-linked attacks in Israel since the Arab Spring when compared to those linked to the Islamic State. A possible explanation for this is al-Qa`ida’s lowered profile during the years when the Islamic State, its powerful jihadi rival, was on the march. During these years, al-Qa`ida focused on survival, strengthening its African and Middle East affiliates, and working on establishing new partners in the Indian subcontinent. Interestingly, however, during the same period the number of al-Qa`ida statements on the Palestinian issue increased significantly, suggesting that the group utilized the Palestinian issue in order to stay relevant.

Ultimately, trigger events have impacted al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State in different ways. In the case of the Islamic State, key events such as the Knives Intifada or the move of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem caused an uptick in propaganda and were also followed with operations on the ground. Such events also had

a strong impact on the ideological pronouncements of al-Qa`ida in regard to Israel and the Palestinian issue. In contrast to the Islamic State, in the case of al-Qa`ida such verbal proclamations translated far less frequently into a connection to consequential actions on the ground.

The Islamic State’s “superiority” over al-Qa`ida in terms of its ability to strike at Israel has less to do with tactical acumen. Instead, it appears to be rooted in the Islamic State’s success in branding itself a caliphate (and subsequently a caliphate under attack) whose exhortations to violence needed to be obeyed by “true” Muslims. The group’s successful self-portrayal as a caliphate was itself predicated on its extraordinary initial territorial expansion, making a significant number of Muslims around the world feel like the group must have divine backing and inspiring tens of thousands to join its ranks in Syria and Iraq. Arab Israelis and Palestinians have been just as attracted by the group’s branding prowess as have jihadis in other theaters. The Islamic State’s savviness on the social media front contrasted with al-Qa`ida’s somewhat more outdated mode of social media operations. Moreover, the Islamic State’s ultra-violent ethos and the brutality it put on display against its enemies resonated with and inspired a larger cohort of young Muslims than al-Qa`ida’s more cerebral and long-winded calls for jihad.

A second reason for the Islamic State’s outperformance of its jihadi counterpart with respect to violent operations against Israel is more technical. Once the Islamic State made a strategic decision to claim attacks by inspired jihadis as its own—even in cases where the group did not direct such attacks itself—it lowered the barrier of entry for participation in jihadi violent extremism, enabling a broader set of individuals to connect to the jihadi cause. By making itself more accessible to a broader pool of people attracted to the jihadi mindset, the group was able to present itself as far more dangerous and consequential than it truly was.

The authors’ analysis offers a number of implications for policy. First, the analysis underscores the importance of physical defenses when contending with persistent global jihadi threats. Standard counterterrorism measures such as intelligence collection and border security, however, are easier to plan and implement at the state level. Jewish communities that are geographically distributed and lack the resources afforded to states will be more difficult to defend, and hence face more sustained vulnerabilities.⁹⁷ This helps explain why al-Qa`ida has been connected to more attacks and plots against Jews outside of Israel than inside Israel (see Figure 4). It is noteworthy that the Islamic State, instead, has been mostly linked to attacks and plots inside Israel rather than attacks targeting Jews outside Israel, as reflected in Figure 4.

Secondly, this study implies that global jihadi organizations have underperformed when it comes to attacks against Israel because

of their inability to gain an ideological and operational foothold in a space where other, established actors are predominant. In the case of global jihadi actors, these problems are even more acute given how firmly entrenched existing militant competitors are in the Palestinian arena. Hamas, for example, is firmly in control in the Gaza Strip, tolerating little to no dissent, while benefiting from generous funding by external states.⁹⁸

Third, this study has underscored the importance of “trigger events” which, at least in the Israeli-Palestinian context, have been reliably followed by an increase in verbal condemnations and threats directed at the Jewish state. While such threats have been accompanied by physical violence in only a relatively small number

of cases, it is not unreasonable to posit that more intensive “trigger events” in the future could result in new levels of radicalization among Palestinians, including a broader adoption of global jihadi agendas. The current constitution of Israel’s government—the most right-wing government in the Jewish state’s history—has already sparked acute tensions between Jewish Israelis and their Arab counterparts, as well as their Palestinian neighbors. With Jews and Muslims seemingly on a collision course once again, global jihadi actors might sense a renewed opportunity to succeed where they have previously mostly failed—to translate their impassioned anti-“Zionist” words into deeds. **CTC**

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After Prigozhin: The Future of the Wagner Model in Africa

By Christopher Faulkner, Raphael Parens, and Marcel Plichta

In the immediate aftermath of the Wagner Group's mutiny, many commentators and analysts expected that the Kremlin's premier private military franchise had made itself obsolete. Such thinking only accelerated following the apparent assassination of Yevgeny Prigozhin. Yet, despite relegation from the Ukrainian frontlines, exile to Belarus, and the assassination of core Wagner figures, the mercenary outfit's operations live on, for now. Whether the group's European wing is warehoused in Belarus indefinitely, liquidated altogether, supplanted by a Kremlin-crafted PMC, or commandeered by Moscow and the Ministry of Defense, Wagner personnel in Africa appear poised to carry on their original missions given the importance of the continent to Russia's broader strategic ambitions. Though the mercenary mutiny and Prigozhin's death may lead clients to raise questions about what a continued partnership with Wagner means for relations with the Kremlin, Moscow has signaled a tolerance, if not need, for Wagner or a Wagner-like entity in Africa. Abandoning Wagner clients would severely undermine Russia's influence on the continent.

On June 23, 2023, Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner's chief warlord, released a pivotal diatribe against Russia's military leadership. A scathing Prigozhin accused the Russian army of bombing a Wagner Group camp in eastern Ukraine that had resulted in many Wagner casualties.¹ While the circumstances of the event are unclear, it became a catalyst for action.² Coupled with a looming requirement for non-Ministry of Defense (MoD) personnel to sign contracts with the Russian military, Prigozhin demanded justice, and to everyone's surprise, he launched a mutiny targeting Sergei Shoigu and Valery Gerasimov, Russia's Minister of Defense and Chief of Staff, respectively.³ Wagner forces eventually aborted the mutiny, but not before taking over the Southern Military District headquarters in Rostov-on-Don and halting less than 200 miles from Moscow.⁴

Just as shocking as the mutiny itself was the seemingly lack of consequences for the plotters. Immediately following Prigozhin's acquiescence, many assumed that he, along with Wagner, had signed their death warrants. Yet, for nearly two months, Wagner's operations abroad appeared unaffected, and Prigozhin continued to travel in and out of Russia without consequence. That all changed when his private jet crashed under suspicious circumstances on August 23, 2023, exactly two months after his aborted mutiny.⁵ Several prominent members of the Wagner Group were also onboard, including Dmitri Utkin, the group's founder; and Valery

Chekalov, Prigozhin's deputy, head of Wagner's operations in Syria, and key logistician for Wagner's operations in Africa.⁶ While the Kremlin denied any involvement in Prigozhin's death, hollowing out Wagner's leadership core aligns with Moscow's broader efforts to reassert control over the mercenary firm's influence overseas.⁷

Many questions remain surrounding the fallout both from the Wagner mutiny and Prigozhin's death. Chief among them is what this all means for Wagner's overseas deployments, particularly in Africa.⁸ Banished from the frontlines of Ukraine and exiled to Belarus, the organization's long-term durability remains very much in question and such speculation on the group's viability post-Prigozhin is ripe.⁹

On the surface, Wagner's African deployments appeared to have suffered little from Prigozhin's self-described meltdown.¹⁰ Quite the contrary, and despite a chorus of initial reports that questioned Wagner's viability on the continent in the aftermath of the revolt, Wagner's operations looked to be running as business as usual. The group's move to Belarus seemed to give Wagner new life, reinforcing its durability. Wagner's core leadership used the Belarussian exile to their advantage, signaling their intent to recalibrate and expand their network, especially in Africa. Nowhere was this clearer than with Prigozhin's praise of Niger's coup leaders and his attempts to court the Sahel's newest military junta.¹¹

All this is to say that in the weeks leading up to the infamous plane crash, Prigozhin and Wagner's commitment to Africa was abundantly clear. Prigozhin's first significant post-mutiny video depicted him in the Sahel where he vowed to make Russia

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greater across all continents and to make Africa even freer.¹² Such messaging seemed to illustrate Wagner's acceptance of its demotion and Prigozhin's willingness to reconstitute his focus on Africa. However, and as elucidated by investigative journalists, Prigozhin's efforts to shore up relationships with African clients, including meeting with African delegates such as Freddy Mapouka, chief of protocol for President Toudera of the Central African Republic, during the Russia-Africa summit in St. Petersburg in late July 2023, and his short-lived propaganda campaign were less about repairing relations with Moscow and more about ensuring the economic viability of his enterprise.¹³ Yet, trips to Bangui and Bamako in mid-August, where Prigozhin boasted about surviving the rebellion unscathed, proved to be part of his "farewell tour."¹⁴

While Prigozhin sought to rekindle relationships and spark new ones, the Kremlin was reportedly operating a parallel campaign designed to undercut Wagner's partnerships with regimes in Africa and the Middle East.¹⁵ From Syria to Libya to the Central African Republic (CAR) to Mali, the Russian MoD set in motion a concerted effort to draw clients away from Wagner's orbit and back to Moscow, promising more formal state-state engagement.¹⁶ The jostling for influence and behind-the-scenes competition exemplify just how fractured and irreparable the Prigozhin-Kremlin relationship had become in the post-mutiny environment. At the same time, jockeying to maintain relationships with Wagner clients while ditching Wagner accentuates the importance of Africa to Russia and demonstrates why Moscow cannot abandon the Wagner infrastructure entirely.

This article provides an overall assessment of what Prigozhin's mutiny and subsequent death mean for Wagner's operations in Africa, using open-source information and interviews with analysts closely tracking the group. The article first provides background on Wagner's operations across its various African deployments. Second, the authors explore the post-mutiny and post-Prigozhin environments in Africa, focusing specifically on Wagner operations in the CAR and Mali. Here, the authors discuss how the Kremlin and Prigozhin appeared to be competing to shore up relations with African partners in the immediate period after the mutiny and how Prigozhin's death does not spell the end for Wagner operations in Africa. Third, the article considers Wagner's future on the continent. The authors assess that while Wagner's autonomy is over and its future uncertain, it is likely that Moscow will continue to use PMCs as a foreign policy tool in Africa given the success of the Wagner model in Africa. Fourth, the authors discuss the U.S. response to Wagner and emphasize the importance of remaining proactive in countering Wagner. The article concludes with an assessment of the way forward for Wagner, noting that regardless of Wagner's long-term future, Moscow is likely to retain the Wagner model in Africa.

Background on Wagner Operations in Africa

While the Wagner Group derived significant notoriety from its Ukrainian operations, the group made its mark as a Kremlin foreign policy tool and as a credible military and security outfit in Africa.¹⁷ From its deployments alongside Russian special forces in Libya to its standalone operations in Mali, Wagner has yielded significant influence for the Kremlin in at least four African countries.¹⁸ Far from Putin's gaze, the group's operations gradually became more autonomous. Wagner relied heavily, for instance, on Moscow for logistics and leveraged its connection to the Kremlin to attract buyers, but Prigozhin increasingly sought ways to use his

vast corporate network to cut out the Russian state where possible. Prigozhin, for instance, contracted United Arab Emirates (UAE)-based firm Kratol Aviation to transport contractors and material across its African deployments in lieu of MoD aircraft, and used companies like Industrial Resources General Trading, ostensibly a Wagner shell company, to move resources such as gold to global markets.¹⁹

Commentators are eager to paint Wagner's motivations as part of a coherent strategy, but Wagner's contracts are as much a product of opportunism as planning. In Libya, Wagner's involvement began as a force multiplier for the Russian military. The group's initial operations aligned with the Russian military's efforts to oust the Western-backed Government of National Accord in Tripoli. Libya's vast oil wealth undoubtedly served as a clear motivator for Wagner, but its operations were more aligned with Russia's foreign policy objectives in the region and directed by the Russian MoD. Wagner's operations shifted to running airfields that served to facilitate transportation of personnel and equipment to their operations in other African countries such as CAR and Mali.²⁰

Like Libya, other major Wagner deployments started under the guise of Russian security assistance but grew into something more independent, particularly at the operational level. Wagner's initial deployment to CAR began through political jockeying by Moscow at the United Nations to secure an exemption on CAR's arms embargo and provide trainers in late 2017.²¹ Wagner's security role in CAR expanded dramatically alongside its economic interests in the country's timber, gold, and diamond industries. Wagner parlayed these activities into a broader effort aimed at embedding itself into the local economy.²² In Mali, the Wagner Group entered alongside a deal for Russian Mi-141 attack helicopters, but the group appeared to quickly mount independent patrols while frequently killing civilians at alarming rates.²³ The firm successfully exploited anti-French sentiment and capitalized on a deteriorating security situation in the region to gain favor with the ruling junta.²⁴

Wagner's aggressive campaign to court clients is only half the equation in understanding its expansion on the continent. African regimes facing security crises and with few viable alternatives saw Prigozhin as a counterbalance to Western and African institutions. As one analyst recently put it, Russia, and Wagner specifically, served as an effective "ally of last resort."²⁵ Moreover, Wagner offered democracy-skeptical leaders a chance to insulate themselves from both internal and external pressures, whether they be rebel and terrorist groups or calls for democratic reform. Even if Wagner never delivered on defeating rebels and terrorists, regime security and insulation were often sufficient enough attractions to get contracts signed.

How Wagner's Mutiny and Prigozhin's Death Impact Wagner Operations in Africa Overall

In the days following the Prigozhin-led mutiny, the Kremlin quickly sought to reassure Wagner's clients in Africa. Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, made a statement to "partners and friends" across the continent that events in Moscow would have no impact on Russia's relationships or with the Wagner Group's activities in Africa.²⁶ It appears Lavrov's comments were genuine, to a degree. In the days and weeks following the mutiny, Wagner's operations on the continent remained largely unaffected. Rumors that Wagner forces were evacuating CAR, for example, proved to be erroneous.²⁷ Moreover, open-source flight tracking identified that a



This photograph, handed out by French military, shows Russian mercenaries in Sévaré in central Mali in February 2022. A white skull, a feature of the Wagner Group's insignia, appears to be visible on a vest. (French Army via AP Images)

Russian Ministry for Emergency Situations aircraft, an aircraft used to transport Wagner personnel in the past, continued to fly similar routes from Moscow to Damascus to Bamako and back.²⁸ In short, just days before Prigozhin's death, Wagner personnel, and perhaps Prigozhin himself, appeared to still be benefiting from Russian logistical support in Africa.

Yet, Prigozhin's death has ushered in renewed debate about the likelihood of Wagner's sustained operations across Africa and Middle East. At this point, it may be too early to assess with sufficient confidence what Wagner's future holds, if anything, and what a post-Prigozhin Wagner entails. However, Moscow is unlikely to abandon the Wagner model in its entirety because it serves Kremlin interests to build influence in Africa and to threaten or damage Western influence in exchange. Equally important is that fully dismantling the Wagner enterprise would be self-defeating as the Wagner Group set the foundation, developed the infrastructure, and facilitated the political, economic, and social connections that have enhanced Moscow's reach.

At the time of publication, Putin's Wagner dilemma post-Prigozhin is still in its infancy, but it is clear that the Russian president is making every effort to counter any potential Wagner backlash while accelerating efforts to exert control over it. Such efforts were already well underway as Prigozhin's mutiny unfolded in late June, with reports suggesting that Wagner personnel in Syria were being rounded up and forced to sign contracts with

the Russian MoD or leave the country.²⁹ Then, just two days after Prigozhin's plane went down, Putin signed a decree requiring all paramilitary units, like mercenaries, to swear an oath of allegiance to the Russian state.³⁰ In addition, Prigozhin's funeral was kept secret, an intentional effort by the Kremlin to avoid any fanfare.³¹

While the death of Prigozhin is undoubtedly a blow to Wagner, assuming the group is incapable of operating in his absence is misguided. Prigozhin's skills as a propagandist, his business acumen and capacity to thrive in corruption, and his success in sanctions evasion provided Wagner with a comparative advantage. But Prigozhin was far from a military operator, and despite his death, many of Wagner's key personnel in Africa appear to be "staying put for now."³² In CAR, for instance, Vitali Perfilev and Dimitri Sytyi, two key Wagner leaders, are still running operations.³³ The main challenge for Wagner is that its destiny is not its own. Defense Minister Shoigu is expected to have a key role in deciding Wagner's fate, and the Russian MoD appears committed to ensuring that Wagner's days of autonomy are over.³⁴ But while Moscow will want substantial oversight, in the short term, Wagner's African operations—even if Wagner is not at the helm—are likely to march on.

The Impact in the Central African Republic

CAR is host to Wagner's most comprehensive operations. As a result, even with Prigozhin's death, it is unlikely that the mercenary firm

and its network of business entities will exit CAR any time soon.³⁵ The group's economic portfolio in CAR is particularly diversified, ranging from investments across traditional economic activities like gold and diamond extraction to more atypical ventures into the forestry industry, and alcohol and coffee production.³⁶ Wagner's economic base and connections to the central government make it difficult, if not impractical, for the Russian state to seamlessly take over the broad portfolio of Wagner-adjacent activities. Some analysts have speculated that if the Kremlin was complicit in the death of Prigozhin, the delay in action may have stemmed from a need to assess and audit Wagner operations in CAR in order to better understand its network in efforts to usurp control over it.³⁷ Tying up loose ends was vital before burying Prigozhin once and for all.³⁸

In addition to Wagner's economic web, the mercenary firm's deep involvement with the Touadera government over the past five years discounts the possibility of a withdrawal of Russian support. CAR officials met with both Putin and Prigozhin after the mutiny to keep communication lines open.³⁹ After proclaiming themselves the saviors of CAR, leaving would almost certainly lead to a political and military crisis and a massive hit to Russia's image as a provider of regime security on the continent. In fact, Wagner's value as a pseudo-diplomatic tool in CAR all but ensures the Kremlin will retain a mercenary-like outfit in Bangui if not elsewhere.⁴⁰

Nowhere is the deleterious nature of Wagner more apparent than in CAR's recent constitutional referendum.⁴¹ The proposed changes in the referendum were controversial enough that the president needed to extrajudicially remove several judges to even hold it. A "yes" vote meant supporting increased presidential term limits, an increase of term length to seven years. It also restricted who could run for president, and gave the presidency more power over the judiciary.⁴² Such tactics are not unfamiliar on the continent.⁴³ Wagner's infiltration of CAR's political and economic spaces sets the foundation for its influence and impact on the regime's trajectory, even if CAR has not had as violent a break from France and the United Nations as Mali has.⁴⁴

Much of the movement of Wagner forces in CAR immediately after Prigozhin aborted the mutiny in Russia, a troop rotation that many suspected was a sign of Wagner's departure, had more to do with ensuring the referendum ran smoothly; and it did. Initial estimates alleged that 95 percent of votes cast were in support of the new constitution, despite disguised opposition boycotts and limited access in rural areas, which neither Wagner nor Central African authorities worked to address.⁴⁵ The last big vote in CAR, the 2020 elections, had resulted in a rebel offensive that nearly dislodged Touadera's regime. With Wagner, co-opted rebel groups, and bilateral Rwandan forces in play, that was not going to happen again.⁴⁶

Before the vote, there was speculation that France and the United States were contemplating a deal with Touadera that if he expelled Russia's mercenaries, they would drop opposition to Touadera's third term.⁴⁷ Such bargaining is reminiscent of a Cold War era approach that falsely puts democratic value and geopolitical goals in conflict.

Wagner's economic position in CAR makes it more resilient to dismantlement than several of its other enterprises and deployments.⁴⁸ Putin would loath giving up these resources, particularly while his regime is sanctioned and precious metals are limited in supply. Wagner-affiliated shell companies, including

Meroe Gold, Lobaye Invest, and Diamville, offer multiple illicit economic channels, likely through the UAE, that provide gold and possibly diamonds to Russia.⁴⁹ Abandoning these projects altogether would be unwise, but Russian officials will likely find it difficult to keep so many plates spinning after Prigozhin's death.

At the same time, with Prigozhin out of the picture, the Kremlin has an opportunity to commandeer these economic outfits, rebrand them, and even install new ownership structures. Putin's regime has a history of commandeering businesses of oligarchs through manipulation of Russia's legal system—as seen in its hostile takeover of Michael Khorovsky's Yukos Oil.⁵⁰ Appeasing Wagner personnel will be incumbent in the short-term, and while some percentage of Wagnerites may be disgruntled over the Kremlin's efforts to reassert control over them and could choose to leave, their loyalty is more likely to a paycheck than to a dead Prigozhin.

The Impact in Mali

Comparatively, Wagner operations in Mali have been more challenging. Deterred by Western, particularly Canadian, mining companies and local interests, Wagner has been unable to secure the types of lucrative resource extraction deals that its leadership appears to prefer in lieu of direct payment, and its operations have been funded by the Malian state instead.⁵¹ Wagner's limited economic portfolio in Mali means that the Russian government may find it easier to overtake Wagner's portfolio in Mali without needing to unravel complicated Wagner economic operations, as it would likely need to do in CAR.

Even before Prigozhin's death, questions loomed surrounding the strength of Wagner's relations with the junta. Malian junta leader Assimi Goïta voiced support for Putin at the Russia-Africa Summit just days after the Prigozhin mutiny and allegedly spoke with Putin directly.⁵² And, despite Prigozhin's death, Russia's deputy ambassador to the United Nations confirmed that Russia would continue providing Mali with "comprehensive support"—what many assume is a clear signal that Moscow is unlikely to abandon Wagner forces in Bamako.⁵³

The Kremlin needs Wagner, or something akin to it, to hold down the fort, literally and diplomatically. A Wagner withdrawal without a clear operational plan to replace it would only accelerate the pace at which terrorist organizations gain control over territory in the country. In a report that was distributed in the summer of 2023, U.N. experts noted that the Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS) "almost doubled its areas of control in Mali" in less than a year.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, al-Qa`ida affiliate JNIM has exploited the ISGS territory grab, situating itself as "the sole actor capable of protecting populations against Islamic State in the Greater Sahara."⁵⁵ The oncoming MINUSMA withdrawal,^a not to mention France's withdrawal of Operation Barkhane, has only heightened the security challenges. Reports of a potential temporary truce between ISGS and JNIM until after the U.N. withdrawal only add to concerns of a growing terrorist threat.⁵⁶ For its part, Wagner has done little to rectify security challenges in the country and has instead been complicit in exacerbating insecurity.⁵⁷ At the same

a While MINUSMA was terminated on June 30, 2023, the official and complete withdrawal of MINUSMA troops is expected on December 31, 2023. See "Security Council ends MINUSMA mandate, adopts withdrawal resolution," United Nations, June 30, 2023.

time, and prior to Prigozhin's death, analysts observed ongoing base construction at Wagner's headquarters in Bamako.⁵⁸ Such base expansion was interpreted as a signal of Wagner's intention on fortifying its position in Mali. But with the Kremlin's diplomatic onslaught to lure Wagner clients away from Wagner, the effort may have been more indicative of Wagner attempting to compete in the face of Moscow's efforts to reclaim control over it.⁵⁹ Either way, Russia is unlikely to abandon Bamako given the geopolitical and reputational costs it would face in doing so.

Such reasoning is reinforced by Moscow's concerted effort to reassure Mali's junta that it is a committed partner. On August 30, 2023, Russia vetoed a U.N. Security Council resolution that would have extended sanctions against Mali.⁶⁰ Additionally, and despite claims that Wagner personnel were leaving Mali following Prigozhin's death, personnel movements out of Mali appear to be more about troop rotations than a mass exodus of Wagner employees, echoing personnel rotations in CAR after the Prigozhin mutiny.⁶¹ Though difficult to confirm, some evidence even points to the movement of Wagner personnel from Syria to Mali, both to bring in more experienced operators as well as personnel that are either more loyal to the Kremlin and/or under the MoD's direct control.⁶²

Regardless of the way forward, Wagner and the Russian state are in for a challenge in Mali. On September 8, 2023, JNIM claimed it shot down a helicopter belonging to Wagner.⁶³ Moreover, ISGS and AQIM propaganda already casts Russian mercenaries as the new enemy in their recruiting drives and public statements.⁶⁴ Such anti-Russian propaganda should worry a Russian regime with a history of violence in Chechnya and the Caucasus, particularly when Russian deployments have already threatened these groups. Putin will need to decide whether such a deployment under the direct supervision of the Russian military is worth the potential geopolitical blowback.

Wagner's Malian experiment and its uncertain future is indicative of the dangers and difficulties faced by regimes hellbent on contracting mercenary outfits. Regardless of Mali's strained relations with Paris and the United Nations, betting on Wagner has painted the junta into a precarious corner.⁶⁵ It is unreasonable to expect that Wagner's contingent of 1,000 personnel in Mali can adequately supplant the nearly 13,000-strong MINUSMA force.⁶⁶ Moscow's efforts to stress its commitment to Mali have been notably unambiguous, but it has kept up the propaganda campaign with its deputy ambassador to the United Nations recently stating that Mali's decision to count on Russia is "keeping our former Western partners up at night."⁶⁷ For Moscow, relying on the Wagner footprint there is the most pragmatic approach in the short term.

Wagner's Future Operations on the Continent

The longer-term future of Wagner in Africa remains anyone's guess. As noted, Wagner's post-mutiny period seemed to reflect a conscious effort to reconstitute its mission set and focus on expeditionary activities and overseas deployments far from the frontlines of Ukraine. On July 19, 2023, Prigozhin and a figure

“Regardless of Wagner’s long-term future, it is important to understand that the Kremlin’s mercenary diplomacy is here to stay. Wagner may have spiraled out of the Kremlin’s control and been given too much autonomy, but the value of paramilitary and mercenary groups as a foreign policy tool is not lost on Moscow.”

believed to be Dmitri Utkin, promised that Wagner's relegation to Belarus did not signal its end, rather it was "just the beginning."⁶⁸ And, as mentioned earlier, Prigozhin made a concerted effort to assure African partners that the Wagner saga was in fact under control, courting African delegates at the Russia-Africa summit just one month after the mutiny.⁶⁹

That all appeared to be window-dressing. Prigozhin's efforts to move on from the mutiny are now a moot point. The Kremlin appears intent on ensuring that Wagner or whatever vanguard it taps to take over the Africa mission understands its place in the Russian hierarchy. Ambiguity notwithstanding, Wagner personnel will undoubtedly experience heartburn over being subservient to the Russian MoD or being folded into another mercenary outfit, but they will have little say in the matter. What they are likely to have, however, is continued work as Russia is poised to take the mantle from Wagner and push forward with its African missions one way or the other. Reinforcing this point, a Russian delegation headed by Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov undertook an African tour in the days before and immediately after Prigozhin's death, meeting first with General Khalifa Haftar, leader of the Wagner-backed Libyan National Army in Libya, then reportedly visiting Bamako, meeting with Burkina Faso's junta in Ouagadougou, before heading to Bangui.⁷⁰

Where Wagner or its replacement might venture next is a complicated question. Before Prigozhin's death, Wagner was floated as a potential option for Niger's junta, which, at the time, was dealing with a looming ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) intervention. Reeling from the uncertainty and in the face of Western condemnation, Nigerien General Salifou Modi, vice president of the junta, flew to Bamako to meet with Wagner officials.⁷¹ But both ECOWAS' threats and Wagner's promises of assistance have proven to be empty.⁷² For Wagner, the ability to shift assets from other African deployments to Niger was questionable even before Prigozhin's death, given commitments in Ukraine and limited Russian transport support. However, based on Wagner's historic track record of capitalizing on insecurity and civil-military crises, Moscow will look to deploy Wagner or its successor organization wherever the opportunity arises. This time, however, Russia will make sure the leash is much shorter.

Walking the Walk: What Can the United States Do?

Regardless of Wagner's long-term future, it is important to

b Recall that this is the same deputy ambassador who claimed back in February 2022 that Russia had no intention of invading Ukraine. See "Russia has 'no intention' to invade Ukraine, deputy U.N. ambassador says," CBS, February 16, 2022.

“A proactive approach is imperative, one that anticipates ways in which the Kremlin will seek to alter Wagner’s surface features—its name and public figures—rather than its functionality, as a method to skirt sanctions and find new clients.”

understand that the Kremlin’s mercenary diplomacy is here to stay. Wagner may have spiraled out of the Kremlin’s control and been given too much autonomy, but the value of paramilitary and mercenary groups as a foreign policy tool is not lost on Moscow. Meanwhile, the U.S. government has reached a critical inflection point in its Africa policy. Even if the deaths of Prigozhin and Utkin stagnate Russia’s momentum in Africa, the coups in Niger and Gabon raise serious strategic dilemmas. Niamey remains one of, if not the only, remaining bastion of American-led counterterrorism activity in the Sahel. A U.S. drone base⁷³ and a modest military assistance program⁷⁴ there demonstrated that African leaders need not contract entities like Wagner to counter militant threats—though such efforts clearly did little to address underlying domestic political volatility that enabled the coup.⁷⁵ Today, U.S. officials must walk a tightrope between what can seem to be opposing interests: either supporting hard-nosed strategic and military interests or supporting democratic processes and opposing non-democratic transitions, while recognizing this can be a false dichotomy when it comes to long-term American ideals and interests. The Biden administration’s reluctance to brand Chad’s transition as unconstitutional following the death of Idris Déby in 2021, for instance, has not gone unnoticed, putting the United States in a difficult position when other undemocratic transitions take place.⁷⁶

As a result, when it comes to Niger, U.S. government officials both advocate for a return to democratic governance and emphasize the importance of U.S. partnership with Niger’s armed forces.⁷⁷ The unresolved tension between promoting values of democratic integrity and maintaining operations also knocks the United States out of alignment with France, a key ally and NATO partner, as well as ECOWAS states Senegal, Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, and Nigeria that are far more assertive on the issue of restoring the president to power.⁷⁸ Although U.S. operations in the Sahel will likely continue, Niger’s role in a U.S.-backed counterterrorism mission remains an open question, even with the United States resuming drone and manned intelligence and surveillance operations after reaching an agreement with the junta.⁷⁹ That question became even more complicated when Niger, along with Mali and Burkina Faso, signed a mutual defense pact, the Alliance of Sahel States, on September 16, 2023.⁸⁰

The fundamental challenge is that the United States has no clear strategy in cases when democratic values do not align with African politics, or rather, when a small contingent of political and/or military elite decide that their democratic experiment has run its course. Accusations from within the American body politic that the U.S. training of African militaries or U.S. military aid to specific African nations caused instability are symptomatic of

strategic uncertainty.⁸¹ While some will view this as an opportunity to withdraw U.S. security support across the continent, doing so without a revitalized approach would add fuel to the fire of jihadism and democratic backsliding. It would simultaneously embolden Moscow as it tries to piece together its post-Wagner puzzle in Africa.

On the other hand, Africa’s insurgencies have made it clear that limited support is not enough. In particular, instability in the Sahel and West Africa is growing, but U.S. resources to help are not. Today, sub-Saharan Africa is a marginal part of U.S. foreign policy, particularly after U.S. failures in Somalia in the early 1990s.⁸² Despite its importance as a base for terror activity during al-Qa`ida’s formative years, including the bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998,⁸³ sub-Saharan Africa was a secondary concern in the U.S. “war on terror” after 9/11 while the Middle East and North Africa were prioritized. That so much of the discussion of Sahelian security focuses on Wagner reflects U.S. anxieties over great power competition, rather than African security in and of itself. Nonetheless, U.S. officials in Africa have access to hundreds of millions of dollars, so making the most of that funding is key to operationalizing the Biden administration’s strategies to counter extremism in Africa.⁸⁴

On the Wagner front, and despite the fracturing between Prigozhin and the Russian MoD, the United States has at least rhetorically signaled that it is still taking the mercenary group seriously. The U.S. representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, confirmed as much roughly a month after Prigozhin’s mutiny when she stated “that any attacks by the Wagner Group will be seen as an attack by the Russian Government.”⁸⁵ Remarks such as these are important in that they counter any attempt the Kremlin may make to reinstitute the veil of plausible deniability in its sponsorship of mercenary proxies.⁸⁶ Yet, remarks alone are insufficient for countering Wagner in Africa, let alone Moscow’s broader weaponization of private military companies (PMCs). And while a Pentagon spokesperson in responding to a journalist’s question recently claimed that Wagner is “essentially over,” complacency in countering Wagner, even if it is weakened, sets a dangerous precedent.⁸⁷ A proactive approach is imperative, one that anticipates ways in which the Kremlin will seek to alter Wagner’s surface features—its name and public figures—rather than its functionality, as a method to skirt sanctions and find new clients.

Conclusion

The Sahel’s security challenges are bigger than Russia. Even if Prigozhin’s death stunts Russian PMCs or formal expansion in the Sahel, the wave of external threats and internal instability Wagner helped facilitate will continue to challenge African, European, and American policymakers. Washington’s willingness to release statements in support of democracy and security in Africa needs to be matched with a serious effort to build consensus around the imperative to stop the spread of jihadism now and strengthen the stability of the region’s democratic governments. Wagner may be floundering, but terrorist threats are not, and neither will Moscow’s efforts to capitalize on persistent insecurity and civil-military volatility.

Unfortunately, potential U.S. partners in Africa and Europe seem far from a consensus about the severity or a way forward. In 2022, a coalition of West African governments called the Accra Initiative agreed in theory to form a multilateral joint taskforce to

help contain the spread of extremist groups but is struggling to fund it.⁸⁸ France is reeling from the perception in the Sahel that its counterterrorism efforts are neo-imperialist and ineffective.⁸⁹ The United Kingdom recently moved to proscribe Wagner as a terrorist organization^c but withdrew its peacekeepers from Mali after tensions between the United Nations and the Wagner-backed junta reached a boiling point.⁹⁰ Lastly, Germany and the European Union are seeking to consolidate their security assistance missions in coastal West Africa, in the hopes of preventing more democracies from falling to their own militaries.⁹¹

Russia benefits from the international community's lack of consensus. Even if its mercenaries and arms sales cannot solve the wider crises of state failure, extremism, and ecological disaster, Moscow will be able to package its assistance as the hard but necessary measures that appeal to coup leaders in the short term.

Returning to the question of Wagner specifically, what belies the mercenary outfit and its operations in Africa is ambiguous. Prigozhin's mutiny and death have put the Kremlin into triage mode as it works to untangle the Wagner network and assess the best path forward. There are at least three options the Russian state may consider: abandon the organization completely, commandeer the organization entirely and house it under Russia's defense and intelligence infrastructure, or attempt a public-private partnership.⁹² None of these are particularly good options, but some are better and/or more likely than others.

First, abandoning the Wagner Group entirely, the most unlikely scenario, would exacerbate already volatile security situations across Wagner's operations in CAR, Mali, Libya, and elsewhere, as Wagner units would likely either withdraw or form their own fiefdoms, allowing terrorist groups and insurgents to roam free. This scenario would also be the most damaging for Moscow's international reputation, and losing friends in the midst of the ongoing war in Ukraine is an undesirable outcome. Option two, a complete Russian state takeover, would require the diversion of resources and assets currently dedicated to the war in Ukraine. As Russian experts note, the administrative burden, particularly for a

Russian military that is focused on operations in Ukraine, would also be substantial if not impractical.⁹³ Moreover, identifying which Russian institutions, whether the MoD or the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), would be the right fit for inheriting Wagner is also up for debate.⁹⁴ Moreover, folding Wagner formally into state institutions removes any remaining facade of plausible deniability and increases Moscow's accountability over its forces. A third option, the public-private partnership, while perhaps the most prudent involves elevating a new individual to Prigozhin's position, potentially causing instability in Putin's inner circle.⁹⁵ While Prigozhin is far from irreplaceable, he was effective in managing a complex web of business entities across multiple countries and amidst mounting international pressure.⁹⁶ Few oligarchs in the Russian sphere of influence are presumed to have the ability to maintain Prigozhin's business contacts or replicate his networks as effectively as he did.⁹⁷

Regardless of what approach is taken, Prigozhin's model of economic exploitation, disinformation, and military assistance is here to stay.⁹⁸ This model has proved useful in Russia's campaign for international influence, helping Russia seize control of the military assistance program in Mali and dispelling anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda across Africa. It has provided the added benefit of aiding Russia via sanctions evasions through gold, diamond, and forestry concessions exchanged for military assistance in places such as CAR and Sudan. There is also a pragmatic element that makes maintaining a Wagner-like entity attractive. "If the Kremlin wants to reduce Wagner's influence on the doorstep of Moscow, it would be logical to send more mercenaries to Africa."⁹⁹ Ensuring mercenaries are far from centers of political power has been the historical norm. For Putin, keeping mercenaries—some who may harbor resentment at the death of Prigozhin—busy abroad both sends a signal of commitment to partners in Africa and keeps Wagner loyalists at bay while Moscow determines Wagner's long-term fate.

Overall, the Wagner Group has proven too valuable both economically and politically to abandon, but also too complex to effectively commandeer entirely. Wagner has played a crucial role in galvanizing support for Russia on the African continent and has enabled the Kremlin to compete for influence at a relatively low cost in comparison to strategic competitors. Irrespective of the long-term future of Moscow's most infamous mercenary outfit, the Wagner model, especially in Africa, is likely to remain a persistent and enduring threat in the years ahead. **CTC**

c The U.K. Home Office issued the draft to proscribe Wagner a terrorist organization on September 6, 2023. Following parliamentary debate, the proscription became official on September 15, 2023. "Russian Wagner Group Declared Terrorists," UK Government, September 6, 2023; "Wagner Group Proscribed," UK Government, September 15, 2023.

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The Islamic State's Shadow Governance in Eastern Syria Since the Fall of Baghuz

By Aaron Y. Zelin and Devorah Margolin

Since losing its last semblance of control in Syria in March 2019, the Islamic State has spent the last four and a half years not only attempting to survive, but also working to create the conditions for returning to territorial control. While it is true that the organization's insurgency has been degraded in recent years, only focusing on the Islamic State's attack claims and propaganda misses an important trend happening at the local level: Despite the best efforts of the Global Coalition Against the Islamic State and the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Islamic State has continued attempts to govern as shadow actors in eastern Syria. The Islamic State's shadow governance efforts can be seen occurring on four main axes: taxes, moral policing, administrative documents, and retaking of territory (albeit for brief periods of time). The Islamic State's level of governance today is nowhere near where it was when it controlled territory the size of Britain from 2014–2017. Yet, these governance attempts illustrate that the group may be stronger than many assume, while also highlighting that the group's interest in governing and controlling territory has not waned in recent years.

Since the Islamic State lost its last bit of physical territory in Baghuz al-Fawqani, Syria, in March 2019, much focus has unsurprisingly been placed on the group's terrorism and insurgency campaign to try to retake territory, as well as the indefinite detention of approximately 60,000 Islamic State-affiliated individuals in northeast Syria.^a Yet, quietly, within a few short months of the group's territorial collapse, there were already signs that it had not given up its governance ambitions and was still attempting to enforce its writ in territories it once held. As early as June 2019, evidence of the Islamic State's governance attempts appeared in Deir ez-Zor Province (formerly the Islamic State's Wilayat al-Khayr) and Hasakah Province (formerly the group's Wilayat al-Barakah).

Although the Islamic State has yet to regain permanent *tamkin* (consolidated administrative control)¹ over any area in eastern Syria, through its shadow governance activities over the past four years, the group has continued to project power and instill fear into local populations across eastern Syria. In doing so, the Islamic State

seeks to create a mechanism to reimplement its caliphate project quickly if it were ever able to occupy territory again in the future. More immediately, however, these efforts by the Islamic State provide financial infrastructure for the organization to continue its terrorism and insurgency campaign, primarily directed against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), including SDF-run detention centers and prisons holding Islamic State-affiliated individuals. For example, on July 31, 2023, Internal Security Forces in northeast Syria (supported by coalition forces) arrested an Islamic State-affiliated leader accused of conducting finance operations in Deir ez-Zor.²

Therefore, while it is important to continue to track the Islamic State's claimed attacks and ongoing insurgency, doing so without understanding evolving dynamics at the local environment misses the broader aperture of Islamic State activity. In order to understand the full nature of the Islamic State threat today in Syria, one must look below easily quantifiable actions at what the group could be hiding, specifically indicators that can evaluate its strength below the surface. This is in part because over the past few years, a lot of the Islamic State's governance activity has occurred at night or in areas where the SDF has reduced operations due to security concerns for its own safety. To address this gap in understanding the current status of the Islamic State, this article will explore the group's history of governance and analyze the reality of the Islamic State's propaganda and claims of responsibility for attacks since the fall of its territorial control, before examining its shadow

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^a This number includes approximately 50,000 individuals held in Al-Hol and Roj camps, and approximately 10,000 individuals held across 26 SDF-run facilities. See "Lead Inspector General, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2023–March 31, 2023," U.S. Department of Defense, May 2, 2023.



An Islamic State fighter is featured in the Islamic State media product “Days With Soldiers of the Caliphate During the Blessed Month of Ramadan,” the Islamic State’s Wilayat al-Sham, al-Khayr (Deir ez-Zor), Ramadan (April 12–May 11) 2021.

governance efforts in eastern Syria between 2019 and 2023.

The Islamic State’s History of Governance

The Islamic State movement’s long history can be broken into several distinct periods.³ The group’s foundation in the 1990s until 2006 was defined by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s leadership. This saw the group move from the training camps of Afghanistan to Iraq where, under the name *Jama’at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad* and later al-Qa`ida in the Land of Two Rivers (better known as al-Qa`ida in Iraq, or AQI), it rose to notoriety for waging a bloody sectarian insurgency.

In October 2006, the group’s next phase began. Then-leader of AQI, Abu Ayyub al-Masri (Abu Hamza al-Muhajir), pledged allegiance to the new self-declared leader of the faithful, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, and with it established its first self-declared state, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). In January 2007, ISI’s Shaykh ‘Uthman ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Tamimi released a book explaining the group’s rationale for declaring its state.⁴ In his writing, al-Tamimi outlined ISI’s responsibilities as a state in the areas it governs: “prosecuting criminals and sinners, implementation of the hudud (fixed punishments in the Qur’an and Hadith), mediating and resolving conflicts, providing security, distributing food and relief, and selling oil and gas.”⁵

Although ISI proclaimed itself as a state,⁶ the Islamic State of Iraq controlled limited territory, for insubstantial amounts of time—due to the U.S. military occupation, but also as a consequence of rival insurgent and tribal competition for power. ISI attempted to show a “veneer of legitimacy” by establishing a cabinet of ministries first in April 2007 and again in September 2009. Nevertheless, because of numerous obstacles facing ISI, the group was unable to properly implement the administrative responsibilities al-Tamimi outlined.⁷ Instead, ISI primarily focused on “instituting *hisba* (moral policing) activities and targeting enemies as *murtadin* (apostates) who were

seen as legitimate to target and kill.”⁸ This period helped to set up the Islamic State’s later governance, which was marshaled by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi after he became the leader in 2010 when al-Muhajir and Abu Umar were killed.

The Islamic State movement’s next period spanned 2012 to 2017 and marked its transnational expansion. Renamed in April 2013 to the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (aka ISIL, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), ISIL’s main focus was to present itself in a positive light to the Syrian population through *da’wa* (missionary) forums and by providing services,⁹ prior to a wave of infighting that began in January 2014 between ISIL and revolutionary, Islamist, and other jihadi factions in Syria.¹⁰ As ISIL, the group also carried out “softer” moral policing, including burning cigarettes and confiscating alcohol.

Yet, like a decade prior, ISIL killed other leaders from rival Syrian insurgent groups, prompting backlash. Due to infighting, ISIL was pushed out of Latakia, Idlib, and parts of Aleppo between January and March 2014.¹¹ As a result, the organization focused its state-building project in eastern Syria in Raqqqa governorate and parts of Deir ez-Zor governorate. After ISIL’s consolidation in the east, reports of “harsher punishments began to appear, such as cutting off hands for robbery or crucifying alleged apostates.”¹² As ISIL, the group “sought to appear as a state-like entity, showing off its various administrative departments including its *da’wa* offices, shariah courts, religious schools, police stations, and local municipalities, among others.”¹³ Despite these efforts, during this period the group performed “an uneven governance strategy across its proto-*wilayat* (provinces).”¹⁴

In June 2014, the group captured Mosul and declared its caliphate, changing its name again—to simply the Islamic State. During this time, the Islamic State took control of large swaths of territory across Syria and Iraq, and created an intricate bureaucratic system that sought to touch on and govern all aspects of the lives

of those that lived under its control.¹⁵ When compared with its first state as ISI and its building toward a second state as ISIL, the post-June 2014 Islamic State governance structures, plans, and implementation were far superior.

At its height, the Islamic State operated government *dawawin* (administrations; *diwan* as singular) across numerous provinces.¹⁶ These included: Administration of the Judiciary and Grievances, Administration of the Hisba (Morality Police), Administration of Da'wa (Proselytization) and Mosques, Administration of Zakat and Charities, Administration of the Soldiers, Administration of Public Security, Administration of the Treasury (Finance), Administration of Media, Administration of Education, Administration of Health, Administration of Agriculture and Livestock, Administration of (Natural) Resources, Administration of Services (Water, Electricity), Administration of Spoils of War, and Administration of Real Estate and Land Tax. It used these government bodies to regulate social relationships, extract resources from local populations, and appropriate those resources for their own gain.¹⁷ But also during this period, the Islamic State constantly struggled to balance its ideology with the practical realities of its state-building project.

From 2017 to today, the Islamic State has been characterized by decline. Leading up to the full loss of territory in March 2019, the Islamic State took active measures to consolidate its organizational structure and to position itself to survive as an underground insurgent group. Unlike previously when it had a series of *wilayat* (provinces) within a particular country, the group melded them together into one “province” to streamline decision-making and operations. In the case of Syria, this transformed Wilayat al-Raqqah, Wilayat Halab, Wilayat al-Barakah, Wilayat al-Khayr, Wilayat al-Furat, Wilayat Homs, Wilayat Hamah, Wilayat Dimashq, Wilayat Hawran to just Wilayat al-Sham in mid-July 2018.^b However, it is important to acknowledge that despite the fact that the Islamic State has been on the defensive, it retains its governance ambitions.

Do Numbers Tell the Whole Story? The Current State of Islamic State Propaganda and Claimed Attacks

Since 2019, the Islamic State has been relatively quiet on the propaganda front when it comes to eastern Syria. Most of the limited focus has been on the so-called daily life in the caliphate. But, without the physical territory it once held, today it usually features fighters hanging around one another, praying, cooking, or preparing for a battle during Ramadan or Eid al-Adha.

From mid-2019 to mid-2020, the Islamic State's Wilayat al-Sham (in its former provinces of al-Khayr and al-Barakah) media office in Syria released three videos threatening its various enemies (SDF, coalition, local leaders, and activists) in northeast and eastern Syria.¹⁸ This was accompanied by an Al Naba—the Islamic State's weekly newsletter—interview in mid-November 2020 with Islamic State commander Abu Mansur al-Ansari in which he stated how terrible life had become under SDF rule in the area and that the Islamic State would continue to fight for people locally against this so-called “apostate” force.¹⁹ More recently, an Al Naba editorial in

“In many ways, the Islamic State hopes to wait out its strongest enemy: the United States. If Washington were to withdraw U.S. forces from northeastern Syria, this would not only animate the Islamic State's propaganda, but also provide the space for the group to up the tempo of its now lagging operations.”

late January 2022, praised Islamic State fighters for the prison break attack earlier that month at Ghwayran.²⁰

Since 2019, the majority of Islamic State propaganda from eastern Syria has focused on daily life and the group's enemies. In 2022, a unique piece of video propaganda was published showing Islamic State fighters in eastern Syria praising the efforts of their counterparts in the Islamic State's self-proclaimed provinces in West Africa, the Sahel, and Central Africa.²¹ In doing so, the Islamic State was able to contextualize the group's more successful operations in other areas around the world.

When zooming out to examine the rest of Syria, the Islamic State's weekly newsletter Al Naba has continued to feature polemics against enemies outside of its core forces in eastern Syria.²² Since the fall of Baghuz, the Islamic State has verbally gone after the jihadi group that controls northwest Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, nine times, the Assad regime four times, the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army twice, and Russian forces once.²³

Several successful counter-operations against the Islamic State have resulted in the death of four leaders since October 2019, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, and very recently Abu al-Husayn al-Husayni al-Qurashi. Islamic State propaganda has featured several new *bayat* (religious oaths of allegiance) taken by fighters in the region following the ascension of each new leader.²⁴ When examining the current state of Islamic State propaganda, the group has had more overall losses than wins. That being said, it has continued its calls to break its supporters free from prisons and detention camps.²⁵ In many ways, the Islamic State hopes to wait out its strongest enemy: the United States. If Washington were to withdraw U.S. forces from northeastern Syria, this would not only animate the Islamic State's propaganda, but also provide the space for the group to up the tempo of its now lagging operations.

When looking closer at the group's insurgency, the Global Coalition Against the Islamic State has seen many successes in the fight against the group since 2019. Successful counter-financing operations coupled with leadership attrition have significantly degraded the group. The military operations against the Islamic State have been led by the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR)—stood up by U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM)—which found in 2023 that “ISIS capabilities remained ‘degraded’ due to Coalition-assisted counterterrorism pressure, but the group continued to pose a threat.”²⁶

This finding by CJTF-OIR seemingly corresponds with

b See the change in how the Islamic State claimed attacks in its weekly Al Naba newsletter between issue 139 and 140. The July 12, 2018, issue still used the various wilayat for Syria, while the July 19, 2018, issue began describing everything in Syria as just Wilayat al-Sham. These issues of Al Naba are available via Jihadology.

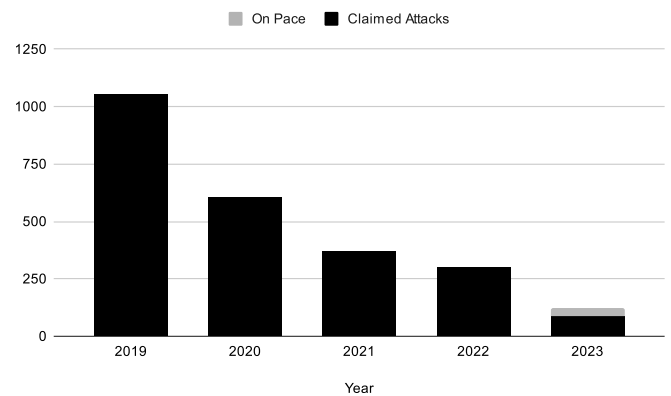
quantifiable statistics on the ground. Over the past four years, the number of claimed attacks by the Islamic State in Syria has gone down significantly every year; it dropped from 1,055 in 2019, to 608 in 2020, to 368 in 2021, to 297 in 2022. Thus far, in 2023, the Islamic State has claimed only 90 attacks in Syria as of September 19. This means that the Islamic State is on pace for 125 attacks in Syria in 2023, the lowest number of claimed operations to date.

Despite these impressive statistics highlighting counter-operations against the Islamic State, researchers such as Aymenn Al-Tamimi, Haid Haid, Gregory Waters, and Charlie Winter have identified that the Islamic State has been underreporting its claimed attacks in different parts of Syria, including the “badiyah” Homs desert region and in the Hawran in southern Syria.²⁷ These scholars highlight that this is due to two possible reasons, either a concerted effort to underreport these attacks, or that Islamic State propagandists have been unaware of the full scope of the group’s ground operations due to communication issues.

According to a series of leaked internal Islamic State documents originating from the fall of 2020,²⁸ this has also been the case in eastern Syria in the Islamic State’s Wilayat al-Khayr alongside Homs and the Hawran. According to these internal documents, the rationale for underreporting the number of attacks appears to be twofold in all three territories: first, worries over greater enemy action (the Assad regime and the anti-regime rebel insurgents) against the Islamic State if it publicizes the attacks it has conducted; and second, a lack of communication and media equipment to record or share information (audio/visual) from the attacks to the Central Media Diwan. In one of the letters, a media emir named Saqr Abu Tayim stated that some cells in Wilayat al-Khayr, for example, only have “one mobile device” and do not receive enough funding “to subscribe to the Internet.”²⁹

While those two factors are relevant, there is also another that came up within these three territories in the leaked internal Islamic State documents and seems to be most pertinent to this discussion: Namely, there is a rift between the media and military officials within the Islamic State’s operations. Military officials overruled the group’s media officials due to security concerns or not seeming to think claiming everything is always important.³⁰ The documents also alleged that Islamic State military officials sometimes remove details from reports on claimed operations in order to downplay the extent of attacks. The documents further contended that this “suppression policy” is not always used consistently, as military officials are sometimes okay with reporting on an attack in one area one day, but refuse to grant approval the next day.³¹ The indications of under-reporting of attacks by the Islamic State discussed above and further discussed immediately below suggest that although these Islamic State documents are nearly three years old now, these trends and rifts remain consistent.

One way of digging deeper on the degree to which the Islamic State may be underreporting attacks is to examine data reported by the Rojava Information Center (RIC) on Islamic State sleeper cell attacks in SDF-controlled areas since the fall of the Islamic State’s territorial control. Similar to the data on Islamic State-claimed attacks, this RIC data should also be caveated, as the RIC is closely aligned with the SDF, who have their own interests in the current situation. Moreover, when looking at the data side by side, it is important to acknowledge that the Islamic State’s claimed numbers are for *all* of Syria, while RIC’s are *only* for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES),



*Islamic State-Claimed Attacks in Syria, 2019-2023
(as of September 19)*

the Kurdish civil government operating in the northeast region of the country.

With that said, RIC data also confirms that there has also been a drop in Islamic State attacks over the years: from 906 attacks in 2019, to 572 attacks in 2020, to 274 attacks in 2021, and a small spike with 285 attacks in 2022.³² Thus far in 2023, the RIC has recorded 139 Islamic State attacks through August, which equates to being on track for 208 attacks by end of year.³³ Therefore, while there has been a drop since 2021, Islamic State attacks logged by the RIC in eastern Syria have remained relatively stagnant and have seemingly not decreased as the rate suggested by the Islamic State’s Syria-wide claims. This data gives further credibility to the theory that the Islamic State is underreporting its claims and that the group has remained more resilient than its attack claims suggest, even though three of its highest leaders have been killed in the past year and a half.

Moreover, when combined with the revelations from the leaked internal Islamic State documents, it would suggest that if the military officials within the Islamic State decide at any point in the future to be more forthcoming about operations, the perception of the group’s strength could alter quickly.

It is plausible that Islamic State military officials are conducting hybrid information warfare to lull their enemies into believing the group is weaker than it actually is. This campaign of suppression is also likely targeted toward the United States in particular, the key player in the fight against the Islamic State. In recent years, the Islamic State’s messaging has consistently claimed that the United States has been weakened since COVID-19. For example, in the most recent message from the Islamic State’s official spokesperson on August 3, 2023, announcing the newest “caliph,” Abu Hudhayfah al-Ansari stated:

As for crusader America: in the past, God inflicted torture upon you at our hands. Today, He inflicts torture upon you from Himself as a just punishment for your war against God’s loyal followers. By God, to us it is the best torture since we give glory to Him as the lord of honour. It is most healing to our hearts, and most grievous and severe to you. It started with the coronavirus [Covid-19] plague, and then came its economic consequences and crises for you. It does not end with your immersion in the quagmire of a crusader-crusader war, which exhausted your economy and military materials. Worry, unease, and fear is even apparent in the statements of your military officials due to the near depletion of your

*military arsenal designated for proxy wars. You are now experiencing your dying days and consecutive misfortunes. Praise and thanks be to God. We lie in wait for you with more, God willing.*³⁴

Therefore, it appears that the Islamic State is waiting for the United States to lose interest in the region, biding its time for the right moment to come back when the context is more favorable to it. This is even more plausible if the United States were to decide to withdraw forces from northeastern Syria if there is a new American president in January 2025, given former President Trump's never-followed-through wishes to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria.³⁵

Overall, the Global Coalition Against the Islamic State has rightly sought to highlight successful operations against the group, and the reported numbers from both the Islamic State itself and the RIC both suggest these operations have degraded the group. However, because the group appears to have held back on reporting attacks, it may not be as weak as appears. With this important context established, this article now explores the Islamic State's shadow governance efforts since 2019.

Shadow Governance Efforts

Only focusing on the Islamic State's claims of responsibility or propaganda may distort the picture of the group's strength or seemingly lack thereof. A true picture of the threat posed by the group also needs to take account of the Islamic State's on-the-ground governance efforts, however intermittent and unsophisticated compared to the heyday of its caliphate. The authors divide these efforts into four parts: taxes, moral policing, administrative documents, and retaking of territory (albeit briefly).

Taxes

One way the Islamic State has attempted to maintain influence in eastern Syria is through the *kulfa sultaniyah* (royal cost)³⁶ tax whereby it targets oil merchants, landowners, farmers, business owners, shop keepers, doctors, millers, bakers, fuel traders, pharmacists, money exchangers, sheep breeders, and herders.³⁷ The Islamic State reportedly charges 2.5 percent on the value of individuals' savings and goods.³⁸ The group calls it the *kulfa sultaniyah* tax instead of the traditional *zakat* tax because it does not have *tamkin* over the territory and can only implement the *zakat* once it formally does so. The Islamic State is able to target potential taxpayers through a network of informants that "monitor sales locations, document quantities sold, and identify recipients."³⁹

This taxation has several implications. First, the Islamic State uses it as an attempt to demonstrate it still has some semblance of influence in eastern Syria. The ability to collect taxes shows that its authority and influence is not all lost. Second, the group uses this as a mechanism to strike fear into local populations, even going so far as to threaten individuals via WhatsApp to extort such payments.⁴⁰ The Islamic State has also been known to blow up locals' stores, houses, or cars if individuals do not pay these taxes.⁴¹ For instance, in mid-October 2022, the group blew up a money exchange and money transfer shop called Maktab al-Iman in the town of al-Izbah, due to the owner not paying the tax.⁴²

The aforementioned WhatsApp extortion messages reportedly come from unknown numbers and one-day-used SIMs with alleged receipts bearing the Islamic State official seal.⁴³ These types of activities have been reported across eastern Syria in al-Hawajiz, Diban, al-Rughayb, al-Busayrah, al-Izbah, Hatlah, Khasham,

"A true picture of the threat posed by the group also needs to take account of the Islamic State's on-the-ground governance efforts, however intermittent and unsophisticated compared to the heyday of its caliphate."

al-Tabiyah, and al-Suwar.⁴⁴ However, these activities have likely occurred elsewhere as well.

In the latter half of 2021, Islamic State fighters stormed a number of oil fields (in Subaihan,⁴⁵ Kharata,⁴⁶ Abu Habba,⁴⁷ al-Taym,⁴⁸ and Daas⁴⁹), demanding a cut of the oil revenue and threatening to kill investors if they were not paid. When an individual does decide to pay the tax, the Islamic State then provides an official administrative receipt for the exchange to show proof that it has been paid (like it did at the height of its governance) so that no other Islamic State members continue to bother them about further payments.⁵⁰ This provides yet another layer to the Islamic State's attempts to legitimize itself as being the true power broker locally.

Beyond helping finance the Islamic State's continued operations, locals have noted that Islamic State fighters making threats have also stated that the funds would go to the women and children held in IDP camps such as Al-Hol, as well as supporting the families of killed Islamic State fighters.⁵¹

Moral Policing

Another key component in the Islamic State's governance infrastructure has been its *hisbah* (moral policing) patrols. With patrols regulating both men and women, the Islamic State utilized the *hisbah* to implement its gendered system of control in the territories it administered.⁵² To showcase that it has continued to administer such justice since 2019, the Islamic State has, for instance, raided shops in villages like Gharibah al-Sharqiya and confiscated cigarette packs and then burnt them in front of onlookers in the center of the village. The group has also blown up schools in places such as al-Hawajiz for supposedly teaching what the group deems an un-Islamic education.⁵³ Similarly, in September 2020, four Islamic State members paraded through al-Busayrah while chanting "*dawlat al-islamiyah baqiyah*" (the Islamic State remains), and destroyed a shop selling hookahs, as smoking shisha is against the group's interpretations of Islam.⁵⁴

In late June 2021, there were reports of a number of incidents in the eastern Deir ez-Zor countryside of the Islamic State's *hisbah* apparatus harassing and warning different segments of the population to stop conducting certain activities that violate the group's morality laws.⁵⁵ Islamic State members stopped a taxi transporting women to work on farmland and demanded that they not wear makeup.⁵⁶ These same Islamic State-affiliated individuals also called on all public transportation operators not to transport women contravening the group's approved dress code.⁵⁷ The Islamic State also threatened restaurant and cafe owners for playing live and recorded music.⁵⁸ In late May 2023, Islamic State members posted leaflets on walls in mosques and public places in the town

of al-Shuhayl that ordered women to commit to the group's version of modesty, including wearing the *niqab* or face punishment.⁵⁹ Similar leaflets were found in al-Tayana in early August 2023 as well.⁶⁰ These calls harkened back to the peak of the Islamic State caliphate.⁶¹

Beyond warnings, the Islamic State *hisbah* killed an individual the group claimed was practicing sorcery and other individuals supposedly selling drugs.⁶² The Islamic State *hisbah* also burned a liquor store and confiscated large quantities of tobacco.⁶³ This makes it clear that although the Islamic State is no longer actively controlling territory, it is seeking to still control the behavior of local populations.

Administrative Documents

Another method the Islamic State has used to showcase its relevance and endurance is by continuing to post administrative documents (official governmental documents versus propaganda) from its Wilayat al-Khayr and Wilayat al-Barakah and then subsequently from its Wilayat al-Sham (Syria Province) office. For example, in October 2019, the Islamic State printed a statement directed at those working in the education sector for the AANES, warning them not to work with this “atheistic” system.⁶⁴ The group stated that it would attack individuals that did not abide by its order. These threats caused female teachers in particular to continue to comply with the Islamic State's ‘modesty’ strictures. For example, one 28-year-old female teacher stated that she continued to wear the full-face and body *niqab* while teaching in a local elementary school because she was afraid to expose her face in front of her students, who were all below the age of nine.⁶⁵

The Islamic State's general security official in the region issued additional threats in April 2020 via a hand-written pamphlet that was distributed door-to-door in al-Husseiniyah village, again, warning that anyone who was working with the AANES, or the SDF this time—whether as a combatant, teacher, or council member—was a legitimate target in the Islamic State's ongoing assassination campaign.⁶⁶ Furthermore, following the implementation of a new school curriculum by the AANES, the Islamic State released an administrative document under its al-Barakah province again threatening teachers and institutions if they implemented the changes, because the group deemed them un-Islamic.⁶⁷ The Islamic State sought to utilize and co-opt pockets of local anger against the new curriculum from the general Arab populace, some of whom also saw it as foreign to their more traditional education.

In March 2021, the Islamic State became even more brazen, releasing an administrative document with the names of 27 people from the town of Jadid Akidat who were described as apostates because of their supposed cooperation with the SDF.⁶⁸ The document threatened that if these individuals did not repent, they would face death and their homes would be destroyed.⁶⁹ The group also warned that additional names would be added to the list soon, illustrating the scope of the Islamic State's assassination campaign just in one village.⁷⁰

Highlighting the influence the Islamic State has continued to hold, according to a February 2022 investigation from *The Washington Post*, one way the organization has been able to keep track of local residents is through informants it pays off.⁷¹ As highlighted above, despite its lack of control of physical territory, the Islamic State has sought to continue to release administrative documents seeking to enforce its writ on the local populace.

“While international events around the world appear to be pulling attention away from the activities of the Islamic State, it is important to remain focused on the group, its insurgency, and its future governance ambitions.”

Retaking Territory Briefly

Due to strategic restraints, the SDF often withdraws from rural villages when the sun goes down due to high security concerns.⁷² This limited gap in governance and control has allowed the Islamic State to take advantage of the situation and occupy parts of villages overnight. In doing so, it not only undermines the SDF operations in the area, but shows local populations that not only was it not defeated, but it can still exert power, even if not permanent control.

In addition to its nighttime operations, in late November 2019, Islamic State elements controlled parts of al-Busayrah and Ibrihimah wherein they set up checkpoints and scrutinized individuals passing through against their records of residents in the area from when they were fully in charge.⁷³ According to a Syria Direct source in the Special Protection Division of the Internal Security Forces of the AANES in mid-June 2022, there are direct “instructions from leadership [of the Internal Security Forces] not to travel at night on the highways between cities, especially isolated [ones]” and that there are remote areas “with no security and military checkpoints” whatsoever.⁷⁴

Since mid-July 2022, there have also been reports from locals in places like Diban and Sweidan that the Islamic State is once again openly recruiting individuals in mosques and squares.⁷⁵ The group also has spaces to run so-called “repentance” sessions to convince individuals to follow its ideological path. In one instance, the Islamic State promised locals salaries of \$150-\$200 per month, a personal weapon and motorcycle, and a future guarantee to financially support recruits' families if they were killed in the line of duty. The paying of these salaries harkens back to the Islamic State's peak, where it had thousands of individuals on its payroll.⁷⁶ Through new recruitment efforts, this has allowed the Islamic State in Diban and Hawajiz, for example, to set-up daytime checkpoints between regime and SDF-controlled areas to push its aforementioned *kulfa sultaniyah* and *hisbah* agenda upon travelers. According to SDF officials speaking to Voice of America in October 2022, the Islamic State has had more room to operate in the eastern Syria due to SDF “preoccupation with other security threats facing the region,” such as the Turkish-backed campaign of the Syrian National Army (SNA) to fight the SDF.⁷⁷ This claim, however, lacks credibility given the SNA has been attacking SDF targets for more than a half of a decade.

More recently, in late March 2023, locals began describing the towns of al-Shuhayl, al-Busayrah, and Diban as the “Bermuda Triangle” due to the Islamic State's sway over the areas.⁷⁸ Moreover, in another one of the Islamic State leaked documents, it claimed that 70 percent of its fighters were based in these areas.⁷⁹ Residents have recently been too fearful to let the SDF know about the Islamic

State's positions, because the Islamic State uses its records of locals from the time when it was in territorial control of the area to threaten local populations into compliance. For instance, a resident from Hajin who was picked up by the Islamic State at a checkpoint in Diban was later found beheaded by the group in the town of Sweidan.⁸⁰ Moreover, in July 2023, members of the Islamic State openly participated in a large caravan demonstration through the town of al-Izbah against the Iraqi Christian individual that had recently burned the Qur'an in Sweden.⁸¹

Conclusion

The fight in Syria against the Islamic State continues, though as time goes on, some of the coalition against the group seems to be losing resolve to continue for the long term. With increased normalization with the Assad regime and escalating conflicts in Africa and Europe, there appears to be a growing perception by the political class in North America and Europe, and many in the populace, that there is no reason to remain in Syria. While international events around the world appear to be pulling attention away from the activities of the Islamic State, it is important to remain focused on the group, its insurgency, and its future governance ambitions.

Local events on the ground also appear to highlight an unclear future for the region. Dissatisfaction with the SDF's governance agenda seems to have hit a breaking point on August 27, 2023, when the SDF arrested Ahmad al-Khubayl (Abu Khawla), the head of the Deir ez-Zor Military Council for alleged "communication and coordination with external entities hostile to the revolution, committing criminal offenses and engaging in drug trafficking, mismanaging of the security situation."⁸² The SDF also pointed to "his negative role in increasing the activities of ISIS cells, and exploiting his position for personal and familial interests."⁸³ Some may see recent events as an opportunity for the Assad regime to

take advantage of the unstable situation;⁸⁴ yet, there is no love lost between many of the tribes and the regime. While it is important to track the ongoing relationship between the AANES and local tribes,⁸⁵ in the fight against the Islamic State, it is paramount to not lose sight of the group's ambitions and the possible opportunities for it to take advantage. As the Islamic State itself recently taunted, it sees these events as part of a broader "world order reeling," which God has arranged to "prepare the land" for creation of a "divine order" whose "nucleus has been established by the [Islamic State] Caliphate."⁸⁶

Today, the Islamic State's insurgency capabilities appear to be declining due to Coalition operations. However, as detailed through the authors' analysis, these numbers may not be all that they appear, and those focusing on countering the Islamic State should not become over reliant on these statistics.

The various forms of Islamic State shadow governance detailed above highlight that the group appears to have more control than what its official media output reveals. This analysis has painted a more complicated picture of a resilient Islamic State that seeks to take advantage of any crack in the foundation of AANES governance or any lull in the SDF and coalition's counterterrorism operations.

This resilience by the Islamic State means that if the campaign against the group loosens—either because of another tribal uprising,⁸⁷ the SDF being more focused on Turkey, the United States withdrawing from Syria, or the Assad regime and its allies taking over the area—the group could resurge quickly. The Islamic State has learned from its past governance and has laid the foundation for a future administration. Even if it sounds far-fetched now, a reasonable worst-case scenario is that the Islamic State could rapidly take advantage of a changed local context to attempt to carve out a small statelet in eastern Syria again. **CTC**

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