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Badr Organization: Iran's Oldest Proxy in Iraq

Michael Knights and Crispin Smith

THE BADR ORGANIZATION HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS "IRAN'S OLDEST proxy in Iraq,"[1] reflecting the paramilitary group's formation by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) over 40 years ago. Despite maintaining close ideological and operational ties to the IRGC, Badr has avoided being sanctioned by the U.S. government in the intervening decades, largely by enfolding itself within Iraq's democratic political processes and minimizing overt aggression against the United States. Various calls have been made by members of U.S. Congress since 2020 to sanction Badr,[2] and Israel has also named them as a belligerent in the Gaza conflict since 2023.[3] With legislation under consideration again on the issue of designating Badr leadership,[4] this piece will review the recent evolution of the group in the decade spanning the formation of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces in 2014 and the Gaza War since 2023. Many short studies have discussed Badr, and this article builds on their foundation, with the objective of focusing more acutely on the "shared DNA" between Badr and U.S.-designated terrorist groups like Kata'ib Hezbollah and on the deteriorating trajectory of U.S.-Badr relations since 2019.

Badr's Iranian Origin

THE ROLE OF THE IRGC IN FORMING AND SUPPORTING BADR IS UNAMBIGUOUS, BEING supported by a wealth of historic documentation.[5] Iranian clerics and IRGC generals[6] formed Badr in 1983. The 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War had entered its third year, and the IRGC sought to build an auxiliary military force[7] that combined prewar anti-Saddam oppositionists (known then as *mujahideen*)[8] and turncoat Iraqi prisoners of war (known as *ahrar*) freed by Iran in exchange for service.[9] Badr was formed as an infantry unit in the Iranian order of battle, growing to reach brigade strength in 1984[10] and division strength[11] in 1988, whereupon the IRGC conferred the title of Badr Corps (Failaq Badr) to inflate their apparent numbers.[12]

The group was organized as a military wing of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, Al-Majlis al-Aala li-Thawra al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq), an anti-Saddam Iraqi oppositionist group formed in Iraq and led by Mohammed Baqer Hakim, an Iraqi from the Islamic Daawa party (Hizb al-Daawa al-Islamiya) who fled to the Islamic Republic of Iran shortly before the Iran-Iraq War began in 1980.[13] (Daawa membership was declared a capital offense by Saddam's regime in 1980.)[14] Mohammed Baqer Hakim called the new force the "Badr 9" unit, referring to the battle of Badr, where Muslims overcame great odds to defeat a polytheist army for the first time.[15] As Zana Gulmohamad observed, the ideological preparation of Badr fighters "drew inspiration from the Shia Karbala narrative, which places a strong emphasis on themes of martyrdom, sacrifice, and dedication to justice."[16] The slogan "Jafari rule" (Shi'ite rule) encapsulated the outcome sought,[17] what would later be called by SCIRI/Badr leadership "the Shi'ite project" of Shi'ite majority rule in post-Saddam Iraq.[18]

The ideological framing of Badr was, from the outset, *walai*, meaning dedicated to the Khomeinist concept of the *velayat-e faqih* (religious jurisprudence) system that it maintains should be spread to other societies through preaching and armed revolutions.[19] The walai orientation of Badr also required unquestioning obedience to Iran's supreme leader. Hadi al-Ameri, as a young Badr fighter in the 1980s, told an Iranian combat cameraman on an Iran-Iraq War battlefield that "we are with the Imam [Khomeini]...if our Imam says war then we say its war; If Imam says peace then its peace."[20] This is a lifelong commitment, and strong anecdotal reporting suggests Hadi al-Ameri and Badr's other longer-serving leaders view their primary loyalty to Iran's supreme leader.[21]

The Political Caste System within Badr

BADR WAS A FUSION OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF ANTI-SADDAM OPPOSITIONISTS FROM THE outset, with a kind of "caste" system that has remained evident as the organization has grown.[22] At the top of the Badr pecking order are the aforementioned mujahideen, the Daawa movement militants who worked with the Islamic Republic of Iran and the IRGC since the Islamic revolution and the guard's foundation. These are broken down even further into the *mosafereen* (those deported from Saddam's Iraq)[23] and the *mohajjereen* (those who followed the deportees to Iran).[24] The clearest example of a mujahideen (and a mosafereen) was Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (real name Jamal Jafar Muhammad Ali Al-Ibrahim), an Iraqi member of Daawa's covert operations arm who left Iraq prior to 1979 and who worked with the Islamic Republic of Iran's security services to undertake terrorist attacks in Kuwait in 1983.[25] Joining Badr in 1984 after his covert career was blown by the Kuwait operations, he rose to become the military commander of the unit by the war's end in 1988.[26] He later formed the terrorist group Kata'ib Hezbollah, was sanctioned by the U.S.,[27] and died in the same U.S. strike that killed IRGC Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani on January 3, 2020. Today's leader of Badr, Hadi al-Ameri, appears to be either a *mosafereen* or a *mohajjereen* who was trained by the Islamic Republic of Iran as an intelligence officer in SCIRI and who joined Badr around 1986 and became its chief of staff under Muhandis.[28] Within Badr, age and years served are often markers of seniority between this first generation of commanders: as a result, Hadi was loyal and subservient toward Muhandis even after the latter "left" Badr in 2002.[29]

Then there are newer cadres of Badr members known (somewhat derogatorily) as *tawabeen* ("penitents," turncoats who defected to Iran after being captured (the aforementioned *ahrar*), plus any Sunni-to-Shia religious converts).[30] No tawabeen rose to high command within Badr's military wing.

The newest cadre of Badr senior leaders are the *rafha*, named after the camp where Iraqi Shia gathered in exile in Saudi Arabia after Saddam's brutal suppression of the failed 1991 uprising (the intifada).[31] Badr's military wing grew strongly between 1991 and Badr's invasion of Iraq in 2003 (in parallel to the U.S.-led coalition).[32] The most prominent example of a rafha leader within Badr is Iraqi National Security Advisor Qassem al-Araji, who will be discussed below.[33] Those who joined Badr after 2003 do not seem to have a

generational moniker yet, but they are clearly a large segment of the rank-and-file, with Badr's military cadre swelling from around 12,000 in 2003 to well over 22,000 troops by 2019.[34]

Badr's Military and
Political Structure since 2003

IN LATE 2002, AS WILL BE FURTHER DISCUSSED BELOW, MUHANDIS HANDED OVER control of Badr to his chief of staff Hadi al-Ameri.[35] This appears to have happened because Badr and Iran understood in the year-plus buildup to the Iraq war that Badr's military expeditionary force would eventually need to coexist alongside U.S. forces inside post-Saddam Iraq and the broader political wing, SCIRI, wished to enter into the new interim governance structures being set up by the Americans.[36] Muhandis and a number of other Badr commanders (notably Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani, later sanctioned by the U.S.[37]) chose to operate covertly within the new Iraq to undertake missions for and with the IRGC Qods Force, later forming anti-U.S. militant cells such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and Kata'ib Sayyed al-Shuhada, both of which have been designated as terrorist organizations.[38]

In parallel, SCIRI and Badr began to quickly integrate within the Iraqi political and security transition. Four years after Mohammed Baqer al-Hakim died in a 2003 suicide bombing widely blamed on al-Qaeda in Iraq, SCIRI changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, Al-Majlis Al-Aala Al-Islami Al-Iraqi) in 2007, an apparent effort to somewhat differentiate its brand from Iran's Islamic Revolution.[39] The Badr Corps meanwhile incorporated thousands of its fighters into the middle ranks of the post-Saddam military and interior ministry in a process known as *demaj* (amalgamation).[40] In particular, Badr achieved dominance in Hadi al-Ameri's native Diyala province, attaining control of the local Iraqi army division (the fifth division) and taking over the Ashraf camp, a major military complex in Diyala that had previously been allocated to Badr's mirror-image and nemesis, the Saddam-backed Iranian oppositionist group called the Mojaheddin-e Khalq Organization (MeK).[41]

Badr quickly began to outgrow its old political wing, ISCI, and split off to form its own political bloc in 2012. (At that time, Badr Corps also declared a military wing, Al-Jannah al-Askari li Munadhamat Badr.) Badr's nomi-

nally civilian side shed its military nomenclature and renamed as the Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development (Munathemaat Badr li al-Imar wa al-Binaa). The movement's framing subtly changed from a sectarian grievance-based *Husseini* movement to a nationalist posture (*mauquf watani*) as well.[42] As the power of Badr and other Shiite militias grew, the movement backed away from its support of a pan-Shi'ite region within Iraq (running only part of the country) to a centralized model of governance that would bring all governorates under Shiite majority rule within the Baghdad government.[43] Badr also greatly expanded its media operations and societal engagement,[44] as well as its role within Iraq's media regulators.[45]

In successive local and national elections, Badr outperformed ISCI, which itself splintered again in 2017.[46] In Iraq's most recent national elections in 2021, Badr emerged with only 8 seats after initial seat allocation but hung in during a yearlong government formation process and emerged at the head of the 48-seat Tahalof al-Fatah al-Muben (Conquest Alliance), with 22 seats of its own after the reallocation of seats vacated by MPs whose faction boycotted the new parliament.[47] Badr also did reasonably well in the December 2023 provincial elections, with Hadi al-Ameri leading the Talahof Nabni (We Build Coalition), which won four of nine governorships across the Shi'ite south of Iraq.[48] Hadi al-Ameri even tried to install the son of a political ally in the Diyala governorship—Mohammed Jassim al-Omairi, the son of the president of the Federal Supreme Court, Judge Jassim Mohammed Abboud al-Omairi—but was foiled as Mohammed did not meet the minimum age requirement of 30 years.[49]

The Badr-Kata'ib Hezbollah Partnership in the PMF

AT LEAST AS IMPORTANT, BADR HAS CONTINUED TO STRONGLY GUIDE THE IRAQI security sector due to its leading role in the formation and growth of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which were raised to combat the rise of the Islamic State, since 2014. Though Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was the day-to-day commander of the PMF from 2014 to 2020, and though he stuffed the institution's key leadership with Kata'ib Hezbollah commanders, it is undeniable that Badr commanders have also had a strong influence on the PMF. Indeed, as this

section will note, many key Kata'ib Hezbollah commanders were themselves openly serving as Badr officers only years before they identified as Kata'ib Hezbollah.

The connective tissue between these two named entities—Badr and Kata'ib Hezbollah—was arguably revitalized during Muhandis's period in charge of the PMF, an era that reflected the original growth of Badr in the 1980s in many respects. With background as the chief of staff of a multi-division military force built from scratch in around half a decade, it is unsurprising that Hadi al-Ameri played a key role in the creation of the PMF. In building out the PMF after 2014, Hadi once again worked under his old commander, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a recognized designated terrorist throughout the 2014-2020 period. Overseeing the first couple of years of the PMF's development, Muhandis's chief of staff, Abu Farkad (Sadiq al-Saadawi), was also a mujahiddin Badrist who will be discussed below.[50] In the authors' view, the rerun of the IRGC-backed formation of Badr in the glory days of the Iran-Iraq War seems to have reawakened something in Hadi al-Ameri and Badr more generally: after that war, the IRGC began to grow and claim its social and economic rewards for the sacrifices it made. Hadi al-Ameri began to adopt the same language—regarding the PMF being the saviors and the rightful inheritors of the nation—during and after the counter-Islamic State war of 2014-2017.[51]

When Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis died in 2020, the seven-member selection committee that chose his replacement as PMF commander included two serving and two former Badr members. The serving Badr members were Abu Ali al-Basri (Adnan Ibrahim al-Najjar), the PMF inspector general and a mohajjereen holding senior commands in Badr throughout the 1990s, and Abu Muntadher al-Husseini (Tahseen Abid Murat al-Abboudi), a tawabeen officer who rose to command a Badr division by 1999.[52] (Both served under Muhandis's command and served longer in Badr than Hadi al-Ameri.) The two "former" Badr officers (identifying by 2020 as Kata'ib Hezbollah members) were Abu Iman al-Bahali (Adhab Kaytan al-Bahali, serving in Badr intelligence roles until 2014) and Abu Fadak (Abdul-Aziz al-Mohammadawi, who served in Badr under Muhandis and Ameri). The committee chose Abu Fadak to lead the PMF in Muhandis's place, underlining the very strong Badr-Kata'ib Hezbollah shared lineage and mutual support.[53]

At the mid-level, the Badr-Kata'ib Hezbollah joint ownership of the PMF is equally evident. Given that Badr was once a fully fledged multi-division auxiliary of the IRGC, it has played an outsized role in the centralized maintenance, provisioning, and training of the PMF. For instance, the PMF training directorate was set up and run by a combined Badr-Kata'ib Hezbollah staff[54]

led by Abu Bilal al-Jabiri (Kadhim Jabr Jasim al-Jabiri),[55] originally a Badrist[56] with a track record of working with Kata'ib Hezbollah.[57] Muhandis's focus on professionalization and training for the PMF was championed by the afore-mentioned Abu Ali al-Basri (Adnan Ibrahim al-Najjar), who spearheaded the effort to get PMF officers fast-tracked through professional military education colleges at Nasiriyah and Rustamiyah (in Baghdad) in order to meet the stan-dards to command non-PMF formations of the Iraqi security forces (much as Iran's IRGC commanders can lead Iranian regular military services and for-mations).[58] The PMF education directorate is likewise championed by Badr officers, notably Abu Muntadher al-Husseini, and now sends PMF officers for professional military education on Iran-paid scholarships to Iran.[59]

The PMF logistics branch was likewise established by a Badrist,[60] and PMF logistics (including those functions supporting U.S.-designated terrorist or-ganizations) have historically relied upon Badr's national-level maintenance depots[61] and military industries,[62] both of which are jointly run with Kata'ib Hezbollah officials. The heavy weapons branches of the PMF—anti-armor, artillery, missiles, and armor—were all built from Badr cadres and command-ers working closely under Kata'ib Hezbollah.[63] High-end materiel provided by Iran to the PMF in the counter-Islamic State war (i.e., T-72 tanks, Kornet-type guided missiles, and HM-20 and HM-27 multiple-barrel rocket launchers) tended to be provided through Badr.[64]

Looking to the future, Badr has many structural advantages that make it ideal for bypassing U.S. export controls on Iran.[65] Its many front companies and affiliated businesses provide it with the finances, commercial infrastruc-ture, and plausible justification for the import of various commercial products. Meanwhile, Badr's extensive logistic infrastructure and influence within Iraq's government and its close relationship with the IRGC provide it with additional advantages useful for importing and then re-exporting items to Iran.[66]

Growing Tension with the United States

THE ABOVE SECTIONS GIVE MORE THAN ENOUGH CAUSE FOR CONCERN TO AMERICAN policymakers in terms of Badr's closeness to the IRGC and other terrorist

organizations. Badr has frequently adopted the narratives of *al-Muqawama al-Islamiya* (Islamic Resistance) in Iraq, has consistently sought (at least rhetorically) the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from the region,[67] and has conspiratorially accused the U.S. of being the hidden hand behind the rise of the Islamic State.[68] Yet while Kata'ib Hezbollah and other groups are open about their efforts to physically attack U.S. and partner forces, Badr distances itself publicly from such actions, and its leader, Hadi al-Ameri, was even allowed to visit the White House in 2011.[69]

Badr certainly has employed persons linked to international terrorist attacks, for instance Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who held command positions in Badr *after* the Kuwait bombings in the early 1980s. Persons who had served in the group also regularly took part in anti-U.S. terrorist acts after 2003, notably Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani and Qassem al-Araji. Though typically described by the U.S. government as "former" Badr personnel serving in "special groups" at the time, some declassified U.S. intelligence reporting does directly link Badr to "weapons smuggling from Iran into Iraq."[70] United States federal courts have found that Iran provides material support for Badr and that Iran has directly sponsored Badr's activities in Iraq, including the gathering of intelligence and acts of sabotage and subversion in southern Iraq.[71] Badr has also been directly implicated in serious human rights abuses, including wartime massacres of Sunni civilians[72] and the mass shooting of unarmed civilian protestors in the 2019 "Tishreen" uprising against the Badr-supported government of Prime Minister Adel Abdal-Mahdi (a former SCIRI and ISCI politician).[73] Any of the above issues could arguably justify U.S. designation of Badr on counterterrorism or human rights grounds.

As important, the trend line in U.S.-Badr relations has deteriorated in recent years. Badr has been notably more hostile toward the United States since 2019–2020, the years in which the first Trump administration unleashed "maximum pressure" on Iran; when the PMF's inheritance of the state seemed to be threatened by the aforementioned Tishreen protests; and when IRGC Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis—mentors to generations of Badr leaders—were killed in a U.S. airstrike in Baghdad.[74] Maximum pressure seems to have triggered more aggressive impulses in Badr as it sought to protect its founder, the IRGC, and its close relative Kata'ib Hezbollah. Thus, in April 2019, Badr's Abu Farkad (Sadiq al-Saadawi) held a press conference denouncing the U.S. designation of the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.[75] In that year, Badr took over the Iraqi Civil Aviation Authority and began closing airspace above Kata'ib Hezbollah's main base to

coalition surveillance flights.[76] Badr's former head of intelligence, Ali Taqqi, took over as director of Baghdad International Airport and controversially transferred the baggage handling contract to a front company controlled by Kata'ib Hezbollah[77]—putting a U.S.-designated terrorist organization in charge of loading bags onto aircraft with direct routes to European capitals.

Later in the year, after December 28 U.S. airstrikes on Kata'ib Hezbollah sites, Badr's leaders played a key role in violent attacks on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad on December 31, 2019.[78] On the eve of the attacks, Hadi al-Ameri attended a coordination meeting at a farm in Zafraniya, Baghdad, owned by U.S.-designated terrorist Shibl al-Zaydi.[79] Other attendees included U.S.-designated terrorists Akram Kaabi, leader of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HaN); Qais al-Khazali, leader of Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH); Abu Ala al-Walai, leader of Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS); and Ahmad Mohsen Faraj al-Hamidawi, secretary-general of Kata'ib Hezbollah.[80] On December 31, 2019, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo wrote on X: "The attack today was orchestrated by terrorists – Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Qais al-Khazali – and abetted by Iranian proxies – Hadi al-Ameri and Faleh al-Fayyad. All are pictured below outside our embassy."[81] The killing of Soleimani and Muhandis likely deepened the preexisting grievance between Badr and the United States.

Badr's Role in Threatening Israel

BADR'S SUPPORT FOR TERRORIST ATTACKS ON ISRAEL HAS ALSO BECOME MORE evident in recent years and has brought Badr closer to direct confrontation with the United States. On October 10, 2023, following Hamas's attacks on Israel, Hadi al-Ameri uncharacteristically threatened: "If the Americans intervene in the battle with Hamas, we will attack all U.S. targets. Therefore, they need to stop the support for this Zionist entity."[82] On October 30, Hadi al-Ameri demanded a "short-term timetable" for the departure of U.S. forces from Iraq and described attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq as "a natural reaction to the bias of America and some European countries toward the usurping Zionist entity."[83] Hadi al-Ameri's increasingly angry remarks appeared to break his longstanding habit of not explicitly calling for the killing of Americans. The Gaza conflict is another forcing mechanism that has encouraged Badr to openly "pick a side" in the U.S.-Iran conflict.

Israel has likewise become increasingly focused on Badr due to its closeness to the IRGC and its control of military infrastructure and forces linking Syria and Iraq. In a November 2024 letter to the United Nations, Israel named Badr as one of the Iran-backed factions attacking Israel from Iraq.[84] However, Israeli concerns about Badr's provision of lethal aid to terrorist attacks goes back further. Badr sent groups of fighters to Syria in 2012–2014 to fight alongside the Syrian regime and under direct IRGC control as part of Badr-al-Janah al-Askari fi Suriya (the Badr military wing in Syria).[85] Badr's control of the Iraqi Ministry of Transport for at least eight of the fourteen years since the start of Syria's civil war provided opportunities to facilitate the "air bridge" between Iran and Syria or Lebanon, including through the use of Iraq's airlines.[86] In July 2019, mystery airstrikes damaged Badr's Camp Ashraf in Diyala province, apparently part of an Israeli effort to interdict shipments of missile and drone components from Iran to Syria via the "land bridge" of Iraq.[87] Advanced Iranian unmanned combat aerial vehicles such as the Mohajer-6 have also been showcased at Ashraf since 2021.[88] One of the drone attacks on Israel in June 2024 by the Iraqi *muqawama* was dedicated to a fallen Badr fighter,[89] interestingly the same man that Camp Ashraf was renamed to honor.[90]

Another intersection with Ashraf, and a very recent example of Badr's provision of support to terrorists, is the apparent hosting of foreign fighters from U.S.-designated terrorist groups at the base.[91] Liwa Fatemiyoun (composed of Pakistani Shi'ites) and Liwa Zainabiyoun (composed of Afghans) are both directly controlled by the IRGC.[92] Badr is reported to have arranged for the transport of these forces to Camp Ashraf and other Badr-linked camps in Iraq[93] after the units were ejected from Syria after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. Transporting, housing, and sustaining these terrorist forces surely meets the criteria for the provision of material support.

Badr as a Source of Terrorist Financing

BADR MAY NOT BE THE FASTEST GROWING PRO-IRANIAN GROUP IN IRAQ, BUT IT does show political resilience, and it is extraordinarily skilled at extracting financial value from the Iraqi public and private sectors. In combination with

Badr's demonstrated closeness to the Iranian regime, this makes Badr a potent player in terrorist threat financing. Badr hit the ground running in post-Saddam Iraq and has developed powerful networks in the military, parliament, government ministries (e.g., transport, interior, finance), Federal Supreme Court, local governments, investment committees, media regulators, and anti-corruption agencies. Based on the author's long view of Iraqi governance, there are very few rivals able to compete with the sophistication and experience of Badr in the design and execution of mega-corruption initiatives, nor the breadth of Badr's organized crime activities.

With regard to mega-corruption, the best single case study of Badr's capacity is the so-called Heist of the Century, which investigations by *The Guardian* and *The Economist* laid at Badr's door.[94] According to *The Guardian,* the $2.5 billion fraud was "masterminded by a well-connected businessman and executed by employees in the tax commission, who enjoyed the support of an Iran-aligned political faction called Badr."[95] The heist was a multi-year (2015–2021) effort by Badr officials to access tax deposits, first only temporarily used to float currency speculation and access U.S. dollars, and later to completely empty the accounts.[96] It is an example of the kind of patient, years-spanning efforts that Badr undertakes when working out how to structure a corruption scheme. One of the key architects of the scheme, Noor al-Zuhair, escaped accountability or repayment of the stolen monies due to the protection of Hadi al-Ameri,[97] and the Badr-run Committee on Integrity[98] misdirected the investigation away from the actual culprits.[99] A relative of Ameri's in the Central Bank of Iraq anti-money-laundering department further insulated the scheme from investigation.[100]

Badr's grip on the Ministry of Transport[101] and its ports has given the movement a second avenue for mega-corruption and organized crime. All projects signed by the ministry generate a financial percentage of the contract value for Badr's leadership.[102] The Grand al-Faw Port Project and expansion of other ports and navigation channels under the General Company for Ports in Iraq, the State Company for Marine Transport and the Iraqi Oil Tankers Company, airport projects, new rail lines, and multi-modal freight projects are all in the hands of Badr-linked officials and businesses, including the architects of the Heist of the Century.[103] Some of these projects—such as digital vessel management and digital barrel-tracking of oil volumes—could revolutionize Badr's illicit access to unmonitored quantities of oil and petroleum products[104] and its ability to facilitate large-scale Iran sanctions evasion.[105] In addition to these mega-projects, Badr works industriously every day to monetize its ability to block (and then resolve) approvals for investment opportunities and land

grants.[106] Hadi al-Ameri's greed for agricultural investment projects is legendary, with each example bringing free land grants and the right to import large quantities of building materials from Iran without paying customs duties.[107] Then there is plain old organized crime increasingly focused on the major money-maker of drug trafficking. In particular, a Badr officer (Mehdi Taqi al-Amerli), working under the authority of Hadi al-Ameri, leads the importation of crystal meth from Iran via the Amerli area of northern Salah al-Din.[108]

Critical from a U.S. perspective, a portion of these revenues flow back into the "mother ship," namely the IRGC in Iran. A variety of Badr officials send multi million dollar consignments of U.S. dollars to Iran each month: Hadi al-Ameri's financial assistant Abu Dhia al-Basri (whose nom de guerre, since the Iran-Iraq war, is Mehdi Saleh al-Bubsairi); the head of Badr's economic committee, Dr. Mohammed al-Khalisi; the head of Badr's Special Economic Committee, Sayyed Wahab (Wahab Ali Abbas); commander of PMF Diyala Operations Command, Taleb al-Musawi (Taleb Mohammed Hussein); and Hadi al-Ameri's jihad assistant and head of the PMF Tigris Operations Command Abu Husam al-Sahlani (Hamid Ibrahim Abdal-Ridha).[109] The latter two also facilitate the movement of stolen oil between federal Iraq and Iran due to their control of the northern and eastern parts of Diyala, Salah al-Din, and Kirkuk provinces.[110]

Policy Implications

DESPITE A MULTI-DECADE TRACK RECORD OF CORRUPTION, STATE CAPTURE, human rights abuses, and terrorist activities, Badr has consistently escaped serious regulatory or law enforcement sanction by the U.S. government and its allies. Despite this inaction, the United States at least has various regulatory tools available which could justifiably be used to punish Badr's hostile or illicit activities while dissuading legitimate actors from engaging with the group.[111] These activities can and should be imposed in a cautious and targeted manner to impose financial and temporal costs on this important Iranian asset while encouraging affiliates to distance themselves from illicit activities. Badr's activities and affiliations mean it is almost certainly eligible for sanctioning under at least three extant sanctions programs.

The U.S. Treasury could designate Badr as "Specially Designated Global Terrorists" (SDGTs) pursuant to Executive Order 13224 (as amended).[112] This has

been applied to Kata'ib Hezbollah and Kata'ib Sayyed al-Shuhada, both Badr descendants and close affiliates. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat al-Nujaba are also sanctioned under this authority. The U.S. government has great latitude[113] to sanction those deemed to pose a terrorist threat[114] as well as supporters and affiliates of previously designated terrorists. Even if based solely on open-source information, Badr's activities, past and present, are likely sufficient for the organization to be eligible for designation under SDGT. As outlined above, Badr has committed acts which would fall under the definition of terrorism laid out in Executive Order 13224. Moreover, Badr employs individuals known to have engaged in terrorism and provides material support to various entities and individuals already designated under the SDGT program. Badr's coercive activities (and support to others engaged in violent coercion) designed to capture and control parts of the Iraq state and its government have also contributed to the capture of the world's fifth largest oil producer, placing state-level resources and financing in the hands of militias and Iranian proxies hostile to the United States.[115] In short, therefore, the U.S. Secretaries of State and the Treasury are likely able to sanction Badr as Specially Designated Global Terrorists.

Badr could also be designated as a Foreign Terror Organization (FTO),[116] as in the case with Badr's founder, the IRGC, and Badr's offshoot organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah. Some of Badr's activities almost certainly meet the criteria for designation as an FTO.[117] Equally importantly, Badr's ongoing material support to Kata'ib Hezbollah is also sanctionable activity. Kata'ib Hezbollah, an FTO in its own right, has frequently attacked U.S. personnel and interests while contributing to regional instability. Badr's ongoing relationship with the IRGC also means that Badr likely "engages in terrorist activity" due to various forms of material support that Badr provides to its Iranian affiliate. This activity would further support the organization's eligibility for designation as an FTO.

Badr also has a track record of human rights and corruption offenses that make it eligible for Global Magnitsky sanctions.[118] Badr participated in wartime massacres of Sunni civilians and the mass shooting of unarmed civilian protestors in the 2019 Tishreen uprisings. Meanwhile, its role in government capture, the theft and diversion of Iraq's natural resources and oil wealth, and the Heist of the Century scandal are all likely sufficient grounds for Badr officials and affiliates to be eligible for sanctioning under the Global Magnitsky program.

U.S. export controls[119] are a fourth area where sanctions on Badr might prove beneficial. As noted above, Badr provides Iran and even terrorist groups like Kata'ib Hezbollah with a workaround to U.S. export controls on dual-use materiel, including drone components. This potential to facilitate U.S. export control

evasion would be significantly limited, however, if Badr was to be sanctioned as an FTO or SDGT. This is because a designation under these programs subjects the designee to an additional export licensing requirement (thereby providing the U.S. government an opportunity to scrutinize and potentially deny exports to the designee). Alternatively, the U.S. could close Badr's export loophole without resorting to sanctions by imposing specific license requirements[120] on Badr affiliates. Such a listing would be useful both as a way to limit Badr's utility to Iran as a possible source of otherwise embargoed products and as a less politically explosive tool to place a "shot across the bow" of Badr.[121]

Given the eligibility of Badr to be sanctioned under a host of existing U.S. legislation, regulations, and executive authorities, why has the organization not been targeted in any of these ways yet? The decision to spare the organization thus far may have resulted from specific policy considerations. Badr is much larger than other Iraqi militias subject to sanctioning and has an extensive role in Iraq's government and its wider economy. Perversely, Badr therefore has made itself safer from sanctions with every passing year due to the success of its state-capture efforts, becoming "too big to fail." Badr's apparent integration into the system is even sometimes hailed as a demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) success, but it is worth asking if, in fact, the system has been swallowed by Badr instead. It is also worth pondering whether any member ever really leaves Badr, being that Badr is the parent unit within the IRGC from which Kata'ib Hezbollah's manpower has largely been "seconded" and to which they may return one day. If Badr, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and the IRGC are as tightly connected as this article suggests, it may be foolish to be concerned that sanctioning Badr would push them closer towards these terrorist groups, as it is occurring in plain sight on a daily basis anyhow. The moment to "turn" Badr probably passed over a decade ago, before the PMF formed, before Muhandis was killed, and before the Gaza war broke out.

Failure to take meaningful actions against Badr in recent years has left one of Iran's most effective proxies able to operate almost uncontested within Iraq while sending a message that Badr, its leaders, and its members can act with relative impunity. Given Badr's track record, any extant policy of avoiding sanctioning the group should be revisited. At a minimum, limited sanctions against key leaders and limited elements of the wider group—for example, mosaffereen and mohajjereeen should be imposed to encourage wider behavioral changes. Badr is always susceptible to splintering due to its generational caste system, and the U.S. government may want to take this into account, favoring tawabeen and especially rafha Badrists with less aggressive treatment.

NOTES

1   Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Special Report: The fighters of Iraq who answer to Iran," *Reuters,* November 12, 2014.

2   On December 3, 2020, U.S. Congressman Joe Wilson introduced a draft bill calling for Badr's designation. See "Wilson Calls to Designate Iranian-Backed Militia as Terrorist Organization" U.S Congressman Joe Wilson website, December 3, 2020. The U.S. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 also prohibits Badr from receiving any U.S. funding due to its close links with Tehran.

3   On November 18, Israeli foreign minister Gideon Saar sent a letter to the president of the UN Security Council expressing concern over increased attacks by militias in Iraq. See Ameer al-Kaabi, Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, "Iraqi Militias Downscaling Their Anti-Israel Actions," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 26, 2024, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-militias-downscaling-their-anti-israel-actions.

4   On April 2, 2025, U.S. Congressman Joe Wilson introduced a draft bill calling for the designation as a terrorist of Badr's leader, Hadi al-Ameri. See the Free Iraq From Iran Act, discussed here: "Wilson Introduces the 'Maximum Support Act'" (press release), U.S Congressman Joe Wilson website, April 3, 2025 , https://joewilson.house.gov/media/press-releases/wilson-introduces-maximum-support-act.

5   For instance, see the official U.S. Army history. Joel D. Rayburn and Frank Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War – Volume 1: Invasion – Insurgency – Civil War, 2003-2006* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2023), 14, 181, 187. Also see Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics and Iran's Revolutionary Guard* (London: Oxford University Press, 2016), 111-112, 171-174. There are also captured and translated Iraqi intelligence materials that provide great detail on the issue: see the detailed 2002 Iraqi intelligence profile of Badr, Harmony document ISGQ-2005-00038283, "Full Translation, Intelligence Services: Study of Badr Corps 9," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

6   The key Iranian ayatollah involved in forming Badr was Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, and the key IRGC general was Major General Shaban Nasiri. See Amir Toumaj, "Death of a General: What Shaban Nasiri Reveals About Iran's Secretive Quds Force," War on the Rocks, March 23, 2018, https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/death-of-a-general-what-shaban-nasiri-reveals-about-irans-secretive-qods-force/. See also Mehdi Khalaji, "The Future of Leadership in the Shiite Community," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 24, 2017, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/future-leadership-shiite-community.

7   This kind of effort has many precedents in military history, such as the Waffen-Stahl forces raised by the Soviet-run National Committee for a Free Germany and the Indian National Army forces raised by Imperial Japan, both in the Second World War.

8   The "Al-Daawa party, Al-Mujahideen Movement and the Scholars and Independent Group" are mentioned as component elements in a 2002 Iraqi intelligence profile of Badr (see "Harmony," p. 2). Walter Posch has also referred to the D'awa "mujahideen" as an obscure militant fringe of Daawa and a component of Badr. See Walter Posch, "Iraq and Iraq: Revolutionary Guards and PMUs," translated by Christopher Schonberger, (Vienna: National Defense Academy, Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management, 2020) 7.

9   Zana Gulmohamad, "Munathamat Badr, from an armed wing to a ruling actor," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 33, no. 8 (2022): 1285-1313.

10 Badr was built into a single-brigade force between February 1983 and March 1984. See the 2002 Iraqi intelligence profile of Badr (accessed via Harmony) 7.

11 Badr was a three-brigade force in 1988. (2002 intelligence assessment accessed via Harmony, 9).

12 Ibid., 2.

13 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 111-112.

14 Ibid.

15 2002 intelligence assessment accessed via Harmony, 8.

16 Gulmohamad, "Munathamat Badr."

17 L.E. Cline, "The prospects of the Shia insurgency movement in Iraq," *The Journal of Conflict Studies* 20 (Fall 2000).

18 This is the phrase commonly used (*the Shiite project*, *the project*, *our project*) to the author during his interview processes with Iraqi Shi'ite leaders in Iraq between 2003 and 2025.

19 See the original 1983 Central Intelligence Agency study of Khomeinism called "Khomeinism: The Impact of Theology on Politics," accessible via CIA Library, Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room.

20 "Foreign Relations Bureau – Iraq, Archive: Hadi al Ameri during Iran-Iraq war: we are on the side of Imam Khomeini," accessible on YouTube, October 16, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFP-x4itHLQ.

21 This has been a point of consensus in the author's interview processes with Iraqi Shi'ite leaders in Iraq between 2003 and 2025.

22 The author undertook detailed interviews with Badr members, including Hadi al-Ameri, in the 2017-2019 period to learn this system from them firsthand.

23 *Mosafereen* is a Ba'athist term for the Daawa and other Shiite oppositionists de-

ported and stripped of their citizenship by Saddam's regime. The phrase was "reclaimed" as a badge of honor by oppositionists.

24 The title *Mohajjereen* recalls the followers who voluntarily joined the Prophet Mohammed when he was in exile in Medina, before he returned triumphantly to Mecca.

25 James Glanz and Marc Santora, "Iraqi Lawmaker Was Convicted in 1983 Bombings in Kuwait That Killed 5," *New York Times*, February 7, 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/07/world/middleeast/07bomber.html. On December 12, 1983, U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait were struck by suicide car bombs, part of a seven-car bomb attack sequence that was launched by Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shia militants. Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb'allah in Lebanon: The Politics of the Western Hostage Crisis* (London: Palgrave McMillan, 1997), 63. See also Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 112.

26 Harmony document ISGQ-2003-00023756: "Full Translation, Presidency of the Republic Intelligence Service Anti-Espionage General Office Study on the Disloyal Badr Corps," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 8.

27 "Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq," U.S. Department of the Treasury, July 2, 2009, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg195.

28 "Study on the Disloyal Badr Corps," 8.

29 Author's interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

30 The first author undertook detailed interviews with Badr members, including Hadi al-Ameri, in the 2017-2019 period to learn this system from them first-hand.

31 Ibid.

32 This was a multi-column/axis advance towards Baghdad via the Iranian borders in Diyala and Wasit provinces.

33 Araji left Iraq during the 1991 intifada. Authors' interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

34 Michael Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 7 (August 2019), 3. The author undertook detailed examination of Badr sub-units in the PMF, which yielded a range of 18,000 to 22,000 troops registered within the PMF based on a tallying of the author's interview data. Badr controlled the state-funded 1st, 4th, 5th, 9th, 10th, 21st, 22nd, 23rd, 24th, and 27th Brigades of the PMF, and appears to have strong influence over the 16th, 30th, 36th, 50th, 52nd, 53rd, 55th and 110th Brigades of the PMF. To this total, one should add

Badr members inside the non-PMF Iraqi Security Forces, which is harder to calculate, but which could easily take the Badr total military membership up to the 50,000 troops that they claim. See also Guido Steinberg, "The Badr Organization: Iran's most important instrument in Iraq," German Institute for International and Security Affairs—SWP Comments, July 26, 2017, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2017C26_sbg.pdf. This also came across in the author's interviews with multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

35 Author's interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

36 Ibid.

37 Abu Mustapha al-Sheibani (aka Mustafa Abdal-Hamid Hussein al-Otabi and Hamid Thajeel Wareij al-Attabi) was designated for trafficking in advanced Iran-provided roadside bombs in 2007. "Treasury Designates Individuals, Entity Fueling Iraqi Insurgency," U.S. Department of the Treasury, January 9, 2008, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/hp759. Sheibani has been formally identified by the U.S. as a Badr front commander, intelligence chief, and IRGC Qods Force agent in declassified intelligence materials: see Counter-IED Operational Integration Center (COIC) As of: 9 August 07 ACTO: CW3 Bryan Gray 242-0647 JAM SPECIAL GROUPS Assessment Reviewed for declassification by: MAJ W.C. Blythe Jr. Date: 23 July 2015.

38 For the 2009 designation of Kata'ib Hezbollah, see "Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq." On November 17, 2023, the U.S. government designated KSS as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. See "U.S. Treasury Sanctions Iran-Aligned Militias in Iraq," U.S. Department of the Treasury, November 17, 2023, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1921.

39 Matthew Yglesias, "ISCI is the New SCIRI," The Atlantic, March 27, 2008, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2008/03/isci-is-the-new-sciri/44039/.

40 Michael Knights, "Tehran Seeks to Consolidate Power in Iraq in 2018," *Cipher Brief*, September 24, 2017, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tehran-seeks-consolidate-power-iraq-2018.

41 Susannah George, "Breaking Badr," *Foreign Policy*, November 6, 2014, https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/breaking-badr/. Also see Michael Knights, "After Tikrit," *Foreign Affairs*, March 16, 2015, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2015-03-16/after-tikrit.

42 Gulmohamad, "Munathamat Badr." Gulmohammad notes the difference between the new "Mauquf Watani (nationalist posture)" and the traditional "Husseini posture," relating to Husseini being "a revered Shia title that relates to Imam Hussein

ibn Ali, who is the grandson of prophet Muhammad."

43   For discussion of various ideas and debates around regionalism, see Reidar Visser and Gareth Stansfield (eds.), *An Iraq of Its Regions: Cornerstones of a Federal Democracy?* (London: Hurst, 2007).

44   Badr developed the Qanat al-Ghadeer television channel; the Badr News Agency (Wakalat Badr al-Akhbariya); the Manasat Baa ("B Platform") Telegram, Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, and TikTok channel (whose format appears to have been inspired by Kata'ib Hezbollah's "Kaf" (K) channels; Badr's media center (Al-Markaz al-Ilami li Munadhamat Badr); plus the Badr Islamic Cultural Center (Markaz Badr al-Thaqafi al-Islami) and Wilaya Youth Gathering (Tajamo Shabab al-Wilaya), Badr's youth organization.

45   For detailed description of Badr's key personnel within the Communications and Media Commission (a powerful media watchdog) and the state-run Iraqi Media Network, see Ameer al-Kaabi, Michael Knights, and Hamdi Malik, "Profile: Iraqi Media Network," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 29, 2024, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-iraqi-media-network; and Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Crispin Smith, "Profile: Communications and Media Commission," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 15, 2023, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-iraqi-media-network.

46   Ibrahim al-Marashi, "Shia Factions in the Iraqi Election: Divided and in Disarray," Italian Institute for International Political Studies, May 10, 2018, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/shia-factions-iraqi-election-divided-and-disarray-20461.

47   Many thanks to Kirk Sowell and his wonderful research publication, *Inside Iraqi Politics*, for helping to unravel exactly how many seats Badr won within its coalition. Inside Iraqi Politics remains a vital resource for Iraq researchers.

48   Ameri's Talahof Nabni (We Build Coalition) list won the largest haul of any Shiite bloc (107,554 votes, translating to four seats), to which one might add the 29,961 votes and one seat belonging to the nominally independent Asar bloc, leaning towards Badr. Michael Knights and Ameer al-Kaabi, "Diyala Governorship Shows Badr Leaning on Maliki to Remain Competitive," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 19, 2024, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/diyala-governorship-shows-badr-leaning-maliki-remain-competitive.

49   Ameer al-Kaabi, Michael Knights, and Hamdi Malik, "Hadi al-Ameri's Bad(r) Month," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 21, 2024, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hadi-al-ameris-badr-month.

50 Abu Farkad (Sadiq al-Saadawi) was chief of staff to Muhandis in 2014-2016 and then Badr's representative in Najaf in 2017-2019. Abu Farkad was a senior staff officer to Muhandis in Badr in the 1980s and 1990s.

51 For instance, Hadi notes in 2015: "Without the [PMF], Iraq would no longer exist." Qanat al-Fathaiya, "Interview with Hadi al-Ameri the Secretary General of Badr Organization" accessible on YouTube, February 10, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24QPjHZPxHI. Also identified in Gulmohamad, "Munathamat Badr."

52 Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Aymenn al-Tamimi, "Honored Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 23, 2020, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/honored-not-contained-future-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid. Badr maintains well-organized and depot-like recruitment and training bases at Camp Ashraf (in Diyala) and in Basra, Baghdad, Babil, Karbala, Kirkuk and Salah al-Din. All PMF factions appear to be able to undertake training at Camp Speicher, where a form of collective training center is led by Badr and Kata'ib Hezbollah.

55 Certificate presented to a Hashd Brigade 41 member for completion of a course, featuring the name and signature of the head of the Hashd's General Directorate for Training. Post by Fawj al-Diwaniya for Hashd Brigade 41, January 27, 2020, https://justpaste.it/hashdtrainingdirectoratejan2020.

56 Jabiri went from Badr to the ISCI-formed Saraya al-Ashura (PMF brigade 8), Michael Knights, "Back into the Shadows? The Future of Kata'ib Hezbollah and Iran's Other Proxies in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 10 (October 2020).

57 Ibid.

58 See Amir al-Kaabi and Michael Knights, "Mainstreaming Hashd Commanders (Part 2): Fifty-Fold Increase in Officer Training," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 15, 2023, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mainstreaming-hashd-commanders-part-2-fifty-fold-increase-officer-training.

59 Sary Mumayiz, "Profile: Directorate of Education, al-Hashd al-Shabi (DEHS)," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 18, 2024, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-directorate-education-al-hashd-al-shabi-dehs. Badr secretary-general Hadi al-Ameri and Abu Muntadher al-Husseini attend many high-level meetings and conferences at DEHS also uses Badr facilities to host large celebrations intended for DEHS graduates who served in Badr's brigades.

60   Knights, Malik, and al-Tamimi, "Honored Not Contained." The PMF's logistics setup was done by by Abu Hawra al-Ahmadi, who was the 1990s chief of staff of Badr's Mohammed Rasul Allah division. See 2002 Iraqi intelligence profile of Badr accessible via Harmony, 7.

61   Knights, Malik, and al-Tamimi, "Honored Not Contained," 31.

62   Ibid., 70-71. Badr has military industries in Khalis, Baquba, Balad Ruz, al-Numaniyah, and al-Zafaraniyah (jointly with Kata'ib Hezbollah).

63   Ibid, 32-35. The PMF's centralized pool of antitank weapons, artillery, missiles, and tanks all started as nationalized Badr units. The PMF Artillery Directorate (Mudiriyat al-Madafiya) was formerly known as the Badr Divisional Artillery Battalion and was led by a mohajjereen Badrist Abu Majid al-Basri (Ahmad Sami al-Hilali), the 1990s commander of Badr's Mohammed Rasul Allah division. Likewise, the PMF Tank Directorate was known as the Badr Tank Battalion until 2015. It was led by Badr's 1990s commander of the Al-Hassan battalion armor, a *tawabeen* Badrist called Abu Dhanun al-Khalidi. The PMF's Directorate of Combating Armored Vehicles (Mudiriyat Muqatalatal-Duru) was previously Badr's anti-tank unit, led by Fadhel Abdul Husseini, a tawabeen Badrist chosen by Muhandis in the 1990s to develop anti-armor forces in Badr. See 2002 Iraqi intelligence profile of Badr, 31-34. Also see Knights, Malik, al-Tamimi, Honored Not Contained, 70-71.

64   Imagery and videos of the Badr-provided PMF artillery and armor directorates is widespread because the PMF is proud to show off its capabilities. For a good description of Badr equipment holdings, see Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 100. Also see Michael Knights, "The Future of Iraq's Security Forces," Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, March 2016, 78, accessible at: https://www.bayancenter.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/The-future.pdf.

65   Even to export relatively innocuous low-technology consumer goods items to Iran, U.S. companies must obtain licenses from the Department of Commerce. This severely limits Iran's ability to obtain a range of important products needed for both ordinary commercial purposes, as well as for manufacturing weapons.

66   Iraq and Iraqi entities, on the other hand, are not subject to as stringent export controls as those imposed on Iran. This raises an opportunity for the Badr Organization to support Iran.

67   At the earliest moment possible after the liberation of all Iraqi cities from the Islamic State, Badr began to call for U.S. withdrawal. See Ahmad Majidyar, "Iran-Backed Badr Organization Calls on U.S. Troops to Leave Iraq," Middle East Institute, November 30, 2017, https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-backed-badr-organization-calls-us-troops-leave-iraq.

68   Norm Cigar, *Iraq's Shia warlords and their militias: political and security challenges and options* (Strategic Studies Institute and the U.S. Army War College Press, June 2015).

69   Dave Boyer, "Hadi al-Amiri, leader of U.S. Embassy siege in Iraq, was guest of Obama at White House," *The Washington Times*, January 2, 2020, https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jan/2/hadi-al-amiri-leader-us-embassy-siege-iraq-was-gue/.

70   The U.S. Counter-IED Operational Integration Center noted in 2007 that the Special Groups attacking U.S. forces "seem to have evolved from previous networks [before 2003] of the Badr Organization, and [the post-2003] Sheibani network", referring to Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani, the "former BADR Corps Baghdad Front Commander, BADR Corps Intel Chief, & IRGC-QF Intel agent who conducted operations against Saddam's Regime." The report also notes the combination of "IRGC-QF, BADR Organization, border tribes" in smuggling Iranian roadside bombs into U.S. to be used to attack U.S. troops. See Counter-IED Operational Integration Center (COIC) As of: 9 August 07 ACTO: CW3 Bryan Gray 242-0647 JAM SPECIAL GROUPS Assessment Reviewed for declassification by: MAJ W.C. Blythe Jr. Date: 23 July 2015.

71   See, for example, W.A. v. Islamic Republic of Iran, 427 F. Supp. 3d. 117, 125-127, & 134 (United States District Court for the District of Columbia, 2019).

72   Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch issued substantial reports that documented Badr misconduct in 2014, 2016 and 2017 massacres. See "Absolute Impunity: Militia Rule in Iraq," Amnesty International, October 14, 2014, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde14/015/2014/en/; "Iraq: Possible War Crimes by Shia Militia," Human Rights Watch, January 31, 2016, https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/31/iraq-possible-war-crimes-shia-militia; and "Turning a Blind Eye: The Arming of the Popular Mobilization Units," Amnesty International, January 5, 2017, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde14/5386/2017/en/.

73   The role of Badr in the "Crisis Cell" that orchestrated the murder of unarmed civilian protestors is described in Michael Knights, "Punishing Iran's Triggermen in Iraq: Opening Moves in a Long Campaign," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 6, 2019, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/punishing-irans-triggermen-iraq-opening-moves-long-campaign.

74   Hadi al-Ameri attended the commemoration for the two slain terrorists in Baghdad but did not visit Tehran or Qom for other gatherings of terrorist leaders afterwards. "Chanting 'Death to America, Israel,' thousands join Soleimani funeral procession," *AFP*, January 4, 2020, https://www.timesofisrael.com/chanting-death-to-america-thousands-join-soleimani-baghdad-funeral-procession/.

75   "Iraqi resistance factions condemn the inclusion of the Revolutionary Guards in the list of terrorism," *Tasnim News*, April 14, 2019.

76   In March 2019, multiple U.S. government interviewees confirm, Iraq began to close airspace to coalition intelligence flights, particularly around Kata'ib Hezbollah's Jurf as-Sakr base but also in other places. After apparent Israeli airstrikes started in Iraq in July 2019, the militia-controlled CAA took additional steps to remove access. For an open-source reference to this, see Suadad al-Salhy, "Iraqi government cancels permission for anti-Daesh coalition to fly in Iraqi air space," *Arab News*, August 16, 2019, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1540421/middle-east.

77   The author received this information via multiple contacts and has copies of the baggage-handling contract in its original Arabic form. Ali Taqqi also headed the Civil Aviation Authority at the time.

78   Seth Frantzman, "Pompeo names Iraqi Badr militia leader Hadi al-Amiri as Iranian proxy," *Jerusalem Post*, January 2, 2020, https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/pompeo-names-iraqi-badr-militia-leader-hadi-al-amiri-as-iranian-proxy-612751.

79   Abdullah Hayek, Ameer al-Kaabi, Michael Knights, and Hamdi Malik, "Profile: Kataib al-Imam Ali," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 27, 2024, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-al-imam-ali.

80   Ibid.

81   "The attack today was orchestrated by terrorists – Abu Mahdi al Muhandis and Qays al-Khazali – and abetted by Iranian proxies – Hadi al Amari and Faleh al-Fayyad. All are pictured below outside our embassy," Mike Pompeo, X post, December 31, 2019, https://x.com/SecPompeo/status/1212160732445499394.

82   Amir al-Kaabi and Michael Knights, "Iran-Backed Militias Applaud Hamas, Threaten Americans," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 13, 2023, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-backed-militias-applaud-hamas-threaten-americans.

83   Hamdi Malik, Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, and Ameer al-Kaabi, "Potential Escalation in Iraq (Part 1): Khamenei and Badr," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 1, 2023, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/potential-escalation-iraq-part-1-khamenei-and-badr.

84   On November 18, 2024, Israeli foreign minister Gideon Saar sent a letter to the president of the UN Security Council expressing concern over increased attacks by militias in Iraq. AFP and ToI Staff, "Israel urges UN to push Iraq to take 'immediate action' against Iran-backed militias," *Times of Israel*, November 19, 2024, https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-urges-un-to-push-iraq-to-take-immediate-action-against-iran-backed-militias/.

85 Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, Hamdi Malik, "Profile: Badr Organization," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2, 2021, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-badr-organization. Also see Phillip Smyth, "The Badr Organization's Syria Expeditionary Force: Quwet al-Shahid Muhammed Baqir al-Sadr," *Hizballah Cavalcade*, October 18, 2013.

86 David Adesnik, LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster, and Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Burning Bridge: The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, June 18, 2019, https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/06/18/burning-bridge/.

87 Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "Militias Are Threatening Public Safety in Iraq," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 14, 2019.

88 Farzin Nadimi and Michael Knights, Militias Parade Under the PMF Banner (Part 1): Drone Systems, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 3, 2021, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/militias-are-threatening-public-safety-iraq.

89 Michael Knights, "Saraya Awliya al-Dam Finds New Mission in Israel Attack," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 27, 2024, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saraya-awliya-al-dam-finds-new-mission-israel-attacks.

90 Ashraf was formally re-named by Badr in honor of the martyr in question, Abu Muntadher al-Mohammadawi, killed by the Islamic State in Anbar in 2015).

91 "Treasury Designates Iran's Foreign Fighter Militias in Syria along with a Civilian Airline Ferrying Weapons to Syria," U.S. Treasury, January 24, 2019, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm590.

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97 Hadi al-Ameri protected Nour al-Zuhair saying that he would treat an attack on him as an attack on Hadi's own son, Mehdi. Hadi al-Ameri is "old school," protecting his business partners and threatening retribution on their detractors. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2023-2024 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

98 Hayder Hanoun Zayer was appointed to head the Federal Commission of Integrity after winning a seat as one of Hadi al-Ameri's Badr candidates in the 2018 elections. He was replaced in 2022 by Mohammed Ali al-Lami, another Badr-linked official who is close to Hadi al-Ameri's family, especially Hadi's son Mehdi. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2023-2024 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). The misdirection eventually failed when Interpol quashed Iraq's requested "red notices" for lack of even basic supporting evidence.

99 Michael Knights, "Profile: Federal Commission of Integrity," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 19, 2023, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-federal-commission-integrity.

100 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2023-2024 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

101 Hadi al-Ameri was Minister of Transport from 2010-2014, and his protégé in the minister's office, Sadiq al-Saadawi, is now the Minister of Transport under al-Sudani since 2022.

102 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2023-2024 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

103 Ibid.

104 For detailed examples of such land and investment rackets, see Knights, Malik and Smith, "Iraq's New Regime Change." This includes the so-called "electronic barrel" project, which (in the wrong hands) has the potential to make vast quantities' of oil "disappear" from Iraq's inventory.

105 Ibid. The digitized vessel management system, in the wrong hands, likewise has the potential to cover the tracks of Iranian oil sanctions-busting in Iraqi territorial waters, making it easier to spoof marine traffic analysis and make volumes of oil "disappear" or receive certification as un-sanctioned Iraqi oil.

106 Ibid.

107 Ibid.

108 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi intelligence figures in 2024-2025 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid. This further underlines the importance of northern Salah al-Din and Diyala to Badr's cross-border smuggling schemes—whether they involve Iranian weapons, stolen oil, narcotics or traditional smuggled contraband.

111 Various Iranian aligned Iraqi militia groups are subject to U.S. sanctions. These measures (broadly) freeze property and interests held by sanctioned persons that are subject to U.S. jurisdiction – in effect cutting the individuals and entities off from conventional global financial and banking systems. Sanctions also prevent certain third parties from transacting with designated individuals, imposing civil and criminal penalties for violations.

112 This regulatory tool allows the U.S. government to disrupt the financial support network for terrorists and terrorist organizations by designating and blocking the assets of foreign individuals and entities that commit, or pose a significant risk of committing, acts of terrorism. The sanctions regime also allows the U.S. government to block the assets of individuals and entities that provide support, services, or assistance to, or otherwise associate with, designated terrorists and terrorist organizations as well as their subsidiaries, front organizations, agents, and associates.

113 For an individual or entity to be designated under the SDGT program, the Secretary of State (in consultation with the Secretary of the Treasury and the Attorney General) may designate foreign individuals or entities determined to have committed, or to pose a significant risk of committing, acts of terrorism that threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States. Alternatively, the Secretary of the Treasury, in consultation with the Secretary of State and the Attorney General, may designate individuals or entities determined either (1) to be owned or controlled by, or act for or on behalf of an SDGT designated individual or entity; or (2) individuals or entities determined to assist in, sponsor, or provide financial, material, or technological support for, or financial or other services to or in support of, acts of terrorism or individuals or entities designated under the SDGT program; or (3) individuals or entities otherwise associated with certain designated individuals or entities.

114 Terrorism, meanwhile, is defined as an activity that (1) involves a violent act or an act dangerous to human life, property, or infrastructure; and (2) appears to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; to influence the policy of a

government by intimidation or coercion; or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, kidnapping, or hostage-taking.

115 These activities all threaten the security of U.S. nationals as well as the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States, as they contribute to empowering and financing Iranian-aligned threat actors and terrorists in Iraq and throughout the broader Middle East. These actors have directly targeted U.S. and allied service-personnel and facilities while also contributing to regional instability.

116 FTOs are foreign organizations that are designated by the Secretary of State in accordance with section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), as amended.

117 The legal criteria for designating an FTO requires the target to (1) be a foreign organization; (2) engage in terrorist activity, or retain the capability and intent to engage in terrorist activity or terrorism, and (3) the organization's terrorist activity or terrorism must threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national security (national defense, foreign relations, or the economic interests) of the United States. The expansive definitions of "terrorist activity" and "terrorism" for purposes of the INA include committing acts "that the actor knows, or reasonably should know, affords material support, including a safe house, transportation, communications, funds, transfer of funds or other material financial benefit, false documentation or identification, weapons (including chemical, biological, or radiological weapons), explosives, or training" either for the commission of a terrorist activity, or to individual or organizations who the actor knows, or reasonably should know, has committed or plans to commit a terrorist activity.

118 The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Global Magnitsky Act, Title XII, Subtitle F of P.L. 114-328, as amended; 22 U.S.C. §§10101 et seq.) authorizes the President to impose economic sanctions and deny entry into the United States to foreign persons identified as engaging in human rights violations or corruption. Individuals who have acted as agents of or on behalf of human rights abusers or who have materially assisted corrupt officials can also be sanctioned. Broadly, to be sanctioned under the corruption prong of this regime, an individual must be a current or former government official, or a person acting for or on behalf of such an official, who is responsible for or complicit in, or has directly or indirectly engaged in: (i) corruption, including the misappropriation of state assets, the expropriation of private assets for personal gain, corruption related to government contracts or the extraction of natural resources, or bribery; or (ii) the transfer or the facilitation of the transfer of the proceeds of corruption.

119 The United States imposes export controls to protect national security interests and promote foreign policy objectives. The U.S. government can impose various

controls to regulate the export, reexport, and transfer of weapons, as well as other items that can also be used in conventional arms, weapons of mass destruction, terrorist activities, or human rights abuses. Iran is subject to especially comprehensive export restrictions and licensing requirements under U.S. law, effectively amounting to an embargo.

120 Under the U.S. "Export Administration Regulations" for example, the U.S. Commerce Department can add individuals and entities to a list known as the "Entities List" which outlines specific licensing requirements for export of certain products to the listed end user.

121 While sanctions might be particularly harmful beyond their intended target and may also result in significant hostility from Badr members, imposing export controls and licensing requirements might provide a way of sending a message to potentially hostile actors and to any third parties transacting with them—while limiting blowback and unintended consequences.

Aligning Prayers and Push-Ups: Exploring the Rise of "Salafitness"

Sergio Altuna

ONLINE COMMUNITIES HAVE CHANGED THE WAY PEOPLE AND groups interact with religion and identity, providing new spaces from where to challenge religious authority and offering alternatives to long-standing traditions. The last years have witnessed the rise of a new generation of Muslim social media influencers who are skilled in the art of digital storytelling and highly embedded in global online culture. Highly skilled in content production, these influencers have carved out niches where they build communities and present alternative visions of Muslim identity, rooted in contemporary lifestyles.[1]

The rise of digital technologies has enabled these content creators—and their followers—to produce, distribute, and engage with religious contents in unprecedented ways. Like other digitally connected communities, young Muslim millennials are mostly urban, well-educated, and technologically savvy. As a result, the practice and communication of Islam are undergoing significant transformations, shifting away from institutionalized settings toward more personalized, visually driven forms of interaction.[2]

Therefore, considering the above, and just as new terms like "muslimpreneurs"[3] and "hijabers"[4] have been coined to describe new digital expressions of Muslim identity, this article explores a new form of online pious activism that merges ultraconservative Islamic practices and contemporary fitness culture—an intriguing phenomenon I humbly propose to term "Salafitness."

Although seemingly innocuous, the rise of Salafitness deserves close examination, as it mirrors broader trends of social isolation, ideological rigidity, and the potential for radicalization within closed networks. While contact sports and fitness activities have often been promoted as positive alternatives for young individuals at risk of social marginalization, Salafitness presents a more complex dynamic. Unlike such initiatives that seek integration and broader social benefits, Salafitness often fosters exclusionary identities that may undermine social cohesion. Recent cases in Europe have raised concerns about how fitness-based religious movements might serve as gateways to more extreme interpretations of Islam, and similar patterns have been observed in other ideological movements, where fitness subcultures have played a role in fostering extremist identities. From neo-fascist fight clubs to mixed martial arts (MMA) networks linked to jihadist recruitment, physical training has proven to be a means of exclusivist in-group cohesion and, in some cases, a pathway to radicalization.

What Is "Salafitness"?

A NEOLOGISM BY DEFINITION, SALAFITNESS IS A TERM PROPOSED TO LABEL A NEW phenomenon among certain Muslim communities, especially young men, which blends the religious rigor of Salafism with the physical discipline of fitness and calisthenics. This blending fosters community, enhances personal piety, and promotes a distinct socio-religious identity. However, it also raises questions about ideological insularity, social integration, and even the potential for extremist behaviors and radicalization. Crucially, Salafitness is inextricably linked to a strong communicative and visual component, with a significant presence on social media—thus giving rise to figures such as the Dutch "Ek.Anon," the British "J4hedul," or the American Hiwa Busally, each of them with hundreds of thousands of followers across different social media platforms.[5]

The rise of Salafitness can be attributed to several socio-cultural dynamics. In an era in which social media and online platforms are at the forefront of building individual and collective identities,[6] Salafitness groups have crafted highly effective communication strategies for disseminating their ethos through platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Their content seamlessly combines physical and religious elements, showcasing muscular bodies, workout routines, and halal dietary recommendations alongside collective prayers, fasting tips, and advice on integrating fitness with religious observance. This combination serves as a powerful visual representation of their ideals, attracting followers—particularly those with a fragile sense of identity in the Western world—who seek both spiritual fulfillment and a sense of belonging.

As the ideological backbone of this phenomenon, Salafism provides both the theological framework and the moral imperative for the fusion of religious piety and physical discipline that defines Salafitness. This interpretation of Islam seeks to emulate what its adherents consider the purest form of the faith, modeled after the practices of the Prophet Muhammad and the lived example of the earliest generations of Muslims.[7] Within Salafitness, this doctrinal foundation manifests not only in theological doctrine but also in aesthetic and behavioral markers. While traditional Salafi aesthetic markers and practices—such as long beards, trimmed mustaches and modest clothing—remain central to signaling piety, adherents have adapted to the physical demands of intensive exercise.

Bestowing Piety upon Strength:
The Salafitness Ethos

IN ISLAM, PHYSICAL WELL-BEING IS A WAY OF DEVELOPING ONE'S SPIRITUAL LIFE. IT is about nurturing a healthy body and soul and maintaining a proper balance between the two. Through a healthy body, a believer can better fulfill religious obligations and engage in acts of worship with more energy and focus. Muslims believe that their bodies have been entrusted to them by God (*amāna*)[8] only temporarily, and thus the endeavor to maintain one's body in good health is not just a personal choice but a religious obligation.[9] Indeed, Islamic teach-

ings classify physical activity as *mustahab* or *mandūb*[10]—recommended practices that are beneficial for the body and the spirit. This religious emphasis on physical activity reinforces the idea that good health is not just a personal or aesthetic pursuit but a moral and religious one.[11]

To further reinforce the principles of stewardship of the body and encouragement of physical activity, adherents of the Salafitness movement frequently draw from Quranic verses and *ahādīth*. The most cited verse of the Quran among different Salafitness communities is Quran 2:195, "Spend in the Way of Allah and do not cast yourselves into destruction with your own hands; do good, for Allah loves those who do good." Various ahādīth like "Your body has a right over you"[12] and "A strong believer is better and is more lovable to Allah than a weak believer"[13] are also frequently cited to highlight the importance of physical well-being as an act of religious devotion. Another widely cited *hadīth* states: "There are two blessings that many people are deceived into losing: health and free time."[14] This narration serves as both a motivational exhortation and a moral imperative, summoning believers to make the most of their physical capabilities and available time before this opportunity is lost.

The ethos of Salafitness is rooted in the belief that physical fitness and religious devotion are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. Indeed, for Salafitness practitioners, being fit is more than just a personal goal—it is a path towards attaining righteousness and discipline. By framing physical exercise as a form of worship, advocates of Salafitness promote the idea that strength and well-being are key to fulfilling one's religious obligations. In addition, by advocating for a strict religious observance and physical exercise as a shield against the temptations and distractions of worldly influences (*dunyā*),[15] Salafitness presents itself as a morally superior alternative to other lifestyle choices that may be appealing, particularly during the often-turbulent period of adolescence and early adulthood.

A second key element in Salafitness is the emphasis on discipline, both moral and physical. In the same way religious practice requires commitment, perseverance, and self-restraint, so does intensive physical training. The rigorous regimen of fitness routines is framed as a way to cultivate *taqwā*[16] through the development of habits of self-control and endurance. Through structured workouts and strict dietary guidelines, Salafitness practitioners cultivate discipline as the basis for both physical and spiritual purification.

Aside from individual spiritual gains, physical exercise is also encouraged as a way of contributing to the community through acts of charity and service.[17] Islam places great emphasis on helping others, and Salafitness adherents ar-

gue that being fit enables believers to better serve those in need—whether that is through physically demanding charitable work, protecting their families, or even defending the *ummah* if necessary. This idea fits within larger Islamic narratives about resilience, responsibility, and communal solidarity, reinforcing the notion that physical fitness is not merely an individual endeavor but a way of fulfilling both religious and social obligations.

The Paradox of Community and Isolation: The Social Dynamics of Salafitness

AT THE HEART OF SALAFITNESS LIES A PARADOX: IT PROMOTES A CULTURE OF brotherhood and belonging, yet it also encourages a withdrawal from mainstream society, reinforcing a distinct and often exclusionary identity. Salafitness communities cultivate religious and physical discipline through virtual and in-person networks in which strength, purity, and commitment to a higher cause define one's place in the community. Still, the movement's emphasis on communal self-sufficiency and religious exclusivity raises questions about its role in shaping social and religious dynamics—particularly in non-Muslim societies.

This is particularly evident in the promotion of private, Salafitness-exclusive spaces that limit membership to devout followers. While Salafitness originates in the digital sphere, its influence has extended far beyond social media. Groups that began as online communities now frequently organize meetups, workshops, training sessions, and fitness camps where followers can deepen their commitment to the movement. In fact, meetings between like-minded Salafitness groups from different countries are not unusual. The cases of "Full Force" in the Netherlands or "The Basin Movement" in the UK are indicative: what began as an Instagram-based fitness-calisthenics project has evolved into a self-described "army of brothers" with a highly developed system of frequent in-person events. These sessions are often presented as more than just workouts—they are spaces where ideology is strengthened, bonds are formed, and a sense of belonging is solidified.

Moreover, there are also some Salafitness communities that have established closed gyms where membership seems to be controlled based on religious adherence. These clubs are exclusive to men of the same ideological leaning, reinforcing an alternative social structure that exists in parallel to mainstream fitness culture. By imposing strict religious and social boundaries, such initiatives not only cultivate physical discipline but also serve as a means of self-imposed segregation from the wider society.[18]

A recurring theme in Salafitness discourse is the idea of a higher, divinely mandated path that sets adherents apart from the broader society. Slogans such as "*Deen*,[19] Unity, Brotherhood" encapsulate this notion, presenting religious devotion, community cohesion, and a tight-knit support system as the defining features of the movement. Likewise, other recurrent mottos such as "Work Hard, Pray Harder" reinforce the idea that spiritual commitment must parallel physical effort, turning both into indicators of piety and discipline.

A key ideological pillar of Salafitness communities is the concept of *jamā'a*[20]—widely used in a variety of Islamist endeavors—which is central to both their communicative strategies and group identity. Inherent to the concept of jamā'a is the notion of order, which stands in opposition to chaos and division (*fitna*)—forces that, according to these communities, the West seeks to instigate among Muslims. "The community (*jamā'a*) is mercy, and division is torment"[21] is a commonly used hadīth to reinforce this principle. Analyzing the use of jamā'a across different Salafitness networks reveals that it serves two primary functions: first, it serves as a recruitment tool, aiming to attract new members to the community; and second, it functions as a mechanism of internal cohesion, acting as a safeguard against both internal schisms and external influences.

As Salafitness communities become increasingly self-contained, they risk fostering an exclusionary ideology where engagement with broader society is discouraged. In its most extreme forms, this ideological isolation can pave the way for extremist interpretations of religion, where adherents see themselves as distinct from, or even in opposition to, non-believers and secular influences. Furthermore, the emphasis on physical strength as both a religious and communal imperative reinforces a militant undertone in some Salafitness circles. The rhetoric of "defending the ummah" and "being part of an army" used by some of these communities, coupled with the glorification of physical endurance, can potentially blur the lines between spiritual resilience and ideological militarization. This phenom-

enon is particularly concerning in contexts where disenfranchised young men seek belonging and purpose, as it creates fertile ground for the development of rigid, insular communities that resist integration into pluralistic societies.

While Salafitness presents itself as a path to self-improvement and religious righteousness, its emphasis on exclusivity, dogmatism, and separation are grounds for concern regarding its long-term impact on social cohesion. By structuring life around a distinct set of religious and physical commitments, adherents are not only shaping their personal identities but also constructing alternative communities that challenge mainstream social norms. Thus, the movement represents a double-edged sword: for some, it is a source of strength and stability, while for others, it becomes a mechanism of withdrawal from broader society.

From Discipline to Radicalization: Examples of the Intersection of Physical Training and Identity in Extremist Movements

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS HAVE PLACED GREAT EMPHASIS ON physical strength and combat readiness, often depicting them as necessary virtues in the defense of faith and community. This combination of spirituality and physical prowess is neither new, nor exclusive to any single tradition; rather, it can be found across various ideologies like white supremacist organizations, Christian nationalist militias, and even neopagan extremist groups.

Fascist and ultra-nationalist movements have historically emphasized physical strength and combat training not only as a means of cultivating ideological discipline but also as part of a broader aesthetic project. Yukio Mishima, for example, was deeply invested in the samurai ideal, constructing an ultra-nationalist vision in which physical perfection reflected moral and ideological purity. Similarly, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in India incorporates paramilitary drills under the guise of martial arts, reinforcing a vision

of disciplined, militant masculinity. The most infamous historical example remains the Nazi regime, where physical fitness was central to the aestheticization of power—projected through Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda films, the militarized youth culture of the Hitlerjugend, and the 1936 Olympics, all of which framed the idealized body as an expression of physical and ideological supremacy.

In recent history, several extremist groups with religious underpinnings have integrated fitness and combat training into their operational frameworks. Fitness culture has been central to radical identity building within white supremacists and neo-fascist movements across North America and Europe. One of the most illustrative examples is the Rise Above Movement (RAM), a US-based white supremacist organization. RAM members actively promote martial arts and combat training as paths of personal self-improvement and militant preparation. The group's ideology frames physical fitness to embody the warrior ethos of their imagined ancestors, preparing for what they perceive as an impending racial conflict. This emphasis on physical strength is not merely about health or aesthetics; it serves as a visible indicator of ideological commitment and a tool for fostering in-group solidarity.[22]

Similarly, The Base, another neo-Nazi group, has established paramilitary training camps to equip members with combat skills. These camps are intended to prepare individuals for a so-called "race war," blending physical conditioning with white supremacist indoctrination. These practices underscore the role of structured physical training in fostering a sense of belonging and mission among adherents, while simultaneously advancing their extremist agenda.[23]

Beyond explicitly white supremacist organizations, neo-pagan identitarian movements have also taken up physical training as a core component of their identity. Odinist groups like the Asatru Folk Assembly provide one more example of the blending of physical training and extremist ideology. While not explicitly religious, groups like the Asatru Folk Assembly promote physical fitness to create a sense of continuity with a mythicized past and as a means of embodying the "warrior spirit" of their ancestors, while preparing for a forthcoming war and building a cohesive and militant community.[24]

But the intersection of physical training and radicalization is not unique to secular extremist groups; it also occurs in religiously motivated groups. The case of Michael Patrick Caughran, a retired U.S. Air Force survival expert, exemplifies the intersection of religious nationalism and paramilitary training. Operating under the umbrella of American Reconstruction Concepts (ARC),

Caughran offers survival and live-fire combat training that attract individuals from law enforcement and military backgrounds. These courses are filled with Christian nationalist rhetoric, and they attempt to prepare participants for perceived threats against their religious and national identity.[25]

The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) has highlighted the strategic use of sports, particularly combat sports like mixed martial arts (MMA), by identitarian right-wing extremist groups as a tool for recruitment and radicalization. These groups use the discipline, structure, and physical prowess associated with such sports to recruit and indoctrinate young men and instill a sense of belonging based on extremist ideologies.[26]

The role of combat sports in radicalization is also evident in radical Islamist milieus, where physical training is systematically paired with ideological indoctrination. The rigorous training regimes and the sense of belonging that dominate MMA clubs can provide fertile soil for radicalization, offering a sense of identity and purpose that can be co-opted by extremist ideologies. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in the Caucasus region, where wrestling and combat sports are part of the region's cultural traditions. In fact, the region has produced a significant number of foreign fighters who, prior to joining jihadist organizations in Syria and Iraq, were active members of combat sports clubs or training groups where they honed their physical skills through sporting activities like wrestling, boxing, and mixed martial arts.[27] Two stark examples of this dynamic are the Tsarnaev brothers, of Chechen descent, who perpetrated the Boston Marathon bombing—both of whom practiced MMA[28]—and the Chechen-born refugee Abdoulakh Anzorov, who had been part of a predominantly Chechen MMA club in Paris and beheaded the French secondary school teacher Samuel Paty in 2020.[29]

However, this phenomenon is not confined to individuals from the Caucasus. A strong example of the intersection of martial arts training and jihadist recruitment is that of the An-Nur Mosque in Winterthur, Switzerland. Several members of this now-shuttered mosque established an exclusive martial arts gym for Muslim men, operating under a strict interpretation of Islam. The facility not only provided combat sports training but also served as a space for ideological reinforcement, attracting young members from the mosque's congregation. A total of eight individuals who participated in these training sessions left Switzerland to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq.[30]

While leading Salafitness figures present their movement as centered on discipline, piety, and community identity, this growing phenomenon mirrors elements found in movements that have historically strayed into radicaliza-

tion. In fact, recent arrests in Spain provide a concrete picture of how far fitness social media influencers can serve as radicalization nodes within jihadist networks. In early 2025, Spanish authorities, in coordination with Moroccan intelligence and EUROPOL, dismantled a jihadist recruitment cell operating under the guise of fitness influencing.[31] The individuals involved allegedly embedded jihadist propaganda—including *anāshīd* [32] and official ISIS material—into their workout content while promoting calisthenics and self-defense training.[33] Among those detained was "Nordin Workout," a well-known influencer within the Spanish-speaking Muslim fitness community, who investigators accuse of using his influence to lure and manipulate young followers under the pretext of self-improvement and religious devotion.[34] Although the case remains under judicial review, Spanish authorities have linked his activity to a broader transnational network, emphasizing the ease with which jihadist actors exploit digital fitness subcultures to disseminate propaganda and groom potential recruits.

This case is particularly indicative of the broader dynamics of the Salafitness phenomenon and concerns about it as a source of radicalization. Although these communities are prone to defining themselves on the basis of self-discipline and religious devotion, their emphasis on exclusivity, physical conditioning, and ideological cohesion raise questions about how such spaces may evolve over time.

Conclusion

THE EMERGENCE OF SALAFITNESS IS A FASCINATING YET CONCERNING DEVELOPMENT at the intersection of religion, fitness, and digital culture. On the surface, the movement advocates self-discipline, community engagement, and physical and spiritual well-being as a path to self-improvement, blending physical health with religious devotion in a way that resonates with youth. Behind this veneer of piety and discipline, however, lies a more complex reality—one marked by ideological insularity, social segregation, and the potential for radicalization. As this article argues, Salafitness is not merely a benign fitness trend; it also reflects broader societal challenges, including the allure of closed communities, the appeal of rigid ideological frameworks, and the risks posed by the militarization of physical training.

At its core, Salafitness embodies a paradox. Although it fosters a sense of brotherhood and communal solidarity among its adherents, the Islamic fundamentalism inherent in the narratives disseminated by prominent members also implicitly encourages a withdrawal from mainstream society. This duality is evident in the movement's emphasis on exclusive spaces: by creating segregated gyms, private training sessions, and online communities, Salafitness practitioners construct alternative social structures that exist in parallel to, and often in opposition to, mainstream fitness culture. Slogans such as "Deen, Unity, Brotherhood" and the rhetoric around self-defense framed in religious terms as both a spiritual and physical shield against the perceived moral decay of secular societies echo dynamics observed in other Islamist movements. Such elements, when reinforced within closed social structures, can gradually shift adherents toward a worldview in which purity is measured through both physical rigor and rejection of external influences. Although this can provide a sense of purpose and belonging to some, it also raises concerns about the long-term impact on social cohesion, particularly in plural societies where integration is itself challenging.

Apart from that, the potential for radicalization within Salafitness communities cannot be overlooked. The movement's emphasis on physical strength as a religious virtue, communal loyalty, and ideological purity mirrors elements found in other extremist groups that have historically used physical training as a tool for indoctrination and mobilization. The glorification of strength as a form of religious duty, coupled with the rhetoric of defending the ummah, blurs the line between spiritual resilience and ideological militarization. This is particularly concerning in contexts where converts and second-generation, disenfranchised young men grapple with identity crises. The recent arrest of Salafitness influencers in Spain accused of embedding jihadist propaganda into their content shows how easily the line between self-improvement and radicalization can be crossed. Although obviously not all Salafitness practitioners will embrace extremist ideologies, the movement's insular nature and ideological rigidity create fertile ground for radicalization, especially when combined with the persuasive power of social media.

The rise of Salafitness and similar movements poses significant challenges for law enforcement and security institutions in the West. One of the main difficulties lies in distinguishing between legitimate religious and fitness practices and those that serve as fronts for extremist recruitment. The use of digital platforms adds another layer of complexity, as influencers can reach global audiences with relative ease, disseminating propaganda under the guise of fitness content. Moreover, the transnational nature of these networks under-

scores the need for enhanced international cooperation. However, even with such collaboration, the volume of online content and the speed at which it spreads make it very difficult to monitor and intervene effectively.

In addition, the ethical and practical dilemma of balancing security concerns with respect for religious freedom and individual privacy is not an easy one to overcome. Salafitness, like other digital religious trends, operates within a legal framework that protects freedom of expression and association. The potential for direct and indirect radicalization inherent to Salafitness shouldn't be ignored, but how do we identify at which point a movement rooted in self-discipline and faith becomes an incubator for exclusionary, if not radical, ideologies? At the same time, the heightened scrutiny of Muslim spaces risks reinforcing perceptions of unfair treatment, complicating efforts to address genuine security concerns. And perhaps more crucially, how should societies respond to a movement that, while not inherently violent, fosters conditions that may lead to extremism? Striking this balance requires not only vigilance against radicalizing narratives but also efforts to ensure that fitness and faith are not co-opted by exclusionary ideologies.

Lastly, Salafitness is a mirror reflecting the broader tensions of our time: the search for identity in a globalized world, the allure of digital communities, and the fine line between steadfastness and extremism. It is neither an isolated nor an incidental trend but a manifestation of deeper societal transformations—transformations that demand nuanced scrutiny, not only for what they are today but for what they may eventually become. As Salafitness continues to grow, an obvious conclusion emerges from this article: it will be essential to monitor its evolution and adjust strategies accordingly.

ENDNOTES

1   Heidi A. Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (London: Routledge, 2010), 18-25.

2   Mohamed Isah Shehu, Muhammad Fuad Bin Othman, and Nazariah Binti Osman, "The Social Media and Islam," *Journal of Management Sciences* 15, no. 4 (2017), 67-80.

3   Mohd. Faizal P. Rameli, Muhammad Ridhwan Ab. Aziz, Kalsom Ab. Wahab, and Suhaida Mohd Amin, "The Characteristics of Muslimpreneurs from the View of Muslim Scholars and Academician," *International Journal of Teaching and Education* 2, no. 2 (2014): 47-59.

4   Annisa Beta, "Hijabers: How Young Urban Muslim Women Redefine Themselves in Indonesia," *International Communication Gazette* 76, no. 4-5 (2014): 377–389.

5   The author has intentionally limited the number of specific individuals and groups named in this analysis to maintain a focus on the broader socio-religious dynamics of Salafitness rather than on individuals or organizations. This approach avoids overemphasizing the role of any single influencer or group, which could inadvertently amplify their prominence or detract from the structural and ideological dimensions of the phenomenon. Furthermore, given the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential for misinterpretation, this decision aligns with ethical considerations regarding the representation of religious movements and their adherents. By prioritizing a macro-level perspective, the analysis seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of Salafitness as a cultural and religious trend, rather than as a collection of isolated case studies.

6   Emad Khazraee and Alison N. Novak, "Digitally Mediated: Social Media Affordances for Collective Identity Construction," *Social Media + Society*, 4, no. 1 (2018).

7   For further context, see Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (Oxford Academic, 2014).

8   Transliteration of the Arabic term [أمانة]. In an Islamic context, this refers to the concept of trust, responsibility, or stewardship. It is the belief that everything, including one's body, is a trust given by God. Muslims are expected to care for and protect what has been entrusted to them, as part of their duty to live in accordance with divine commandments. In this context, maintaining physical health is not seen as a personal choice but as an obligation, as the body is a gift and responsibility from God to be preserved and used in fulfilling one's religious and worldly duties. A similar notion exists in Christianity, where the body is regarded as a "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), emphasizing the responsibility of believers to honor God through the care and stewardship of their physical being.

9   Mohsen Joshanloo, "Islamic Conceptions of Well-Being," In Richard J. Estes and Joseph M. Sirgy (eds.) *The Pursuit of Human Well-Being, The Untold Global History* (International Handbooks of Quality-of-Life, Springer, 2017), 109-131.

10   *Mustahab,* transliteration of the Arabic term [مستحب], and *mandūb,* transliteration of the Arabic term [مندوب], are Islamic legal terms referring to actions that are recommended but not obligatory. Engaging in mustahab or mandūb practices is considered virtuous and spiritually beneficial, though their omission does not incur sin.

11   Abu Hamid Al-Ghazzali, *The Alchemy of Happiness* (Chicago: Luchena Books, 2022), 19–30.

12   Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 67, Hadith 133.

13   Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 46, Hadith 52.

14   Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 81, Hadith 1.

15   Transliteration of the Arabic term [دنيا], which, in Islamic thought, refers to the material world or earthly life.

16   Transliteration of the Arabic term [اتقوى], *Taqwā* is an Islamic concept often translated as "God-consciousness" or "piety." It refers to a state of heightened awareness of God's presence, leading to a disciplined life in accordance with Islamic teachings. In the context of Salafitness, taqwā is framed not only as spiritual devotion but also as self-discipline, where physical training becomes a means of cultivating piety and moral strength.

17   For further context, see Thierry Kochuyt, "God, Gifts and Poor People: On Charity in Islam," *Social Compass* 56, no. 1: 98–116.

18   Several influencers within the Salafitness movement promote exclusive gyms aligned with their religious and ideological principles. One gym in London may serve as an illustrative example, as it describes itself as "the UK's first specialist and fully segregated calisthenics gym [...] An Islamic-inspired calisthenics center' that offers more than just a workout—'we offer a lifestyle.'"

19   Transliteration of the Arabic term [دين], meaning religion, i.e., Islam.

20   Transliteration of the Arabic term [جماعة] refers to a group, community, or congregation, particularly in an Islamic context.

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Jamaat-ud-Dawa and the Pakistan Army's Narratives

M. Ilyas Khan and C. Christine Fair

L ASHKAR-E-TAYYABA (LET), MORE COMMONLY KNOWN AS JAMAAT UD Dawa (JuD) in Pakistan, is well known for its military assistance to the Pakistan Army by conducting terrorist attacks in India and Afghanistan.[1] What is less commonly understood is the organization's ideological support that it lends to the army. In this essay, we analyze a 2018 Urdu-language book titled *Jamaat ud Dawa's Role Against Terrorism* by Ameer Hamza, a principal LeT ideologue. The book is a compilation of his previously published columns as well as several articles written by his wife. We dilate upon Hamza's writings here.

Hamza organizes his articles in this volume around three central themes. First, the author vigorously advocates his support for the Pakistani military, often phrasing it in explicitly Islamic terms to paint the Pakistani military as the "Army of Allah." Second, Hamza's intellectual work counters any drift, however partial, towards a stable political process and media freedoms. It paints political leaders and some journalists as part of a corrupt mafia eager to protect their wealth by serving the interests of Pakistan's—and Islam's—enemies, including India and the United States. Third, it depicts the anti-military Islamist groups—of which there are many in the region—as *Kharejis* using religious vi-

olence to serve the interests of Pakistan's and Islam's enemies. Finally, Hamza turns his attention to Pakistan's external foes.

In this essay, we first provide a brief history of LeT/JuD. Subsequently, we explain who Ameer Hamza is and why his opinions are significant in the context of LeT/JuD. Third, we exposit the main themes of the volume mentioned previously: Support for the military, arguments against Pakistan's political leaders, arguments against other Islamist groups, and arguments against Pakistan's foreign adversaries (ostensibly including the United States).

We conclude this essay with a discussion of the volume's wider implications. Namely, we discuss the ways in which the arguments of this book advance the interests of Pakistan's army itself and mirror the army's own narratives. Consistent with the Pakistan Army's worldview, the list of Pakistan's ostensible internal and external foes detailed by Hamza overlap. The Pakistan Army has long argued that its domestic challenges are due to conspiratorial efforts of India as well the United States and the West.[2]

What Is the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba?

ALTHOUGH THE EXACT YEAR IN WHICH LASHKAR-E-TAYYABA (LET, MEANING "ARMY of the Righteous")[3] coalesced is unknown,[4] scholars generally contend that it began in the late 1980s. During that period, the Ahl-e-Hadees Islamist militant Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi gathered several Pakistani Ahl-e-Hadees[5] adherents to wage jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan.[6] Separately, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed and Zafar Iqbal, two professors from the Islamic studies department of Lahore Engineering University, founded Jamaat ud Dawah (JuD) around 1985. JuD, the "Organization for Preaching," was initially a small group engaged in *tabligh* (proselytization) and *dawah* (missionary work) with the intent of promulgating the Ahl-e-Hadees creed. Around 1986, Lakhvi's LeT amalgamated with Saeed and Iqbal's JuD to form the Markaz al-Dawah-wal-Irshad. This combined organization, the "Center for Preaching and Guidance" (MDI), had three preoccupations: jihad, proselytization of the Ahl-e-Hadees *maslak* (Islamic interpretive tradition), and the creation of a new generation of Muslims committed to their ideology.[7]

Within a year of its formation, MDI established its first militant training camp, Muaskar-e-Taiba, in the Afghan province of Paktia in eastern Afghani-

stan. It established another camp, Muaskar-e-Aqsa, in Kunar, which abuts the Pakistani tribal agencies of Bajaur and Mohmand in what was then known as Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).[8] After the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, MDI reoriented its militant efforts toward Indian-administered Kashmir because the group wanted to distance itself from the internecine infighting among different so-called jihadi groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. MDI relocated its training facilities to Pakistani-administered Kashmir where it established numerous camps in the mountains. The organization's decision to eschew warlord infighting partly reflects MDI's preference to abjure Muslim-on-Muslim violence. The decision also reflects its belief that Kashmir is the most legitimate open front for jihad in the region and indicates that MDI entered the fray there before it became Pakistan's proxy of choice.[9]

MDI's headquarters (*Markaz*) was built in 1989 on a 200-acre campus in Muridke in Pakistan's Punjab province, some 30 kilometers from Lahore. Punjab, unlike the FATA, is one of the most militarized provinces in Pakistan. Of the nine regular Pakistan Army corps, six are in Punjab alongside the Army Air Defense Command and Strategic Forces Command, which are treated as corps. The MDI Markaz, which is now the headquarters for JuD, hosts numerous amenities and businesses, including a *madrasa* (seminary), large *jamia* mosque, hospital, market, large residential area for scholars and faculty members, garment factory, iron factory, woodworking factory, stable, swimming pool, fish farm, and agricultural tracts.[10]

On January 25, 1990, MDI staged its first militant mission in Kashmir when its operatives ambushed a jeep that was carrying Indian Air Force personnel traveling toward Srinagar airport, killing one squadron leader and three pilots.[11] In the early 1990s, MDI segmented its activities and organizational structure. While MDI continued the mission of proselytization and education, it hived off LeT as a tightly related militant wing of MDI.[12] However, Hafiz Saeed was the leader (*emir*) of both organizations, which attests to the degree to which it was nearly impossible to distinguish MDI and LeT.[13] Hafiz Saeed explained the continuity between the two organizations as follows: "Islam propounds both dawah and jihad. Both are equally important and inseparable. Since our life revolves around Islam, therefore both dawah and jihad are essential; we cannot prefer one over the other."[14]

Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), had hoped that LeT, with its demonstrable lethal capabilities,[15] would intensify the conflict in Kashmir and expand the geographical reach of the insurgency.

In the early 1990s, the ISI and the Pakistan Army began providing support to the organization. The army helped build LeT's military apparatus specifically for use against India, as opposed to Afghanistan, Chechnya, or other theatres of international jihad where LeT activists periodically fought. The Pakistan Army helped design the organization's military training regime and has long co-located army and ISI personnel at LeT training bases to help oversee the regimen.[16] Pakistan's investments paid off: within a few years, LeT became the biggest challenge to the Indian security forces in Kashmir, prior to the 2000 introduction of the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), a brutal Deobandi Kashmir-oriented terrorist group.[17]

In December 2001, Pakistan officially banned LeT, along with several other militant groups, after JeM attacked the Indian parliament, bringing India and Pakistan close to the brink of war. These bans deceived no one. Pakistan's intelligence agencies alerted the soon-to-be banned organizations of the upcoming proscription, providing them ample time to transfer their assets to new accounts and to reorganize and re-launch under new names. In the case of LeT, Hafiz Saeed announced the organization had been restructured and would operate as JuD, separate from LeT, with the latter being a strictly Kashmiri organization led by Maula Abdul Wahid al-Kashmiri. Saeed dissolved MDI and replaced it with JuD, which was the name of the original organization he had founded in 1985 and which was still registered as a Pakistani charity. He resigned as LeT's emir and became the emir of JuD, which was described as an "organization for the teaching of Islam, politics, [and] social work."[18] Yahya Mujahid, spokesperson for LeT-cum-JuD and one of the founding members of MDI, announced that "We handed Lashkar-e-Tayyaba over to the Kashmiris in December 2001. Now we have no contact with any jihadi organization."[19] This purported division was merely a reorganization: JuD subsumed the vast majority of LeT's human, financial, and material assets while the organizational nodes and operatives outside of Pakistan continued to serve under the banner of LeT. As further evidence of the organizational continuity between the various groups, Hafiz Saeed, Zafar Iqbal, Hafiz Abdul Rehman Makki, and Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi oversaw the new organization while al-Kashmiri was merely a figurehead.[20]

Curiously, the US government did not recognize JuD as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) until December 2001, reflecting American indifference to it. Washington only did so after JEM's attack on India's Parliament in December of that year, which had precipitated the largest Indian military mobilization along the Pakistani border since the 1971 war. Both to preclude an Indo-Pakistani war and re-concentrate Pakistani focus towards its Afghan

border, where NATO military operations were just commencing, Washington spent considerable political capital persuading India to stand down. As a part of these diplomatic efforts, the United States proscribed LeT and JeM among other Pakistan-based and Pakistan-backed terrorist organizations. At the same time, the administration of President George W. Bush pressured Pakistan's military dictator and president, General Pervez Musharraf, to ban LeT and other organizations that Washington had designated. Washington also pressured Musharraf to make a series of public statements aimed at mitigating Indian concerns and even persuaded him to curtail sending terrorists into India for some time after the 2001 parliament attack.[21] While Musharraf may have conceded to Washington on some issues, the bans were a farce.

JuD has been part of several umbrella organizations with other Pakistani militant groups as well as non-militant, right-of-center political groups. For example, in January 2009, JuD was involved in a group called the Tehreek-e-Tahafuz Qibla Awal (Movement for the Safeguarding of the First Center of Prayer), which held anti-Israel protests in Lahore.[22] Similarly, in 2010, JuD had a noticeable presence in the Tehreek-e-Tahafuz-e-Hurmat-e-Rasool ("Movement to Defend the Honor of the Prophet"), which organized protests against the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. Later in 2012, JuD was prominent in the Difa-e-Pakistan Council ("Defense of Pakistan Council"), which organized large rallies in Lahore, Rawalpindi, Karachi, and elsewhere to protest American policies in Pakistan as well as U.S.-International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) activities in Afghanistan. In the spring of 2015, JuD also generated popular support for Pakistani military assistance to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. To do so, JuD formed the Pasban-e-Harmain-Sharifain ("Defenders of the Sacred Sites in Mecca and Medina") and argued that the Yemeni Houthi rebels aimed to invade Saudi Arabia and assault the *harmain*—the Grand Mosque in Mecca—and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina.[23]

In August 2017, JuD opened a new front when it formed a political party named the Milli Muslim League (MML, the "National Muslim League") with the aim of rendering Pakistan a "real Islamic and welfare state."[24] While Saeed initially said that this party was separate from JuD this ultimately proved to be fiction, like many of his other pronouncements. Upon Saeed's release from "house arrest" in late November 2017, the MML leadership opined, "Mr. Hafiz Saeed will soon start planning out our membership strategy and getting others on board through networking."[25] Saeed dropped the façade in early December when he announced that JuD is "planning to con-

test the 2018 general elections under the banner of Milli Muslim League."[26] The MML, headed by Saifullah Khalid, a close aide of Saeed and a foundational member of JuD, fielded several candidates in the 2018 general election but won no races.

Who Is Amir Hamza?

AMIR HAMZA, THE AUTHOR OF THE 2018 BOOK JAMAAT UD DAWA'S *ROLE AGAINST Terrorism*, is a core member of LeT/JuD and a member of the central committee of their mother organization, the MDI. He is considered to be a top LeT/JuD ideologue and is described by observers as a fiery speaker and prolific writer.[27]

He is said to have led JuD's fundraising campaigns and negotiated with authorities for the release of JuD leaders arrested over the years. He is the founding editor of JuD's official publications, including the weekly *Jarrar*. In a 2012 report, the U.S. Department of Treasury provided details about his career, noting that:

> As of 2011, Amir Hamza, a member of LeT's central advisory committee, actively maintained LeT's relationships with other groups under the direction of LeT emir Hafiz Muhammad Saeed. Hamza has led an LeT-associated charity and, as of 2010, was also an officer and member of an LeT university trust that was led by Saeed. Hamza's responsibilities as of mid-2010 also included publishing propaganda on behalf of LeT. Hamza has served as editor of an LeT weekly newspaper and, as of mid-2011, he was contributing articles to the LeT publication. Hamza was also one of three LeT leaders to negotiate the release of detained LeT members as of mid-2010. Hamza served as the head of LeT's "special campaigns" department as of mid-2009.[28]

In the beginning of *Jamaat ud Dawa's Role Against Terrorism,* Hamza describes himself as a widely traveled person, having traveled to Afghanistan several times, the last being after the withdrawal of the Soviet forces. He also

claims to have "traveled to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Moscow and Astrakhan, and then wrote a travelogue. He also went to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, and wrote books about those travels." He further describes himself as "one of Pakistan's prominent newspaper columnists [...] writing regular columns for daily *Dunya*."[29]

According to the book:

> Maulana Amir Hamza cites facts and events to prove that that the Pakistan Army is the strongest army in the world. He also revealed to the enemy that apart from defending the geographical and ideological borders of the country, the Pakistan Army also represented the desires and dreams of the entire Islamic world. It is the army of Islam as embodied by its motto "faith, piety, and jihad in the name of God." It will never let its enemies fulfill their desire to cause damage to Pakistan. He accomplished this mission by visiting the homes of the martyred soldiers, speaking to their families, and bringing forth those families' sentiments regarding Islam and jihad. Likewise, he penned credible material about the Khareji ideology and its links to terrorism. These are the two subjects on which the present book is based.[30]

This volume is thus important because it bears the imprimatur of LeT/JuD's inner-most circle and reflects the thinking of one of the group's principal ideologues and propagandists.

JuD Narratives on the Army and Pakistan's "Foes" at Home and Abroad

HAMZA'S COLUMNS COMPILED IN THIS BOOK EXPOSIT SEVERAL THEMES THAT undergird LeT's support for the Pakistani military, widely using quotations from the Quran and Sunna (sayings of the Prophet) to paint it explicitly as the Army of God. The author also uses religious quotes and moral themes to ideo-

logically counter the country's meager drift towards a stable political process and media freedoms. Hamza paints political leaders and some journalists as part of a corrupt mafia, eager to protect their wealth by serving the interests of Pakistan's—and by extension Islam's—enemies, including India and the United States. In a subsequent section, Hamza portrays the anti-military Islamist groups—or *Kharejis*—as using religious violence to serve the interests of Pakistan's and Islam's enemies, just as politicians and secular-minded journalists do. Finally, Hamza describes Pakistan's external foes. The reader will note that that there is considerable overlap in the internal and external foes because the Pakistani state sees a foreign hand behind the activities of its internal enemies.

The Army of Allah

IN HIS WRITING, AMIR HAMZA AIMS TO ENSURE THAT THE ENTIRE POPULATION of the country is supportive of the military so as to secure the future of Pakistan. One example is a speech he delivered at a JuD gathering in May 2014 and which he quotes in his column:

> And praise be to God, I made an announcement there that every Pakistani needed to become a symbolic minister of defense, and that we will train every child of the country to that effect, so that they can step in time with the army, and when their combined fist of self-defense lands on the terrorists, we could see [Narendra] Modi falling flat on his face.[31]

The book opens with a column paying tribute to General Ziaul Haq, Pakistan's second military dictator (1977–1988), who toppled the country's first elected government and is widely seen as the main driving force behind the Islamization of Pakistan and the subsequent evolution of its jihadist-based militant strategies in Afghanistan and India. Here, Hamza claims that it was General Zia who founded the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) with an aim to weaken India.[32] He writes, "I salute the vision of General Ziaul Haq who brought together the countries of the sub-continent in the SAARC organization, and thereby compelled India, which considers itself

as the mini super-power of the region, to stand down as an equal with (smaller) countries like Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Bangladesh."[33] In subsequent articles included in the book, Hamza also explores the "divine" traits of the Pakistani soldiers, providing "physical" as well as "intellectual" evidence of their supposedly godly character.

Physical stature of Pakistani soldiers

HAMZA SEEKS TO BUFF THE PHYSICAL STATURE OF THE PAKISTAN ARMY. THIS IS perhaps considered important given that Pakistan has started each of its wars with India and failed to win any of them. In the 1971 war, it lost half of its population when East Pakistan seceded and became independent Bangladesh with India's assistance. In one column originally published in December 2016 and included in the book, Hamza gathers quotes from the Bible and the Quran to explain how, with his 12-foot-tall stature, the pious King Saul of *Bani-Israel* was able to overcome and defeat 10-foot-tall Goliath, the leader of the polytheists.[34] This, he writes, happened despite the fact that Saul hailed from a humble background as compared to Goliath, and despite the fact that his people were not confident in his strength and acumen.[35]

Hamza next applies this divine logic to the "Saul-like" army chiefs of Pakistan, listing among them General Raheel Sharif, whose term as the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) had just ended at the time of writing in 2016, and the then-newly inducted army chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, whom he describes as the tallest of them all, with a height of six-foot-four-inches. Hamza contrasts General Bajwa to the then-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, using coarse language to discredit the latter. He does this by describing scenes in several pictures taken after General Bajwa's induction as COAS, in which the two men are shown standing together, looking at each other. Nawaz Sharif, he writes:

> [Is] looking at Qamar Bajwa in the same way as one would look at the moon and stars in the sky. It is understandable. Gen. Qamar is so tall that a man of middle-height like Nawaz Sharif will have to bend his head up in order to look at him. On his part, Gen. Qamar Bajwa looks at the man in front of him just as someone standing on the terrace will look at someone down in the street."[36]

Hamza then extends the comparison to Indian soldiers and the daily parades that take place at the Wagah border-crossing between India and Pakistan. He writes of the parade:

> [While Pakistani soldiers] rise to six and a quarter foot, those of India come up to just five and a half feet. At times, it has happened that an Indian soldier fell to the ground because one of our tall and broad-shouldered soldiers banged his foot down on the ground in full force. During the parade, when our soldier lifts his foot, it rises higher than the Indian soldiers' chests, or even their heads. And when the Indian soldier lifts his foot, it only goes up to the height of our soldiers' hips.[37]

Prophetic traits of soldiers

HAMZA ATTRIBUTES TO PAKISTAN'S SOLDIERS VARIOUS PROPHETIC TRAITS, enhancing their spiritual stature in addition their physical stature. For example, in a February 2015 piece titled "Military Intellectuals and Today's Politicians," Amir Hamza spins a dramatic tale of how a senior military officer and former ISI chief, General Akhtar Abdur Rahman, had predicted the December 1991 break-up of Soviet Union as early as in 1976. He claims that General Rahman shared his prophecy with a LeT preacher and ideologue, Asadullah Ghalib, after the end of a farewell ceremony of a retiring officer that both of them had attended.

He writes:

> Brig. Akhtar Abdur Rahman[38] holds Asadullah Ghalib's hand and tells him, "We are faced with an ignoble enemy (India) who cannot tolerate our existence. The problem is that he is not alone in attacking us; a super-power, Russia, is standing behind him. Pakistan is being punished for being an Islamic country. The real fun will start when this enemy confronts us directly." Mr. Ghalib is slightly confused, and asks him, "a confrontation with Russia? How?" Brig. Rahman replies that there will be a direct confrontation with Russia; there will be a clash. Russian intentions are not hidden from anyone. It wants to have access to warm waters. From the era of the Tsars till the age of its new

communist monarchs, they have always craved for access to the Arabian Sea. Afghanistan is their short cut to achieve this aim, and they will send their troops there sooner or later. And this is where it will get trapped in a conflict so serious that keeping itself in one piece will become hard despite all of its nuclear and military strength.[39]

Amir Hamza narrates another story to prove a saying attributed to the Prophet Mohammad that the earth will never eat up the body of a martyr—meaning that a martyr's body will never decay or decompose. Hamza says he came across this story while sitting around a winter fire with some retired soldiers working as security guards in his neighborhood. During a chat, he quotes one soldier as telling him:

> [T]here is a military graveyard in Bedyan area on the outskirts of Lahore, where martyrs from the wars of 1965 and 1971 are buried. Some days ago, we had to bury a soldier there who had recently died. My name was on the list of grave diggers. As I was digging the grave, I accidentally discovered a human body down there. My hoe hit one of its wrists and blood started sprouting from it like a spring. I tried to stop it with my hand but failed. Finally, we called a doctor from a nearby village who bandaged the slashed part to stop the blood flow.[40]

The column continues:

> Dear readers! I was listening to him, and wondering, if the body was that of a martyr from 1965, it would be 50 years old. If it was from 1971, then it was 44 years old. Whether 50 or 44, the body was nearly half a century old anyways, and yet it was still fresh and oozing blood. Obviously, this blood is that of a prince of God's paradise, where billions of residents and all the angels know him and are aware of his exalted status.[41]

In another column published soon after the retirement of COAS General Raheel Sharif in November 2016, he demonstrates how the newly inducted army chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, has been treading in the path of the

Holy Prophet. He starts with a conversation of the Holy Prophet, quoted in the compilation titled *Tirmizi Sharif*: "Once a man walked up to the Prophet, and said, 'O Prophet of God, I have committed a grave sin; is there any room for forgiveness?' The Prophet asked, 'Is your mother alive?' He said, 'no.' The Prophet said, 'do you have an aunt (mother's sister)?' He said yes. The Prophet said, 'be kind to her, and your sins will be forgiven'."[42] Then Hamza turns directly to the topic of General Bajwa:

Dear readers, soon after being inducted as the army chief, Gen. Bajwa went to his mother's grave, raised his hands in prayers, and wept. Then, from the graveyard, he headed to the house of his maternal aunt, Safia Begum. She doesn't have any children of her own. So, whenever Gen. Bajwa called on her, he would invariably convey to her the impression that he was her child. And so, after his mother's death, she also took the place of his mother. While my Holy Sire (Prophet Mohammad) granted a paternal uncle the status of a father, He also granted an aunt the place of a mother. So, the first thing Gen. Bajwa did after becoming the army chief was to go and pay his respects to relations with an exalted status.[43]

Hamza's conclusive description of the character of army officers comes in one column, where he writes that an army general "is a creature of God, an heir of the martyrs, having an honest heart and a straight tongue; he believes in action, considers state's assets as a trust of the nation, and tries to live within the means of his monthly salary. Most of all, he believes in God, and humbly requests his interlocuters to remember him in their prayers."[44] It should be noted that Pakistan's military does not describe its own soldiers in these ways. Thus, in a sense, Hamza is filling a propaganda niche that the army has left vacant.

Pakistan's Internal Foes

BECAUSE THE ARMY FIERCELY PROTECTS ITS PRIMACY IN THE OSTENSIBLY CIVILIAN-led government, the army conflates its own domestic enemies with those of Pakistan. This tendency is evidenced in this volume in which Amir Hamza identifies several internal foes: politicians, journalists, and Kharejis and Takfiris, all of whom oppose the military's role in Pakistan's politics. We discuss each theme in turn.

Politicians

IN A CLEAR CONTRAST TO ARMY OFFICERS, THE BOOK PAINTS POLITICIANS AS A driving force behind the social, political, economic, and security problems that the army is trying to bring under control. Those heading larger political parties are painted as a corrupt, self-serving mafia focused on personal gains, thereby compromising national interests. And those representing different regions of the country—particularly the restive and insurgency-prone provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan—are painted as anti-Pakistan.

As mentioned previously, the columns reproduced in the book were written during the period when the chief of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N),[45] Nawaz Sharif, was the country's prime minister. Consequently, he is the most consistent target in these columns, although Hamza does not spare other leaders such as Asif Zardari and Bilawal Bhutto of the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP).[46] The main narrative contrasts political corruption with the sacrifices made by the army and how this has led the army to supposedly rise above the politicians in terms of popularity.

One example is a column published in September 2015, in which Hamza describes the scene at a gathering following the oath-taking ceremony of the country's new chief justice, Anwar Zaheer Jamali. He writes "As soon as the oath-taking ended and tea-party started, all the people present there gathered around Army Chief, General Raheel Sharif. The prime minister [Nawaz Sharif] was also present there, but nobody went to him. His own ministers and governors also joined the crowd around the COAS. When Nawaz Sharif saw this, he thought it would be better to leave. So, he left promptly, without taking tea." The column further adds; "The tragic part is that this event has flung his popularity from heavens to Earth, and the sound of the crash has shaken my heart."[47]

Why did this happen? It happened because, as Hamza sees it, the politicians care more for their "stomachs" than the safety and well-being of the nation. He writes in one column: "The Holy Prophet once said that the stomach was the worst of all bags. Today's politicians are busy filling this foul-smelling bag, while those who are sacrificing their lives to save Pakistan are none other than army soldiers."[48]

Hamza also examines how politicians are supposedly responsible for the rise of terrorism in the country. In one January 2015 column titled "The Prophet's Love for Martyrs' Children," Hamza is extremely critical of PPP leader Asif Zardari as well as PML-N chief Nawaz Sharif for continuing with a moratorium on the death penalty which had been signed by Mr. Zardari when

he had been president back in 2008.[49] Human rights advocacy groups within the country had demanded the moratorium, citing flaws in the system that allowed powerful circles to manipulate the judiciary.[50]

Advocating in favor of the death penalty for terrorists following the December 2014 attack on Peshawar's Army Public School that killed more than 150 people (mostly school children), Hamza writes:

> Pakistan's legal system has totally collapsed. Criminals continue to practice terrorism; when judges convict them, they kill those judges; when imprisoned, they break jails or use threats to avail facilities inside jail and thereby continue their business of bloodshed via their operatives in the field. They were further facilitated when in return for a few pennies worth of trade agreement,[51] former president Asif Ali Zardari put a moratorium on executions. Mian Nawaz Sharif has continued that policy... Yes sir! Such cooperation by the state has helped murderers and terrorists to further accelerate their activities. The rulers have security cordons around them, but the common people and their children don't have it, and so they are the ones who are being killed.[52]

In a December 2017 column titled "Drift of Military and Today's Politicians," Hamza focuses on so-called anti-Pakistan politicians, and how Nawaz Sharif has started to drift in their direction after he was disqualified by the Supreme Court in July of that year.[53] In a dramatic sequence, the column first mentions a quote from a Nawaz Sharif's speech and then discloses where the speech was delivered. The quote from the speech says, "a prime minister has been sacked; such are the decisions that destroy countries, that create anarchy and confusion, and thereby undermine the nation's sense of its intended destiny."[54] He then reveals to the readers that Sharif "expressed these thoughts at a public meeting organized in Quetta by a nationalist party led by Mehmood Khan Achakzai." Hamza continues:

> The meeting was held to mark the death anniversary of Abdus Samad Achakzai,[55] a political and ideological friend of Abdul Ghaffar Khan,[56] known as the Frontier Gandhi. It was presided by Mehmood Achakzai, the son of Abdus Samad Achakzai. So, nowadays, Mian Nawaz Sharif is propagating his ideas from the platforms of the people who were opposed to the creation of

Pakistan; people who were causing troubles to Quaid-e-Azam [Mohammad Ali Jinnah].[57]

This is an allusion to the fact that Abdul Ghaffar Khan opposed joining Pakistan and advocated for the Northwest Frontier Province to join India.

Journalists

A CENTRAL THEME OF ALL THE COLUMNS IN THE BOOK IS THE NEED TO COUNTER the secular, anti-military sentiment that was arising at the time. The rise of independent reporting and analysis, which started with the return of democracy in 1988, had by then started to expose the secretive terror and business interests of the military.[58] In most cases, such reports were published without directly naming the military, but they did add to the mass perception of how the military was using backdoor channels to influence political decision-making.

Most of the columns included in this volume that focus on Pakistani media and journalists build a narrative to support the military's evolving strategies to influence and control the media.[59] Among other tactics, the military at the time was accused of using its terrorist proxies to eliminate journalists who could potentially damage the military's image in the public's eye.

The opening column in the book, titled "Fashion and the Army," was published on May 7, 2014, against a backdrop of an unprecedented wave of attacks on journalists. At least seven news reporters were killed in attacks by armed militants in 2013, according to international advocacy group Reporters Sans Frontièrs (RSF), while many others were injured. Among the latter was Raza Rumi, a well-known columnist and television anchor associated with the Express Media Group. Rumi had emerged as an authentic analyst of the Pakistani politico-security landscape and a frontline critic of the ideology promoted by the military establishment. Armed militants attacked his car on March 28, 2014, killing his driver and causing many injuries to Rumi.[60] A mere three weeks later, on April 19, Geo TV's most popular talk-show host, Hamid Mir, was attacked and suffered severe bullet wounds. Like Raza Rumi, he was an outspoken critic of the military, its intelligence services, as well as of the judiciary, which he said was harming the political establishment and thereby creating room for the military to protect its political and economic interests. Soon after the attack, Mir's brother, also a journalist, quoted him as saying that the attack was part of an assassination plan hatched by the ISI.[61] This claim was

repeatedly aired by Geo TV and also picked up by other media outlets, thereby damaging the public image of the military. In response, military-promoted religious groups started to pour out onto the streets in all the major urban centers of the country, chanting pro-military slogans, expressing their love for the army and ISI, demanding the cancellation of Geo's license, and calling on the media network to issue an apology.[62] While the country's media regulator, Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), put Geo TV off the air at that time, the decision apparently came from quarters beyond the control of the elected government of Nawaz Sharif, who, on his part, was among the first political leaders to visit Hamid Mir in the hospital to express his sympathies.[63]

In one column, Hamza weaves a long tail of the threats Pakistan faces from hostile forces and the sacrifices rendered by the army to protect the Pakistani people from those threats. He then writes:

> But on the other side, our own people have started condemning our defenders. There are certain "patriots" in the mainstream media who never mention occupied Kashmir and the violent suppression of its innocent Muslims by the Indian army. They never see how the Gulfams and Ayeshas of Kashmir are pricked and plucked and killed by the Indian army. They just look for a chance to assault the army with taunts and catcalls. It is said that these patriots are pocketing sizeable benefits from America.[64]

He then compares those journalists to the "real patriots"—the male and female religious activists who staged demonstrations against Geo TV at that time, raising posters that carried pictures of then-army chief General Raheel Sharif and then-ISI chief Lt. Gen. Rizwan Akhtar. He writes, "So, these are the circumstances in which patriots have walked onto the scene so as to challenge those people."[65] While it is impossible to know how readers have received these writings, rhetorically, they help delegitimize the press's attacks on the military and firmly characterize Pakistan's anti-military media as domestic enemies to be countered.

Kharejis and Takfiris

DUE TO EVENTS EXPLAINED FURTHER BELOW UNDER THE TITLE "PAKISTAN'S External Foes," by the 2010s, Deobandi Islamist groups once raised and equipped by the Pakistani military had broken into factions, and many of

them had turned against Pakistan and its army. Perhaps the most important example of this is the Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan, or TTP). Since these groups were raised in the name of Islam, Hamza uses numerous quotes from the Quran and Prophet Mohammad to establish how they had transgressed the principles of Islamic faith.

He defines such groups as *Kharejis* (extremists who also use *Takfir*) and *Takfiris* (those who declare other sects as apostates and frequently kill them) on the grounds that "when they plan an attack, they launch it on Muslims. When they chose a target, it is either a mosque, a school or an institution that defends Muslims. They attack women and children."[66]

He supports his claim in the same column by interpreting a saying of the Prophet according to his own perception:

> According to a saying of the Prophet, quoted by *Ibn-e-Maja*, "the Kharejis are the dogs of hell." The way I see it in the light of this saying, their faces will transform into faces of dogs, and they will enter the hell barking. But since they believe in *Kalima* (Muslim statement of faith), the question that arose in my mind was, why is God so harsh on them. The answer I received was, because when they kill, they only kill Muslims. When they bark, it's only on the believers of *Kalima*. And therefore, their punishment will be the severest of all.[67]

In another column published in March 2016, he follows up on this theme in the context of the killing of four Pakistani soldiers by TTP militants in a clash in the Waziristan region: "And while the Khareji narrative terms all the people linked to the security forces, and even their children, as Satans, the message from God is that theirs is the holy blood, spilled on the path of righteousness. The message from Pakistan's four provinces is also the same, that they will fight terrorists. Hence, victory belongs to these uniformed men, on earth as well as in the heavens."[68]

Regarding militant attacks on non-Muslims in Pakistan, he writes: "There is a saying of the Prophet that 'guard yourself against the curse of the oppressed, even if the oppressed is not a Muslim.' Yes sir. Muslim or no Muslim, he is still a creature of God. God is the creator of the world, and does not tolerate maltreatment of anyone, whether a believer or a non-believer."[69] This argument is consistent with LeT's more general position against violence committed against Pakistanis or in Pakistan, as articulated in his manifesto *Hum Jihad*

Kyon Kar Rahe Hain.[70] This puts LeT in stark contrast to the various sectarian groups that target religious minorities as well as other Muslims due to their sectarian commitments.

Pakistan's External Foes

IN THIS VOLUME, HAMZA PRIMARILY IDENTIFIES AND DILATES UPON TWO external foes: India and the United States (and the West more broadly). This may come as a surprise to many given the substantial military and non-military assistance the United States has given Pakistan in recent decades. Between financial year 2002 and 2022, the United States gave Pakistan $8.4 billion in military assistance, nearly $11.9 billion in economic assistance, and $14.6 billion to the Coalition Support Fund (created after the September 11 attacks to support Pakistani counterterrorism operations) for a grand total of $34.9 billion.[71]

India

AMIR HAMZA PENNED THE OPENING COLUMN OF THE BOOK, *FASHION AND The Army,* on May 7, 2014, the day general elections were held in India. Modi's Bharatya Janata Party (BJP) won those elections, and he was tipped to be the next Prime Minister of India at the time of Hamza's writing. In the column, Hamza reminds his readers that as Chief Minister of Gujrat province in 2002, Modi "burnt to death 5,000 Muslims in his provincial capital, Ahmadabad, by sprinkling oil on them" in reference to the anti-Muslim riots that Modi tolerated (or actively stoked, according to some testimonies). According to Hamza, when asked if he felt sorry for Muslim deaths, "he replied that he felt just as sorry as when his car overran a dog."[72]

While appreciating Pakistan's military ruler, General Ziaul Haq, for creating SAARC and thereby compelling India to behave as an equal with the smaller states of South Asia (noted previously), the writer builds a narrative of how Modi exacted his revenge against Pakistan. Hamza writes, without providing credible evidence,[73] that India was behind the assassination of Nepal's King Burendra and his family in 2001. This was because, according to Hamza, "King Burendra loved Pakistan despite being a Hindu and had is-

sues with India."[74] Hamza also claims, with greater evidentiary basis, that India "helped Sheikh Hasina Wajid become Bangladesh's prime minister for the third time—the same Hasina Wajid who had banned the waving of Pakistani flags in the sports stadiums because they had started emitting hot air for her." Hamza continues, "India has also provided triggers for Buddhist-Muslim clashes in Sri Lanka, which has come very close to Pakistan because of Gen. Zia's efforts. And now, India has started playing a role in Afghanistan, with which it shares neither a border nor faith. And from there, it is sending its agents to launch attacks on our armed forces."[75] It should be noted that each of these claims have quite varying degrees of empirical underpinnings. While India's posited role in Burendra's assassination has little evidentiary support, India was indeed a staunch supporter of Sheikh Hasina's continued premiership and did intervene in 2024 to support her onward tenure.[76] Indian involvement in Afghanistan is well known, even if the extent of India's involvement is debatable.[77]

In a September 2016 column titled "War, Despite Avoiding War," Hamza is writing in the aftermath of an attack carried out by militants on an Indian army base in the Uri region of Indian Kashmir.[78] In response to this Pakistani provocation, the Indian Air Force carried out "surgical strikes" on suspected militant hideouts on Pakistani side of the region.[79] In the column, Hamza blames Pakistan's Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, for his peace overtures to India, which Hamza claims were viewed in India as Pakistani weakness. Hamza opines that, "We flew around our '*doves of peace*' [an Urdu idiom] so much that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif even invited Modi to the wedding of his granddaughter, and also sent him a gift of sarees for his mother." [80] The author claims that this hospitality was not reciprocated. Hamza further criticizes Nawaz Sharif because he "even went to the extent of ordering the lodging of a criminal case in Gujranwala against the perpetrators of the Pathankot attack,"[81] which the author sees as another effort at rapprochement towards an arrogant and unbending Modi. Hamza accuses Modi of exhibiting politeness and humility only for the sake of maintaining a tactical peace. But by issuing his exaggerated war threats, Modi only proves that he is truculent, trouble-monger.[82]

Hamza also blames India for the rise of violence in the Pashtun and Baloch regions. He writes: "This [Indian-backed] war is being fought on the ideological as well as the media front. The sad part is that India has been able to avail the services of not only the gun carrying fighters (Pakistani Taliban, TTP), but also proxy ideologues and media platforms within Pakistan."[83]

The United States and the West

THROUGHOUT THE SUCCESSIVE COLUMNS PUBLISHED IN THE BOOK, HAMZA promotes a narrative that India is fomenting terrorism in Pakistan with the help of the United States and the West more broadly. Their purported aim is to rid Pakistan of its nuclear power by breaking up the country along ethnic lines. He writes that this Indian policy has continued since the time that "the Americans decided to leave Afghanistan and hand the region over to India." But since the whole world "knows that Pakistan Army has become unbeatable, India is only waging a proxy war at the moment. And it recruits its proxies from within Pakistan."[84] This is a clear reference to the anti-state militant groups in Pakistan, with Hamza further elaborating that "attacks on Pakistan's defense institutions are launched by these same Kharejis, and India is behind them. These Kharejis set up their sanctuaries in Afghanistan, which means that they enjoy American support."[85]

Hamza extends this conspiratorial mindset that sees Western support behind militancy to several other parts of the Muslim world. For example, he claims in another column published in November 2016:

> During his recent visit to Pakistan, Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, also disclosed in clear terms that the West was behind Daesh,[86] which was carrying out terror attacks in Turkey. The ill-fated suicide bomber who recently attacked the Holy Abode of Medina has also been found to be linked to the same Khareji group. Similarly, a missile attack launched on Mecca from the side of Yemen, which the Saudi air force successfully countered by destroying the missile in the air some 65 kilometers away from Mecca, was also launched by the Khareji group of Houthi rebels.[87]

Relatedly, in a September 2015 column, Hamza builds an anti-American narrative in the context of America's reported request to establish a military base in Deosai plains in the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan.[88] He writes:

> I was lost in my thoughts, thinking about America which often spoke about being a friend of ours. During the September (1965) war,[89] it continued to assure us that India will restrict the fight to Kashmir and will never cross the international bor-

der. But in secret parleys with India, it had already planned that India will attack Lahore and Sialkot. During the era of Gen. Zi-aul Haq, the same America backed India to capture Siachen,[90] where a limited war between Pakistan and India has continued for several years. Almost every unit of our army has gone through the experience of confronting the enemy in Siachen. On the other hand, the duplicitous America is asking Pakistan to let it set up an airbase in Deosai, so that it can keep a close watch over China. How can Pakistan keep throwing its axe on its own feet by handing its vast and most beautiful earthen "roof" to an enemy disguised as a friend, so that he could create problems for Pakistan's bosom buddy, China.[91]

LeT's depiction of the United States is widely shared by the Pakitani military as well as Pakistanis more generally. In a 2012 Pew Poll (the most recent conducted), 74% of Pakistanis viewed the United States as an enemy compared to 8 percent who viewed it as a partner.[92] As seen in Hamza's quote above, from the Pakistani military's point of view, the United States evinced its duplicity as early as 1962 when the United States aided India—Pakistan's archnemesis—in its war against China. Then again in 1965, the United States cut off assistance to Pakistan as well as India due the outbreak of hostilities between the two countries; however, Pakistan was dependent upon the United States for military maintenance and supplies whereas India was not. This sentiment deepened when the United States sanctioned Pakistan for nuclear-proliferation-related concerns after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan and Pakistan was no longer needed as a security partner.[93]

Conclusion

THIS VOLUME OFFERS IMPORTANT INSIGHTS INTO THE WAYS IN WHICH LET promotes narratives that support the Pakistan Army. Prior to the identification and translation of this volume, scholarship on the relationship between LeT and the army focused upon the way in which LeT contributes to Pakistan's grand strategic objectives, with Pakistan relaying on militants to execute its foreign policy objectives.[94] Hamza's book also advances the military's objec-

tives in domestic politics, as Hamza goes to great lengths to bolster the Pakistani army's image during a period when Pakistan's media and public began to criticize the army. This volume's arguments about the pious and Islamic nature of the Pakistan Army may be more even more important in contemporary Pakistan as the army is under relentless criticism for its persecution of the highly popular politician, Imran Khan.[95] Second, Hamza's volume identifies Pakistan's (ostensible) internal and external foes. It should be noted that LeT's identification is very similar to that of the Pakistan Army, thus legitimizing the arguments of the latter. Domestically, these enemies include journalists, political parties, as well as the militants attacking Pakistan's armed forces. Externally, LeT refers to India and the United States and the "West" more generally. Consistent with the Pakistan Army's understanding, Pakistan's internal and external enemies are intertwined in LeT's telling. The Pakistani army has long propounded the theory that India, the United States, and the West are engaged in a wide array of conspiracies to undermine Pakistan through brutal proxies.[96] As such, Hamza's book provides invaluable insights for scholars who are looking for answers as to why Pakistan feels the need to sustain religious militants such as LeT.

ENDNOTES

1   C. Christine Fair, *In Their Own Words: Understanding the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

2   C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

3   This section draws from Fair, *In Their Own Words*.

4   It is impossible to adjudicate which version—if any—of this history is accurate given that studies tend to rely upon interviews with militants and Pakistani officials who may not be truthful and/or who may remember events incorrectly. Indeed, scholars who have interviewed LeT militants find that they often disagree with one another on key dates, pivotal events, and even important personalities involved in the group's history and operations. Pakistani officials, moreover, have their own incentive to dissemble about the role of the state in supporting the organization. See Yoginder Sikand, "The Islamist Militancy in Kashmir: The Case of the Lashkar-e-Taiba," in *The Practice of War: Production, Reproduction and Communication of Armed Violence,* ed. Aparna Rao et al. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 215-238; and Mariam Abou Zahab, "I Shall be Waiting at the Door of Paradise:

The Pakistani Martyrs of the Lashkar-e-Taiba (Army of the Pure)," in *The Practice of War*, 133–158; Saeed Shafqat, "From Official Islam to Islamism: The Rise of Dawat-ul-Irshad and Lashkar-e-Taiba," *Pakistan: Nationalism without a Nation*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot (London: Zed Books, 2002),131–147; and Zaigham Khan, "Allah's Army," *The Herald Annual,* January 1998, 123–130.

5   In Pakistan there are five major sectarian traditions, referred to as *maslak* (school of Islamic thought, which derives from the Arabic *salaka*, which means "to walk" or "to walk on a path"): four are Sunni and include Barelvi, Deobandi, Ahl-e-Hadees and *Jamaat-e-Islami* (JI); while the fifth is Shia, which also includes several distinct traditions. Most Sunnis in Pakistan follow the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). For example, even though Deobandis and Barelvis have many differences, they are both Hanafi. Ahl-e-Hadees rejects all *fiqh* and self-identify as *ghair-muqallid* (those who do not follow *taqlid*, which is guidance that has been historically given). Ahl-e-Hadees proponents see the various schools of jurisprudence as being tantamount to personality cults surrounding their various founders. As such, they are even more zealous than Deobandis in establishing a singular standard of piety and behavior, and even more unrelenting in extirpating the various customary practices that they understand to be *bid'at* (literally translates to innovation, but it carries the valence that it is heretical and displeasing to Allah). They also propound a rigorous doctrine of the oneness of god (*tawheed*). Ahl-e-Hadees followers are frequently confused with Wahhabis; however, Wahhabis follow the Hanbali school of jurisprudence. See Mariam Abou Zahab, "Salafism in Pakistan: The Ahl-e Hadees Movement," in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (London: Hurst, 2009), 126–139; and Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Contestations: Essays on Muslims in India and Pakistan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

6   The Geneva Accord which brought the conflict to a close was signed in 1988. See Stephen Tankel, *Storming the World Stage: The Story of Lashkar-e-Taiba* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Stephen Tankel, "Lashkar-e-Taiba: Past Operations and Future Prospects," *New America Foundation*, National Security Studies Program Policy Paper, April 2011.

7   In total, around seventeen persons helped found the MDI, one of whom was Abdullah Azzam, an associate of Osama Bin Laden who was affiliated with the Islamic University of Islamabad and the Maktab ul Khadamat (Bureau of Services for Arab mujahideen). Azzam was killed in a bomb blast in 1989 in Peshawar. See Zaigham Khan, "Allah's Army," *The Herald Annual*, January 1998, 123–130. Yasmeen's timeline is somewhat different. She says that linkages between JuD and Lakhvi's militia happened in 1995. Yasmeen Khan, *Jihad and Dawah: Evolving Narratives of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jamat ud Dawa* (London: Hurst, 2017).

8   See Sikand, "The Islamist Militancy in Kashmir"; and Abou Zahab, "I Shall be Waiting at the Door of Paradise"; and Shafqat, "From official Islam to Islamism." The FATA was subsequently merged into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018 through the 25th Constitutional Amendment. Amir Wasim, "President signs KP-Fata merger bill into law," *The Dawn,* May 31, 2018. https://www.dawn.com/news/1411156.

9   Tankel, "Lashkar-e-Taiba: Past Operations and Future Prospects."

10 Khan, "Allah's Army." There are various unconfirmed rumors that Osama bin Laden contributed ten million Pakistani rupees (approximately $480,000 in 1990 dollars) to help build the mosque and residential area at the Markaz. There are also rumors that, until 1992, when he was ostensibly "banned" from travelling or staying in Pakistan, bin Laden regularly attended rallies at the Markaz. See Yosri Fouda and Nick Fielding, *Capture or Kill: The Pursuit of the 9/11 Masterminds and the Killing of Osama bin Laden* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2012); and John Wilson, *Caliphate's Soldiers: The Lashkar-e-Tayyaba's Long War* (New Delhi: Amaryllis and the ORF, 2011).

11 Fair, *In Their Own Words.*

12 See Tankel, *Storming the World Stage,* which says that this happened in 1990; other sources suggest it happened later in 1993: "Hafiz Saeed asks govt to curb foreign bid to bolster IS in Pakistan," *Indian Express,* 17 Oct, 2015, http://indianexpress. com/article/world/world-news/hafiz-saeed-asks-govt-to-curb-foreign-bid-to-bolster-is-in-pakistan/; Sikand, "The Islamist Militancy in Kashmir"; Abou Zahab, "I Shall be Waiting at the Door of Paradise" and "Salafism in Pakistan"; and Shafqat, "From Official Islam to Islamism."

13 Tankel, "Lashkar-e-Taiba: Past Operations and Future Prospects."

14 Saeed, "From official Islam to Islamism," 143.

15 C. Christine Fair, "Insights from a database of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Hizb-ul-Mujahideen militants," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 2 (2014): 259–290.

16 See Tankel, *Storming the World Stage* and "Lashkar-e-Taiba: Past Operations and Future Prospects"; and Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, *The Siege: 68 Hours Inside the Taj Hotel* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

17 Bhattacharya, Sanchita. "Jaish-e-Mohammad (The "Army of Mohammed")." Handbook of Terrorist and Insurgent Groups. CRC Press 644–650.

18 Tankel, *Storming the World Stage*, 116.

19 Tankel, "Lashkar-e-Taiba: Past Operations and Future Prospects."

20 See Tankel, *Storming the World Stage*; and Sean Noonan and Scott Steward, "The Evolution of a Pakistani Militant Network," Stratfor, September 15, 2011, https:// www.stratfor.com/weekly/evolution-pakistani-militant-network.

21 See C. Christine Fair, *The Counterterror Coalitions: Cooperation with Pakistan and India* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2004); and Peter Chalk and C. Christine Fair,

"Lashkar-e-Tayyiba leads the Kashmiri insurgency," Jane's Intelligence Review, 14, 10, (Dec. 2002): 1–5.

22 LeT/JuD attendees at such protests are easily identified by the organization's distinctive black and white flag.

23 C. Christine Fair and Ali Hamza, "The Foreign Policy Essay: Whether or Not Pakistan Will Join the War in Yemen May Depend on a Group You've Probably Never Heard Of," *Lawfare*, April 12, 2015, https://www.lawfareblog.com/foreign-policy-essay-whether-or-not-pakistan-will-join-war-yemen-may-depend-group-youve-probably.

24 "Hafiz Saeed's JuD Launches Political Party in Pakistan," *The Quint*, August 8, 2017, https://www.thequint.com/news/hafiz-saaed-jud-launches-political-party.

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Religious Vigilantism in Pakistan: A Growing Crisis

Muhammad Nasir Chaudhry and Farhan Zahid

THE MILITANT LANDSCAPE IN PAKISTAN IS VARIED AND COMPLEX. A range of ideologically motivated Islamist terrorist groups, ethno-political groups, and irridentist nationalist-separatist terrorist organizations operate across the country. The Global War on Terror that began in 2001, culminating in the return of the Afghan Taliban to power in Kabul in August 2021, has invigorated Islamist terrorists in Pakistan over the last two decades. The most severe threat emanates from Islamist terrorism, but the country also experiences multiple other forms of terrorism. Since the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and subsequent war (1979-89) various Afghanistan-based militants have operated in neighboring Pakistan. This includes a mixture of globally and regionally oriented groups such as al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, the latter of which the Government of Pakistan recently branded as "Khawarij."[1]

Organized terrorism and insurgency are not the only forms of political violence that Pakistan faces, however. In recent years, a new form of political violence has become increasingly prevalent: mob violence against individu-

als accused of disobeying Islamic injunctions. These supposed infractions may range from not praying to the mere suspicion of uttering something sacrilegious. Scores of people have been declared as heretics and subsequently lynched by religious fanatics because they were alleged to have committed certain acts falling under Pakistan's severe religious laws, which carry maximum punishments (if they are to reach a court of law at all). This new wave of sporadic violence in Pakistan does not quite fit standard understandings of terrorism but could best be described as religious vigilantism. This article analyzes this trend as evidence of growing extremist tendencies in contemporary Pakistani society, using an original dataset of cases of religious vigilantism between 2014 and 2024 compiled by the authors from open-source material.

Defining Religious Vigilantism

WE PROPOSE DEFINING RELIGIOUS VIGILANTISM AS ANY FORM OF UNAUTHORIZED, quasi-spontaneous, and extrajudicial violence taken by intolerant individuals (typically a mob) against an individual or individuals that were observed or rumored to have violated certain religious tenets.[2] Certain key features of religious vigilantism include:

- A motivation to uphold religious values

- Extrajudicial in nature

- The underlying accusations often lack rigorous evidence

Scores of examples throughout history could be given here such as certain lynchings of women accused of witchcraft in Medieval Europe and colonial America. More recently, this trend has been observed in India, where Hindu nationalists have endeavored to enforce cow protection laws while harassing religious minorities.[3] However, the focus of the present study is to examine the surge of religious vigilantism in Pakistan, and we will remain focused on that subject.

Historical Background

DURING THE BRITISH RAJ, COLONIAL AUTHORITIES ENACTED RELIGIOUS LAWS in order to safeguard the religious sensitivities of their subject populations while keeping in view the diverse nature of the Indian subcontinent. These laws were intended to maintain public order by preventing actions or speech that could inflame religious sentiments and spark communal violence, particularly between Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians. The raison d'etre of these laws was thus to penalize individuals involved in activities or speech that could disturb the peace and complicate colonial administration by the British.[4]

The first penal law enacted under the British Raj was the Indian Penal Code (IPC) of 1860, principally drafted by Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay. IPC Section 295 included one of the earliest legal provisions addressing religious sentiments. The said law criminalized the destruction, damage, or defilement of any place of worship or sacred object with the intent to insult the religion of any group of people. The purpose of this law was to prevent acts that could lead to communal violence. Violators could be punished with imprisonment, a fine, or both.

Section 296 of the IPC similarly addressed the issue of disturbing religious assemblies. It criminalized any voluntary disturbance to a lawful assembly engaged in religious worship or ceremonies.[5] Similar to Section 295, the aim was to maintain peace and order and prevent any communal frictions resulting from offended religious sentiments.[6] Similarly, Section 298 criminalized the act of uttering words, making gestures, or producing sounds with the deliberate intent to wound the religious feelings of any person. Section 295A, which was introduced in 1927 after a blasphemous publication resulted in the killing of its publisher, was designed to prevent verbal insults or gestures directed at individuals' religious beliefs, with punishment being a jail term of up to one year.[7]

To this day, India and Pakistan continue to use versions of these colonial-era laws to police religious speech. In India, since the ascension to power of the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) under Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, these laws have become more pronounced, with a large uptick in clashes among various religious communities and subsequent incidents of mob violence and lynching.[8]

In Pakistan, the scope and implementation of religious speech laws expanded earlier, during the military regime of General Zia ul Haq (1978-1988).[9]

General Zia initiated an Islamization process of Pakistan during his reign, which included amending laws and adding new sections to the existing legal code, as well as implementing a series of policies to align social, political, and legal principles with Islamic injunctions (as he understood them). This included legal reforms such as the Hudood Ordinance (1979) that mandated certain physical punishments for extreme crimes under sharia law; new blasphemy laws; the establishment of a Federal Shariat Court; and an ordinance on zakat and usher (1980),[10] which established a system for the assessment, collection, and disbursement of two Islamic pillars of charity and land tax. General Zia's goal was to remake Pakistan as a state committed to Islamic principles, likely in order to help legitimize his military regime after the 1978 coup that overthrew the elected government of Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. Rules regarding interest free banking, Islamization of the school curriculum, unofficial moral policing, increasing restrictions on women, and finally the complete Sharia Bill of 1988 were also introduced in this time.[11] These laws served as a mechanism for preventing religious insults that might disturb the peace, but they also helped pave the way for religious vigilantism in the years to come.[12]

Religious Extremism in Pakistan

SECTARIAN AND COMMUNAL VIOLENCE HAVE BEEN A CONSTANT FEATURE OF Pakistani politics since the country's independence. This includes tensions between Sunni and Shia sects and the growth of militant anti-Shia terrorist organizations such as Lashkar-e-Janghvi (LeJ) in the 1990s and the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP) since 2014.[13] Violence against religious minorities is not limited to the Shia, however: Hindu and Christian minorities have seen their neighborhoods and places of worships attacked and burnt.

The following chart includes cases of religious vigilantism since 2014 recorded by the authors through a review of Pakistani media and social media. This original dataset might not be exhaustive, but it nevertheless underscores common dimensions seen across cases of religious vigilantism in Pakistan.

Chronology of Mob Lynchings in Pakistan from 2014 to 2024

November 4, 2014	A mob lynches two Christian laborers, Shama and Shahzad Masih, at the site of their brick kiln factory in Kot Radha Krishan, Punjab province over allegations of desecrating the Muslim Holy Book.[14] (An anti-terrorism court eventually charges over 106 people over the incident the following year.)
March 15, 2015	Twin explosions damage Roman Catholic Churches in Lahore, Pakistan during a Sunday mass. The attacks kill 15 people and are followed by mob violence in which two Muslims accused of being militants are killed.[15] One of the victims of the mob lynching is subsequently identified as a Muslim laborer working in a Christian-majority neighborhood, suggesting that the claims that he was a militant involved in the attack were spurious.
April 13, 2017	Mashal Khan, a student of Abdul Wali Khan University in Mardan is lynched on the premises of the university over allegations of posting blasphemous content online.[16]
April 21, 2017	A mob attacks a man accused of committing blasphemy during Friday prayers in Chitral, northern Pakistan. Six policemen are also injured in the ensuing violence.[17]
May 3, 2017	A charged mob attacks a police station in an attempt to lynch a Hindu man alleged to have posted an incendiary image on social media in Hub, Balochistan.[18] A 10-year boy is killed and five others are wounded in the ensuing crossfire.
July 29, 2020	Tahir Naseem, an American citizen, is shot dead in a courtroom in Peshawar while he is facing allegations of blasphemy.[19]
November 28, 2021	A mob sets fire to a police station in Charsadda, northwest Pakistan, after police authorities refuse to hand over a man suspected of sacrilege.[20]
December 3, 2021	A Sri Lankan factory manager, Priyanka Kumara Diyawadana, is lynched by a mob in Sialkot over allegations of committing sacrilege.[21]
December 2, 2022	A mentally unstable man, Mushtaq Ahmed, is lynched by a mob in Punjab province after allegedly burning the Holy Quran inside a mosque.[22]
February 11, 2023	An angry mob lynches a man after he is arrested for blasphemy in Nankana District, Punjab. The mob storms the police station and kills him in his cell.[23]
May 7, 2023	A local cleric, Nigar Alam, is lynched by a mob in the village of Sawaldher, Mardan District in northwest Pakistan after allegedly making blasphemous remarks at the end of a political rally.[24]
August 5, 2023	Abdul Rauf, a teacher recently accused of committing blasphemy, is shot by unknown assailants while riding on his motorbike in Turbat, Balochistan.[25]
August 12, 2023	Naseer Ahmed, an Ahmadi man, is reportedly stabbed and killed in Rabwah in Punjab province over his refusal to chant slogans in support of the TLP, Pakistan's Islamist anti-blasphemy party.[26]
August 16, 2023	A mob storms a Christian locality in the district of Jaranwala in Faisalabad, burning several Christian homes and churches over allegations of blasphemy.[27]
May 25, 2024	A mob ransacks a Christian man's factory and sets fire to his home over allegations of blasphemy in the city of Sargodha. The man dies of his injuries a week later.[28]

| June 21, 2024 | Violent mobs storm a police station, killing a man accused of desecrating holy scriptures.[29] |
| June 24, 2024 | Violent mobs attack a police station in Swat, killing a man accused of blasphemy and burning his body.[30] |

Note: The data in this chart was compiled by the authors based on their analysis of Pakistani media reportage across print, electronic, and social media streams.

Causes of Religious Vigilantism in Pakistan

PAKISTAN'S PRESENT CRISIS OF RELIGIOUS VIGILANTISM HAS ITS ROOTS IN extremist religious ideology, which itself can be explained by several factors. These range from recent changes in Pakistan's political space, specifically the rise of a political party dedicated to enforcing anti-blasphemy laws, to longer-term, social and political factors that have been shaping Pakistani society for decades. This section examines these various factors.

The 1970s and 1980s: The Islamization of society and geopolitics of religious extremism

TODAY'S VIOLENT EXTREMISM IS PARTIALLY A RESULT OF THE ISLAMIZATION of Pakistani society that began the late 1970s. While Pakistan has been a Sunni Muslim-majority state since its inception, certain elements of sharia law were only first enacted during the era of Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (1972-77) as part of his attempts to appease Islamist parties that formed part of a growing opposition alliance towards the end of his rule. In 1977, an opposition alliance formed against Bhutto's left-leaning government. The Pakistan National Alliance, or PNA, was chiefly a religious alliance of seven parties that launched a countrywide agitation after Pakistan's disputed 1977 elections. In response to this pressure and allegations that he had rigged the elections, Prime Minister Bhutto began introducing an Islamist agenda, declaring Friday to be a holiday, outlawing gambling, and banning the sale and consumption of alcohol. Bhutto intended these to be temporary

measures, to be reversed once he could return to power without the support of Islamist parties,[31] but in any case, he failed to appease the Islamist opposition. The disputed 1977 elections paved the way for a coup in 1978 that brought General Zia to power with the support of the Islamist PNA.[32] (Bhutto was eventually hanged by General Zia's government in 1979.) General Zia's "Martial Law" regime saw further Islamic clauses added to Pakistan's constitution by executive order. General Zia also launched his Islamization policy, heralding an era of imposing religious laws and practices into the business of the state. In particular, as a prominent part of the PNA, the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) Islamist party emerged as one of the key beneficiaries of the 1978 coup. JeI consequently wielded considerable influence on the Islamization agenda and convinced General Zia to bring rapid changes into the country's banking, judicial, and educational sectors, with a particular emphasis on changing the primary school curriculum.[33] More than 40 years later, Pakistani state schools still teach children the same curricula established by JeI and General Zia.

It was during the Islamization policy of General Zia's regime that religious intolerance began to escalate into sectarian violence. This was partially due to geopolitical factors: Ayatollah Khomeini's Iranian revolution in neighboring Iran in 1979 was a catalyst in the exponential growth of Shia Islamism within Central and South Asia and the Middle East, as the Iranian regime sought to export its revolution abroad.[34] This had a major impact on Pakistan, since the country boasts the second largest Shia population outside Iran but was undergoing its own distinctly Sunni form of Islamization at the time. While Iran was indeed actively trying to foment Shia unrest in Pakistan, General Zia responded to the Iranian threat by ramping up the Islamization of Pakistan in a way that further persecuted religious minorities such as Shia, thereby aggravating the regional rivalry while simultaneously increasing religious extremism in Pakistan.

Similarly, the emergence of transnational jihadism next door in Afghanistan after 1979 saw Pakistan and its Western cities such as Peshawar and Quetta become bastions of Salafi-jihadist ideologues that contributed to the rise of extremism within broader Pakistani society. The exponential growth of Deobandi and Salafi-jihadist madrassahs in western Pakistan, established to serve the recruitment needs of the Afghan Mujahideen, contributed to the rise in extremism and intolerance across Pakistani society.[35] Mosques, particularly in areas near the country's border with Afghanistan, echoed with the clarion call for jihad, often issued by non-Pakistanis at the

pulpit. The military regime tolerated these jihadists, as it was desperate for international and domestic legitimacy and found willing partners in the West and Middle East who were eager to finance the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad. (The CIA had launched Operation Cyclone, which would eventually become one of the biggest and most expensive covert operations in its history, in 1979 and coordinated support for the Afghan Mujahideen with General Zia's regime.[36])

Politicized religious vigilantism: The formation of the TLP

BY THE 2000S, VIGILANTE MOBS WERE BECOMING EMBOLDENED AS THEY SOUGHT to remake Pakistani society along Islamist lines in the same manner as Iran or Saudi Arabia. In contrast to those countries, however, and despite the growth of Islamist sentiments, the Pakistani state never established any official religious police force. Instead, a culture of religious vigilantism was beginning to take shape.

While Islamic morality police were never officially established in Pakistan, in 2015, a far-right Islamist political party that commits itself to "defending the honor" of the Prophet Mohammed, Tehreek-e-Labiak Pakistan (TLP), was formed.[37] While TLP is not solely responsible for religious vigilantism in Pakistan, it is the most vocal and politically organized advocate of such violence. The TLP was founded by a religious cleric of the Barelvi sect, Khadim Hussain Rizvi, and its core ideology is the staunch defense of Islamic laws. The TLP has emerged as a significant political force since 2015 and exhibits a powerful street presence in all provinces of Pakistan. The party also received a significant number of votes in general elections in 2018 and 2024.[38] Some scholars have attributed a rise in religious vigilantism to the TLP's founding in 2015, given that the TLP draws its strength from the Barelvi sect, which constitutes a majority in Pakistan.[39]

Televangelists and social media activists

SOCIAL MEDIA HAS PLAYED A ROLE IN FANNING EXTREMIST SENTIMENTS and religious vigilantism. There have been incidents when calls for killings have been disseminated rapidly over social media, such as the storming of the police station in Hub, Balochistan in 2017 recorded in our database.

Religious televangelists and self-proclaimed religious scholars on social media—both Pakistani and foreign scholars—play a major role in spreading extremist interpretations of blasphemy as well. Since the emergence of social media platforms in the 21st century, a number of clerics and televangelists have emerged who justify religious violence and incite hatred against minority groups, creating fertile ground for religious vigilantism. A highly popular (now late) televangelist, Aamir Liaqat Hussain, was particularly controversial and routinely in the cross chairs of the Pakistani authorities for his inflammatory remarks on television about religious minorities, against whom he often called for violence.[40] During a recent trip to Pakistan, another televangelist, the Malaysia-based Indian Dr. Zakir Naik, made controversial speeches in which he implied that some religions are absurd and a "farce." Pakistan's Christian community wrote a letter to the President of Pakistan in protest.[41]

Some religious televangelists have tremendous reach, as they are prominent on television and the internet, enabling them to impact large audiences globally, sometimes bypassing traditional checks and balances of content moderation. Satellite channels stream the content of these televangelists to millions, not only in Pakistan but globally. Self-taught and self-proclaimed televangelist scholars like Dr. Zakir Naik often carry a specific form of popular authority even as they interpret Islamic injunctions in a very different manner than classically trained scholars. For example, Naik's preaching is highly misogynistic. He refused to share the stage with orphan girls in one instance, and he has similarly denounced the role of women in the workforce in interviews.[42] Yet these preachers can amass large followings, and they often mobilize their supporters with extremist rhetoric that depicts religious minorities as sub-humans. Their rhetoric reflects a Manichean mindset in which Islam is under attack and Pakistani society must rise up to confront supposed un-Islamic practices, individuals, and indeed entire faith communities. This rhetoric creates an environment wherein extrajudicial actions are seen by the broader community as acceptable or even necessary to defend the faith.

Weakening writ of the state

PAKISTAN, WITH ITS COMPLEX MILITANT LANDSCAPE, IS STRUGGLING AS A RESULT of a weakened internal security infrastructure. A plethora of Islamist, sectar-

ian, nationalist-separatist, and ethno-political terrorist organizations operate in Pakistan and perpetrate hundreds of terrorist attacks every year, killing thousands.[43] The military, and the less well-trained and -equipped police, often struggle to effectively combat these groups. Furthermore, Pakistan's perpetual economic poly-crisis and the politicization of law enforcement undermine the professionalism, effectiveness, and impartiality of security agencies. Police officers often align themselves with the country's political and military elite to accrue benefits such as plum postings, and many run social media accounts for personal publicity rather than to promote and enhance the state's policing work. Pakistani law enforcement is increasingly used for suppressing political dissent, to the detriment of its ability to perform routine yet essential responsibilities such as ensuring law and order.[44]

This has produced a scenario in which law enforcement is frequently unable, or unwilling, to maintain law and order and provide due process in instances in which individuals or communities are accused of sacrilege or similar offenses. Pakistanis increasingly take law into their own hands to settle scores and personal disputes. They feel justified in taking extrajudicial actions as they believe that the legal system is either too slow or too lenient toward offenders. Indeed, a number of incidents of religious vigilantism referenced in our dataset indicate that personal disputes might have been a catalyst in some lynchings, such as the 2015 lynchings of Shama and Shahzad Masih and the 2017 lynching of university student Mashal Khan.

Whatever the impetus behind a specific incident of religious violence, law enforcement officials have been accused in several cases of standing by and being complicit in mob actions. In several of the cases referenced in our dataset, an angry mob stormed a police station and seized a suspect from custody and murdered them. More recently, in September 2024, a high-ranking police officer in Sindh province actually ordered the extrajudicial killing of a doctor accused of saying something sacrilegious on social media (the victim's social media account was apparently hacked),[45] pointing to a culture of lawlessness that has taken root even in the upper echelons of the police.

As a result of weakening state capacity, the legal system has also proven unable to provide justice in cases of accusations of religious offense, which further incentivizes vigilante behavior. Court cases are often lengthy affairs, which leaves people frustrated with the inefficiency of the justice system. Thus, common people fear speaking out against religious vigilantism not only due to societal pressures, but also because it is clear the state cannot or will not protect them if they were to fall victim to the mob.

Addressing the Issue

THE CRISIS OF RELIGIOUS VIGILANTISM APPEARS TO BE WORSENING. WHILE OUR database covers incidents reported in the media, sources we interviewed across Pakistan suggested that the crisis is even worse than our database would suggest, with far more incidents going unreported—potentially as many as one a month across the country—due to a pervasive fear of speaking out about the problem. Our research suggests that Punjab has seen the most cases of such violence, which might be explained by the strong support that the TLP enjoys in the province owing to the prevalence of Barelvi Islam there, but vigilantism has been witnessed in numerous urban centers and small towns across Pakistan. There does not appear to be any end to this crisis in sight, as the institutions that should be able to reign in this problem—the police, courts, and indeed religious scholars and politicians—have proved highly inadequate in their responses. Police provide limited protection to victims of these mobs, if they are not actively participating in the violence themselves.

Religious vigilantism undermines the rule of law and leads to a culture of fear and self-censorship in which individuals, especially those from religious minorities, hesitate to express their beliefs or challenge dominant religious narratives. The vigilantism also damages Pakistan's international image, impacting foreign relations and economic development. A senior European diplomat told one of the authors how incidents of mob violence make his task of sustaining his country's investments in Pakistan—let alone inviting new investment—a herculean task.

Pakistan must tackle the crisis of religious vigilantism if it wants to improve its economy, security, and international standing. The legal pathways to doing so are risky, as any amendments to Islamic laws would elicit a further emergence of protests and mob violence due to staunch opposition from Islamist parties (which have strong followership and experience mobilizing protesters). Even discussing amending such laws in political forums would cause immense opposition from Islamist parties. In the recent past, when religious parties have demonstrated across the country, it has resulted in damages amounting to billions of rupees affecting public and private properties alike.[46]

There are other options available that might take longer to implement but could eventually prove effective in addressing the issue. First, there is a need to strengthen the country's law enforcement and security forces to effectively curtail extrajudicial vigilante activities. Key components of such reforms would

include the promotion and rotation of officers on merit (many law enforcement officials have served with distinction either in Pakistan or in UN missions abroad) and operational autonomy for officers to avoid undue political interference. This would also require thoroughly reforming the police forces in all four provinces as well as the Islamabad Capital Territory Police. Enhanced training to boost police and prosecutor capacity in investigative procedures and victim support, while not a complete solution, could help strengthen the rule of law in small but important ways. Relatedly, Pakistan's archaic justice system is deeply compromised, characterized by a lack of qualified judges and adequate job protection along with extremely weak training for prosecutors. Anti-terrorism courts and indeed the entire judicial framework need immediate reforms in order to more effectively try perpetrators of religious vigilante violence.

The Pakistani state must do more to regain its monopoly on violence. This includes finding an effective way to deal with the growing challenges of militancy in the country. While the state has long insisted on military solutions to any militant challenge, given its inability to deliver results through such an approach to date, it should also consider dialogue where possible.

The Pakistani state must do more to combat online hate speech, and there must be more legal clarity pertaining to these issues. Existing laws for hate speech include the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016, but this statute suffers from a lack of a clear definition of hate speech, and there is likewise no mechanism for implementation. A regulatory framework for online hate speech must be enacted with adequate penalties for offenders, albeit in a manner that does not infringe on free speech. A related challenge will be to ensure that any such amendments or new laws are not used against religious minorities, which is a risk given Pakistan's recent history. While the challenge of religious vigilantism may seem significant, the Pakistani state has indicated that it recognizes the challenges posed by vigilante actions and has previously shown the capacity to clamp down on the problem when forced to, as seen when the state suppressed rioters who attacked Western fast-food chains in the wake of the Gaza war.[47]

The media and clerics will also have to play a critical role in addressing the issue of religious vigilantism to avoid fanning sectarian flames. This is a significant challenge, given how pervasive such extremist attitudes have become in Pakistan. The state will have to work in partnership with non-governmental organizations to cultivate stronger ties with journalists and seminary and mosque leaders across the country to mitigate religious extremism and hate speech.

Conclusion

RELIGIOUS VIGILANTISM SHOULD BE A MATTER OF GRAVE CONCERN FOR PAKISTANIS and the country's international partners. The cases of religious vigilantism examined in this study occurred between 2014 and 2024, underscoring how recent and contemporary a trend this is, and most of the victims were targeted on flimsy and unsubstantiated allegations without any form of due process. To date, the government has not been able to devise a strategy to combat and mitigate the challenge and has not taken steps to address the underlying conditions that drive the crisis. Admittedly, the crisis is driven by multiple factors, and the policies of past governments have contributed to the conditions behind this vicious cycle of violence.

Any approach to resolving this crisis will have to involve both national policy as well as local outreach across the country to engage the nation's diverse population. There is a dire need to reeducate and reorient people towards a more tolerant understanding of interfaith relations. Pakistan could benefit in this regard from the experience of other Muslim-majority countries such as Saudi Arabia and Indonesia to learn how to best curtail extremist tendencies in society.

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Boko Haram 2.0? The Evolution of a Jihadist Group since 2015

Michael Nwankpa

THE BOKO HARAM[1] CONFLICT REMAINS ONE OF NIGERIA'S LONGEST active insurgencies, if not the longest, and one of the most destructive conflicts in recent African history.[2] According to the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) Nigeria Security Tracker, in the span of seven years (June 2011–June 2018), there were 2,021 Boko Haram–related incidents in which 37,530 people were killed.[3] In the same period, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) identified 3,346 Boko Haram–related incidents in which 34,261 people were killed.[4] The Boko Haram conflict has been ongoing in some form or another for more than 20 years, since approximately 2002, when the late Mohammed Yusuf established his preaching movement, which eventually evolved into an insurgency. After Nigerian police extrajudicially killed Yusuf in 2009, his successor, Abubakar Shekau, transformed the movement into an even deadlier insurgency.

Boko Haram has undergone different phases throughout its history. I identify three key periods: the pre-insurgency period of 2002–2009; the peak insurgency period of 2009–2015; and the post-peak phase, from 2015 to the pres-

ent.[5] This paper focuses on the latter period, which began with Boko Haram's oath of allegiance (*bay'ah*) to the caliph of the Islamic State (IS) and its official reorganization as the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP).[6] In August 2016, following an internal leadership struggle, ISWAP splintered into two factions. Shekau led one faction as the revived Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li'l-Da'wa wa'l-Jihad (JAS, the original name of his insurgency) and ISWAP as a distinct faction under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the son of Mohammed Yusuf. Following the death of Shekau at the hands of ISWAP in 2021, JAS has further devolved into several autonomous constituent units (which nonetheless remain loyal to overall JAS leader Bakura Doro, Abubakar Shekau's successor). Since 2016, the intensity of Boko Haram's attacks and its influence have reduced drastically, compared to its peak period between 2012–2015. During that time, it conducted near-daily attacks that led to huge civilian casualties, making it the deadliest terrorist group in the world at one point.[7]

Boko Haram continues to be one of the world's deadliest armed groups, according to ACLED data, although there have been fluctuations in the frequency of attacks and rate of fatalities. For example, there were approximately 2,700 Boko Haram–related fatalities in 2018, a significant reduction from the 11,500 reported in 2015.[8] As of 2024, an extreme conflict index level continues to characterize Nigeria, largely due to activities involving bandits (rather than Boko Haram) operating in the northwest.[9] Nonetheless, the various factions of Boko Haram remain deadly and continue to conduct significant attacks in the northeast and around the Lake Chad area, if perhaps with less frequency than before. For example, on September 5, 2024, ISWAP killed at least 170 villagers, mostly boys and men, from Mafa village in Yobe state after warning the inhabitants against returning to their village.[10] On October 28, 2024, suspected Boko Haram (JAS) militants killed 40 Chadian soldiers in a raid on a Chadian military base in the Lake Chad Island of Barkaram.[11] And on January 27, 2025, ISWAP carried out a deadly suicide attack on a Nigerian military convoy in the Timbuktu Triangle between Borno and Yobe states, leaving 25 soldiers dead.[12]

In 2025, ISWAP began deploying weaponized drones in its attacks against military targets. One example is the March 24 attack on the Nigerian military's forward operating base (FOB) in the Wajiroko area of Borno state.[13] This is a worrying development in the insurgents' military capabilities, as the group had previously used drones only for surveilling targets and recording propaganda videos. The low cost of commercial drone technology makes it easily accessible to both insurgent and counterinsurgent forces, a dangerous trend in modern warfare.[14]

Why is Boko Haram still able to carry out these deadly attacks in Nigeria and around Lake Chad, and why does it continue to present a significant security threat even in its degraded state? Equally important, how should Nigeria and its regional and international partners respond to these threats? These are the major questions that this paper attempts to answer. To understand Boko Haram's continued relevance and danger, it is necessary to accept its transformation since 2015, which is marked more by competition, rivalry between factions, and the quest for survival and territorial control than by a coherent grand strategy for expansion and conquest as it demonstrated in the pre-2015 era.

For instance, the splits between JAS and Ansaru, an early splinter that formed in 2012, and between JAS and ISWAP in 2016 were rooted in ideological differences (for instance, disagreements over Shekau's indiscriminate application of *takfir*, or excommunication,[15] and attendant attacks against the Muslim populace). However, the continued fratricidal conflict between ISWAP and the many constituent units of JAS, particularly since Shekau's death in 2021, has little to do with ideological disagreement in my assessment. The strong ideological motivation that guided Boko Haram under Mohammed Yusuf from 2002 to 2009 appeared less credible under Shekau's leadership (2010–2021) due to Shekau's greed and indiscriminate targeting of Muslim civilians. The original grand mandate of establishing a Shari'a state in Nigeria has taken a further hit from the infighting between JAS and ISWAP since 2016. In my view, rivalries between JAS and ISWAP commanders and their personal mundane interests are more important factors in the insurgency's dynamics than ideological divisions at this stage. Therefore, this paper argues that Boko Haram is in a new stage, "Boko Haram 2.0," which requires fresh insights into the group using new lenses and angles.

To provide these fresh perspectives, I will first review established scholarship and views of Boko Haram. This will entail a discussion of the earlier period, 2002–2015, which covers the pre-insurgency and peak insurgency phases, and an overview of the different theories that scholars typically offer for Boko Haram's emergence. The second part of this essay will analyze the transformation of Boko Haram since 2015. In the conclusion, I will consider the policy implications of this new phase of Boko Haram.

This paper benefits from the arguments that several contributors present in a forthcoming volume on Boko Haram that I edited, as well as from field research in northern, central, and southern Nigeria in the 2010s. In addition, it draws from more recent analysis of JAS and ISWAP propaganda videos and other open-source material.

Boko Haram 1.0: The Evolution of Boko Haram from Nigerian Islamic Preachers to the Islamic State in West Africa Province: 2002–2015

Phase 1: The Pre-Insurgency Period (2002–2009)

FORMED IN THE EARLY 2000s,[16] BOKO HARAM SPENT THE FIRST FEW YEARS OF its existence in Islamic activism, which mainly involved challenging the conservative Muslim leadership in northern Nigeria for what it perceived as their corruption and un-Islamic practices.[17] Boko Haram was at this stage a socio-religious movement whose anti-government, anti-corruption, and Islamic fundamentalist messages resonated with a large majority of people across northern Nigeria and neighboring countries (i.e., Chad, Cameroon, and Niger) who felt a genuine disillusionment with their political and religious leaders. During this period, under the leadership of its charismatic founder Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram had up to a million followers.[18] The group's modus operandi at this stage was *Da'wah* (proselytization) through fiery preaching against political and religious leaders. Its leaders, including Yusuf and his associates Abubakar Shekau and Mamman Nur (both now dead), evoked the successful nineteenth-century West African jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio as they advocated for the return to a supposedly true practice of Islam. Fodio had done the same when he had condemned polytheism, paganism, and the un-Islamic practices of the Hausa rulers.[19]

Interestingly, Uthman Dan Fodio's jihad remains a unifying theme and a powerful rallying force among conservative and dissenting Islamic groups in northern Nigeria. There is no doubt that Dan Fodio remains an inspiration for northern Nigerian traditional and dissident Islamic groups alike. Boko Haram exploited this important history to its own ends in its quest for power and hegemonic control over the production and consumption of Islamic knowledge and practices. Initially, it sought to push the conservative Muslim leadership to implement "purer," more comprehensive Shari'a law in northern Nigeria. However, when the group felt that it could not trust the established religious leadership to do this, its position became more radical and aimed at usurping

religious authority and becoming the spiritual gatekeeper of the Islamic religion in Nigeria.[20] However, I believe that during this pre-insurgency stage, politics, understood as a quest for power and control by working within the political system, was less a calculation in Boko Haram's campaign. The weight of this argument lies in Boko Haram's *hijrah*,[21] which in modern parlance certain Islamic sects use to describe their withdrawal from what they perceive as a corrupt and un-Islamic state. A faction of Boko Haram, under early Boko Haram associate Muhammad Ali, withdrew to a remote commune outside Kanamma town in Yobe state, where it sought to practice its version of Islam without the adverse influence of the corrupt Nigerian state.[22] However, the tension between this sect and the Kanamma community led to the intervention of the Nigerian police and eventually a clash between the sect and the police and military, who killed and arrested many sect members.[23] Mohammed Yusuf did not participate in the commune, preferring a more strategic approach that included engaging northern Islamic scholars and clerics in theological debates.

The Kanamma incident and other early history of the movement lead me to believe that Boko Haram might not have escalated into violence if the Nigerian state had responded differently. Before 2009, it had relatively limited clashes with members of the security forces. These include the 2003–2004 synchronized attacks on several police stations in the towns of Kanamma and Geidam in Yobe state by the members of the Kanamma compound that led to the death of many policemen and a reprisal attack from the military that led to the death of about 18 Boko Haram members. In 2004, group members conducted two more attacks on police stations and convoys in Borno state and along the border with Chad. The military intervened and engaged Boko Haram for two days, leaving up to 27 members dead.[24]

There was also evidence that members had started hardening their stance during this period. The assassination of the influential Muslim cleric and Yusuf's one-time mentor, Sheikh Ja'afar Adam, by suspected members of the "Taleban," i.e., the early sect that had previously split from Boko Haram and established the commune in Kanamma, supports this view.[25] However, the climax of the phase that transformed Boko Haram into an insurgency occurred in summer of 2009, when Governor Ali Modu Sheriff's government in Borno state dispatched a military and police task force that clashed with members of the sect over their refusal to wear motorcycle helmets. Boko Haram interpreted this as a ruse to attack the sect. The incident set off a chain of events marked by several days of fighting with the joint task force, which culminated in the deaths of up to 800 Boko Haram members, the destruction

of its mosque and headquarters in Maiduguri, and the extrajudicial killing of Yusuf by Nigerian police.

Phase 2: The Insurgency Period (2010–2015)

The scholarly consensus[26] in the Boko Haram literature is that the July 2009 clashes catalyzed Boko Haram's transformation from a socio-religious movement into an insurgent organization, expediting its jihadist agenda. This is true to an extent. Nonetheless, the Nigerian state had a one-year period between 2009 and 2010 when Boko Haram was in hiatus and willing to negotiate. According to one individual involved in early, backchannel negotiations with members of the sect, Boko Haram expressed legitimate grievances that it wanted the Nigerian government to address in this time. These included (1) prosecuting the security forces that had killed Mohammed Yusuf extrajudicially; (2) releasing members of the sect whom the state had unlawfully detained, particularly wives and children of Boko Haram members; (3) rebuilding the group's destroyed mosque and headquarters; and (4) allowing sect members freedom of worship.[27] However, the Nigerian government missed this window of opportunity to deescalate the tensions and possibly halt Boko Haram's transformation into an insurgency. The government instead maintained a hardline position.

President Goodluck Jonathan's administration had little to no understanding of Boko Haram and responded in a typically heavy-handed manner. Initially, Boko Haram

> [was] running from the Nigerian state. They were not fighting the Nigerian state. They were trying to create an ideal Islamic state. It was actually the Nigerian state that was responsible for radicalizing the BH people, in the manner they misunderstood them, in the manner they were attacking, in the manner they fought them, in the manner they killed Mohammed Yusuf, and in the manner they subsequently handled the post-Mohammed Yusuf. . . . So the Nigerian state essentially radicalized BH and turned them as hostile.[28]

Some scholars, however, accord little importance to the role that the Nigerian state played in Boko Haram's violent transformation, believing instead

that Boko Haram was already on the pathway of jihad before 2009.[29] These scholars mostly belong to the "global" school of thought.[30] To them, there is no alternative explanation for Boko Haram's declared goal of Islamizing Nigeria and ensuring the rule of majority Muslims in the country other than jihadist ideology. Such scholars often rely on a literal interpretation of primary texts that Boko Haram produces and publishes. The global school of thought stands in contradistinction to the "local" school of thought, that is, scholars who give primacy to the idea of Boko Haram as a group with local grievances and targets.[31] Other scholars maintain more of a middle-of-the road position,[32] and I count myself among them.

Boko Haram is at once global and local. We cannot separate its local drivers from its global goals and influences. Although both schools of thought recognize ideology as a driver for Boko Haram, the global scholars accord it greater importance. These ideological-leaning scholars also associate the group with transnational terrorist organizations and therefore global goals. Boko Haram's connections to international jihadist groups prior to 2015 have been the source of scholarly debate. Some have speculated about early external connections, especially to al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates. They base such hypotheses on Boko Haram's sophisticated attacks (particularly suicide attacks and increased skill in making improvised explosive devices from the 2010s onward), some (limited) documented correspondence between the leadership of Boko Haram and al-Qaeda networks, and reports of a limited transfer of funds from al-Qaeda to Boko Haram (the latter of which Abubakar Shekau eventually confirmed).[33]

Undoubtedly, ideology plays a central role in Boko Haram's origin and transformation. However, under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau (2010–2021), the group's religious credentials took a nosedive as Shekau developed a cult personality. Throughout Boko Haram's evolution—especially since 2015, as I will argue later—ideology became less prominent as a strategic motivation. Shekau became power-drunk and unrestrained in his indiscriminate attacks, which often targeted the wider Muslim population within Boko Haram's area of operations as well as members he viewed as straying from his doctrine. He thus faced criticism from other commanders within the Boko Haram ranks for such "un-Islamic" acts and for his display of ostentatious greed and appropriation of the "spoils of war" for himself.[34] Evidence of the declining ideological motivation in Boko Haram's campaign thus appears more in the actions of its leaders than in its statements. Explanations of the insurgency based exclusively on Boko Haram's official statements and propaganda thus can no longer suffice.

The ideological incoherence of Boko Haram began to emerge within a few years of the insurgency. In the first two years of the insurgency period (2009–2011), the group generally engaged in targeted and systematic attacks. Its targets included the Nigerian security forces, traditional Islamic clerics, local politicians, and churches and other targets associated with Christians. Similarly, Boko Haram attacked police stations, military barracks, and other security checkpoints and officers. It was clear that the motive was partly revenge, which is one of several theories that experts have posited to explain Boko Haram's rise.[35] The group attacked these targets in part to avenge the extrajudicial killing of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf, and other members as well as to reconstitute its force by freeing detained members and acquiring weapons from the military stockpile. For example, on September 7, 2010, Boko Haram attacked the federal prison in Bauchi state, freeing roughly 730 prisoners including dozens of its members.[36] The choice of targets at this phase also reflected its anti-democracy, anti-Western, and anti-Christian dispositions.

However, as early as 2012, the attacks became more indiscriminate. Boko Haram increasingly began attacking the country's Muslim population. For example, on January 20, 2012, it carried out a horrific attack on a mosque in the largest city in northern Nigeria, Kano, leaving approximately 185 worshippers dead.[37] In addition to leading this campaign of terror, Shekau excommunicated Boko Haram members and denounced them as apostates, leading to the first internal split and the emergence of Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (the Group of Defenders of Muslims in the Lands of the Blacks), generally referred to as Ansaru, in 2012. Ansaru is Hausa-dominated and based in northwest Nigeria, unlike the core Boko Haram, whose stronghold is in the northeast and whose leadership is heavily Kanuri.[38] Ansaru sought to differentiate itself from Boko Haram by aligning with transnational regional jihadist groups and focusing on foreign targets.[39]

Scholarship generally suggests that for either an insurgent group or a counterinsurgent force to be successful, it needs the support of the population—hence, winning hearts and minds is paramount.[40] Conversely, when a group turns against the local population, this might indicate the group's success depends less on local support and more on external factors. Interestingly, Boko Haram defies this logic. Under Shekau, it did not enjoy the same popular support that it did during the pre-insurgency years under Yusuf. The northeastern populace, largely Muslims, became double victims of Boko Haram's constant terrorist attacks and the Nigerian military's collective punishment. Both Boko Haram and the military perceived the people as accomplices to the other camp.

Neither side tried to "energize and mobilize [popular] support and deny energy and mobility to the enemy's support base."[41] It is, however, difficult to accept the argument by some "New Terrorism" or "Fourth Wave" theorists[42] that ideological terror groups such as Boko Haram are irrational and are capable of using violence only for their own sake rather than as a means to an end. Daniel Byman provides a succinct characterization of Salafi-jihadist groups such as Boko Haram: The "highly ideological nature" of their movement "makes it prone to division."[43] Byman argues further that "despite the common critique that Salafi-jihadist agenda is entirely destructive, in reality many groups care tremendously about ruling."[44] For all their peculiarities, Salafi-jihadist groups such as Boko Haram would require certain conditions, just as non-Islamic insurgencies would, to win. These conditions include a weak state (characterized by feeble or overreactive counterterrorism) and a territorial haven.[45]

As the source I interviewed who engaged in initial discussions with Boko Haram between 2010 and 2012 alluded to, the Nigerian state's response to the group did not account for these nuances. Instead, the state excessively militarized its response from the start. This "war on terror" approach contributed to an escalation of the conflict, even as it has also been necessary to some extent.[46] For example, Boko Haram raided the highly fortified Giwa Barracks in Maiduguri, which were holding suspected Boko Haram prisoners who had mostly been swept up in mass arrests without due process. On March 14, 2014, the Nigerian military carried out a reprisal attack by gunning down 600 unarmed prisoners whom the raiders had freed.[47] The military had conducted a similarly indiscriminate attack on the residents of Bama town following Boko Haram's May 7, 2013, coordinated attacks there, killing an estimated 2,000 civilians in reprisals.[48]

Boko Haram 2.0: Evolution since 2015

BOKO HARAM ENTERED A NEW PHASE ON MARCH 7, 2015, WHEN ABUBAKAR Shekau swore an oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the then-caliph of the Islamic State, thus officially transforming Boko Haram into ISWAP. Shekau was the emir of ISWAP until August 2016, when al-Baghdadi rec-

ognized Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the son of the late Mohammed Yusuf, as its new leader after rival factions of the Nigerian group failed to reach an agreement on their leadership. This resulted in the bifurcation of the movement into JAS (the "original" group that Shekau continued to lead but that the Islamic State no longer recognized) and ISWAP (which the Islamic State recognized and which eventually became the stronger of the two factions). Since 2016, both the leadership and configuration of JAS and ISWAP have changed multiple times.[49]

The 2015 pledge marked the first time the group formally aligned itself with a transnational terrorist organization. Shekau swore his allegiance to the Islamic State when Boko Haram was in a weakened position owing to the increasing intensity of attacks from the increasingly better coordinated Multinational Joint Task Force, the South African mercenary group known as Specialized Tasks, Training, Equipment and Protection (STTEP, which had been hired by the Nigerian government),[50] and local vigilante groups in northeastern Nigeria known as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF). The benefits of the new relationship between the Islamic State and Boko Haram were not unidirectional. The Islamic State also stood to gain immensely from an already established jihadist organization operating in a country with one of the largest Muslim populations in the world. Indeed, it had started courting Boko Haram around 2014.[51]

Unsurprisingly, however, the partnership between Shekau and the Islamic State was short-lived. Shekau's pledge was strategic, but he did not intend to submit full control of his organization to the Islamic State. He revived the parent body, JAS, after ISWAP deposed him as emir. However, the ISWAP faction became even stronger than JAS and benefited from its continued and substantial ties to the Islamic State, which helped refine its combat capabilities and governance strategy. ISWAP started to have success when it shifted to renewing strategic attacks on military targets and limiting attacks on civilian targets, unlike JAS. This ushered in a new phase of the Boko Haram conflict.

Boko Haram 2.0 is defined largely by a strong rivalry and intra-group competition between ISWAP and JAS. JAS itself has decentralized and is now divided into three main groups in the northeast:

> 1. The Ibrahim Bakura Doro (known as Bakura), which is
>   the main JAS group, presently operating on the islands of
>   Lake Chad along the borders of Chad and Niger

2. Aliyu Ngulde's group, operating in the Mandara Mountains and Gwoza Hills along the Nigeria-Cameroon border

3. The Dar al Gazuwa group (Bula Dalo or Bula Daloye), operating around Bama vicinity and under the command of Alhai Kale[52]

Analysts suspect another JAS faction, under the leadership of figures such as Umar Taraba and Sadiku (Sadiku Faction), is operating in northwest and north central Nigeria.[53] This fragmentation of JAS implies "weakness, decline and a loss of control."[54]

Shekau's death at the hands of ISWAP in 2021 has not united the JAS and ISWAP factions, which puts a question mark on the centrality of ideology in the insurgency at this stage. The death of Shekau reveals a profound problem facing Boko Haram in its ostensible political objectives: Material interests, identity politics (ethnicity), and personal loyalty to specific commanders seem to be more important than the general cause. Vincent Foucher and Maman Inoua rightly posit that JAS resists ISWAP's bureaucratic governance, rather preferring "sectarianism, predation and clientelism."[55] The same issues that caused Ansaru's split in 2012—namely, Shekau's targeting of Muslim civilians and use of takfir (or, after 2021, that of his successors)—remain drivers of the JAS and ISWAP rivalry today.

Previously there was little to no violent competition between Boko Haram and Ansaru—if anything, there was cooperation and/or the prospect of collaboration between the two factions.[56] However, the rivalry between JAS and ISWAP today is bloody. As Vincent Foucher aptly observed, "Ansaru's split did not stop the ascent of JASDJ."[57] In contrast, the split between JAS and ISWAP has transformed into open confrontation and a battle for control of territory and members. Both groups have scored significant victories (including defections to the opposite camp), although ISWAP has enjoyed the better outcome so far. While ISWAP gained a significant number of defectors from JAS between 2015 and 2021, the Bakura faction seized a number of ISWAP camps in 2023 and 2024. The two groups have published propaganda videos of their victories against each other since 2021.[58]

The Nigerian military, and to some extent the civilian population of the northeast, has gained from the internecine warfare between the Boko Haram factions, while the jihadist campaign of expansion has suffered. The Nigerian military is involved in psychological operations (psy-ops) that include drop-

ping leaflets in insurgent-controlled areas of the northeast to encourage intelligence gathering from the civilian populace (a demonstration of the improving civil-military relations) and encourage insurgents to surrender and enroll in the amnesty program.[59] The military is also deploying the media strategically to project victory and offer demoralized JAS and ISWAP members a better alternative through the amnesty and reintegration programs if they surrender.

The benefit of the inter-factional warfare and more successful counterinsurgency campaign is most visible in the lower number of civilian casualties since 2015 compared to the preceding peak insurgency period.[60] It is important to note that open-source conflict datasets struggle to capture the full quantity of civilian casualties, but even so, the relative decrease apparent in such datasets points to a reduction in the intensity of the conflict. Furthermore, it is undeniable that thousands of JAS and ISWAP members and their families have surrendered to the Nigerian government and benefited from official amnesty programs through Operation Safe Corridor[61] as well as the Borno-state-led Borno Model, which claims to have welcomed over 160,000 former insurgents and their family members who voluntarily surrendered.[62] The Borno Model's unique approach involves transitional justice (including deradicalization, rehabilitation, reintegration, and resettlement) for former Boko Haram combatants, some of whom then deploy as part of a hybrid force to fight their former insurgent colleagues. Yet, despite this progress, JAS and ISWAP continue to show the capacity to attack both the military and the public.

A Continued Threat

JAS AND ISWAP "STILL HOLD SIGNIFICANT TERRITORY, EXERT INFLUENCE, AND maintain fighters in their ranks."[63] Matthew Kukah, the influential Catholic bishop in northern Nigeria, rightly observes that it is accurate to view Boko Haram more as an "idea than a human being to be attacked."[64] Yet after more than two decades, the Nigerian government has not yet properly conceptualized the problem.

I suggest two concepts that are useful for understanding Boko Haram. First, the group can be defined as "an extremist group that is part of the historical trend of Islamic reforms in northern Nigeria which has instrumentalized the Islamic religion in its pursuit for power and control over the interpretation of

the Islamic religious texts and practices." Second, Boko Haram is "an extremist organization that has been radicalized by the violent nature of the Nigerian state and challenging its legitimacy which includes its (in)ability and/or (un)willingness to provide for the welfare of its citizens and improve their standard of living as well as manage the competing interests of the diverse groups."[65]

Regarding the first concept, Boko Haram fits the tradition of Islamic resistance groups of the region, beginning with the nineteenth-century jihad of Uthman Fodio and also visible in the rise of the Tijaniyya against the established Qadriyya Sufi order between 1805 and 1960.[66] Similarly, in the late twentieth century, several movements emerged in northern Nigeria as challenges against the existing religious hierarchies of the region:

- Izala, the main Salafist organization in Nigeria established in 1978 to fight the perceived *Bid'ah* (innovation) and *Shirk* ("association," ascribing to someone a partnership or rivalry with Allah) that the Sufi orders practiced

- The Yan Tatsine movement, a militant Quranist movement formed by Muhammad Marwa, aka Maitatsine, in the 1970s that led to several destructive riots in the early 1980s

- The Islamic Movement of Nigeria, a Shi'ite organization that the Iranian Revolution inspired, led by Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky

While each of these movements shared a desire to establish a more "pure" Sharia state in northern Nigeria, they differed significantly in the practical means and ends of this vision. These include their preferred methods of achieving such a state, their level of tolerance for non-Muslims in any Islamic society, and the possibility of existing alongside the secular state for the time being.[67] These different movements underscore the heterogeneity of Islamic religious interpretations and practices in northern Nigeria.

The Boko Haram conflict is primarily an intra-Muslim conflict in which different groups battle for hegemony. Hence, throughout its stages of evolution, Boko Haram has shown a deep-seated internal friction regarding its ideology, tactics, and strategy, which has caused splintering and fragmentation. The splintering of a terrorist organization has a significant impact on its durability. It can lead to either more violence or the end of the insurgency. Accord-

ing to Evan Perkoski, this depends on whether the disagreement at the heart of the fracture relates to strategy, which will most likely "create splinters that radicalize, attack rivals and undermine peace," or to ideology and leadership, which "are less likely to produce new organizations that ramp up violence and escalate their operational profiles."[68] Boko Haram shows elements of both. For example, Shekau's indiscriminate use of takfir and JAS's attacks on Muslim civilian populations caused the split between JAS and ISWAP. However, there have been multiple leadership tussles in each of these camps as well.

In terms of the balance of power between factions, ISWAP has shown its capability to deploy violence and may have outperformed JAS in terms of sophisticated attacks, especially between 2021 and 2023 after the death of Shekau. JAS, however, continues to surpass ISWAP in its violence against civilians.[69] It appears that many more JAS members have surrendered to the Nigerian military rather than defecting to ISWAP.[70] The rivalry is now a game of numbers, including of territories controlled and fighters in each camp, which some scholars find are indeed crucial factors in the durability of insurgencies following a split.[71] As Vincent Foucher's research show, JAS and ISWAP maintain considerable strength in this regard.[72]

Yet numbers alone do not determine a group's survival; strategy also shapes it.[73] Here, ISWAP has the advantage over JAS in its greater use of nonviolent strategies of control, such as governance and administration (in addition to its military campaign). JAS is also refining its methods of governance, however—the Bakura faction is implementing taxes in the areas it controls,[74] and there are reports that the Sadiku-led faction in northwest Nigeria is enforcing compliance and raising revenue through taxes on local populations.[75]

Regarding the second concept I propose, the influence of the Nigerian state's violent nature is pervasive throughout the different phases of Boko Haram's evolution. For instance, in 2009, the security forces' destruction of Boko Haram's mosque and center, arrests of family members (including wives and children) of Boko Haram members, and extrajudicial killing of Mohammed Yusuf transformed Boko Haram from a social movement into an insurgent group. In the peak insurgency period of 2010–2015, other government actions helped to mobilize a degree of popular support for the group, albeit support that Boko Haram typically failed to capitalize on. Among these were gross violations of the human rights of citizens of the northeast (often in the form of collective punishment), marked by the imposition of a federal state of emergency in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States in 2013. By 2012, Boko Haram had turned against the people and degenerated into a full-blown terrorist

organization that attacked public places including churches, mosques, marketplaces, schools, and other public infrastructure. Even though the group has been in decline since 2016, it has managed to stay relevant and active, due in part to the Nigerian state's continuously militarized response.

Beyond my conceptualization of Boko Haram as an Islamic resistance movement radicalized by the violence of the Nigerian state, other factors perpetuate today's conflict, as contributions from our forthcoming volume illustrate. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos concludes that "Islam will continue to be manipulated to legitimize revolts that can turn out to be quite violent. Ultimately, the fundamental problem indeed lies in governance and the redistribution of wealth in one of the poorest regions in the world."[76] James Barnett and Murtala Rufa'i provide a detailed analysis of how Boko Haram and its factions attempt to exploit inter-communal conflict in northwestern Nigeria through connections with other armed networks, such as bandit gangs, as they seek to expand their influence beyond their longtime base in northeast Nigeria.[77] This scathing assessment by Alessio Lochi likewise succinctly captures the criminal or material dimension of the conflict: "ISWAP shakes hands with local power-brokers and ensures the continuity of supply chains in exchange for certain benefits; in the public space, though, ISWAP condemns the same establishment accused of perpetuating an obscurantist and fundamentally wrong form of Islam."[78] For Usman Tar and Sasilkar Banu suggest the adverse impact of climate change on the Lake Chad Basin, an important source of economic survival for the surrounding population, may be paradoxically fueling the intensification of conflict in the region.[79]

How Should We Respond to the Threat?

TO ACHIEVE DURABLE PEACE, THE NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT MUST ADDRESS the conditions behind the insurgency, including the absence of state and rural governance. Boko Haram and its factions thrive in these conditions. This is becoming clearer now as ISWAP and even JAS (to a lesser extent) entrench themselves in the administration and governance of neglected rural areas—for example, as Barnett and Rufa'i show in their forthcoming chapter, a faction of JAS has had some success imposing order on banditry-afflicted communities

in the northwest and consequently gaining economically from taxing those same communities. In many parts of the northeast, jihadists are establishing themselves as the de facto government by performing administrative duties even as they are equally capable of violence, challenging the government's claim to the monopoly of force.

Importantly, the Nigerian military has improved in its counterinsurgency efforts, as there is now better coordination and cooperation among the different branches of the military than in the peak insurgency period.[80] In combination with amnesty programs such as Operation Safe Corridor and the Borno Model, the improved military response has produced important results visible in the number of insurgents that forces have captured and in those that have voluntarily surrendered. However, in the absence of tangible development investment in the Boko Haram–ravaged communities and effective victim support programs, the gains from the amnesty programs will be futile. Authorities return former "rehabilitated" insurgents to communities that are often justifiably hostile to them, considering the government's actions imply neglect of victims' needs while rewarding insurgents.[81] However, it is necessary to acknowledge Nigeria's effort to achieve a political solution, which is a significant shift from its otherwise militarized response. The Borno Model is particularly worthy of mention because of the local transitional justice component, *Sulhu*, that it embodies. The populace of the northeast seems to be warming up to Sulhu, "a religious norm of mediation and reconciliation rooted in the socio-cultural precepts of northern Nigeria."[82] Nevertheless, as cases of recidivism rise with reports of some rehabilitated ex-insurgents returning to the terror groups,[83] the government will need to prioritize socioeconomic development programs for victims of Boko Haram—including eventually in the hinterlands of northeastern Nigeria, where government presence has long been conspicuously absent.

The history of rebellion and insurgency in northern Nigeria shows that Boko Haram, like others before it, will likely disintegrate and end through internal frictions and contests rather than by government force. Therefore, a militarized response to Boko Haram will not end it. The government can hasten Boko Haram's demise by denying it popular support, particularly by improving the environmental and material conditions of the people while also ensuring security, an effort that will entail a military role for the foreseeable future.

The government holds the advantage so long as JAS and ISWAP continue to disintegrate and fragment, even as JAS's internal cohesion remains questionable. It is therefore likely that more insurgents will defect and/or surrender to the Nigerian government and military. The government's amnesty programs

have been relatively successful, such that it has begun replicating them in the northwest to demobilize the bandits.[84] Demobilization alone will not necessarily produce durable peace in the absence of efforts to address the grievances and incentives that give rise to insurgency. The Borno Model is worth observing as it potentially offers a more comprehensive response that integrates humanitarian, restorative, and development components. By and large, Nigeria is in a better position to significantly degrade the Boko Haram insurgency as infighting and the battle for territorial control and resources undermine JAS and ISWAP's religious credibility and brand. Any effective response would require a law-and-order approach, which will involve better training and equipping the Nigerian police, and will combine it with the provision of governance. Over time after the insurgency has degraded, the police (not the military) would need to secure the urban areas as well as the hinterlands.

The Boko Haram conflict entered a new phase in 2015 ("Boko Haram 2.0") when Abubakar Shekau swore an oath of allegiance to the Islamic State. However, the contradictions that led to the movement's early internal crisis and split in 2012 have continued into this phase and, in fact, have become much more pronounced. Boko Haram is a splintered movement that, since 2016, has been characterized by open confrontation among factions. The battle for supremacy between JAS and ISWAP has produced grave consequences for the jihadist group that include, among other things, further damage to its credibility and the loss of members due to either capture or willing surrender to the Nigerian military. Sadly, JAS and ISWAP continue to present threats and demonstrate the capacity to conduct significant attacks. The durability of these groups reflects not only jihadist military prowess but also their strategic efforts at governance in areas with a palpable state absence. The Nigerian government will have to improve governance and become visible if it aims to win over jihadists in the battle for the hearts and minds of the people.

ENDNOTES

1   In this paper, I use the name Boko Haram to describe the original insurgent group, Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li'l-Da'wa wa'l-Jihad (JAS, the group's official name), and its factions, particularly ISWAP. However, where necessary, I draw distinctions between factions by referring to them as Boko Haram (JAS) and ISWAP.

2   This paper is part of a larger project, an edited book volume by the same author titled *Rethinking Boko Haram: The Evolution of a Jihadist Group since 2015,* to be pub-

lished by Indiana University Press. Editors' note: One of the editors of this journal contributed a coauthored article for that volume.

3   John Campbell and Asch Harwood, "Boko Haram's Deadly Impact," Council on Foreign Relations, August 20, 2018, https://www.cfr.org/article/boko-harams-deadly-impact.

4   Campbell and Harwood, "Boko Haram's Deadly Impact."

5   Michael Nwankpa, "Conceptualizing Boko Haram," in *Rethinking Boko Haram: The Evolution of a Jihadist Group since 2015,* ed. Michael Nwankpa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming).

6   ISWAP is now the biggest Boko Haram faction and has become more powerful than the parent body, JAS, which has fragmented into several cells and factions.

7   The 2015 Global Terrorism Index published by the Institute for Economics and Peace ranked Boko Haram the world's deadliest terrorist organization in 2014, responsible for 6,644 deaths. ISIS came next with 6,073 deaths.

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15 Referring to the controversial practice of declaring another Muslim an apostate.

16 For more on this period, see Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa, eds., *The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

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Hillbillies or Riders of the Apocalypse? The Strange Case of the Islamic State in Somalia

Stig Jarle Hansen

THE ISLAMIC STATE IN SOMALIA HAS RECEIVED MUCH ATTENTION in the global media over the last few years. U.S. intelligence analysts reportedly believe that the leader of the Islamic State's Somalia outfit, Abdulqadir Mumin, has become the new overall leader of the Islamic State.[1] In Sweden, police arrested the so-called Tyresø gang, consisting of four individuals, in May 2024 for planning terror attacks and having ties to the Islamic State in Somalia.[2] Prior to that, in 2018, police arrested former Islamic State member Omar Mohsin Ibrahim in Bari, Italy, allegedly for planning a terror attack against St. Peter's Basilica.[3]

The Islamic State in Somalia also has regional significance. Its decision to reorganize its global chain of command in 2018–2019 resulted in the establishment of the so-called al-Karrar office in Somalia. The Karrar office has a regional responsibility to distribute funds to other Islamic State provinces in East and Central Africa. The office has become a financial hub for money transfers to several other provinces, allegedly including the Khurasan Prov-

ince in Afghanistan, which is one of the deadliest and most internationally oriented of the Islamic State's branches. In 2023, the *Washington Post* printed an article suggesting that the Islamic State in Mozambique sent battlefield reports to Somalia and that funds from (or transferred through) Somalia saved the Islamic State's Central Africa Province in 2019.[4] The many foreign fighters in the Islamic State in Somalia, as well as its alleged contacts with the Shia-majority Houthi armed group in Yemen, have also made headlines.[5]

Yet, within Somalia, the Islamic State has never held significant territories beyond small hamlets around the Cal Miskaat mountains in a remote area of Somalia's Puntland state, where it relies on support from one local clan. The Islamic State in Somalia is thus both "global" and "local," both foreign fighter-based and clan-based.[6] To follow Adib Bencherif, global-local interaction takes place as a "dialectical process and as a sequence of events and actions occurring in intertwined layers."[7] This article studies how local factors such as geography and local trade patterns made the Islamic state more global, and how, in turn, global impulses drove the small group that became the Islamic State to split from Somalia's al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Shabaab. Meanwhile, local clan protection has enabled the Islamic State to survive in Puntland. This article also introduces a third level, a regional level, by illustrating how regional refugee patterns have generated foreign fighters. The Islamic State in Somalia has thus had a global impact even as it reassembles, in some ways, a group of Somali "hillbillies." This contradiction might be less drastic than observers often believe if we understand that local factors can enable forms of global agency.

Origins: Global Ideas, Local Clans

SOMALIA'S ISLAMIC STATE IS A PRODUCT OF GLOBAL IDEAS FERTILIZED BY A local context. The original Islamic State expanded rapidly by taking territories in the Levant and broke with al-Qaeda in 2014, creating a new global jihadist outfit.[8] Its rapid expansion and its belief in eschatology and militarism made it a successful rival to al-Qaeda, projecting an image of success that al-Qaeda lacked at the time. Meanwhile, the Islamic State and its affiliates actively wooed the longstanding Somalia-based insurgency and al-Qaeda affiliate Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen ("the movement of youth jihadists," better known as al-Shabaab). For example, they waged an outright media campaign

against al-Shabaab aimed at getting them to switch sides.[9] Al-Shabaab's problems in 2011–2014 may have made joining the Islamic State more appealing at the time. Al-Shabaab had gone through several years of setbacks, losing territories since 2011, suffering an internal purge in 2013, and facing the loss of its leader in 2014.[10] Moreover, and often overlooked, the group had not been clear in its condemnation of the Islamic State prior to 2015. This ambiguity may have indicated either that its leadership had secretly considered joining the Islamic State or that it knew Islamic State sympathizers were within its ranks and wished to maintain unity by neglecting the matter for as long as possible.[11]

However, al-Shabaab's internal security units quickly killed the various mid-level leaders who eventually declared their loyalty to the Islamic State (none of the top al-Shabaab leaders defected). The Islamic State's attempt to take over al-Shabaab and/or establish a viable alternative to the latter thus failed. Some Islamic State loyalists might have survived in Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, and conducted sporadic extortion in the city, but even this was limited.[12] It was rather in Puntland, a northeastern province of Somalia, far away from the central territories of the al-Shabaab, that the Islamic State established a more permanent presence. This minimized the threat from al-Shabaab, which had a much weaker presence in the area in which the Islamic State grew than in central and southern Somalia. It is not a coincidence that the Islamic State indeed decided to establish its al-Karrar office here: The part of Puntland where the Islamic State established its province, in the remote Cal Miskaat mountains, offered survival to the new group. It offered security against both Puntland's security forces and al-Shabaab, while its proximity to the strategic coastline along the Gulf of Aden provided ample income-generating possibilities and logistical advantages for an organization loyal to a Middle Eastern insurgency.

The Puntland State of Somalia is an autonomous federal state that enjoys considerable self-rule and shuns the influence of the central authorities in Mogadishu, but it has not declared full independence from the country (unlike Somaliland, located to Puntland's west). Puntland was formed in 1998, but its roots go back to 1993.[13] Over the years, there have been several clan-based state-like entities in the area that today constitutes Puntland. The most famous was the Majeerteen sultanate, the political entity closest to functioning as an independent local state in nineteenth-century Somalia. The northeastern part of the country has also historically had strong maritime ties to Yemen, Oman, and the wider Middle East. Mercenaries from Yemen played a con-

siderable role in the history of the Majeerteen sultanate, and political leaders from northeastern Somalia at times fled across the Gulf of Aden to Yemen.[14] The region is today a hub of human smuggling, where refugees seek to migrate to the Middle East (and, when the civil war in Yemen grows intense, also refugees going in the opposite direction), alongside maritime trade between Somalia and Yemen and the wider Middle East. Puntland's rugged terrain also makes it ideal for piracy, illegal smuggling, and insurgency.

Puntland is not a militarily weak actor. While its security forces, the Darawisha, are not large in number or capabilities, its strength lies in its popular support among specific subclans of the Majeerteen (itself a clan of the larger Darod clan family), particularly the Omar Mahmoud, Osman Mahmoud, and Issa Mahmoud subclans (although there is considerable rivalry between these groups when they do not face an external threat).[15] Other clans in the area include the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli clans (separate from the Majerteen but related to them by membership in the Harti subgroup of the Darod), which have at times affiliated themselves with Puntland. Voices within these clans have also argued for their own independence and even, in the past, for a union with Somaliland.[16] There are smaller clans with less influence on Puntland politics, such as the Ali Suleiman subclan of the Majerteen, which is marginalized in the province, though its members play a major role in maritime commerce as well as piracy and illicit trade.[17] These clan dynamics and the geography of Bari province in Puntland were important factors that first drew the Islamic State to the region in an effort to protect itself and explain why the Islamic State has survived in the north of Somalia and not in the south.

The Islamic State group emerged from the northern part of Somalia's al-Shabaab. While in southern Somalia, al-Shabaab initially expanded slowly but steadily out of a small group based in Mogadishu, in the north it had entirely different origins: the Warsangeli clan, more specifically its Dubya subclan. It resulted from animosities toward Puntland's oil exploration in the mountains of northern Sanaag, located slightly west of the present-day core areas of the Islamic State. Arms smuggler and businessman Said "Atom," who has deep ties to smugglers in Sanaag, established the group as a small militia in 2010.[18] Over time, Atom developed extensive ties with al-Shabaab, partly due to his arms smuggling.[19] He was a pragmatist whom al-Shabaab had to convince to remain loyal at times. Al-Shabaab even sent two emissaries from Mogadishu, Yasin Kilwe and Mohamud Mohamed Nur Faruur, to Puntland to ensure Atom's loyalty.[20] Indeed, it might have at first similarly dispatched Sheikh Abdulqader Mumin, the founder of the Islamic State in Somalia, to join the northern

group as an emissary like Kilwe.[21] Upon his return to Somalia in 2012 after several decades as a refugee in Sweden and the United Kingdom (where he came under surveillance for his incendiary preaching and ties to homegrown British jihadists), Mumin gave a fiery introductory speech that al-Shabaab media networks broadcasted, illustrating his role in the group at the time and specifically as an ideologue conveying ideological messages to the organization and its sympathizers.[22]

The arrival of Mumin might have helped al-Shabaab to expand eastward within Puntland into other clan areas, including the Dhadaar area that Mumin's own clan, the Ali Suleiman subclan of the Majeerteen, inhabited. The group also developed ties with the business community in Puntland's major port city of Bosaso, including the prominent businessman and smuggler Isma'il Hassan "Kutuboweyne," also from Mumin's clan. Another top northern al-Shabaab official from Mumin's clan was Muhamed Ismael "kini kini." In 2012–2013, the organization established a 50-to-80-man outfit operating in the Ali Suleiman–inhabited parts of Bari. Their leader was Abdirahkim Dhuqub, Mumin's cousin, who brought with him other notable al-Shabaab leaders from the Ali Suleiman, such as Abdikarim Ahmed Ibrahim.[23]

This small Ali Suleiman component of al-Shabaab enjoyed many advantages in Bari. First, the terrain was well suited to guerrilla warfare. Mountain ranges and limited road access made it harder for Puntland to conduct counterinsurgency campaigns. Second, the members of this unit were probably protected by members of their clan, the Ali Suleiman. The clan had long opposed the Puntland authorities, who had often excluded them from the top positions in government.[24] Somali clans tend to protect their own members when they are threatened as individuals. This does not mean that Ali Suleiman protected or protects al-Shabaab or the Islamic State. However, it has often protected individual clan members in these organizations who may have been fleeing or trying to hide from the government (in Somalia, a jihadist on the run will often turn into a clannist, fleeing first to his clan for protection). In some cases, clan militias will fight to defend such clan members. This does not mean a clan will protect jihadists at all costs, however. The clan will yield if there is a threat to the security of the clan as a whole or if the military odds against the clan are too large. Moreover, some individual clan members might betray other clan members if they benefit enough from doing so. The importance of clan ties does, however, mean that an individual jihadist from a local clan will have some protection and warning from his clan members and have interlocutors in the security forces through fellow clan members serving in these institu-

tions. This is especially true if the clan as a whole is skeptical of the security institutions, as the Ali Suleiman clan has been. It meant that Puntland security forces could face costly resistance when intervening in Bari (most clans in Somalia possess arms), especially if they had failed to negotiate with local clans to get a "permit" for offensives. Finally, the small Bari offshoot was far from the Puntland authorities' main offensives against the rest of al-Shabaab's northern group, which was predominantly in Sanaag. By 2013, it seemed that Mumin often based himself in the Bari region, among his own clan.[25]

The northern al-Shabaab encountered serious problems between 2012 and 2015, as they were under pressure from Puntland's military offensives and from tensions within the group in the Sanaag mountains. Their old leader, the not-so-ideologically-conformist Said Atom, in the end defected from the organization. It was in this context that Mumin publicly declared his loyalty to the Islamic State in June 2015.[26] The most prominent Ali Suleiman leaders in al-Shabaab, Mahad Moalim and his cousin Abdihakim Dhuqub Ali, also joined the new group in the following months.[27] Indeed, all the leaders of the largely clan-based al-Shabaab group in Bari joined the Islamic State in 2015, when the splinter faction first emerged. At the time, the new group might have enjoyed logistics support from legendary Ali Suleiman pirates, including Isse "Yulhowe" and Mohammed Mussa Saeed "Aargoosto."[28] (Some sources also stipulate that the former paid a percentage of his ransom to al-Shabaab even as he smuggled supplies to the Islamic State, but this writer finds this unlikely; Yulhowe was simply too strong at the time.[29])

Much as it had been for the small unit of then-al-Shabaab fighters, the Bari province was filled with opportunities for the new Islamic State group. The area is both remote and hard to reach for Puntland forces yet also globally connected through its extensive smuggling routes. Bosaso, the largest city in the region, has strong historical trade ties to Yemen, Oman, and the wider Middle East. Militarily, the new Islamic State–affiliated group in Bari faced the weakest part of al-Shabaab, the weak and disunited northern group based predominantly in neighboring Sanaag. The Bari group simply had better chances of survival than any nascent Islamic State movement in southern Somalia. In the end, several Islamic State sympathizers among al-Shabaab based in the south had to flee to this relatively safe location in Bari, to the protection of their fellow jihadists, who in turn enjoyed local clan protectors.[30] The state of affairs became even more advantageous for the Islamic State group when the Bari governor of Puntland, Abdisamed Gallan, a member of Mumin's clan, went into open rebellion against Puntland in 2016. The

rebellion was to the Islamic State's advantage because it distracted Puntland security forces and increased clan loyalty among the Ali Suleiman, who now saw their clan, inclusive of the Islamic State leaders, as under threat from Puntland.[31]

Al-Shabaab tried to kill off the Bari group early on, as they did (more successfully) to other Islamic State cells in the south.[32] It tried to reinforce its northern component by landing its Khalid bin Walid brigade on a beach in south Puntland in 2016.[33] But this unit failed to even reach the battlefield; the Puntland militia (Darawisha) defeated it en route, illustrating the advantages of the Islamic State's distance from the core areas of al-Shabaab. The Puntland Darawisha and the clan militias loyal to it were also strong, yet this coalition faced problems in areas where they lacked the loyalty of the local clans, as in the Ali Suleiman areas of Bari. Puntland's security forces, in many ways, thus acted as a "protection belt" for the Islamic State, hindering al-Shabaab from projecting its power northward but still unable to vanquish the Islamic State itself due to terrain and clan-related issues.

The remote nature of coastal Bari areas also enabled the small group to take control of smaller hamlets, the most well-known being Qandala, a former smuggling and pirate hub on the northern Puntland coast, which they took in 2016. The city had little Puntland security force presence (if any at all) and was an easy target.[34] The international press made much of this early victory by the emergent Islamic State faction and indeed probably overestimated Qandala's importance. Yet, it took time for Puntland to launch its counteroffensive. Puntland had to actively work to create alliances with local Ali Suleiman leaders to avoid clan conflict, and Qandala's remoteness meant it was hard to reach. Some of the more famous Ali Suleiman leaders, such as the infamous pirate Yulhowe, actively fought the Islamic State during this offensive after the Puntland government paid them to do so, a pattern not too unlike classical European privateering during the golden age of piracy. Yulhowe, mimicking the historical pattern of pirates and privateers, followed financial gains and later resorted to aiding the Islamic State, again for his own profit.

All in all, the northern group enjoyed the protection of geography and clan factors. One may say the group was a product of foreign influence (through the ideology of the Islamic State, which gained international attention due to the startling successes in the Levant, and possibly through the Islamic State's specific media campaign targeting al-Shabaab) that nevertheless survived only because of local dynamics. The Islamic State's Somalia branch thus had its roots both in clan politics and in global jihadist ideology.

Creating Stable Income Sources

THOUGH IT WAS SMALL AND NEW, AL-SHABAAB ALREADY HAD A BLUEPRINT FOR income generation, namely its well-tested system of extortion of the Somali business community. The group's geographic position made extortion potentially quite profitable. Bosaso is, as mentioned previously, a key city in both legal and illegal trade between the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. A suicide bombing of the Juba Hotel in Bosaso in 2017 was a major milestone for the new organization, sending a clear message to the city's businessmen to "pay or die."[35] Subsequent assassinations were forceful reminders that helped generate protection money. Abdirahman "Fahiye" Isse Mohamud, whom Puntland authorities also accused of planning the initial 2017 attack, oversaw the racket.[36] Fahiye hailed from the small Dashishle clan that dominates the area around Bosaso. Extortion of the city's business community enabled the group to become relatively profitable given its size. However, it might also have contributed to the development of internal rivalries over money and control of extortion rackets. At one point, a group around Abdirashid Luqmaan (from a local subclan of the Leelkase clan) challenged Mahad Moalim, Abdihakim Dhuqub, and Mohamed Ahmed "Qahiye,"[37] which led to the killing of Moalim.[38] Nevertheless, older leaders such as Fahiye and Mumin held their positions during this internal tussle.[39] In fact, the showdown might have broadened the clan base of the organization by removing some Ali Suleiman leaders, though all the top leaders remained from local clans in central, northern, and northwestern Bari and remain so today.

There were clearly also Islamic State activities in southern and central Somalia in 2017 and 2018. The Islamic State took responsibility for more than 50 assassinations and five improvised explosive device (IED) attacks in Mogadishu and the nearby suburb of Afgoye in this time.[40] Three men went on trial for the attacks, including Jama Hussein Hassan, who the Somali authorities claimed the Islamic State had sent from the north to plan the attacks.[41] Yet, the group's attempts at extortion in Mogadishu appear to have been less successful than those in Bosaso, and its attempts to gain finances from Mogadishu are likely limited today, if not nonexistent.[42]

Nonetheless, the relative wealth the small organization gained from its activities in Puntland might have been one of the factors prompting the Islamic State to eventually give the Somalia branch more of a leadership position within its global network, for the simple reason that the Islamic State in Somalia had the money to reinvest elsewhere.

Going Global from
the Mountains of Bari?

ON JULY 27, 2018, THE ISLAMIC STATE OFFICIALLY DESIGNATED THE SOMALI GROUP a full "province," which it announced in that week's edition of its official *al-Naba* magazine. The following year, in December 2018, Somali national Omar Mohsin Ibrahim was arrested in Bari, Italy, allegedly for planning an attack against St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City as well as for other terror attacks.[43] The steady growth of the Islamic State in Somalia, mostly in terms of finances but also in manpower and international outreach, quickly attracted the attention of the United States, which started to launch air strikes against the organization.[44]

The biggest change for the Islamic State in Somalia came with the global reorganization of the Islamic State in 2018–2019, and with it the establishment of regional offices. All in all, the organization established nine regional offices, basing one, Maktab al-Karrar, in the small Puntland chapter of the group.[45] The reorganization meant a still small and largely clan-based group would hold global responsibilities. The Islamic State made the Somali group responsible for overseeing its activities in the Central African (based in the Democratic Republic of Congo) and Mozambique provinces. Money transfers from the Islamic State might have contributed to the Somalia province's coffers, but the aforementioned extortion money, flowing steadily from Bosaso and other Puntland cities, was probably much more important for the province's longevity.[46] In 2022, the U.S. Treasury claimed that the organization generated nearly $2 million in the first half of the year alone, a relatively good income for such a small group. The Somalia province also lacked the more costly governance structures that al-Shabaab had developed farther south, meaning it was a cheap organization to manage compared to its rivals.[47] The al-Karrar office and Mumin himself thus emerged as key financial players in East Africa and even beyond, handling modest but important financial streams[48] from their base in Buur Dexhtaal in Bari.[49]

The geographic location of the group, as well as its increased importance and media prominence due to the establishment of the al-Karrar office, might have contributed to the Islamic State's ability to recruit foreign fighters. The increasing number of foreign fighters joining the Somali branch contributed to an increase in the group's size from an estimated 350 fighters in 2019 to

600–1,500 fighters in 2024.[50] Drawing on various sources, Caleb Weiss and Lucas Webber find that Moroccans, Ethiopians, Yemenis, Tunisians, Tanzanians, Kenyans, and Sudanese are among the nationalities that have joined the group.[51] Similarly, in 2024, one of the ethnic Swedes in the Tyresø group attempted to join the Islamic State in Puntland, although he was stopped in Turkey.[52] The Islamic State in Somalia actively tried to recruit foreign fighters, especially targeting neighboring Ethiopia.[53] The Puntland authorities claimed that one such Ethiopian, Abu Albara Al Amani, became the head of operations and possibly even the second in command of the organization before his death in 2023.[54] Several foreign fighters have also defected to Puntland, confirming reports of the relatively large inflow of such fighters.[55]

Yet, the flow of foreign fighters was heavily influenced by local factors, such as the role of Bosaso as a trading and smuggling hub. Human smuggling routes enabled easy access for foreign fighters, and connections with Yemen eased recruitment in that country. Bossaso was, and is, the end of human smuggling routes running from the various countries in East Africa and the Horn of Africa into the Middle East. In fact, analysts have recorded the passage of 47,800 individuals through Bosaso on their way to Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula in 2023 alone.[56] Many of them end up in refugee camps in Bosaso, waiting in transit for months if not years. The majority of these refugees are Ethiopian, perhaps explaining the Islamic State's focus on Ethiopia in their propaganda efforts.[57] A local source claimed that while some foreigners joined the group as experienced fighters, others may have joined due to the pressure of their circumstances and vulnerable status as refugees.[58] As the International Crisis Group has stated, the Islamic State may pressure refugees into joining, or they may join because of poverty.[59]

The influx of foreign fighters might be one reason the group was able to finally stop al-Shabaab's periodic attacks against them in the Cal Miskaat mountains after intense fighting in 2022 and 2023. These fighters may have helped the Islamic State develop sufficient manpower to confront al-Shabaab far from the latter's main bases in southern Somalia.[60] Yet despite the growing number of foreign fighters in its ranks, Fahiye and Mumin have led the group for a time (and still do, according to local sources). The group appointed a new head of finance, Abdiweli Mohamed Yusuf "Waran-Walac," in 2019.[61]

The Islamic state in Somalia was, by 2024, a strange hybrid, partly clan-based in its recruitment but also including a large number of foreign fighters. Similarly, while still small compared to al-Shabaab, it had outsized financial strength owing to its successful extortion practices. The Islamic State was still tumbling

around in remote mountains but was also able to build more permanent bases by this time in the remote Jecel Valley (Togjaceel) area of Bari. Yet, for all its apparent growing influence, the group remained vulnerable in many ways.

Not So Great After All?

REPORTS REGARDING THE ISLAMIC STATE IN SOMALIA AND ITS AL-KARRAR OFFICE are often overblown. Regarding foreign plots, the accusations against the Tyresø group for a planned attack on the Israeli embassy in Stockholm failed to hold up in court.[62] In the case of Omar Mohsin Ibrahim's plans to attack the Basilica of St. Peter, it seems Mohsin had already broken off his relationship with Mumin by the time he was in Italy and planned the attack on his own, without the guidance of the Islamic State.[63]

As for the 2024 reports that the U.S. intelligence community now suspects Mumin has become the overall leader of the Islamic State, there is reason for skepticism. According to the Islamic State's own understanding of its movement as a caliphate, any leader of the group must be from a tribe that can trace its lineage to the Quraishi of the Arabian Peninsula (of which the Prophet Muhammad was a member). Because of this and the small size of the Islamic State in Somalia compared to the other Islamic State provinces in Africa, it is doubtful that Mumin is the global leader of the group.[64] Moreover, several factors would explain the large number of foreign fighters in the organization apart from any plans to move its global leadership to Somalia. The geographic position of Puntland as the hub between the Middle East and East Africa and the center of regional refugee streams is sufficient to account for the influx of foreign fighters.[65] Second, because of the income-generating capacities of al-Karrar, in addition to some of the attention the Somali province has received in the Islamic State media ecosystem, this province has likely appeared attractive to foreigners. It is nevertheless important to underline that the province receives much less attention than the other Islamic State provinces in Africa in *al-Naba* magazine, the Islamic State's only remaining official periodical. *Al-Naba* has flagged Africa as a whole as a new and successful "field of jihad," partly to encourage non-Africans to join the African groups, which may have likewise motivated some of the foreign fighters who joined the Somalia province.[66]

Puntland's Campaign in the Valleys (Operation Lightning)

THE OTHER REASON TO MITIGATE SOME OF THE FEARS ABOUT AN ISLAMIC State resurgence in Somalia is that the Puntland authorities launched a relatively successful counteroffensive against the Islamic State that began on December 31, 2024. As is typical of the Puntland Darawisha, they needed to save up ammunition over time to prepare for offensives due to low funds. Moreover, they typically need to gain a form of local clan consensus in the areas where they want to undertake a campaign, a process that takes time. The wait is worth it, as negotiating with local clans prevents additional conflicts from breaking out and usually results in additional clan militias joining the Puntland forces, acting as a force multiplier. The above factors likely explain why the Puntlanders waited so long before launching an offensive against the Islamic State, both when preparing their 2025 offensive and before the offensive against Qandala in 2016.

Puntland forces hold several strategic advantages over the insurgents. The United States has been extensively involved in attacks against the Islamic State in Somalia, including since President Donald Trump took office. This an example of American engagement in a period when the U.S. government's stated position is often to disengage from conflicts around the world.[67] Puntland also has a long-standing strategic relationship with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Emiratis conducted drone strikes against the Islamic State during the 2025 campaign[68] and have also trained the Puntland Darawisha and coast guard, the latter having received regular support and the deployment of Emirati advisers since 2010.[69] However, there is also a cost to having the Emiratis as allies: UAE activities in the region are increasingly alienating the federal president of Somalia, who fears that Puntland might move toward more autonomy or even independence. The UAE's presence in Puntland inevitably creates rumors in Mogadishu, including speculation that the UAE funds the Islamic State. Such conspiracy theories can have an impact on Somali politics. Notably, the main federal security force, the Somali National Army (SNA), did not contribute to Puntland's offensive in 2025. The SNA is currently preoccupied with attempting to contain a heavy offensive by al-Shabaab in central Somalia, though there might also be political reasons for Somalia's lack of support for Puntland: relations between the two governments are fraught.[70] Nevertheless, Puntland Darawisha, with the support of Emirati and U.S. drone

strikes, performed quite well in the 2025 offensive, which it officially launched on January 2.

The main thrust of the Puntland Security Forces offensive focused on the Islamic State's bases in the Cal Miskaat mountains, in the center of Bari. The Darawisha and its allies managed to medevac soldiers through the use of a helicopter while extensively employing drones in its operations.[71] The Islamic State similarly relied on the deployment of armed drones, suicide bombers, suicide-vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIEDs, aka suicide car bombs), and extensive use of caves to store supplies and men as counter-strategies in an effort to disrupt and stall Puntland's campaign.[72]

The Puntland forces pushed through the Jecel Valley (Togjaceel) within the Cal Miskaat range, deploying from the rough road between the northern coast and Iskuban to fully clear this remote area. There were also thrusts in the nearby Miirale valley. The objective of Puntland forces in the Jecel thrust was to destroy the main Islamic State bases in Dhaadaar and Buur Dexhtaal as well as the smaller bases on the route there. The Islamic State responded to this campaign with frequent attacks by drones armed with simple munitions like grenades. A Puntland officer, Jiib Gurey Bootaan, at one point destroyed an enemy drone by grabbing it by hand and smashing it on the ground.[73]
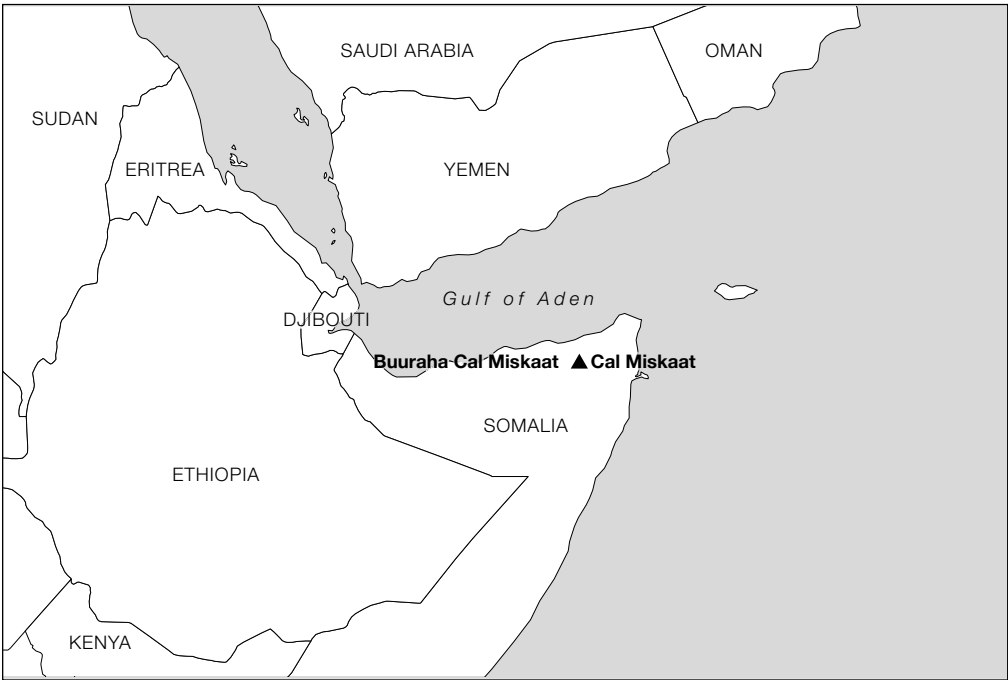

Figure 1. The Cal Miskaat mountain range in Somalia's Puntland state (Source: Author)
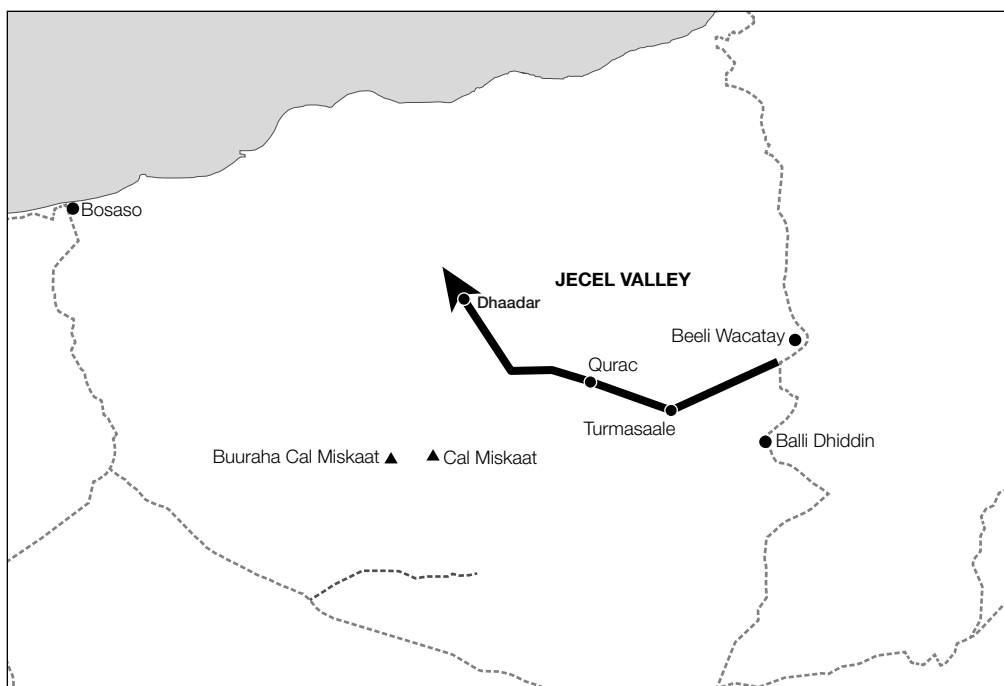
Figure 2. The direction of Puntland security forces' advances through the Cal Miskaat mountain range in early 2025 (Source: Author)

The Islamic State's resistance was selective: In many instances, fighters withdrew without putting up a fight, while in other locations, significant battles occurred. For example, on January 24, Puntland fighters captured Turmasaale after intense combat with the insurgents, perhaps constituting the third-largest battle of the campaign in terms of casualties.[74] The battle of Dharin and Qurac farther up the valley, February 4–5, was the second-largest of the campaign according to figures from the Puntland government, which claimed to have killed 57 Islamic State fighters at the cost of 15 Puntland soldiers.[75] In the last major battle of the campaign, the Islamic State counterattacked on February 8 around Haraaryo, and Puntland authorities successfully repelled the attack and killed 70 Islamic State fighters.[76] By late February, the morale of the Islamic State fighters seemed to break, and Dhasaan and Dhaadaar fell within a few days. Puntland captured Buur Dexhtaal in early March.[77] With that, all the larger (known) bases had fallen, although there was a failed counterattack against Dhasaan on May 3, and U.S. drone strikes likewise continued against Islamic State targets into early May. Sporadic fighting has continued as of this writing in Miirale as well as the Curaar valley, but these skirmishes have so far been limited.

The Islamic State in Somalia Today

THE PUNTLAND OFFENSIVE HAS CULLED THE ISLAMIC STATE IN SOMALIA BUT has not defeated it. Authorities captured many fighters, particularly foreign fighters, after they fled their bases.[78] (The considerable number of captured foreign fighters has had the broader societal effect of creating animosity toward foreigners and refugees among the Puntland population.) Local clan elders mediated a six-day amnesty for Islamic State fighters at the end of the campaign that contributed to the surrender of additional fighters as well.[79]

Puntland authorities claim that 180–200 Islamic State fighters were killed in the recent 2025 campaign. This is a substantial victory. However, it also means 400–1,400 Islamic State fighters remain (although some might have been imprisoned or received amnesty), depending on which estimate of the prewar forces of the group one chooses to believe. The rugged terrain of Puntland will enable some of the remaining fighters to hide from Puntland's drones and ground patrols as well as ongoing air attacks by Emirati forces. Neither Abdulqader Mumin, now over 70 years old, nor his second in command, Abdirahman "Fahiye," nor the reported head of finance, Abdiwali "Waran-Walac" (still in his forties), has been confirmed killed or captured by Puntland authorities. All three are most likely still alive.

Some of the surviving members of the group might still defect to Puntland authorities. Local fighters may return to their clans—meaning that, under some circumstances, they could be activated by the Islamic State again, as Somali clans keep their own arms. It is an open question whether the culling has curtailed the Islamic State's ability to extort money from the northern business community. The Puntland police prevented several bomb attacks in Bosaso during the campaign, which is encouraging. Such police activities are essential to stopping the Islamic State from continuing to generate income from the strategic port city. The struggle for extortion money in Bosaso is perhaps the most neglected battlefield in the fight against the Islamic State and yet perhaps the most important.[80] Extortion money will enable the Islamic State to replenish its losses by recruiting from the large numbers of refugees in the city as well as recruiting poor locals who need jobs all over the Bari province. Whatever happens next, it is worth remembering that the Islamic State has proven more adaptable than many expected: In the course of their campaign, the Puntlanders discovered primitive facilities for producing missiles alongside evidence of a large number of foreign fighters.[81]

The current status of the province illustrates its major paradox. It shoulders large responsibilities for the Islamic State's global mission and is located close to one of the region's maritime hubs and the center of extensive illegal trade networks. Yet, its members are also stragglers dependent on moving and surviving in the harsh mountainous areas of the remote Bari province of northern Somalia. The organization will likely remain a strange mix of foreign jihadists and members of local, marginalized clans. Though it may have some global importance because of its management of financial streams and its geographical location, it will likely lack the number of fighters necessary to act as a major insurgency on the ground. The Islamic State in Somalia is, to a certain extent, a historic anomaly, a group of hillbillies with a form of limited global reach.

ENDNOTES

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30 As, for example, "Abu Hafsa" (Hawiye/Galjaal).

31 32 UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, Report S/2016/919, 144.

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38 Panel of Experts on Somalia, Report S/2019/858; Panel of Experts on Somalia, *Report of the Panel of Experts on Somalia Submitted in Accordance with Resolution 2498 (2019)*, Security Council report S/2020/949 (New York: UN, 2020), 20, https://docs.un.org/en/S/2020/949. Abdihakim Dhuqub was killed by the Americans later in 2019, and Omar Mohsin Ibrahim was also on the losing side. One of the subcommanders, Mohamed Ahmed "Qahiye," fled and joined the Islamic State's central African province, yet Mumin himself carried on as a leader.

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