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Following the "Syria Model"? Assessing the Impact of the HTS Success on the African Jihadist Landscape

Jason Warner

THE SUCCESSFUL DECEMBER 2024 CAPTURE OF SYRIA BY ABU Mohammed Al-Jolani (now Ahmed Al-Sharaa) and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) marked a pivotal moment for jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State around the world. It showed that with enough patience and the right buy-in from civil society, jihadist groups—or at least one-time jihadist groups—can ultimately achieve their goals of taking over states. HTS had, in many senses, won.

Thus, in certain analytical circles, the assumption ran that other jihadist groups around the world might find inspiration in the success of HTS in Syria and seek to emulate its unique playbook, discussed in more detail below. Indeed, in the aftermath of the takeover, there has been no shortage of observers questioning its potential impact on African jihadist groups.[1] One commentator noted that wins by both HTS and the Taliban might "serve as models for other jihadist groups."[2] Perhaps most notably, Wassim Nasr, arguably the best-connected journalist to the panoply of jihadist groups worldwide, started a conversation in the *CTC Sentinel* in December 2024. He suggested that

the HTS model—especially the group's breakaway from al-Qaeda—might be inspiring the Sahel-based Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) and argued that HTS "could be a blueprint for other jihadi groups, including in the Sahel."[3] Another commentator, writing in January 2025, noted that

> HTS's place in the jihadist matrix means that many extremist groups operating throughout the globe, and particularly in Africa, are looking to Syria for lessons to apply to their own theaters of operation. Should HTS embrace restraint, tolerating (or even extending equal citizenship to) religious minorities, this could act as a moderating catalyst for jihadists in regions like the Sahel.[4]

Indeed, as recently as July 2025, observers in the Sahel suggested there were "a series of signs of change" that were "carried by a persistent rumor" and suggested that JNIM has "the initiative to disaffiliate from the parent company Al-Qaeda."[5]

More than six months after the initial HTS takeover, this piece interrogates the reality, asking to what extent various branches and provinces of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Africa have been inspired by (and are reforming their activities to mimic) the HTS model of "success." And to what extent, if any, does this inspiration vary along the lines of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda?

While I initially sought to compare the reactions of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliates, an early discovery bears laying out up front: the Islamic State's African affiliates under investigation, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), did not publicly react to the HTS takeover at all. For two of the major Islamic State groups in Africa, the HTS victory was a non-starter as a path to emulate. There are no indications of any degree of inspiration from the organization across any of the subsequently discussed six dimensions. They did not congratulate the group in word, and none of their deeds have suggested reform efforts to more closely mimic its approaches. Because of the lack of evidence from Islamic State groups, this piece will instead focus on the pseudo-reaction from al-Qaeda groups.

Thus, this piece asks, To what extent have various branches and provinces of al-Qaeda in Africa taken inspiration and reformed their activities to mimic HTS "success" in capturing the Syrian state in December 2024? In the main, it shows that although HTS's successes might be of interest to African jihadist groups, these groups have, to date, shown relatively little deep response to either congratulate HTS *in word* or to newly change their modus operandi to follow its playbook *in deed*. Overall, Africa's al-Qaeda-linked groups—JNIM and

al-Shabaab—have shown mild degrees of inspiration by the HTS takeover largely because HTS's tactics often mirror their own. African Islamic State groups, namely ISWAP and ISGS, have shown no inspiration at all. To explain this somewhat surprising phenomenon, this piece suggests that the four main reasons the HTS model has not generated more enthusiasm among many African jihadist groups are that its model is not *new*, *desirable*, *replicable*, or ultimately *necessary*.

This piece proceeds in three main sections. First, it broadly outlines the six strategies that came to define the HTS playbook. Second, it examines the extent to which al-Qaeda groups in Africa have shown the HTS model inspires them, either in what they have said about HTS or in how they have modeled their behavior after it in the aftermath of its takeover. The third section offers explanations for the somewhat antithetical finding that although they ostensibly espouse similar aims to HTS, no African jihadist groups have shown they are copying its approach.

The Six Components of the HTS Model

BEFORE EXAMINING THE EXTENT TO WHICH AFRICAN JIHADIST GROUPS ARE following the HTS model in the aftermath of its success, it is imperative to delineate just what the HTS model includes. This piece suggests it comprises at least six novel strategies:

1. Disavowing violence against civilians
2. Framing itself as a legitimate alternative authority
3. Pursuing a strategy of localization
4. Considering negotiations with governments
5. Collaborating with a strong regional state
6. Breaking away from transnational jihadist groups

1. Disavowing Violence Against Civilians

HTS actively sought to distance itself from the indiscriminate violence that characterized other extremist groups and the former Bashar al-Assad regime. To be sure, past actions by groups associated with HTS have indeed included human rights abuses (especially Jabhat al-Nusra[6]), and even the actions of HTS did earlier in its existence, as in 2019.[7] However, by 2020, HTS had formed its General Security Service (GSS), one component of which was to protect civilians in the areas it had liberated.[8] And, as Dino Krause notes, following its break from al-Qaeda, HTS became "more flexible in dealing with civilian resistance."[9]

Notably, in the lead-up to and during the December 2024 offensive, HTS reportedly took steps to minimize civilian casualties; initial reports suggested an effort to maintain order in newly captured areas. For example, during the rapid advances in late 2024, reports indicated that HTS attempted to curb misconduct by security forces in areas like al-Bahluliyah following civilian demonstrations against such actions. When protestors burned a Christmas tree in Suqaylabiyah, a Christian-majority town in central Syria, in December 2024—soon after HTS had taken over—an HTS member assured counter-protestors that the rights of Syria's religious minorities would be respected. Reports state that he held up a cross as a form of solidarity and promised Christians that the tree would be repaired by the next morning.[10]

However, recent killings of Syrian minorities—including the massacre of some 1,500 Alawites by Sunni militias allied with the current Syrian government—speak to the fungibility of claims of civilian protection.[11] Nevertheless, despite government actions after the HTS takeover, the point remains that a moderated stance on civilian violence was an important strategy to achieve the takeover.

2. Framing Itself as a Legitimate Alternative Authority

Since its founding in 2017, HTS actively worked to establish itself as a viable governing entity, both in opposition to the al-Assad regime and in contrast to more extreme armed groups in its operational environment. Through the establishment of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) in 2017, HTS sought to provide public services, administer justice, and maintain law and order, portraying itself as a functional alternative to the collapsed Assad state and the nihilistic ideology of ISIS. Dino Krause notes, for instance, that even before 2020,

> [HTS] made further notable concessions to the local population. For example, they allowed Christians to hold church services and women to attend universities and drive cars—seemingly quite basic measures that are, however, remarkable given the group's radical jihadist past. Additionally, HTS has integrated civilians into its governmental administration and adopted a technocratic style of governance, even in sensitive ideological areas such as education and religion, where the group initially sought to exclusively appoint its own personnel.[12]

Echoing this sentiment, when visiting Idlib in April and May 2023, journalist Wassim Nasr noted that the most surprising elements were the absence of military forces and HTS's robust and organized civilian administration, including the running of checkpoints.[13] As Krause noted in December 2024, "Al-Shar'a and HTS have shown that they seek public legitimacy and are willing to respond to the demands of the population."[14]

3. *Pursuing a Strategy of Localization*

HTS consistently pursued a strategy of "Syrianization," shifting its focus from global jihadist aims to a more localized, Syrian-centric struggle.[15] Doing so had a double goal: on one hand, it showed a commitment to the cause of the Syrian revolution, but secondly, it made HTS appear less antagonistic to international actors, taking itself out of their crosshairs to some extent. As Jacob Zenn noted in 2022,

> In recent months, the northwestern Syria-based militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which operates under the leadership of Abu Muhammed al-Julani, has reasserted that its operational and geographical agenda is limited to only a local scope. The group, furthermore, has lived up to these claims by no longer publicly calling for or conducting any attacks outside of Syria. Likewise, HTS has made clear that its main enemies are Bashar al-Assad's government (and his Russian backers) as well as the Islamic State.[16]

Simultaneously, as HTS worked to eschew international entanglements, it also sought to burnish its local credentials by absorbing various local opposition factions into its military and administrative structures.[17] This step broadened its base of support and made it appear as a more unified Syrian force rather than as one directed by or composed of external forces. Indeed, one might consider HTS an analogue of another al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Shabaab, which, despite falling under al-Qaeda's global purview to attack the "far enemy," remained primarily concerned with its local and/or regional areas of operation.

4. Considering Negotiations

Prior to its final push in December 2024, HTS demonstrated a pragmatic willingness to engage in various forms of negotiations, whether with local actors, regional powers, or even, indirectly, with international bodies. This was a significant departure from the rigid "no negotiation" stance that HTS itself held as recently as 2018[18] and that of many other hardline jihadist groups, a trend more common to IS than al-Qaeda. For example, HTS had been part of various de-escalation agreements, even allowing Turkish troops to patrol northwest Syria as part of the Astana negotiations in 2017.[19] More recently, even on the eve of the HTS takeover in December 2024, Al-Sharaa emphasized to Wassim Nasr the importance of dialogue with Syria's various sects: "In Syria, we spoke with all the communities, the Druze, who fought alongside us, the Christians, the Alawites, and the Kurds."[20] Even if purely tactical, such an openness to negotiations and engagements with non-Islamist actors has helped to project an image of a more rational actor capable of compromise, chipping away at its international isolation.

5. Collaborating with a Strong Regional State

One of HTS's more advantageous strategies was to ally with regional power Turkey. While the exact nature of their relationship remains unclear, analysts like Lucas Winter consider that HTS operated under "de facto Turkish protection" in Idlib and, more generally, existed under Turkey's broad if informal security umbrella from roughly late 2017 to the present.[21] Indeed, analysis suggesting that Turkey had a broader role in the HTS takeover advance in November and December 2024 is also rife.[22]

6. *Breaking Away from Transnational Jihadist Groups*

Perhaps one of HTS's most significant long-term strategies was its sustained effort to officially and practically distance itself from its former al-Qaeda affiliation. After originating as Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's official Syrian branch, the group severed ties with al-Qaeda in 2016, rebranding as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and then forming HTS in 2017. By formally distancing itself from the two major jihadist groups, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, HTS was able to portray itself as (more or less) another political actor. And, as Jerome Drevon and Patrick Haenni have assessed,

> The first step in HTS's transformation was to sever its transnationalism. . . . While HTS had not engaged in foreign attacks prior to 2017, when it was still Jabhat al-Nusra, it had an allegiance to two transnational groups, IS [the Islamic State] and then al-Qaeda, making it a target of international scrutiny. Renouncing global jihad was crucial in gaining broader acceptance and reducing external pressure, as many other armed groups were hesitant to unite with HTS due to this transnational connection to al-Qaeda and IS.[23]

While space necessarily limits these discussions, they outline the broad contours of HTS's unique "playbook," which has arguably helped propel the group to success.

Al-Qaeda Affiliates' Reactions to HTS Success

THIS OUTLINE OF THE HTS PLAYBOOK IN SYRIA PROVIDES INSTANCES OF BEHAVIOR, strategies of sorts, that African jihadist groups might support. As mentioned, though this piece originally sought to investigate this question by comparing al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates, we found neither of the Islamic State affiliates—ISWAP or ISGS—showed any inspiration at all. As such, instead,

this piece investigates the responses of the two Al-Qaeda affiliates, JNIM and Al-Shabaab, to HTS's success.

JNIM

At its core, JNIM is the African jihadist group that has, in theory, drawn the most inspiration from the HTS takeover. As an al-Qaeda affiliate, it takes a more pragmatic view of governance than Islamic State counterparts like HTS. But as an umbrella movement of various jihadist group members, ethnicities, nationalities, and even ideologies, JNIM is also necessarily a "big tent" coalition. However, overall, its response is still quite muted, and the extent to which it is drawing inspiration has numerous caveats.

Of note, JNIM does not appear to have explicitly referenced the HTS takeover in any of its propaganda. Indeed, as an al-Qaeda affiliate—which intuitively retains allegiance to al-Qaeda—it would be difficult to publicly vaunt HTS, an al-Qaeda defector. Nevertheless, as shown below, JNIM has indeed been pursuing some HTS-like behavior, yet it was doing so prior to the HTS takeover; thus the group did not necessarily inspire its actions.

Non-civilian Targeting

As an al-Qaeda affiliate, JNIM has historically worked to limit civilian casualties, at least theoretically. Indeed, a significant differentiator between al-Qaeda and Islamic State approaches to violence is the admissibility of civilian targeting; al-Qaeda takes a much more limited view, and the Islamic State takes a much more expansive one. These instructions in former leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's 2013 *General Guidelines for Jihad* rulebook inform al-Qaeda's ethos on limiting civilian targeting:

> - Generally, avoid fighting or targeting those who have not raised arms against us or aided in any such hostile act and maintain focus primarily on the Crusader Alliance and then upon their local surrogates.
>
> - Refrain from killing and fighting against non-combatant women and children, and even if they are families of those who are fighting against us, refrain from targeting them as much as possible.

- Refrain from harming Muslims by explosions, killing, kidnapping, or destroying their wealth or property.

- Refrain from targeting enemies in mosques, markets, and gatherings where they mix with Muslims or with those who do not fight us.[24]

However, in a December 2024 interview with Wassim Nasr, JNIM deputy commander Amadou Koufa underscored the extent to which al-Qaeda intended this to reflect official policy when he claimed that JNIM tries to avoid hitting civilian targets. (In practice, as discussed below, this policy is highly mutable and often goes unfollowed). Nevertheless, for instance, Koufa noted that "the brother of the Ansaroul Islam leader encouraged civilians in Djibo to move away from military sites and leave the city in general for their own safety after the recent attack on May 13."[25] Indeed, as Daniele Garofalo has written,

> JNIM attacks are mainly directed against military infrastructure, convoys of local armies and civilian targets in major Malian and Burkinabé cities, and against MINUSMA and Wagner. The latter has increased the consensus and recruitment of the JNIM in the area due to its excessive violence. Violence against civilians increased after the arrival of the Russian mercenary group. Wagner's attacks have targeted Fulani civilian communities mainly because of his alleged links to the armed jihadist group Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).[26]

Moreover, as James Barnett has pointed out, JNIM propaganda often centers the civilian casualties that the Russian Wagner Group, regional Sahelian militaries, and even the Islamic State in the Sahel Province cause. In this way, JNIM portrays itself as more humanitarian than its enemies.[27]

Nevertheless, while it may take inspiration from HTS, JNIM is far from protective of civilians. As Koufa admitted in the interview with Nasr, JNIM has worked to discourage citizens from cooperating with the government, but it does not hesitate to punish those who refuse.[28] Moreover, Koufa agreed that JNIM had indeed targeted uncooperative villagers, seemingly acknowledging the doublespeak involved in its castigation of Russian and Islamic State Sahel's violence against civilians.[29]

Alternatives to Brutal Governments and Other Jihadist Groups

Again, in the same vein as HTS, JNIM has worked for several years to portray itself as a viable alternative to Sahelian governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger and in their Eurasian counterterror partners (recently Russia but previously France and the United States) and competing Islamic State affiliates, the latter of whom AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) leader Abu Obeida Youssef al-Aanabi called "deviants" in a 2023 interview.[30] Moreover, in the December 2024 interview with Nasr, Koufa articulated that part of the rationale for JNIM fighting ISGS was the latter's "'indiscriminate violence against civilians' in areas where the population is loyal to JNIM and beyond."[31]

Yet long before the HTS takeover, JNIM was already working to establish itself as a trusted, legitimate alternative to local and national governments and other jihadist groups. Observers have long noted that JNIM installs itself in local communities, creates local businesses, and gets involved in community dispute resolution and other forms of governance.[32] Indeed, as Caleb Weiss wrote in 2022, JNIM's integration into local communities and the winning of citizens' hearts and minds in Mali and the broader Sahel were part and parcel of "AQIM's playbook" for expansion in the Sahel.[33]As Daniele Garofalo writes in 2025,

> The expansion of the JNIM in northern Mali and the Sahelian area is linked to social, political, and economic factors rather than ideological factors. Jihadist groups have managed to create an alternative and more efficient welfare system than that of the central government, through the distribution of necessities and care services, employment, education (always linked to radicalism), the administration of justice, and the defence of communities and minorities.[34]

In other words, even though observers may view JNIM as undertaking some degree of legitimacy-seeking governance, its proclivity to do so in no way began in December 2024.

Localization

Another way in which JNIM has been mirroring HTS is its tendency to rhetorically prioritize its localization and thus to avoid drawing the ire of international coalitions, despite its historically more layered local, regional, and

international disposition.[35] But yet again, JNIM was already on the path to asserting its localization efforts well before the HTS takeover. Notably, in March 2024, AQIM's leader bemoaned the fact that the West did not realize al-Qaeda's enemies in the Sahel were local and that it had no desire to take external (Western) targets outside its areas of operation.[36] Apart from simply not taunting or attacking international targets, JNIM has also moved to appear more legitimate on the international stage. Again, these efforts predate December 2024. For instance, in May 2023, JNIM militants released an Australian hostage, Ken Elliot, with no ransom paid.[37] As analysts like Jacob Zenn have assessed, JNIM likely released 88-year-old Elliot, who may have otherwise died in captivity, as a "demonstration of its intent to win goodwill on the international stage."[38]

Suggestions to Negotiate

The fourth metric for assessing JNIM in the vein of the HTS model is its willingness to negotiate. In his December 2024 interview with Koufa, Nasr relayed that Koufa "stated that JNIM were still open to negotiations with the government and what he referred to as 'conflict resolution.'" On September 20, 2024, Koufa stated the same in an audiotape released by the group about the need for conflict resolution.[39] However, others, like Zacharias Pieri and Ahmad Partaw, have shown that JNIM has faced challenges in its attempts to negotiate due to "contextual churn," or difficulty finding a negotiating partner due to the ever-changing cast of would-be players in Mali.[40]

Collaborating with a Strong Regional State

Unlike HTS, JNIM has no hope whatsoever of receiving any genre of assistance from a regional state. Its operations extend across at least Sahelian states—Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Togo, and Benin—and all other regional states fear its entrance into their borders. On this front, JNIM finds no inspiration in HTS tactics.

Distancing Itself from al-Qaeda

Yet it is in the sixth, most extreme dimension—the likelihood of rupture from al-Qaeda—that JNIM arguably does not show as much replication as HTS. In short, though there has indeed been discussion about the potential rupture of JNIM from al-Qaeda, this is perhaps not as likely as some have suggested. One of the core tidbits of knowledge about JNIM's inner logic regarding an al-Qaeda break came from the December 2024 *CTC Sentinel* interview with Nasr:

> The three questions [Koufa] did not answer related to Hamas and the situation in Gaza, the Taliban, and al-Qa'ida Central. He did not want to speak about al-Qa'ida at all. He did not answer any of the questions regarding al-Qa'ida. I followed up with some local sources with knowledge of the deliberations of the group on this and they conveyed to me that his silence on al-Qa'ida had a purpose. In my assessment, Koufa's refusal to speak about al-Qa'ida was significant. I think it's very possible that JNIM is at least seriously discussing and maybe preparing to break from al-Qa'ida.
>
> Since the last third of December [2024], JNIM has stopped referring to AQIM and stopped directing followers to the AQIM media outlet Al-Izza. Furthermore, very interestingly, on January 20, 2025, AQIM issued a communiqué regarding the Gaza war, which for the first time did not come in the form of a joint communique with JNIM. And looking back at the audio answers of Koufa, I noticed that the compilation did not start as usual with a graphic of AQ media branches nor with the regular audio of OBL, but rather only with the al-Zallaqa logo. Even the *nasheed* used in the compilation was not an al-Qa'ida *nasheed*. It looks like they might be preparing the landscape for a split with al-Qa'ida in the same way that Jabhat al-Nusra—the predecessor group of Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), the group now in power in Syria—split with al-Qa'ida.[41]

Certainly, on the surface, this collection of circumstantial evidence, combined with the success of HTS in Syria around the time the piece was published, might reasonably suggest that JNIM could be anticipating a break. But would this be likely?

Unknowable at present, a full rupture—the most extreme plank of the HTS model—would be unlikely in the case of JNIM for four reasons. First, JNIM has already had historical opportunities to disavow its relations with al-Qaeda and has never shown any real intention to do so. Second, at least at the current moment, there are no clear *offensive* benefits to renouncing affiliation with al-Qaeda: JNIM is not necessarily on the precipice of state capture. With aspirations as a terrorist insurgency, not a global legitimacy-seeking new government, it need not take such a drastic step. Third, there are also no clear

defensive rationales: given the current disarray of the Sahelian geopolitical landscape, it remains unlikely that JNIM would gain much protection by renouncing al-Qaeda. Western forces are already not keen to fight JNIM in a serious way, thus as long as it avoids implicating itself in a Western-based attack, JNIM would gain little by shedding its al-Qaeda label.[42] Fourth and finally, as will be discussed further, the success of the Taliban, which did not renounce its global jihadist ethos, arguably serves as a better model for a would-be JNIM rise to power.

Al-Shabaab

After JNIM, al-Shabaab appears to be the African group most likely to draw inspiration from the HTS model and seek to emulate it. Indeed, as an al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Shabaab comes from a more accommodationist stance than Islamic State groups, has already engaged in wide-scale governance, has publicly disavowed the targeting of civilians, and has long sought legitimacy. As one commentator has noted, "The Al-Shabaab group in Somalia is the branch of al-Qaeda perhaps most likely to follow the HTS model."[43] But have any changes in word or deed been evident since the HTS takeover?

For its part, al-Shabaab offered tempered congratulations. As Stig Hansen described, in early December 2024, al-Shabaab began by commending the "Sunni forces" of Syria—not HTS directly—for their efforts against the Assad regime and praised their technical achievements in drone warfare anti-tank capabilities and the Sednaya prison liberation. However, as Hansen notes, "HTS is not praised directly, and there are no direct congratulations to HTS. There are simply no direct celebrations of HTS, only of the general victories over the Assad regime." As December wore on, even the nods to HTS's technical achievements waned.[44] But Hansen points out that

> al-Shabaab never condemned HTS. In the words of an al-Shabaab propaganda leader, they were uncertain about the organization's intentions and its interactions with other powers in the Middle East. Al-Shabaab was confused, but hopeful, and remains so today [January 2025]. The change in the profile of HTS and its more local focus might also have been seen as dangerous to al-Shabaab, inspiring leaders to distance the group

> from the al-Qaida network, and even to seek cooperation with more secular organizations.[45]

While these early commendations serve as the clearest evidence of inspiration in word, in deed, al-Shabaab's behavior has not changed in any way to suggest it is seeking to be more like HTS. Indeed, like JNIM, it had already been undertaking some platforms of the HTS model even before HTS itself.

Non-civilian Targeting

Al-Shabaab may have theoretically been inspired by HTS's non-civilian targeting, but it was arguably espousing a civilian protection rhetoric long before HTS even existed. As detailed above, al-Shabaab, as an al-Qaeda affiliate, has historically had to adhere to its parent's broader ethos of avoiding civilian casualties as laid out in Zawahiri's *General Guidelines for Jihad*. For instance, a main finding of a 2018 report on al-Shabaab's suicide bombers was precisely that the group aims to target symbols of the Somali state; at that time, it was working assiduously to avoid civilian casualties.[46] Notably, for instance, when it killed over 500 civilians in an October 2017 truck explosion that authorities deemed an accident, al-Shabaab never claimed the attack although it was one of the deadliest incidents of terrorism in the twenty-first century. This was presumably because of its unintentional major harm to civilians.[47] But, like its al-Qaeda analogue JNIM, al-Shabaab still harms civilians, and there has been no indication that it has worked to mitigate or minimize that harm in any real way since the HTS takeover, nor has it made any known proclamations suggesting a change in outlook. If al-Shabaab has taken inspiration from HTS on this front, it is apparent in neither word nor deed.

Framing as a Legitimate Alternative Authority

On this front, al-Shabaab was following the HTS model even before HTS was undertaking such steps. Since its inception, al-Shabaab has sought to show itself as a viable alternative to the Somali state, undertaking governance, legal rulings, and taxation—all functions of the state—for far longer than HTS.[48] As Tricia Bacon and I articulated in 2021,

> Part insurgent group, part terrorist organization, part shadow government, and part mafia, al-Shabaab effectively combines provisionary and punitive governance to regularly outperform the Somali government. On the provisional side, it provides

> harsh but relatively predictable order in the areas it controls and justice through its shadow governance in areas it does not directly control. In contrast, the government is at best absent and at worst unpredictable and predatory. Even people residing outside of al-Shabaab's territory choose to use its judicial system and its roads. Its courts have a reputation for being more efficient, effective, and fair than the government's. At its checkpoints, the group charges set tolls and provides receipts, while government checkpoints charge arbitrary amounts at multiple points on the same road. On the punitive front, its extortion racket is coercive and widely resented, but it extracts funds from all sectors of the economy, giving the group reach throughout southern Somalia and a budgetary surplus.[49]

As one analyst stated forthrightly in June 2025, "Al-Shabaab's resurgence has less to do with its military capacity than with its ability to govern and control populations."[50]

In addition to asserting itself as superior to the Somali state, al-Shabaab has worked to outperform its closest jihadi rival, the Islamic State in Somalia, a goal that it has easily accomplished.[51] For al-Shabaab, the HTS model is not new but one it has been pursuing for years. In some sense, then, al-Shabaab more likely informed HTS's trajectory than the other way around.

Pursuing a Strategy of Localization

On this front, HTS's "localization" strategy is not likely to resonate with al-Shabaab. Indeed, one aspect of al-Shabaab's historical uniqueness is the fact that it has remained hyperlocal, national, regional, and internationally oriented all at once. Certain analysts underscore the importance of this "transnational, globalist aspect to its organizational identity."[52] While it ebbs and flows in its commitment to pursuing certain agendas over others, the likelihood that it would fully seek to localize to get into the good graces of the international community is virtually nonexistent.

Indeed, since the HTS takeover, al-Shabaab has been expanding its collaboration with international threat actors, namely in the reported—though highly debated—emergence of its new drone-sharing practices with the Houthis in Yemen.[53] While this action does not necessarily indicate a globalist agenda by any stretch, it does not indicate an increasingly localized outlook.

Considering Negotiations

For its part, al-Shabaab has shown some degree of openness to negotiations. Notably, some analysts have argued—though often without much evidence—that al-Shabaab has sought to negotiate with the United States. As one analyst has written,

> Al-Shabaab has been seeking for some time to talk to the United States, similar to Washington's past consultations with the Taliban in Doha that resulted in the complete withdrawal of the US army from Afghanistan and the group's subsequent assumption of power. . . . Al-Shabaab views the Taliban experience as one it can emulate to consolidate its power in Somalia. It also envisions an effective Qatari mediation role."[54]

Certain analysts, however, debate this claim. Moreover, in June 2025, another analyst underscored al-Shabaab's reversions to the "familiar tactic of negotiating local power-sharing agreements," in this instance, with pro-government Macawiisley fighters.[55] Indeed, for al-Shabaab, unlike Islamic State adherents, negotiations are on the table, though not because of any clear inspiration from HTS.

Collaborating with a Strong Regional State

Like JNIM, al-Shabaab has no hopes of allying itself with a strong regional state, as was the strategy of HTS in its relationship with Turkey. Al-Shabaab's closest analogue is its enduring—if arguably superficial—relations with the Houthis in Yemen, one of the disputed sovereigns of the state. Nevertheless, that relationship would scarcely afford al-Shabaab the benefits that HTS accrued from Turkey.

Breaking with al-Qaeda

While a rupture from al-Qaeda may have been beneficial for HTS and might be somewhat feasible for JNIM, the likelihood that al-Shabaab will break off relations with its parent group remains extremely low. Al-Shabaab has long been al-Qaeda's most powerful affiliate and a fiercely loyal one;[56] analysts underscore the hard-won and enduring nature of their relationship.[57] Notably, when the Islamic State emerged in 2014 and worked to convince al-Shabaab to renounce al-Qaeda and join it, al-Shabaab responded angrily and began to assassinate individuals in its ranks who expressed pro-Islamic State sympa-

thies.[58] For al-Shabaab, there exists little tangible benefit in abandoning its al-Qaeda affiliation, at least when its capacity to fully overtake the reins of the state remains as unlikely as it currently is.

Thus, in sum, while both JNIM and al-Shabaab seemingly found what HTS had accomplished an overall positive sign for both of their organizations, it scarcely served as a game-changing development. Both groups were already undertaking similar behavior to HTS (even before HTS in some cases), and neither envisioned any of the same incentives of breaking ties with al-Qaeda that HTS gained. Instead they were able to see HTS's success in Syria as a proof of concept, but one that simultaneously mimicked their existing approaches and presented particularities that they could not replicate or did not want to. These are discussed below.

Why No Relevance for the Islamic State?

HAVING SHOWN THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE WAYS THAT AL-QAEDA'S AFRICAN branches approached the HTS question, it bears reverting to the non-evidence for the HTS's impact on African Islamic State branches. Why would al-Qaeda affiliates find at least some relevance, whereas Islamic State provinces would find none?

On the one hand, the al-Qaeda groups are more *ideologically* sympathetic to the HTS model because of their historical moderation in violence against civilians, their proclivity for the implementation of governance, and their willingness to work with non-jihadi actors. Conversely, Islamic State groups, who take a more draconian, maximalist view of jihad, reject the HTS model as overly accommodating in working with apostate governments and have been notable for their often-unrestrained use of violence. Thus, in many respects, al-Qaeda's more "moderate" (if such a term can be used) approach to jihad in Africa better aligns with HTS's more state-like approach than with the more "hardline" and unrestrained pursuit of jihad by the Islamic State.

Second, at least in Africa, al-Qaeda groups also have different strategic imperatives to find value in the HTS model: JNIM and al-Shabaab are far more

powerful than any other Islamic State group on the continent and so could theoretically envision the capture of a national government, thus making the HTS model attractive. No Islamic State group exerts similar strength. Islamic State groups also tend to be limited to remote enclaves from far national capitals, such as the mountains of Puntland in the case of the Islamic State in Somalia, the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo in the case of the Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP), northern Mozambique (Islamic State in Mozambique), and the intersection of four countries in the Lake Chad Basin—none of which it could likely overtake—in the case of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). The HTS model is thus of scarce interest to most African Islamic State groups.

Conclusion: Explaining the Underwhelming Response

THE PREVIOUS SECTION SHOWED THAT NONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT AFRICAN jihadist groups have been particularly taken with the HTS model, either in word or in deed. Why, despite observers' predictions of such inspiration, has it not materialized to the degree that might have been expected? Below, this piece argues that at least four rationales undergird the lack of enthusiasm.

HTS's Playbook Was Not New

First, and most broadly, the playbook that HTS arguably offered is nothing new, especially for African groups aligned with al-Qaeda. As shown above, both JNIM and al-Shabaab have been undertaking civilian-centric, legitimacy-garnering activities for years. Indeed, one might even think of HTS and JNIM/al-Shabaab as all having co-influenced one another over time, and the Taliban (discussed in more detail below) as having influenced all of them. Thus, while HTS may have had the most visible example of "success," it was not novel in its approach to building civil society's trust through moderation. In many senses, then, African al-Qaeda groups were undertaking "HTS-like" behavior even before HTS. Importantly, observers should not be too eager to

attribute any visible "HTS-like behavior" among African jihadist groups to HTS success.

HTS's Playbook Was Not Desirable

Second, especially for Islamic State–aligned groups, HTS's model does not necessarily represent a *desirable* outcome. On the one hand, for African jihadist groups, the ways that HTS "won" may appear to have come at too high a cost; they may be overly accommodating. Did HTS abandon too much of the essence of the transnational jihad to get what it wanted? Was breaking with al-Qaeda, integrating itself into the global system of states, accepting broad tolerance of religious minorities, and building relations with Israel[59] really considered a win for jihadists? Whatever the answer, few analysts suggest there is a high likelihood that even more moderate al-Qaeda branches are as open to accommodation as they would need to be to pursue an HTS model. As Caleb Weiss has usefully articulated,

> One must assume a lot to believe that the leadership of either JNIM or AS [al-Shabaab] . . . want to reject and ultimately abandon AQ [al-Qaeda]; adopt and integrate into the international system; and also seek a desire for some form of democratic or inclusive society if they truly want to go the HTS route. . . . Neither JNIM nor AS has indicated that either is willing to do so. In fact, both have been quite adamant over the years that they reject the international system and democracy is a kuffar ideology. Yes, because they are AQ, they can work with non-jihadi, nationalist, or even sometimes non-Islamic entities to advance their agendas, but . . . this is not the same as ultimately wanting a government system in the way that HTS is moving in Syria.[60]

Second, more than merely not wanting to accommodate as much as HTS has, groups may not want to govern to the extent that HTS's takeover now forces it to; managing an entire conflict-ridden state is not necessarily a win. While on paper jihadist groups seek, at their core, to control the states in which they exist, some think that whether or not they actually *would*—or, as Wassim Nasr points out, *could*[61]—is a different story. A scenario exists wherein jihadist capture of a national capital is akin to the dog finally catching the car: they

would not know what to do when they achieved their goal. In the same way that Islamic State experiences in Iraq, Syria, and Libya showed the downsides of jihadist governance between 2014 and 2016, it is hard to imagine any of the aforementioned groups successfully capturing and governing Mali, Burkina Faso, or Somalia.

HTS's Playbook Was Not Replicable

Third, this piece has shown that at least one part of HTS's playbook was simply not replicable for African jihadist groups: its reliance, to some degree, on a nearby regional state. As described above, one of HTS's primary strategies involved a degree of reliance on Turkey. No African jihadist group could imagine a similar regional state sponsor or ally that would mimic the nature of the protection that HTS received from Turkey. Unsurprisingly, the inability to replicate that important plan inherently dampened would-be enthusiasm.

HTS's Playbook Was Not Necessary

Fourth, to the extent that any of the four African jihadist groups might find resonance in any external "model," their real model would come from the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, not from HTS's takeover of Syria in 2024. At the core, the Taliban serves as a better model than HTS, not least because it has captured the state far more fully than HTS and has done so in a way that has thus far been more comprehensive,[62] not mentioning the fact that al-Qaeda affiliates have had a long-standing alliance with the Taliban. For instance, Daniele Garofalo, a noted monitor of jihadist propaganda, has pointed to the distinct differences and lack of enthusiasm that African jihadist groups showed to HTS as opposed to the Taliban.[63] And Idriss Lallali offers a similar assessment, centering the importance of the Taliban, not HTS, in African jihadists' strategic calculations. To that end, he notes that "groups like JNIM are visibly experimenting with 'Taliban-style' local engagement: co-opting traditional authorities, regulating justice, and positioning themselves as arbiters between state and community in areas of contested governance."[64] Others have noted al-Shabaab's desire to pursue negotiations as aligning closer to the Taliban's more hardline, non-accommodationist playbook, not HTS's.[65]

Moreover, one must interrogate the very idea that African jihadists need or want an outside model to follow at all. Here, Christopher Anzalone makes an important intervention: While HTS and the Taliban have achieved gains, it remains reductive—even to African terrorist groups—to claim that certain African groups need to follow some external model. Indeed, AQIM/JNIM and al-Shabaab have long been pursuing their approaches to jihad, arguably serving as models to HTS, and thus the extent to which they need exemplars is questionable.[66]

Finally, perhaps the clearest plank underscoring that HTS's playbook was not needed was the group's decision to break from al-Qaeda. But one might ask, even if none of the African jihadists seem poised to break with al-Qaeda or the Islamic State today, is such a break even imperative to replicate HTS's success? The answer is seemingly no. On the one hand, HTS's struggle to gain legitimacy in Syria *even after a full break with al-Qaeda* underscores that even such abandonment is perhaps insufficient to achieve international legitimacy. On the other hand, the Taliban's experience highlights a different model. Indeed, a group that was once on the UN Monitoring Team's sanctions list is now off of it because it is a national government, even though it has not fully renounced its jihadist principles. The Taliban's "success" did not require abandoning its ethos but doubling down on it. What would prevent JNIM from doing the same? Moreover, at the current moment, when both al-Shabaab and JNIM are more powerful than whatever the al-Qaeda "core" currently is, their parent group does not constrain them, and they would likely prefer not to see their brand damaged as a result of their departure.

And thus this final point bears reiterating. Though JNIM and al-Shabaab are following or continuing the HTS model, they are unlikely to undertake its most significant action: a full break from al-Qaeda. Indeed, they would logically hedge their bets, retaining the global affiliation with al-Qaeda but working toward a takeover with a Taliban-like global acceptance.

In sum, the degree of enthusiasm among African jihadist groups regarding the HTS takeover in Syria has been paltry at best. None of the four major groups has made any public announcements congratulating HTS, nor has any group appreciably changed its behavior to show actions that look more like HTS's. Indeed, many African groups, especially those aligned with al-Qaeda, were already undertaking HTS-like actions even before HTS itself, leading observers to ask, At the end of the day, who inspired whom?

Editor's note: This piece solely reflects the views of the author and in no way expresses the opinions of the U.S. Government, Department of War, or any associated entities.

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Beyond Counterterrorism: A Legitimacy-Centered Framework for Pakistan's Security Crisis

Amira Jadoon

In late August 2025, the Pakistani military once again conducted strikes in eastern Afghan provinces against Tehrik-i-Taliban (i.e., Pakistani Taliban) militants following strikes in March, prompting a harsh response from Afghanistan's Taliban regime.[1] A few weeks prior, in late July, Operation Sarbakaf had resumed in Bajaur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province, after peace talks between local jirgas[2] (tribal councils) and militant commanders failed, forcing thousands of families to flee their homes.[3] The failed negotiations exposed both the limits of local mediation and deeper governance tensions, as provincial authorities publicly warned that the federal government's hardline approach would only deepen community alienation, cause displacement, and undermine future dialogue prospects.[4] Shortly thereafter, a suicide attack on a Balochistan National Party rally in Quetta, Balochistan, in early September served as a reminder of the multi-front nature of Pakistan's security challenge.[5]

After two decades as a partner in the global war on terror, Pakistan now finds itself confronting not just a resilient militant landscape but one that is deeply intertwined with a multidimensional legitimacy crisis—in which contested narratives, governance gaps, and regional tensions undermine the tactical gains of military operations.[6] Pakistan's reliance on military force underscores the security establishment's enduring faith in hard-power solutions. Yet the reemergence of high-tempo violence and Pakistan's position as the world's second-most terrorism-affected country reveal more than a tactical-strategic disconnect.[7] While kinetic operations can temporarily stem outbreaks of violence, they do little to erode the narratives that militants weave into their broader tool kit for survival, adaptation, and influence.

Militants' Tool Kit for Survival, Adaptation, and Influence

PAKISTAN'S MILITANT LANDSCAPE IS HIGHLY DIVERSE AND FRAGMENTED; militant factions frequently merge, splinter, and realign.[8] The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), separatist ethnic Baloch insurgents such as the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) are some of the region's deadliest organizations. They operate within a broader ecosystem of militancy encompassing Islamist, sectarian, ethnonationalist, Kashmir-oriented, and global jihadist groups. Against this backdrop, the most influential actors have refined distinct narrative strategies that transform local grievances into compelling anti-state claims. Regional militant organizations such as TTP, BLA, and ISKP have paired tactical and technological adaptations with potent legitimacy narratives as part of a shared tool kit that exploits Pakistan's governance failures and regional isolation. The TTP frames Pakistan as an illegitimate "apostate" state serving Western interests, while Baloch militants employ anti-colonial rhetoric, framing their actions as a fight against resource exploitation. Both transform local grievances into compelling counter-state narratives.[9] These narratives gain credibility precisely because they target governance gaps—from weak institutional capacity to repressive governance practic-

es.[10] Meanwhile, interstate rivalries with Afghanistan and India provide both sanctuary and external validation for anti-state messaging, contributing to a growing perception of strategic encirclement that becomes self-fulfilling.[11]

Collectively, Pakistan's internal governance gaps and regional isolation have enabled militants to develop increasingly sophisticated capabilities, as evidenced by their inter-group alliances, coordinated multi-location attacks, and recruitment of women operatives.[12] This capability-narrative convergence undermines state legitimacy through a mutually reinforcing cycle: militant tactical successes validate anti-state messaging, while state excesses and hardline approaches generate new grievances, with each element strengthening the other. This dynamic reveals how Pakistan's current security crisis operates across multiple interconnected fronts, from the battle for credible narratives and effective governance to regional diplomatic standing, requiring legitimacy rebuilding as the cornerstone of any effective counterterrorism strategy.

First Front: Militant Narrative Warfare as a Force Multiplier

WHILE TERRORISM SCHOLARS HAVE LONG RECOGNIZED THE COMMUNICATIVE dimensions of political violence, the battle for narratives now represents a foundational front in Pakistan's legitimacy crisis that operates as a force multiplier alongside kinetic operations. Non-state actors seek to gain credibility through a dual-track approach in which narrative successes enable operational capabilities and tactical victories validate anti-state messaging in a mutually reinforcing cycle. Focusing on Pakistan's governance gaps, deep political polarization, and regional tensions, militant organizations construct narratives that present the Pakistani state as illegitimate while positioning themselves as defenders of marginalized communities. Though distinct forms of militancy shape Pakistan's militant landscape, including religious (TTP), ethno-nationalist (BLA, BLF), and transnational jihadist (ISKP) forms, these groups use a similar tool kit of narrative warfare.

Anti-State Narratives

Militant organizations based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region fuse operational innovations with narratives that reinforce each other's anti-state messaging. The TTP has strategically recalibrated from religious puritanism to increasingly privilege Pashtun nationalism, invoking historical battles and framing its fighters as "sons of the soil" whose activities defend tribal honor against a "colonial" army.[13] The TTP has also made efforts to theologically delegitimize the Pakistani state in response to Pakistan's "Fitna al-Khawarij" designation (labeling the TTP as "religious deviants") and other state-led efforts, such as the decision by Pakistani state-aligned clerics to revoke the religious degree of the TTP's chief commander. In doing so, the group fuses Islamist rhetoric with Pashtun nationalist narratives.[14] This messaging is amplified by the TTP's Umar Media, which has professionalized since 2021 to produce emotionally charged audio and video content as well as magazines alongside AI-generated news bulletins in multiple languages, including Sindhi, Punjabi, and Balochi.[15] The dual strategy allows the TTP to link local grievances to state incompetence while exploiting grievances related to global issues like the Gaza conflict to appeal to the more religiously inclined.[16]

The BLA portrays the Pakistani state as an exploitative colonial entity, pushing narratives of liberation from Punjabi domination and Chinese exploitation.[17] It has escalated ethnic-based targeting, explicitly threatening more attacks on the country's Punjabi community and labeling them as "infiltrators and spies."[18] The BLA's messaging showcases educated recruits from prestigious universities in Punjab and Sindh, whom it portrays as socially conscious revolutionaries in tribute videos that incorporate other elements, like popular music.[19] It amplifies this messaging through professional-quality propaganda that includes videos featuring suicide attackers' final messages, real-time operational updates during *fedayeen* attacks (self-sacrificial missions), and multilingual content.[20]

ISKP links local grievances to global jihad through its Al-Azaim Foundation, producing content in over a dozen languages including English, Urdu, Russian, Farsi, and Uzbek.[21] The group's links to notable external operations, including the 2024 attacks in Moscow and Iran, lend credibility to its claims of global jihadist influence.[22] ISKP's regionally oriented propaganda, such as its Pashto-language magazine *Khurasan Ghak*, employs a multidimensional approach, condemning the Afghan Taliban as puppets of Pakistan while criticizing other anti-Pakistan militant groups (for example, it dismisses the TTP as a

replica of the Afghan Taliban following the same path of heresy and declares the BLA an enemy for its ethnic nationalism).[23] This comprehensive competitor delegitimization extends to religious scholars and Islamist political parties whom ISKP accuses of betraying Islamic principles.[24] Through this approach, ISKP not only exploits local grievances but embeds them within a larger narrative of a global war against Muslims, in which local "apostate" governments serve as puppets of the West. This offers its adherents a transnational identity that not only validates their frustrations but also connects them to a larger mission with divine sanction for violence.

A salient cross-cutting trend within these narratives is the intensifying outreach to women by otherwise ideologically divergent groups. The BLA's Majeed Brigade has introduced female suicide bombers and frames women as symbols of collective sacrifice in propaganda.[25] Similarly, the TTP has developed specialized recruitment materials aimed at female audiences, positioning women as "guardians of jihad."[26] ISKP has also targeted women with some of its publications, such as an Urdu booklet outlining 10 "responsibilities" for Muslim women, from religious education and child indoctrination to military preparedness under the banner of defensive jihad. Such audience segmentation and targeted recruitment strategies underscore the efforts by militant groups to diversify their appeal across demographic lines. Collectively, these narratives create an anti-state discursive ecosystem characterized by shared propaganda patterns across ethnic and ideological lines.[27] The convergence is particularly evident in their targeting of educated urban youth and marginalized communities alike through AI-generated campaigns and through the exploitation of both local grievances and global conflicts like that in Gaza.[28] This narrative synchronization, if not necessarily intentional, erodes state credibility more effectively than any single group could on its own while providing multiple entry points for the radicalization of new recruits.

Operational Capabilities as Narrative Validation

Overall, these narrative successes enable and subsequently receive reinforcement from the militants' growing operational capabilities, which leverage advanced technologies. The TTP's claim of over 600 attacks in May–June 2025 included coordinated assaults using drones and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), reflecting its access to weapons through cross-border networks.[29] Similarly, Baloch groups have deployed thermal sights and mag-

netic IEDs in their intensified campaign; the BLA claimed 284 attacks in six months, including attacks on police stations and critical infrastructure.[30] ISKP has evolved from a localized threat into a regional and international network that uses facilitation nodes in Turkey and elsewhere to virtually guide sympathizers in Europe. It favors resource-light plots run by small cells and remote handlers who provide tactical guidance on target selection, weapons procurement, and logistics.[31]

Groups have moved beyond isolated operations to form tactical alliances that amplify their collective impact. The Baloch Raji Ajohi Sangar (BRAS), an umbrella organization formed in 2018 that includes the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), and other separatist groups, has coordinated increasingly sophisticated joint operations across Balochistan.[32] In March 2025, the BRAS and the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (a Sindhi separatist group) announced plans to form a unified "National Army of Balochistan," marking efforts to coordinate different ethnic separatist movements.[33] Similarly, the Ittehad-ul-Mujahideen Pakistan (IUM) emerged in April 2025 primarily as an alliance of smaller Islamist militant groups operating in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's merged tribal districts. These include the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group,[34] a North Waziristan Taliban faction that has alternated between peace deals and conflict with the state; Lashkar-e-Islam, a Khyber-based Islamist group that has historically competed with the TTP for control of the Khyber Pass region; and the newly formed Harkat Inqilab-e-Islami Pakistan.[35]

Collectively, such groups' operational successes lend credibility to their claims of growing strength and state weakness, creating a feedback loop wherein narrative power enables operational capability. Most critically, the convergence around narrative warfare enables militants to compete directly with the state for legitimacy, transforming their tactical wins into political challenges that persist beyond isolated kinetic operations.

Second Front: Domestic Governance Gaps

THE SECOND FRONT OF PAKISTAN'S LEGITIMACY CRISIS STEMS FROM GOVERNANCE gaps that have created the political and economic conditions militants exploit

to construct their narratives. The effects of these governance gaps are evident across multiple dimensions, from political polarization and institutional breakdown to economic woes and repression of the civic space, each one reinforcing the others.

Political Fragmentation and Institutional Breakdown

Balochistan's evolving insurgency now involves educated middle-class participants and women, which is remarkable in Pakistan's most conservative province.[36] Most notably, Pakistan's military establishment has faced unprecedented public scrutiny and disapproval in recent years. Contested election results in 2024 and allegations that post-poll manipulation denied the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party its expected electoral mandate, followed by the removal and imprisonment of former PTI Prime Minister Imran Khan, have created deep societal divisions.[37] Additionally, political divisions between the opposition PTI-led provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—where over 8,000 TTP militants reportedly operate[38]—and federal authorities have complicated counterterrorism coordination efforts. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government's resistance to federal approaches has included provincial Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur's public opposition to purely militarized strategies and his decision to form provincial jirgas to negotiate with the Taliban, which federal authorities condemned as a "direct assault on the federation."[39] This fragmentation was also evident during Operation Sarbakaf in Bajaur in July 2025, during which peace talks between local jirgas and militant commanders failed to secure militant relocation or civilian safety guarantees.[40] The federal-provincial divide was on further display in September 2025, when the federal minister of state for law and justice, Barrister Aqeel Malik, claimed that PTI has "always supported anti-state elements" and criticized its reconciliation policy.[41] Without political alignment between the federal and provincial governments, counterterrorism efforts will continue to be disjointed, and competing approaches will undermine rather than complement each other.

Civic Space Repression

Facing mounting security challenges, the Pakistani state has doubled down on measures that strengthen militant claims about repressive governance.[42]

At the broadest level, the government's continued use of military trials against civilians has undermined judicial independence, while widespread arrests of protesters and criminalization of dissent are eliminating avenues for voicing legitimate grievances.[43] Targeted crackdowns on specific movements and organizations have accompanied these systemic restrictions. The banning of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) in October 2024 under anti-terrorism laws, followed by mass arrests of PTM coordinators during protests across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, exemplifies the state's suspicion of advocacy.[44] Similarly, the arrests of Mahrang Baloch and other members of the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC), who have protested enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings in Balochistan, underline the continued suppression of human rights activism.[45] In August 2025, the Pakistani Parliament reinstated controversial powers allowing law enforcement to detain terrorism suspects for up to three months without charge—powers that expired in 2016 but that it revived despite warnings from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. That same month, the state extended Section 144 measures (a colonial-era criminal code authorizing restrictions on public assembly) across Balochistan for 15 days, prohibiting gatherings of more than five people, while suspending mobile data services for three weeks to prevent militants from coordinating attacks.[46]

Economic Hardship

Pakistan's severe economic crisis has reduced resources available for sustained security operations. Today's military operates under significant budget constraints amid double-digit inflation and IMF-imposed austerity measures, with inflation soaring close to 40% in May 2023.[47] Although Pakistan's economy stabilized in 2024, resources remain limited for sustained policing and counterterrorism operations, which means Pakistani security forces are likely to fight an increasingly defensive battle against strengthening terrorist networks.[48] Repeated attacks on Chinese infrastructure projects and engineers—primarily by Baloch militants opposing resource exploitation, but also by ISKP—have created additional economic pressures as Pakistan tries to balance the costs of increased security measures against the country's development needs.[49]

The human cost of Pakistan's overall economic deterioration is particularly acute in conflict-affected regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, where youth unemployment rates have reached over 40%.[50] Food insecurity af-

fects over 40% of households in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA, the formerly semi-autonomous tribal territories along the Afghan border that merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018[51]), creating conditions of desperation. The closure of over 2,000 schools in merged tribal districts due to security concerns and budget cuts has left an entire generation vulnerable to radicalization through unregulated madrassas.[52] Healthcare access has similarly deteriorated; infant mortality rates in conflict zones exceed 80 per 1,000 births, nearly double the national average.[53] While inflation has fallen and foreign exchange reserves have stabilized, these macroeconomic improvements have yet to translate into meaningful relief for conflict-affected populations, and security concerns continue to impede service delivery and economic opportunities.[54]

Third Front: Regional Isolation and Strategic Encirclement

THE THIRD FRONT CONCERNS PAKISTAN'S DETERIORATING REGIONAL RELATIONSHIPS. Hostile borders with Afghanistan and India have become sources of militant sanctuary and propaganda validation. Pakistan increasingly blames both Afghanistan and India for sponsoring terrorism, creating a sense of strategic encirclement and isolation in the region.[55] The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has eliminated Pakistan's "strategic depth" on its western front, creating a sanctuary for anti-Pakistan militants. Pakistan's August 2025 strikes against TTP militants in eastern Afghan provinces highlighted this dynamic, prompting a formal demarche warning of consequences from the Taliban government.[56] Pakistan's tense regional environment, particularly crises with India and Afghanistan, is exploited by militant groups to validate their propaganda and advance recruitment. They opportunistically frame these crises as evidence of either Pakistan's weakness and isolation or its complicity with hostile regional powers.[57]

With respect to Afghanistan, the ideological and tribal bonds between the Afghan Taliban and the TTP have undermined Pakistan's strategy of hybrid coercion—which combines diplomatic pressure, economic leverage, and military strikes in an effort to compel the Taliban to act against TTP safe havens.[58]

The availability of these cross-border safe havens has rendered traditional military approaches against the TTP less effective, contributing to deteriorating Afghanistan-Pakistan relations.[59] Pakistan's expulsion of Afghan refugees, cross-border skirmishes with the Afghan Taliban, and intermittent targeted strikes against TTP hideouts in Afghanistan have only worsened bilateral relations.[60] China, which has long been Pakistan's strongest economic and diplomatic partner and has also been building ties with the Taliban regime, recently held trilateral meetings in August with Pakistani and Taliban officials, but these did not result in any diplomatic breakthrough.

Regional tensions escalated dangerously following the April 2025 Pahalgam terrorist attack in Indian-administered Kashmir.[61] India alleged that The Resistance Front (TRF), a group it identifies as an offshoot of Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba, carried out the attack, which killed 26 Indian tourists. Indian investigators asserted that they had uncovered digital traces leading to safe houses in Pakistan and suspected involvement of Pakistan's intelligence services in the attack.[62] Pakistan categorically denied these allegations, rejecting the evidence as fabricated, and demanded proof of TRF's links to the Pahalgam killings.[63] In response to the attack, in May 2025, India suspended its 1960 water-sharing agreement (Indus Waters Treaty) with Pakistan and launched Operation Sindoor, which involved escalating artillery exchanges across the contested India-Pakistan border and aerial combat between Indian and Pakistani fighter jets.[64] Seizing upon the escalating tensions, on May 11, 2025, the Balochistan Liberation Army expressed rhetorical support for Indian military action against Pakistan.[65] The BLA's willingness to align with Pakistan's external adversaries may ultimately be a consequence of Islamabad's poor strategic approaches to both domestic insecurity and regional tensions.[66]

Beyond Afghanistan, Pakistan's tense relationship with Iran has enabled cross-border smuggling networks that fund Baloch insurgent groups, while periodic border skirmishes create instability.[67] In January 2024, this instability erupted into direct military confrontation when Iran conducted airstrikes in Pakistan's Balochistan province, targeting Jaish al-Adl militant bases (a Sunni Baloch group fighting Iranian forces in southeastern Iran) and prompting retaliatory Pakistani strikes on Iranian territory.[68] Though both countries quickly deescalated, cross-border smuggling, arms trafficking, and militant movement continue to benefit local militancy and deepen interstate mistrust.

Taken together, these regional crises illustrate how militants thrive in cross-border sanctuaries that emerge when diplomatic relations deteriorate and when weapons and fighters flow freely across hostile borders. Moreover,

militant propaganda gains credibility under such conditions by portraying Pakistan as isolated and besieged by enemies. Unless Pakistan can rebuild trust with its neighbors and establish functional counterterrorism cooperation, the regional environment will continue to provide militant groups with the sanctuaries, resources, and rhetorical ammunition to sustain their insurgencies.

When Legitimacy Enabled Victory: The Zarb-e-Azb Paradox

THE PERSISTENCE OF MILITANCY TODAY STANDS IN STARK CONTRAST TO PAKISTAN'S last major counterterrorism success: Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014–16), which ushered in the TTP's decline by 2018 (from which the TTP has since rebounded). Zarb-e-Azb was effective not simply because of strong military tactics but because the conditions surrounding the operation gave the state legitimacy to pursue its strategic aims. First, the December 2014 TTP massacre of 149 people, including children, at the Army Public School in Peshawar (which occurred several months after the launch of the operation) generated unprecedented national consensus, temporarily uniting Pakistan's fractured political landscape in support of action against the militants.[69] This consensus gave unusual political cover to the military and facilitated the launch of the National Action Plan (NAP), a 20-point framework.[70] While implementation was inconsistent, the framework was important because it combined kinetic operations (i.e., Zarb-e-Azb in the FATA) with a parallel political, judicial, and governance reform agenda that involved efforts such as regulating madrassas and dismantling terrorist financing networks.[71] Second, Pakistan enjoyed substantial external support at this time: U.S. military aid, intelligence-sharing, and drone strikes helped enable Pakistan to strike militants in remote areas.[72]

After the mid-2010s, however, U.S.-Pakistan cooperation declined sharply as U.S. frustrations mounted over Pakistan's alleged failure to combat Afghan Taliban safe havens on its side of the border. The U.S. suspended military aid in 2018, and relations were tense up to and through the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.[73] U.S.-Pakistan security cooperation has recently resumed under President Trump, and the U.S. government designated the

BLA a foreign terrorist organization in August 2025; moreover, talks are underway to expand U.S.-Pakistani economic collaboration in critical minerals.[74] These steps nonetheless fall far short of the comprehensive intelligence and operational support from the U.S. military and intelligence services that underpinned Zarb-e-Azb. The current political polarization within Pakistan precludes the national consensus that once existed in support of counterterrorism efforts, while governance and judicial bottlenecks prevent follow-through on previous pledges of reform. Pakistan's requests of Washington for specific tactical equipment, such as communication equipment, to assist its counterterrorism efforts point to the gap between state forces and militant groups, which has been exacerbated by regional militants' acquisition of American military equipment that U.S. forces abandoned in Afghanistan in 2021.[75]

A Legitimacy-Centered Counterterrorism Strategy

PAKISTAN'S MOST PRESSING CHALLENGE TODAY IS NOT DEFEATING MILITANTS tactically. It is rebuilding legitimacy across three critical fronts—ideological credibility, effective governance, and regional diplomatic standing—to prevent the cyclical resurgence of militancy. Military operations can clear territory and disrupt networks, but they cannot dismantle the political conditions that allow militants to reconstitute, recruit, and expand. Pakistan's sustainable path forward requires rebuilding legitimacy not as an addition to counterterrorism strategy but as its foundation.

Pakistan's Information Warfare Strategy

Pakistan must pivot from reactive censorship to proactive, high-quality messaging that builds state legitimacy through grassroots local influencers and community figures rather than relying solely on platform takedowns and state-aligned religious scholars. Broad cybercrime laws and mobile data suspensions do little to undermine militant propaganda and ultimately reinforce militant claims about state authoritarianism.[76]

To compete in this marketplace of ideas, Pakistan requires a two-pronged strategy. First, it must invest in authentic community voices, grassroots influencers, teachers, tribal elders, and student leaders who can credibly address the local grievances that militants exploit, including economic exclusion, security force excesses, and political repression. Second, it must develop digital parity by equipping civilian agencies with the production capacity to match militant media in quality, reach, and adaptability, including in regional languages and across multiple platforms. State rhetoric that portrays militancy solely as "externally sponsored" or reduces militants to labels such as Khawarij or Fitna al-Hindustan[77] risks appearing as an evasion of responsibility. A sustainable information strategy, however, must couple effective counter-messaging with sociopolitical reform. Only when the state can credibly embody the values it communicates will its narratives carry weight.

Governance Gaps in Conflict Areas

In areas such as Balochistan and the former FATA, the absence of transparent grievance-redress mechanisms, weak judicial accountability, and the collapse of jirga-led negotiations have created a vacuum.[78] Militants fill this void with their own parallel governance, from madrassas to dispute resolution committees, presenting themselves as more responsive to popular needs than the state. Rebuilding state legitimacy in this realm requires civilian-led implementation of the National Prevention of Violent Extremism policy, investment in police and judicial reform, and rehabilitation and reintegration programs such as the Sabaoon initiative, a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program that is supposed to provide education and vocational training as pathways away from militancy.[79] Suppression of ethnic civil society groups like the PTM or BYC only deepens alienation, validating militant claims of defending victimized communities.

Instead of treating journalists, advocacy groups, and human rights organizations as adversaries, the state must see them as partners. It can begin by working to release detained civil society activists, addressing grievances related to enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, and moving away from military trials for civilians and broad cybercrime laws.[80] Accidental civilian deaths during military operations require prompt acknowledgment, transparent inquiry, victim compensation, and accountability. Such measures would not only help rebuild trust with aggrieved societ-

ies but also transform civil society into an early-warning system against radicalization.

Regional Rivalries

Regional rivalries constitute Pakistan's third challenge, as hostile relationships with Afghanistan, Iran, and India create conditions that sustain militants' sanctuaries and geographic fluidity. These frictions also distort border economies in ways that affect vulnerable societies: Repeated crossing closures and other restrictions depress Afghanistan–Pakistan trade and push commerce toward costlier or illicit channels, which can finance militancy.[81] Rebuilding legitimacy will require replacing proxy habits with sustained diplomatic engagement, implementing genuine confidence-building measures with neighbors, and ensuring that development projects serve local communities rather than appearing as externally imposed initiatives that displace indigenous populations.

Conclusion

PAKISTAN'S COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY HAS THUS FAR FOCUSED ON DEFEATING militants where they are rather than on preventing them from emerging where state legitimacy is lacking. Until Pakistan can offer its citizens a more compelling and credible alternative to what militant groups provide, tactical victories are likely to be short-lived. While these legitimacy-building recommendations offer a path forward, substantial structural obstacles to their implementation are admittedly embedded within Pakistan's political economy, society, and foreign policy tendencies. The military establishment's dominant role in foreign and security policy and the use of proxy forces against regional rivals have persisted through multiple civilian governments, making fundamental shifts unlikely in the near term.

Rather than achieving transformative change, Pakistan can achieve progress through measured steps and incremental benchmarks. In the near term, regional stability might improve through increased economic interdependence that raises the costs of conflict while creating incentives to address shared se-

curity threats. With India, this could mean aiming to revive the 2011–12 road map for trade normalization, making conflict escalation costlier for both sides, and establishing communication channels beyond military hotlines.[82] With Afghanistan, realistic steps might include maintaining diplomatic presence, continuing humanitarian assistance, and leveraging Pakistan's control over Afghan trade routes while emphasizing common threats like ISKP or even climate-induced water scarcity. In the civil society space, wholesale liberalization remains improbable. However, economic pressure from international lenders and the military's desire for Western security partnerships could drive selective openings, as occurred during Pakistan's 2019–20 push for Financial Action Task Force delisting.[83]

Similarly, while it is unlikely that the Pakistani government will completely abandon its practice of attributing militancy to external forces, more nuanced messaging that also acknowledges internal drivers of civil unrest and grievances could help diminish the growing trust deficit between state institutions and civil society. Such efforts could become more likely if the costs of Pakistan's rhetoric of denial become unsustainable—for example, if the military loses support from key constituencies, such as urban middle classes and business communities. Overall, the most realistic hope lies in gradual, pragmatic adjustments that slowly rebuild trust between state and society and that, in turn, contribute to resolving Pakistan's cyclical resurgence of militancy.

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The Syrian Civil War and the Shia Villages of al-Fua and Kafariya

Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi

In coverage of the Syrian civil war, which began with unrest in 2011 and culminated in the downfall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in December 2024, external observers have noted two important concerns: (1) the role of Iran and its wider "axis of resistance" in Syria and (2) the status of Syria's minority communities. The story of two Twelver Shia villages in the northwest Syrian province of Idlib, al-Fua and Kafariya, provides an interesting case study in which these two issues became intricately intertwined.

The war displaced a Twelver Shia minority community[1] in the nearby town of Maarat Misrin, many of whom migrated to al-Fua and Kafariya. These three communities constituted an isolated pocket of Twelver Shiism in the region and became the last bastion of regime loyalism in Idlib once insurgents overran the province in 2015. The insurgent offensive severed the link between the two villages and the provincial capital of Idlib city and thereby placed them under siege. Eventually, Iran mediated an agreement to evacuate the inhabitants of the two villages—a process that the Assad regime completed by July 2018.

Iran and the axis of resistance partly framed their intervention in Syria as aiming to protect Shiism and Shia communities in the country. However, in significant part because of the weakness of their local ally (the Assad regime),

Iran and the axis essentially condemned the people of al-Fua and Kafariya to indefinite exile while their villages underwent a complete demographic change at the hands of insurgents. Meanwhile, with the fall of the Assad regime, the exiled villagers have largely found that Iran and the axis have abandoned them and left them unable to return to their homes, despite the new government's rhetorical commitments to upholding coexistence and "civil peace." This should raise concerns for all those who wish to see a genuinely pluralistic Syria emerge from the ruins of 14 years of war.

A key basis for this study is a memoir that details the two villages' experiences during the civil war. Muhammad Hasan Taqi, a notable of al-Fua who headed the "crisis management committee" for the two villages once they came under siege, published the memoir in Syria in 2020. I translated it into English and published the translation with annotations at al-Mustafa University in Qom.[2] However, I have also sought to cross-check and supplement the account through interviews with people from the two villages and other sources as well as using open-source data from social media and contemporary media reports.

This study, following the memoir, begins by briefly considering the status of the Twelver Shia communities of Idlib prior to the war. It then traces in greater detail the events from 2011 until 2018. It concludes by considering what might become of the two villages and their original inhabitants in the aftermath of the Assad regime's fall in December 2024.

Al-Fua and Kafariya Before the War

It is not the place of this study to provide a detailed history of al-Fua and Kafariya prior to 2011, but al-Fua has existed since at least the medieval period. The Twelver Shia presence also extends into this period and is thus indigenous to the region for all intents and purposes. It is also likely that Shiism was more geographically widespread in the local area in this period than it was at the start of the civil war. According to the late Idlib historian Faiz Qawsara, after a Byzantine attack on greater Aleppo in 963 CE, the Shia Hamdanid ruler Sayf al-Dawla (r. 945–67) decided to bring some Shia inhabitants of the Harran area to defend the front lines against the Byzantines. Thus the "Shia madhhab [sect] spread in Aleppo, Sarmin,[3] al-Fua, Maarat Misrin and other neighbouring villages."[4] The remarks of Ibn al-Wardi (d. 1348–49 CE) also suggest that in medieval times Shiism was more widespread in the area beyond

al-Fua, Kafariya and Maarat Misrin. He records an instance of the conversion of some people in nearby Sarmin to Sunni Islam.[5]

In modern Syria just prior to the war in 2011, the government administratively classified al-Fua and Maarat Misrin as towns with estimated populations of 24,000 and 35,000 people respectively. It classified Kafariya, which had an estimated population of 9,700 prior to the civil war, as a locality. Of these three places, al-Fua and Kafariya were virtually entirely Shia as far as is discernable, while Maarat Misrin was a Sunni town and had a Shia minority numbering around only 2,500.[6] The other towns and localities immediately neighboring al-Fua and Kafariya were and still are exclusively Sunni, while much farther northwest and near the border with Turkey are some Druze villages. Their inhabitants outwardly converted to Sunni Islam under pressure first from the Islamic State in 2013 and then from Jabhat al-Nusra in 2015.[7]

Accounts of relations before 2011 between the Shia and Sunnis (and other religious communities) of Idlib Province are generally positive. In his memoir, Taqi recounts that every year, the people of the province held a celebration commemorating the Prophet Muhammad's birth, to which they invited "all the scholars of the region," and a number of Sunni religious figures attended.[8] A resident of the Druze village of Qalb Lawze attests that his own village and al-Fua enjoyed a "relation of affection and respect," noting that he had many friends from al-Fua (regrettably, the source noted, those contacts have now been cut off).[9] He added that he would not know, for example, whether "such-and-such doctor or such-and-such nurse" was among the Shia and that "no one would speak of these matters."

However, Zaki, another resident of al-Fua who served in the information department of the "military formation in al-Fua and Kafariya" (discussed in greater detail later in this study), provided a different perspective. He noted that a few years before 2011, the villagers "began seeing the spread of Wahhabi thought in some of the countryside areas via Syrian preachers who had been in some of the Gulf states and Lebanon."[10] There is some plausibility to the claims about the growth of Salafism. Most notably, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani (real name given as Taha Subhi Falaha),[11] who became notorious as the official spokesman for the Islamic State (among other functions), was reportedly from the town of Binnish[12] just south of al-Fua.[13] For his part, Taqi did not deny that there was a growth in Salafism prior to the war, but he denied that this translated into tangible anti-Shia sentiment, such as harassment or attacks.

Outbreak of Protests, Early Unrest, and Attempts at Conciliation (2011–12)

IN HIS ACADEMIC STUDY FOCUSING ON THE FIRST YEAR OF PROTESTS AGAINST THE regime in Syria, Kevin Mazur cautioned against characterizing the initial unrest through an exclusively ethnic or sectarian lens. He highlighted that members of ethno-religious groups besides the Sunni Arab majority participated in protests.[14] Conversely, there were also members of that Sunni majority who did not seek to challenge the regime. Similarly, it is important to note that many grievances related to economic opportunities and political rights matched those that other "Arab Spring" protests voiced across the region.

However, what is of interest in this context is how the Shia communities in Idlib *perceived* the unrest in 2011–12. While some Shia in al-Fua, Kafariya, and Maarat Misrin might have sympathized with specific grievances about living standards and economic opportunities, the Shia communities as a whole rejected the revolution or regime change that quickly became a central demand of the protests. Amid the regime's violent responses to many demonstrations, the unrest developed a militarized aspect early on, which likely reinforced their decision to stick by the regime.[15] Shia loyalism to Assad's government contrasted with the broad popularity of anti-regime demonstrations and support for armed insurgency among the communities' Sunni neighbors. This in turn likely contributed to the perceived sectarian angle of the unrest that became a firmly entrenched reality over the course of 2011–12. The phenomenon of Shia in Idlib joining the cause of the revolution and the insurgency was wholly exceptional.[16]

Both Taqi's memoir and other interviewees' accounts reflect concerns about the nature of the demonstrations. Taqi, for example, speaks about the demand for "reform" as something "through which falsehood is intended" while also speaking of the demands for "regime change" and the emergence of "hateful sectarian slogans" against Shia.[17] Zaki, an earlier mentioned interviewee, explained that "from the beginning we sensed danger for a number of reasons, among them that the sole demand was a dangerous demand—namely, to bring down the regime, including institutions, which means bringing down an entire

country and making it easy prey for enemies."[18] He added that "this demand also posed a danger for minorities, as the demand to bring down the regime was accompanied by sectarian slogans."[19]

As the unrest continued and the armed insurgency emerged and grew over the latter half of 2011 and the first half of 2012, the refusal of al-Fua and Kafariya to join the protestors and insurgents became a sticking point in relations between the two villages and their neighbors. As other communities siding with the Assad regime did, they formed so-called popular committees, which the Syrian regime's military equipped and backed to enforce security at the local level. Through these committees, the two communities prevented the passage of any insurgents through the villages. By early 2012, tit-for-tat kidnappings began to occur: Insurgents began kidnapping state employees, members of the armed forces, or people they otherwise perceived as regime supporters (perhaps simply for being from al-Fua or Kafariya). The popular committees in al-Fua would kidnap insurgents and/or members of their families,[20] and the two sides would then negotiate prisoner swaps.

In this period, there were multiple attempts, with support from the Assad regime and military in Idlib, to devise and implement "conciliation" initiatives between al-Fua and the Sunni-inhabited Binnish. However, none of them succeeded. It is clear in retrospect that attempts to mitigate the tensions between the two villages were bound to fail. They could not address the fundamental political divide between regime loyalists on one side and the political opposition and insurgency on the other.

For example, Taqi records that there were at least two written conciliation agreements between al-Fua and Binnish, one on February 25, 2012,[21] arranged by a regime-aligned civil committee in Idlib, and a second that members of the Baath Party's Idlib branch subsequently arranged (date unknown). In the first agreement, for which Taqi was al-Fua's leading representative, notable clauses prohibited the use of weapons between the two sides, required the removal of all checkpoints between Binnish and al-Fua, and demanded a pledge by the people of al-Fua not to allow the Syrian army to enter Binnish via al-Fua. Some in al-Fua denounced the agreement as one of "humiliation" that bartered with the "blood of martyrs," and the two parties ultimately did not implement it. Taqi attributes this failure to "the individual positions of some men on our side and their side."[22]

The second written agreement primarily focused on preventing tit-for-tat kidnappings and called for the release of all hostages by the two sides. Yet Taqi criticized what he considered the duplicity of the Binnish notables in main-

taining links with the Syrian state and purporting to function as mediators. They were, in his view, still supporting the insurgents.[23] Other interviewees from al-Fua and Kafariya said they supported the conciliation efforts and attributed their failure to the insurgents, who they claimed killed any member of the Syrian army, whether a volunteer or a conscript.

Amid the lack of any successful agreements, kidnappings continued. In July 2012, insurgents conducted a mass kidnapping of around 30 Shia men in the neighboring town of Maarat Misrin to secure ransoms and pressure the Shia to leave the town. This incident prompted the community's exodus. Some headed to al-Fua and Kafariya, while others traveled farther to regime-held cities such as Tartus, Latakia, Aleppo, and Damascus.[24]

The Partial Siege of al-Fua and Kafariya (2012–15)

WITH THE REGIME'S FAILURE TO MANAGE THE UNREST AMID THE START OF A FULL-blown insurgency and civil war, it lost control over large swaths of the Idlib countryside in the latter half of 2012 and early 2013. Thus, Taqi describes al-Fua and Kafariya as coming under "partial siege" during this period; virtually all the main localities surrounding al-Fua and Kafariya came under insurgent control. The regime's losses confined the connection between al-Fua, Kafariya, and other areas formally under regime control primarily to one route no more than 300 meters wide that linked the two villages with the provincial capital. There was also an older route paved with asphalt that passed just west of the main route and linked Idlib city with Maarat Misrin, which the fighters of al-Fua and Kafariya were obstructing to prevent insurgent advances. Thus, seizing the older route and/or the newer one became an objective for the insurgents in this period.[25]

Amid the deterioration in the military situation, the regime and its allies—Iran and Hezbollah—undertook efforts to bolster and organize popular committees throughout the country. The effort to bolster auxiliary forces was likely a product of the inherent weaknesses within the regime's regular army, which was marred by desertions, harsh terms of conscription, corruption, and heavy casualties within the officer corps. From the perspectives of Iran and Hezbol-

lah, it was strategically imperative to save the Assad regime as a key conduit for supplying Iranian and Syrian weapons to Hezbollah. The two actors were also driven by what they saw as a threat to Shiism and Shia in Syria and the wider region. Supporting local Syrian Shia communities also provided an opportunity to expand religious and cultural influence within those communities, bolstering ideological support for Iran and its axis of resistance.

And so, in late 2012 or early 2013, Lebanese Hezbollah personnel came to al-Fua and Kafariya and met with Muti Sulayman, a leader of popular committees in al-Fua, and Husayn al-Dabas, a leader of popular committees in Kafariya. Among these Hezbollah personnel were Jamil Faqih (al-Hajj Abu Yasir), al-Hajj Abu Ali, and al-Hajj Abu Mahdi. They made an agreement with the popular committee leaders to organize the committees into a single "Military Formation in al-Fua and Kafariya" under the overall command of these Hezbollah personnel and with financing from Hezbollah.[26] Hezbollah also provided specialist training to bolster the fighters' capabilities.[27] In contrast to Hezbollah, there is no evidence that Iran ever deployed officers from its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or personnel from other Iran-backed foreign militant groups to al-Fua and Kafariya.

On the wider level, the conflict in Syria was assuming an ever more sectarian tone; the most overt publicization of Hezbollah's role in the conflict began with the Battle of al-Qusayr in Homs Governorate in 2013. Moreover, Iraqi Shia fighters—both those living in Syria prior to the war and those coming to Syria from Iraq—began advertising their involvement in the fighting. They framed it in religious terms, such as defending the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab in Damascus. In addition, 2013 was the year when the insurgency took on a much more overtly Sunni Islamist tone, and the role of Islamist, Salafist and jihadist groups became much more pronounced and obvious.

Local reports reflect the increasingly sectarian tone of the fighting between al-Fua and Kafariya on one side and the Sunni towns on the other side. For example, one pro-opposition page described a series of clashes in August 2013 between fighters in al-Fua and insurgents in Binnish as such: "Town of Binnish: renewal of intense clashes on the town's northern front with the Shia Rafidites[28] of the filthy people of al-Fua. Oh God, grant victory to our mujahidin brothers over the enemies of the religion."[29] In general, as the Idlibi journalist Zaina Erhaim (who supported the revolution) has observed, relations between al-Fua and Kafariya and their Sunni neighbors had devolved into one of "mutual kidnapping, killing on the basis of identity, and bombing from a distance."[30]

The Fall of Idlib, Total Siege, and Evacuation (2015–18)

THE ASSISTANCE OF IRAN AND ITS ALLIES IN THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE PROVED OF value for the Assad regime in fending off the insurgency in parts of Damascus and areas near the border with Lebanon. But it could not prevent a wave of insurgent advances in Idlib in spring 2015 that began following the formation of the Jaysh al-Fath (Army of Conquest) coalition, which Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham led. This coalition enjoyed the broad backing of the insurgency's main foreign supporters at the time (Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia) who hoped insurgent advances would sufficiently pressure the regime to agree to a political transition.

In his memoir, Taqi gives the impression that the fall of Idlib city to the insurgents in March 2015 came as a surprise to him.[31] However, at least some military personnel on the side of the regime and its allies must have anticipated it in light of the insurgents' growing capabilities. Zaki says that he himself was "among the few who knew that Idlib would fall," which led him to preemptively evacuate his family from al-Fua to Damascus.[32]

According to Zaki, during the 20 days prior to the offensive, he and his colleagues had received information about large-scale military mobilization by the insurgents, including convoys from the Aleppo area and the borders with Turkey. These convoys carried not only personnel but also artillery, tanks, and other equipment for use in an assault. Zaki added that the military formation in al-Fua and Kafariya conveyed information about this mobilization to the Syrian army, but the army made no meaningful response. This suggested to him that the Assad regime had chosen to strategically withdraw in the direction of al-Mastuma to the south of the city (only for al-Mastuma to subsequently fall as well because the army had underestimated the insurgents' capabilities).

Seizing Idlib city and the route connecting it to al-Fua and Kafariya empowered the insurgents to impose a "total siege" on the two villages. The forces left to defend them were primarily the Hezbollah-affiliated military formation (including the Lebanese Hezbollah personnel commanding it) and the smaller National Defence Forces contingent.[33] Only a few Syrian army personnel—around 10, including two officers—were left in the villages.[34] According to Zaki, "It was possible for some of the army's forces [when Idlib city fell] to

withdraw towards the locality [of al-Fua], but orders were issued stipulating that any force withdrawing towards the locality would be considered as virtually defecting from the army, and thus we were left alone to our fate. We were literally abandoned."[35]

With a loyalist Shia community under siege, the insurgents had some form of leverage against the regime and its Iranian and Hezbollah backers. To gain a form of counter-leverage (and out of other concerns, such as further securing the Syria-Lebanon border), the regime and Hezbollah launched an offensive in July 2015 against the insurgent-held town of al-Zabadani[36] and tightened the siege on it.[37] They also besieged the nearby town of Madaya.[38] In turn, the insurgents in Idlib launched a number of attacks against al-Fua and Kafariya during July–September 2015.[39] They probably did not intend to seize the villages outright (even if they portrayed their efforts as such at the time)[40] but to force the Iranians and Hezbollah to negotiate over the status of al-Fua and Kafariya.

These battles indeed resulted in negotiations, marking the beginnings of what came to be widely known as the "four towns" agreement. The negotiations likely involved representatives of Hezbollah, Iran, the Assad regime, Qatar, and Turkey as well as Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra. The four towns are al-Fua, Kafariya, and the Sunni-inhabited al-Zabadani and Madaya. This agreement initially stipulated a ceasefire for six months and mutual evacuations. The insurgents and all civilians who wished to leave al-Zabadani could go towards Idlib in return for the evacuation of 10,000 people from al-Fua and Kafariya, encompassing children under age 18, women, the elderly (those above age 50), and wounded people.[41]

Following this ceasefire agreement, the insurgents did not launch any further offensives against al-Fua and Kafariya, although skirmishes and mortar and sniper fire periodically continued until the final evacuation in July 2018.[42] The parties finalized the four towns agreement at the end of March 2017, clearly with the end goal of the eventual complete evacuation of al-Fua and Kafariya.[43]

As Taqi attests in his memoir, no representatives from al-Fua and Kafariya played any direct role in the negotiations.[44] This may partly reflect logistics: With the two villages' representatives on the ground and isolated, it may have simply been too difficult to arrange evacuation flights for representatives to participate in negotiations held at least partly outside Syria. But Iran, Hezbollah, and the Assad regime may also have felt that having representatives from the two villages participate in the negotiations would impede their abil-

ity to reach an agreement, particularly given that the negotiations concerned whether the two villages' inhabitants would remain in their homes. Whatever the case, the four towns agreement generated considerable resentment among the inhabitants of al-Fua and Kafariya, many of whom justifiably felt sidelined by the regime for whose preservation they had fought. They instead felt that international actors were hammering out their fates with no input from them.

Taking a Role in Humanitarian Efforts

Instead of participating in the negotiations, Taqi and other notables on the ground in al-Fua and Kafariya found their own role limited to addressing the humanitarian issues that the siege had generated. They tried to do so through a crisis management committee that they had set up as early as 2013.[45] Taqi led the committee, which at its greatest extent comprised 13 members. Some of its members in turn headed subcommittees, such as a services committee, an education and culture committee, an agricultural committee, a health committee, and a technical committee.[46] Some also served as representatives for Kafariya, which had its own committee. Two notable members of the crisis management committee were al-Hajj Sayyid Abu Hamza (a Hezbollah member who served as overall commander of the military formation) and al-Hajj Sadiq (a Hezbollah member who was responsible for the Kafariya front for the military formation).[47] The committee likely included them because of their prominence in organizing the defense of the two villages.

Although a charitable association and the local Syrian Arab Red Crescent stored an initial stock of food supplies, these supplies could not last long, and prices quickly began to rise.[48] There were, of course, ways to procure necessities. Smuggling was one such means. In his memoir, Taqi takes a largely unfavorable view of this practice, saying it brought in goods without considering whether they were needed, delivering little actual benefit to the people.[49] The Lebanese Hezbollah personnel in al-Fua and Kafariya—in particular the earlier mentioned Jamil Faqih—tried to crack down on smuggling operations. Taqi even claims this crackdown led to Faqih's "martyrdom."[50] His statement contradicts a hagiography of Faqih, which claims he was killed by bullets from a "takfiri sniper" (a Sunni insurgent).[51] A second source from al-Fua clarified that those who killed Faqih were smugglers from Kafariya.[52]

Another source who served as commander of an Iran-backed formation called al-Ghalibun (which was not based in al-Fua and Kafariya but has ex-

tensive insights into the communities)[53] told me the situation in al-Fua and Kafariya reflected "racism" among Lebanese personnel in dealing with the Syrian civilians, hoarding food supplies delivered via airdrop at the expense of the latter.[54] Skirmishes between angry residents and the Hezbollah fighters consequently "took place and almost led to a catastrophe in the two besieged localities," according to this source.[55] The same source also corroborated the account that conflict between the Hezbollah personnel and smugglers from al-Fua and Kafariya led to Faqih's assassination.[56]

The villages also relied to some extent on aid deliveries by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent within the framework of the four towns agreement. However, the most important means of delivering necessities was the aforementioned airdrop method, which Taqi outlines in some detail in his memoir. He explains that the crisis management committee would contact the Damascus-based supply commission affiliated with Syrian Shia cleric al-Sayyid Abdullah Nizham. The commission would then coordinate with the regime and the Iranians to arrange airdrops. Besides various food goods, the airdrops would also deliver medicines, fuel, metal equipment (e.g., machinery to operate a mill and even an oxygen generator),[57] cash payments for Hezbollah-affiliated fighters,[58] weapons and ammunition, and seeds for planting crops on agricultural land (although farming had become severely restricted by the insurgents' attacks).[59] Of course, delivery by airdrop entailed a significant risk of damage to the deliverables.

In general, the various methods of obtaining necessities at least helped prevent mass starvation, although there were many complaints that the supplies were insufficient for healthy nutrition and comfortable living. Zaki clarified that while he considered the crisis management committee's performance "very good," its capabilities were extremely limited. He explained that hunger was widespread, and he would see "people falling in the streets because of acute malnutrition." His father eventually died because of a combination of malnutrition and lack of medicines.[60] Life under siege also generated its own societal problems. For instance, theft became more commonplace.[61] Taqi's memoir also reveals tensions between his village of al-Fua and neighboring Kafariya regarding issues such as the proportions in which the committee divided supplies between the villages.[62]

Some details in Taqi's memoir suggest local dissatisfaction with his work and opposition to him, to the point that there appears to have been more than one attempt to assassinate him.[63] Like in many of the surrounding insurgent-held areas, there was no real democratic system in the form of regular

popular elections to cement his legitimacy. Rather, his position was the result of consensus among local elites and Hezbollah personnel on the ground as well as consensus and coordination with the cleric al-Sayyid Abdullah Nizham. Local social media posts from the time of the siege also corroborate the existence of dissatisfaction with the crisis management committee stemming from perceptions of the committee's corruption and inability to meet humanitarian needs.[64]

Despite the humanitarian and social problems that the siege generated, Shia religious learning and cultural activities continued in al-Fua and Kafariya. Indeed, for Taqi and others, the suffering in the two villages recalled the Battle of Karbala and the suffering of Imam al-Husayn, and it was a matter of pride to display one's Shia identity in the face of the challenges and dangers.[65] The villagers ran a seminary (*hawza*) for women, though they ultimately suspended the classes in 2017 because of the consistent insurgent attacks and evacuation of large parts of the population.[66] In addition, they continued to hold scouting activities for girls and boys.[67]

The Final Evacuation

The final evacuation of al-Fua and Kafariya took place in July 2018. Per Taqi's memoir, it resulted from popular pressure. Members of the two communities by this time were aware of the military imbalance (in ammunition and manpower) between the local forces and the insurgents. Many also felt it was unlikely that the Syrian army and its allies would be able to break the siege in the near future. Residents wished to reunite with family members who had already evacuated as well, and they found the hardships that the prolonged siege imposed increasingly exhausting.[68] Zaki expressed this sentiment: "In the beginning we did not want this [evacuation,] but in the end we faced two choices: either genocide and destruction of property, or leaving. This was because of the deficiency in fighting manpower and an acute deficiency in ammunition . . . any large attack [by the insurgents] would have been tantamount to the end, therefore the choice became leaving, as we were certain the army and friends would not be able to liberate [us]."[69] Some residents, however, appeared surprised at the decision for a final, complete evacuation and wished to remain until the regime could break the siege.[70]

According to Taqi, the powers that had negotiated the four towns agreement agreed to complete the evacuation within 48 hours.[71] On July 19, buses came

and evacuated all the remaining people to Aleppo Province, from which the evacuees then dispersed further. The four towns agreement did not result in an exact swap of inhabitants between the two sets of locales. That is, it did not settle anyone from al-Fua and Kafariya in the Sunni towns of al-Zabadani or Madaya. Instead, it dispersed the original inhabitants of the Shia villages (and the Shia who had lived in Maarat Misrin) in a variety of locations throughout regions of Syria that the regime controlled, including Aleppo, the al-Sayyida Zaynab area in Damascus (which has a Shia community), and parts of Homs Governorate, Latakia, and Tartus.[72]

Al-Fua and Kafariya After the Evacuation

UNDERSTANDABLY, THE EXILE OF AL-FUA AND KAFARIYA'S ORIGINAL INHABITANTS provoked considerable anguish about leaving behind property and memories of "martyred" relatives and ancestors.[73] The departure also marked a definitive demographic transformation, as insurgent factions moved into the emptied locales and seized the properties for themselves. They divided al-Fua and Kafariya into "sectors" by factions, among them Jaysh al-Ahrar, Faylaq al-Sham, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, the successor to Jabhat al-Nusra that fully broke ties with al-Qaeda),[74] and foreign fighter contingents (namely, Uzbeks and Uyghurs).[75] However, the Salvation Government that was essentially the civilian wing of HTS came to administer the villages. This local administration initially took the form of one local council each for al-Fua and Kafariya, but services for the two locales subsequently became the responsibility of a larger municipal office for the "central region."[76]

Displaced Syrian Sunnis from throughout Syria settled the two locales, paying rent to the factions that seized the dwellings. According to Abu Ali al-Zabadani, who left al-Zabadani (one of the insurgent-held towns that was part of the four towns agreement), most of those who left al-Zabadani for the north settled in al-Fua, while a minority settled in Maarat Misrin and Afrin (an originally Kurdish city whose inhabitants had been largely displaced by a Turkish-led operation in 2018).[77] A displaced person from al-Zabadani even established a restaurant in al-Fua named Gates of al-Zabadani Restaurant.[78]

The Fall of the Assad Regime: A Lasting Demographic Shift?

DISCUSSIONS OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR HAVE FREQUENTLY RAISED THE ISSUE OF demographic change, often with the suspicion that various actors are deliberately engineering it. For instance, Syrians in the opposition as well as foreign commentators have claimed Iran was seeking to engineer demographic change by settling foreign Shia in areas from which Sunni Syrians had been displaced.[79] Even now, one occasionally hears rumors in Syria of how the Assad regime supposedly naturalized hundreds of thousands or even millions of foreign Shia as Syrian citizens to alter the country's demography, potentially influencing, for example, the outcomes of future elections.[80]

There is little concrete evidence to support these claims of such a strategic and concerted demographic shift by Iran or Assad. The claims also risk obscuring the very real large-scale displacements of Sunni Arab communities by the regime and its allies during military operations (to say nothing of the property rights violations that supporters of the regime committed).[81] The story of al-Fua and Kafariya is a well-documented case of a localized demographic shift during the civil war, though one in which it was Sunnis who entirely replaced Shia.

Prior to the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, al-Fua and Kafariya's original inhabitants looked set to endure an indefinite exile amid what seemed to be a frozen conflict. The Assad regime was unable to retake the two locales because extensive Turkish military deployments in the area had effectively blocked further advances into Idlib Province since 2020. Russia accepted the deployments as part of a ceasefire deal for northwestern Syria. There also seemed to be little prospect of a political transition that international actors frequently touted as the only hope of resolving the conflict: The Assad regime proved unwilling to make any political concessions. Its intransigent stance was a deliberate strategy to get the wider international community to eventually accept the regime's endurance and normalize relations. Although it was easy to dismiss rhetoric from HTS and other insurgents about continuing the revolution at the time, it is clear in retrospect that HTS effectively used the ceasefire arrangement in the northwest to rebuild its capabilities and find an opportune moment to go on the offensive again.

The fall of the Assad regime has now raised questions about the status and fate of Syria's minorities, including its native Shia communities. Eager to present itself as worthy of international acceptance, the new government has made rhetorical commitments to protecting Syria's minorities, including outreach to and meetings with leaders of those communities. This included a meeting in March 2025, for example, between Syrian president Ahmad al-Sharaa (known as Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani when he was leader of HTS) and a delegation of Syrian Shia. During the meeting, the delegation raised the need for the return of the Shia communities of al-Fua and Kafariya, Busra al-Sham (in Deraa province), and certain villages in Homs Governorate.[82]

As of this writing, the new government has taken no meaningful action to bring back the two villages' original communities. One clear impediment is a problem that observers have noted elsewhere in Syria, namely whether displaced people actually have livable dwellings to return to. For example, according to one source from al-Zabadani, only a small proportion of the Sunnis now residing in al-Fua have actually returned home because a large proportion of their original homes in al-Zabadani remain destroyed.[83] This same source states that while there has been talk about returning the original Shia inhabitants to al-Fua and Kafariya, the new government has not issued any formal decision or notified the people currently residing in the two villages that they must leave. However, another displaced person from al-Zabadani residing in al-Fua more recently claimed that most of the displaced from al-Zabadani residing in al-Fua have begun returning to their original homes.[84] There is presently no evidence that the new government has prepared alternative accommodation for the people residing in the two villages.

Second, there are concerns about safety and security, especially among those Shia who supported the Assad regime. Taqi, for example, fled the country and says he cannot return barring a major change within Syria itself, noting that the security services found a copy of his memoir, thereby making him a wanted man.[85] One resident of al-Fua who worked as a correspondent for the Iranian Arabic-language channel al-Alam (and has since left the country) could not bear to see "those who killed us, besieged us and displaced us do as they like and curse and boast about a lineage connected with the Umayyads."[86] This refers to a Sunni populist trend that has come to prominence since the fall of the Assad regime and is an outgrowth of the Sunni-centric vision of HTS. It ties Syria's Sunni population to the legacy of the Umayyads, who ruled a vast empire based in Damascus.[87] Some of this populism is linked to anti-Shia behavior, a notable example being footage that apparently

showed the conversion of a Shia shrine in Aleppo (Mashhad al-Nuqta) into a Sunni school for teaching the Quran (or at least the removal of any banners and symbolism associated with Shiism). The video that circulated on social media featured the tag "Umayyads."[88]

More generally, there have been multiple reports about assassinations and acts of violence against Shia in Homs Governorate and elsewhere,[89] and a wave of online outrage from Sunnis forced the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus to remove its "Ya Zaynab" ("Oh Zaynab") banners, supposedly because the hoisting of this banner was "sectarian."[90] In Jamil's view, the people of al-Fua and Kafariya cannot return home when those who have written the constitution are "one group of one color, and are trying and striving to impose their control over everything."[91] For Abu Hasan (who is from al-Fua and remains in Syria), there is no prospect of return to his village, citing in particular alleged "threats" by people from Binnish and other surrounding localities against any of the original inhabitants who do.[92]

Even those from al-Fua and Kafariya who have been willing to support the ongoing political transition in principle do not expect to return to their homes imminently. One individual residing in Husya (a locality in Homs province where some displaced people from al-Fua and Kafariya are residing) noted that some Sunnis currently living in al-Fua and Kafariya are from Ghouta and their homes were destroyed by the Assad regime. As such, the source said, the new government cannot force them out while they lack homes in their own land. But in addition, the individual said the original inhabitants of al-Fua and Kafariya do not wish to return when "no one is giving us a security guarantee."[93]

The new government likely finds that returning the people of al-Fua and Kafariya to their homes is too sensitive an issue to touch for now, given that displaced people are living in those villages and that an atmosphere of Sunni populism and associated anti-Shia sentiment prevails. Exile remains the reality for the villages' original inhabitants for now—as it is for numerous Syrians of all sects—despite the widespread hopes that the fall of the Assad regime would create an opportunity for millions of displaced to return to their homes. In many cases, particularly for those who supported the anti-Assad uprising, return is simply not feasible at present for material reasons, e.g., widespread destruction and the slow pace of reconstruction. But some communities associated with past support for the regime, like those of al-Fua and Kafariya, will likely find themselves displaced for the foreseeable future for reasons of politics and identity as well.

ENDNOTES

1 Twelver Shia constitute the primary denomination of Shia Islam in the world today. The Alawite religion (of which the Assad family are adherents) originated as an offshoot of Twelver Shiism, and generally both Twelver Shia and Alawites consider it distinct from Twelver Shiism. In Syria itself, Alawites far outnumber Twelver Shia and are primarily located in the coastal region, the al-Ghab plain, and parts of Homs.

2 Muhammad Hasan Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya: A Story of Glory and Defiance*, trans. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi (al-Mustafa University, 2024). This translation will be referenced throughout. For the original, see Muhammad Hasan Taqi, *al-Fua wa Kafariya: Waqfat Izz wa Iba* (2020).

3 A town in Idlib Province.

4 See Faiz Qawsara, *Wilayat al-Fua*, (Idlib, n.d.), 21–22.

5 Ibn al-Wardi, *Tarikh Ibn al-Wardi*, vol. 2 (Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiya, 1997), 302–3.

6 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 13.

7 For context, see, e.g., Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Massacre of Druze Villagers in Qalb Lawza, Idlib Province," *Syria Comment* (blog), June 15, 2015, https://joshualandis.com/blog/the-massacre-of-druze-villagers-in-qalb-lawza-idlib-province.

8 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya,* 21–22.

9 Interview, September 2024.

10 Interview, September 2024.

11 Assuming this name is accurate, it suggests he is indeed from Binnish, since Falaha is a known family name in that city.

12 "Who Is Abu Muhammad al-Adnani?" BBC Arabic, August 31, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2016/08/160830_profile_abu_muhammad_al_adnani_isis.

13 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya,* 31.

14 For a summarized discussion, see Housamedden Darwish, "From Peaceful Civil Movement to Civil War and Sectarian Polarization: A Critical Review of Kevin Mazur's *Revolution in Syria: Identity, Networks and Repression*," *International Sociology Reviews* 38, no. 5 (2023): 552–61.

15 Take, for instance, the killings in Jisr al-Shughur in 2011. Rania Abouzeid describes the incident and the cover-up in *No Turning Back: Life, Loss and Hope in Wartime Syria* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2018).

16 For such exceptional cases, see Zaina Erhaim, "عن "الفوعاني" الذي يقاتل مع الجيش الحر" [Regarding the al-Fua native who fights with the Free Army], zaina-erhaim.com, April 7, 2014 (https://zaina-erhaim.com/الذي-يقاتل-مع-الجيش-الحعن-الفوعاني-). The article tells the story of Mu-

hammad Hamdun, who left al-Fua with his family in July 2012 under the protection of insurgents from Binnish. Zaina also mentions at least two other families who opposed the regime and consequently left al-Fua.

17 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya,* 31.

18 Interview, September 2024.

19 Interview, September 2024.

20 See, for example, a post by "Green Idlib Loyalist News Network," on May 24, 2012 (https://justpaste.it/alfua1). The post notes that after the kidnapping of a warrant officer and "a number of civilians" from al-Fua by insurgents in Binnish and Taftanaz (the latter to the east of al-Fua), the popular committees and people of al-Fua detained more than 16 insurgents and more than 12 others. The same post claims that "more than 2,000 people have joined the popular committees in al-Fua."

21 It should be noted that the Israeli-British journalist Jonathan Spyer, who conducted a reporting trip in Binnish and the surrounding area in February–March 2012, recalls a meeting between representatives from al-Fua and Binnish but does not know specifics other than that the Binnish representatives were hoping to secure cooperation from the people of al-Fua. He also noted that a group of Binnish activists burned a Hezbollah flag, which they let him photograph. Interview, September 2024.

22 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 42–46.

23 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya,* 46–49.

24 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 54.

25 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya,* 51.

26 Interview with Zaki, September 2024, and interview with Abu Hasan (who is from al-Fua and worked with the Iranians during the war), September 2024. Abu Hasan supplied the names of the local popular committee leaders. In his appendix of "martyrs" from al-Fua, Taqi lists some under "the party's committees" (i.e., the committees organized under Hezbollah's "military formation") and includes one Mahdi Muhammad Qarbash, who was killed on March 13, 2013, along with a group of other fighters from al-Fua, apparently in a car bombing at one of the entrances to Idlib city. See Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya,* 318. See also posts by "Hayhat Minna al-Hazima," March 14, 2013, and Ahmad Zen, April 21, 2013 (https://justpaste.it/alfua3).

27 A minority of popular committee members were organized and incorporated into the wider National Defence Forces network, which coordinated with the Hezbollah-affiliated military formation and the Syrian army but was not under Hezbollah's direct command. See, e.g., a post by al-Tahaluf al-Alaktruni al-Suri, July 12, 2013, which reports that the National Defence Forces in al-Fua fired a mortar at an insurgent base in Binnish (https://justpaste.it/alfua5).

28 A derogatory term for (Twelver) Shia meaning "rejectionists."

29 Post by Sarmin News Network, August 31, 2013, https://justpaste.it/sarminnews1.

30 Erhaim, "Regarding the al-Fua native."

31 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 66.

32 Interview, September 2024.

33 According to Abu Hasan, the National Defence Forces contingent numbered 200 personnel, while the Hezbollah-affiliated formation had 1600 personnel who would alternate turns in guard duty and rest. Interview, September 2024.

34 The two officers were Major Fadi Salih and First Lieutenant Dhu al-Fiqar Mahfuzh. These two officers stayed in al-Fua and Kafariya until the final evacuation in July 2018. See post by Jablah Now News Network, July 20, 2018, https://justpaste.it/jablah20july2018.

35 Interview, September 2024.

36 The main insurgent factions of relevance in the al-Zabadani area were Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra—the same ones that were leading Jaysh al-Fatah in Idlib.

37 Sulaiman Al-Khalidi, "The Syrian Army and Hezbollah Besiege al-Zabadani," Reuters, July 4, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/--idUSKCN0PE091.

38 E.g., "النظام يستعد لتهجير 15 ألف نازح من "بلودان" و"المعمورة" إلى "مضايا"" [The regime prepares to displace 15,000 displaced people from Blodan and al-Maamura to Madaya], Zaman al-Wasal, July 31, 2015 https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/62970.

39 In his memoir, Taqi lists 10 battles, the first on June 23 and the tenth on September 19. Nine of these occurred between July and September. See *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 151–63.

40 E.g., "إدلب: "جيش الفتح" يبدأ "معركة الحسم" للسيطرة على الفوعة وكفريا" [Idlib: 'Jaysh al-Fath' begins 'the decisive battle' to seize al-Fua and Kafariya], Syrian Memory Institution, August 9, 2015, https://syrianmemory.org/daily-events/event/5ebac3148e4584000133edf6.

41 "اتفاق هدنة لستة أشهر بالزبداني وإدلب" [Truce agreement for six months in al-Zabadani and Idlib], Al Jazeera, September 20, 2015, https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2015/9/20/اتفاق-هدنة-لستة-أشهر-بالزبداني-وإدلب.

42 E.g., Najdat Ridha, a fighter of the Hezbollah-affiliated formation, was killed on June 8, 2018, in a skirmish with insurgents on the Ram Hamdan front (lying north of al-Fua). See post by Murtada Reda, June 8, 2018, https://justpaste.it/najdatridha. For comparison, see Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 337.

43 "Syria Conflict: 'Deal Reached' for Four Besieged Towns," BBC, March 29, 2017, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-39426162.

44 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 165.

45 Interview with Taqi, September 2024.

46 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 75.

47 According to Abu Hasan, he was responsible for machine guns and air defense management in the formation. Interview, September 2024.
48 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 69–71.
49 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 85–86.
50 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 151.
51 Nisrin Idris Qazin, "شهيد الدفاع عن المقدسات جميل حسين فقيه (أبو عبد الله)" [The martyr of defending the holy sites Jamil Husayn Faqih (Abu Abdallah)], *Baqiatollah* 391 (April 2024): 74–78, https://baqiatollah.net/article.php?id=12198.
52 Interview with Abu Hasan, September 2024.
53 For an overview, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Al-Ghalibun: Inside Story of a Syrian Hezbollah Group," aymennjawad.org, April 16, 2017, https://www.aymennjawad.org/2017/04/al-ghalibun-inside-story-of-a-syrian-hezbollah.
54 Conversation with Abu al-Miqdad (leader of al-Ghalibun), September 2021.
55 Conversation with Abu al-Miqdad, September 2021.
56 Conversation with Abu al-Miqdad, September 2021.
57 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 92–94.
58 Interview with Zaki, September 2024.
59 For details, see Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 114–19. He gives the detailed example of a potato farming project that helped keep prices down.
60 Interview, September 2024.
61 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 171. For contemporary documentation of issues of theft, see post by Wikileaks al-Fua, March 15, 2017, https://justpaste.it/wikileaks-fuamarch2017.
62 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 91, 211–14.
63 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 174–76.
64 See a graphic saying, "Abdullah Nizham does not represent me" in a post by Wikileaks al-Fua, December 8, 2016, https://justpaste.it/wikileaksfua8dec2016.
65 See, e.g., Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 381–83, where he features a photos of Ashura processions in al-Fua. He writes, "The processions of Karbala defy the mortars." See also a post by Sabri al-Nasiri on October 8, 2016, regarding a panorama exhibition put up by Kashafat al-Wilaya (a scouting association linked to al-Sayyid Abdullah Nizham) entitled "The Karbala of the Age," which features scenes from al-Fua and Kafariya, https://justpaste.it/fuakarbala.
66 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 134–35.
67 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 135–38; see post by Fawj Fatima al-Zahara, March 24, 2018, https://justpaste.it/fatimazahara2018.
68 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 174, 179.
69 Interview, September 2024.

70 Interview with Jamil al-Shaykh, September 2024.
71 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 179.
72 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 179–83.
73 Taqi, *al-Fua and Kafariya*, 179–83.
74 Interview with a displaced person residing in al-Fua, July 2019.
75 Interview with a source who worked in the Kafariya local council, March 2021.
76 Conversation with the head of the last local council of Kafariya, September 2024. See also "المنطقة بلدية الفوعة طرقات بلدة بإنارة تبدأ الوسطى " [Municipal Office of the Central Region begins lighting the roads of the locality of al-Fua], al-Sham News Agency, May 13, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tz6EDS50z9I.
77 Interview, September 2024. He also noted that some of those who have settled in al-Fua are P alestinian Syrians. In August 2022, I interviewed another person from al-Zabadani residing in al-Fua. He portrayed his settlement in a dwelling there as a magnanimous act as he had not changed or damaged the dwelling in any way. He also implied that he would be willing to hand it back to the original owners should they abandon the Assad regime.
78 He is interviewed in "Municipal Office of the Central Region."
79 See, e.g., Martin Chulov, "Iran Repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to Help Tighten Regime's Control," *The Guardian*, January 13, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/13/irans-syria-project-pushing-population-shifts-to-increase-influence.
80 For example, I heard such discussions during a trip to Azaz in the north Aleppo countryside in March 2025.
81 For example, a local in the Aleppo Shia town of Nubl (whose inhabitants were displaced in the final insurgent offensive but were encouraged to return and have done so in large numbers) warned against the risk of automatically equating minorities with better behavior. He noted that loyalist Shia in Homs had stolen property belonging to displaced Sunnis. Conversation, August 2025.
82 Post by Husya' Refuge Centre News—al-Fua and Kafariya, March 28, 2025, https://justpaste.it/variousshianames.
83 Conversation with source from al-Zabadani, June 2025.
84 Conversation with Abu Haytham al-Zabadani, September 2025. At the time of writing, there is a private van line to transport passengers from al-Fua to al-Zabadani. It is therefore likely that some of al-Zabadani's original inhabitants are alternating time between al-Zabadani and al-Fua.
85 Conversation, February 2025.
86 Conversation, June 2025.
87 For discussion, see "The New Umayyads," *Syria in Transition* 23 (April 2025),

https://www.syriaintransition.com/thenewumayyads.

88 Screenshots of this video can be found at Aymenn J Al-Tamimi (@ajaltamimi), "Screenshots of a recent video that has circulated showing conversion of a historic Shia shrine in Aleppo (Mashhad al-Nuqta) into a 'Dar al-Wahy' school for teaching Qur'an and Sunna . . .," X, May 18, 2025, https://x.com/ajaltamimi/status/1924198874924666997. More recently, in October 2025, a video appeared on social media showing two men standing on the shrine's dome with the white flag bearing the shahada (notably also used by the Taliban and associated with Sunni populism and Salafism in Syria). The individuals boasted of how "red banners" (associated with Shiism) had been removed from the shrine. See post by "Latakia," October 09, 2025, https://justpaste.it/variousshianames.

89 See, for example, a post by Tel Aghar on June 11, 2025, https://justpaste.it/variousshianames, regarding the assassination of one Haydar al-Hasan from the village of Diyabiyat al-Qusayr in Homs countryside. According to the post, three armed men opened fire on him and a companion of his at a bike repair shop. While the motives behind such killings may be more than just anti-Shiism, there is no doubt that many Shia perceive such acts as sectarian violence.

90 See post by al-Sayyida Zaynab News, April 24, 2025, https://justpaste.it/variousshianames. In contrast, I saw the banners on the shrine during a visit in early April 2025.

91 The conception of the new government as of "one color" is a recurring talking point among members of Syrian minority communities skeptical about the new government. This was apparent in an interview I conducted in April 2025 with Tariq al-Shoufi, who heads the al-Suwayda' Military Council.

92 Conversation, September 2025.

93 Conversation, September 2025.

The Lasting Influence of Sheikh Aboud Rogo on the African Jihad

Caleb Weiss

ON AUGUST 27, 2012, ABOUD ROGO MOHAMMED, AN INFLUENTIAL sheikh primarily based in the Kenyan coastal city of Mombasa, was driving north on the highway, away from the city, with his wife and five others when an unknown car pulled in front of their vehicle.[1] As it was overtaking them, its doors opened and two gunmen opened fire, killing Rogo immediately and wounding members of his family.[2] Authorities have never conclusively identified the armed assailants, though many suspect Kenyan security personnel.[3] Immediately after the sheikh's killing, large-scale riots among the local Muslim population befell Mombasa for the next two days, leaving portions of the city in ruins.[4]

Though Aboud Rogo's killing took place 13 years ago, his legacy still thrives today. Jihadists across the global ideological divide—that is, adherents or members of either the Islamic State or al-Qaeda—continue to regularly consume and propagate the sheikh's sermons, teachings, and videos across social media, including YouTube, Telegram, and TikTok. Long after his death, the Kenyan ideologue continues to radicalize, inspire, and ultimately recruit individuals into violent jihad across Swahili-speaking East Africa and beyond. Much of today's jihadist violence occurs in Africa—the continent has been dubbed the current "epicenter" of jihad.[5] Therefore, it would greatly benefit the wider analytic and academic community, as well

as relevant policymakers and stakeholders, to better understand the exact nature of Rogo's legacy.

Through a combination of his particular skills as a respected jihadist sheikh and the personal connections and networks he fostered through his former students and adherents, his direct influence is apparent across three separate ongoing jihadist conflicts in Africa, including in Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Mozambique. This is to say nothing about his remaining influence on the radicalization and recruitment of others in places without current jihadist insurgencies, such as Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi. As such, Rogo is either directly connected to or in some degree influencing effectively half of the current jihadist theaters on the continent.[6] It is for this reason that observers should pay specific attention to the lasting legacy of one of the most important figures in the history of African jihad.

Aboud Rogo is thus another person who fits Thomas Hegghammer's description of a "jihadi superstar," one of the few people with outsized influence in the global jihadist space.[7] Starting with a brief background of Rogo and his role in supporting the East African jihad, this article then turns to explaining how and why he continues to be so influential so long after his death.

Who Was Aboud Rogo?

MANY DETAILS OF ABOUD ROGO'S EARLY LIFE REMAIN SHROUDED IN MYSTERY. What is clear, however, is that he was born in the mid-1960s in the small town of Siyu on Pate Island in Kenya's northern Lamu County. According to some biographies, Rogo obtained a basic education in Siyu before working in menial labor and pursuing a religious education on Pate Island.[8] An al-Qaeda-affiliated media outlet released a brief biography of the sheikh in 2013, which stated that he had traveled to an unspecified part of the Arabian Peninsula to further his religious studies.[9] However, this account is unique, and the jihadist media outlet likely added it in an attempt to increase Rogo's credentials.

What more analysts seem to believe is that by 1989 Rogo had relocated from Siyu to Mombasa.[10] In Mombasa, he pursued further religious studies before joining the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) in 1992.[11] Muslim political and religious leaders in Mombasa, the informal historical capital of Kenya's Muslims,

had founded the IPK as Kenya's first prominent Islamist political party in response to long-standing communal grievances.[12] Muslims in Mombasa—and indeed along much of the larger Swahili Coast[13]—have long felt that populations in Kenya's upcountry discriminate against them as a result of historical religious and ethnic differences and the legacies of divide-and-rule British colonialism (divisions that persisted after Kenya's independence).[14]

The repressive government of Daniel Arap Moi (president from 1978 to 2002) refused to register the IPK as an official party. Moi subsequently cracked down on its supporters and regularly arrested one of its top leaders, Sheikh Khalid Balala, further exacerbating tensions between coastal Muslims and the Nairobi elite.[15] These moves aligned with other authoritarian policies of the Moi regime to consolidate power and suppress other ethnic groups and political parties for the benefit of his own regime and ethnic constituency.[16] It is within this sociopolitical backdrop that another prominent religious official who supported the IPK, Sheikh Abdulaziz Rimo, began to establish the religious frameworks that Rogo later expanded.[17]

According to the scholar Hassan Juma Ndzovu, Rimo, who received Islamic education in Saudi Arabia, brought a form of strict Salafism to Kenya. He offered many Muslims an outlet for feelings of dispossession and marginalization by the Kenyan state. In addition, he encouraged them to turn inward to Islam and find acceptance in the wider Islamic community, the *ummah*, as the solution.[18]

These feelings of dispossession and marginalization in Kenya are not unfounded. Coastal Muslims, especially in Mombasa, indeed faced land dispossession by upland communities following independence,[19] straining relations between coastal Muslims and the government.[20] Some on the Swahili Coast have also felt that Islam, which populations have practiced along the coast for centuries as a result of historical ties to the Arab world,[21] has been under attack. Christianity had become the dominant religion in Kenya under British colonialism.[22] Rimo used these historical grievances as well as criticisms of the Moi government in his preaching, which gained him a significant following on Kenya's coast.[23] This naturally drew the ire of Moi himself, who had Rimo arrested in 1990.[24]

Following his imprisonment, Rimo founded an insular community, Ansari Sunnah, attracting various individuals seeking to learn more about what he dubbed the "true" Islam. As it insulated itself from broader society, the group also offered Muslims in Mombasa a segregated space wherein they lived more closely to what Salafis consider a "true" Islamic society. One of the men who

joined Rimo in this community was Aboud Rogo.[25] Through these lessons in the Ansari Sunnah community, Rogo learned many of the religious concepts about which he eventually preached so prolifically.

By 1998, Kenyan and American authorities had accused Rogo of assisting in the twin suicide bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam (in neighboring Tanzania). They believed he had organized individuals involved in the plot for al-Qaeda senior leader Fazul Abdullah Muhammad, one of the planners of the attacks.[26] Rogo maintained ties with Fazul, also known as Fazul Harun, in the following years. He took the Comoros-born al-Qaeda leader to his hometown of Siyu in 2001, wherein Fazul married a woman related to Rogo.[27]

While little is known about Rogo's direct involvement in the 1998 embassy bombings, his role in the 2002 Mombasa attacks is slightly clearer. An al-Qaeda suicide bomber detonated himself in a vehicle at an Israeli-owned hotel while other gunmen fired surface-to-air missiles at Israeli aircraft.[28] Authorities allege that Rogo, among others, helped Fazul Harun plan and coordinate those attacks,[29] and they arrested Rogo and three other suspects for their involvement. However, a judge dismissed the charges in 2005 due to a "lack of evidence."[30] Rogo returned to preaching in Mombasa, primarily at Masjid Musa but also periodically at Masjid Sakina, which former Guantanamo Bay prisoner Mohammed Abdul Malik Bajabu also attended.[31]

In 2006, Ethiopia invaded Somalia with U.S. backing to oust the al-Qaeda-linked Islamic Courts Union (ICU) from Mogadishu and other areas of the country.[32] The ICU's youth wing, al-Shabaab, led an insurgency that soon emerged against the Ethiopians and their allies in the Somali transitional government—an effort that continues today. In 2007, Rogo began preaching in earnest about the Somali *mujahideen* (warriors for the Islamic faith and community), referring to al-Shabaab in particular and arguing that all Muslims should support its fight and that "Islam shall prevail in Somalia and the whole of Africa."[33] Rogo himself allegedly attended one of al-Shabaab's training camps in southern Somalia in 2010, according to the aforementioned biography of him by an al-Qaeda affiliated media outlet.[34] The Kenyan ideologue also began recruiting many Kenyan Muslims to join al-Shabaab's ranks,[35] especially in the wake of the Kenyan military's Operation Linda Nchi, its invasion of southern Somalia against al-Shabaab in October 2011.[36] Arguing that the Kenyan army was out to destroy Muslim Somali lands, Rogo lambasted the invasion and called for pious Muslims to help defend their brethren in Somalia while declaring *takfir* (the excommunication of Muslims) on any Muslim

Kenyan soldiers taking part in the invasion.[37] One former al-Shabaab member from Kenya whom Rogo recruited said this exact line of reasoning encouraged him to travel to Somalia and fight.[38]

Around the same time, Rogo became affiliated with the Muslim Youth Center (MYC), which Sheikh Ahmad Iman Ali founded in the late 2000s as an organized network of Islamic sheikhs and educational centers affiliated with al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda.[39] The MYC was influential in recruiting other Kenyan nationals into al-Shabaab's ranks, and Rogo's preaching and lectures were instrumental in this recruitment.[40] Iman Ali joined al-Shabaab in Somalia, having previously studied under Rogo.[41] In January 2012, al-Shabaab confirmed Iman Ali as its overall leader in Kenya, a position he still holds to this day.[42]

In February 2012, MYC publicly changed its name to al-Hijra, meaning "migration," referring to the migrations by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions in the early days of Islam. In jihadist parlance, *hijra* connotes traveling for the sake of jihad, and thus the name clearly highlighted the group's nature as a conduit into the Somali jihad.[43] In the same statement, the group publicly reaffirmed Ahmad Iman Ali as its leader and openly stated it was part of al-Qaeda in East Africa (al-Shabaab having recently made public its affiliation with al-Qaeda).[44] As such, in changing its name and reaffirming its leader as directly part of al-Qaeda, the MYC left behind any ambiguity surrounding its aims and aspirations and became outwardly jihadist in its character. Both the United States and the United Nations consequently placed Rogo under sanctions in July 2012 for his ties to al-Shabaab, the MYC/al-Hijra, and al-Qaeda.[45]

As noted previously, gunmen killed Rogo in Mombasa under mysterious circumstances in August 2012, just a month after nations worldwide blacklisted him for his ties to terrorism. After his death, both al-Hijra and al-Shabaab itself publicly revered him. In its eulogy following his killing, al-Hijra, which former student Iman Ali still led at this time, described Rogo as a "shining example of a true and pious Muslim, unwavering and steadfast in his determination to fight injustices against Muslims all over the world. . . . Aboud Rogo used his unique gift and knowledge of Islam to inspire and inform Muslims all over East Africa."[46] In its statement, al-Shabaab noted that "while Aboud Rogo was not officially a member . . . he, like the rest of the Muslims in Kenya, shared unbreakable religious ties with the Mujahideen."[47] Capitalizing on Rogo's death to inspire more radical Muslims, the group also stated that his killing was "vividly indicative of the kuffar's [infidel's] deep-rooted hatred towards Islam and Muslims."[48]

Rogo's direct influence on jihadist violence in East Africa did not end with his death. Though various jihadist-linked sheikhs were already being killed,

likely by Kenyan security forces, as early as 2012, Kenya launched a wider crackdown on extremist elements that authorities suspected in the country following al-Shabaab's September 2013 attack on Nairobi's Westgate Mall.[49] During this crackdown, security forces raided dozens of mosques and arrested hundreds of suspected extremists.[50] Kenyan security forces violently raided Rogo's former mosque in Mombasa, Masjid Musa, in early 2014.[51] As a result of these crackdowns, many Kenyan extremists, including those who had been students and adherents of Rogo, fled to Somalia or Tanzania.[52]

In addition to his ties to al-Shabaab, Rogo already had extensive ties to the Tanzanian jihadist milieu at the time of his death, primarily through his links to the Ansar Muslim Youth Center (AMYC), many of whose members had also studied under Rogo in Mombasa.[53] The AMYC was responsible for recruiting numerous Tanzanians into al-Shabaab's ranks at this time,[54] while other militant networks associated with al-Shabaab were also active in northern Tanzania in the early 2010s.[55] Kenyan extremists flowed into the Tanzanian jihadist sphere following the 2013–14 crackdown in Kenya, and jihadist violence began to increase in Tanzania, mainly in the coastal Tanga and Pwani Regions of the country in 2015.[56] This unsurprisingly led Tanzanian authorities to engage in their own crackdown on these suspected jihadists—in addition to working with local Muslim organizations to prevent local radicalization and recruitment[57]—pushing these extremists to flee yet again by 2017.[58]

Some of these militants reportedly went to the DRC, where they joined the Islamist rebels known as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), which had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State that year, becoming the Central Africa Province.[59] Others ended up in northern Mozambique's Cabo Delgado and joined a group, Ahlu Sunna Wal Jammah, which locals called "al-Shabaab" though it was entirely separate from the group in Somalia.[60] This group eventually became the Islamic State's Mozambique Province, and some of the Tanzanians who had fled their government's crackdown in 2017 became its senior leaders.[61]

In light of the movement's evolution, Rogo's role in the East African jihadist scene becomes quite clear. Beginning as a relatively obscure religious student and scholar, he transformed into an active member of regional jihadist networks and recruited people into al-Qaeda's jihad in East Africa. His former students and adherents also had a central role in fomenting violence in Tanzania and eventually an indirect role in establishing an Islamic State wing in northern Mozambique. Aboud Rogo was thus one of the most important figures for the global jihadist movement in Africa, especially eastern and central Africa. Unlike other prominent Kenyan sheikhs within al-Qaeda's sphere who

were killed in Mombasa under mysterious circumstances around the same time, such as Samir Khan[62] and Abubakr Sharif Makaburi[63] (both of whom were associated with Rogo), only Rogo continues to have an outsized degree of importance today.[64]

Aboud Rogo's Continued Importance

A VARIETY OF JIHADIST COMMUNITIES ONLINE (AND EVEN SOME NON-JIHADIST Salafist ones) still routinely share Rogo's teachings and lectures across Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Telegram, and TikTok.[65] Many of these videos receive thousands of views and shares, undoubtedly reaching a whole new generation of jihadists and would-be recruits to various groups across eastern, central, and southern Africa.

The reasons for Rogo's enduring legacy appear to be threefold. First, no other sheikh within the Swahili-speaking world was as prolific or as popular as Rogo, making him a member of the aforementioned "jihadi superstars" cadre. Second, his death occurred before the global jihadist movement split between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and his former students and adherents have joined both sides, meaning both global jihadist franchises can claim his lineage. Finally, no group within eastern, central, or southern Africa has any particular Swahili-speaking sheikh with the same pedigree, respect, or profile as Rogo, meaning that no modern-day successor has risen.

A Prolific Orator

During Rogo's time as a prominent sheikh at Mombasa's Masjid Musa (among other mosques in Mombasa, and periodically Nairobi),[66] he was known as a skilled and prolific orator.[67] As such, there exists a wealth of audio and video of his preaching and sermons, accounting for hundreds of hours of content. In conjunction with the vast area of Swahili speakers across (parts of) eastern, central, and southern Africa, this large volume of content can reach an audience across a significant geographic space on the continent.

The messages Rogo espoused also continue to hold a certain weight among Muslims across the Swahili-speaking world today. Capitalizing on a perceived marginalization of Muslims in Kenyan society, Rogo, much like his mentor Abdulaziz Rimo, often spoke about the sense of an increased "Christianization" of Kenya to the political, social, and economic detriment of its Muslim inhabitants.[68] According to Rogo, Kenyan society and its government favored Christians, keeping Muslims economically challenged and politically disenfranchised even though Muslims had ostensibly been the dominant class in Kenya for centuries.[69] This mode of argument aligned with many of Kenya's coastal Muslims, who felt more connected to the various historical Islamic polities along the Swahili Coast than to the political elite in Nairobi, who represented the more recent, colonially created (and largely Christian) Kenyan state.[70]

Going further than Rimo in this regard, Rogo justified violence against Christians, churches, and political officials he accused of advancing this so-called Christianization.[71] Based on Rogo's teachings, this violence was "rightfully" called for as a legitimate jihad to protect the Muslims of Kenya and wider East Africa. Rogo also routinely touted al-Shabaab as vanguards against what he believed was the forced conversion of Muslims to Christianity via policies Nairobi had established.[72] Some Muslims drew Rogo's ire for not being sufficiently harsh against the "infidels" and for complicity in this perceived Christianization of the Muslim community in Kenya.[73]

Rogo's preaching was primarily specific to Kenya. However, the wider messages he espoused, requiring a violent response to marginalization and discrimination against Muslims by Christians—real or imagined—holds broader appeal in other countries and contexts. Both in mainland Tanzania and on the island of Zanzibar, Muslims have also felt varying degrees of marginalization (again, both real and perceived). The Zanzibari population and some Tanzanian coastal communities have for centuries identified with Islam and the broader Islamic world, typically more so than with the various populations on Tanzania's mainland.[74] The widespread advent of Christianity in these regions is relatively new, beginning in earnest only in the mid-1800s via colonial missionaries.[75] Following the unification of Zanzibar and mainland Tanzania (then known as Tanganyika) in 1964, political and social tensions have persisted between Zanzibar and the more populous and Christian-majority mainland.[76] Zanzibar has faced political repression by Tanzania's dominant Chama Cha Mapinduzi, which is officially a secular, left-wing party but in fact often has Christian leadership (although the current president is Muslim).[77]

This backdrop again leaves some individuals susceptible to Rogo's religious framing of regional political tensions and his teachings that urge violent jihad as a means of so-called defense of fellow Muslims.[78]

The same is true of Muslims in Uganda's capital city, Kampala, and in the country's east, who also face a degree of marginalization by Uganda's Christian-dominated government. Ugandan security services have cracked down on certain Muslim institutions and populations in the wake of the War on Terror and Ugandan jihadist violence, particularly following al-Shabaab's 2010 suicide bombings in Kampala and continued violence perpetrated by the Islamic State's Central Africa Province.[79] [80] While Rogo primarily preached in a Kenyan context, jihadist recruiters can and have applied the same arguments and justifications for violence using Rogo's preaching.

For starters, it is not only jihadists who propagate Rogo's message. When looking online, one can find dozens of generalized Islamic[81] accounts across social media, including Facebook, X, YouTube, Telegram, and TikTok, routinely sharing clips of Rogo's lectures and sermons espousing the beliefs described above.[82] For example, though TikTok nominally prohibits his videos for breaching "community guidelines," more mainstream Muslim accounts have published dozens of videos featuring Rogo that garner a combined total of hundreds of thousands of views on the platform (see figure 1).

These videos include Rogo speaking on more innocuous topics, ranging from the importance of studying Islam in today's current society to reliance

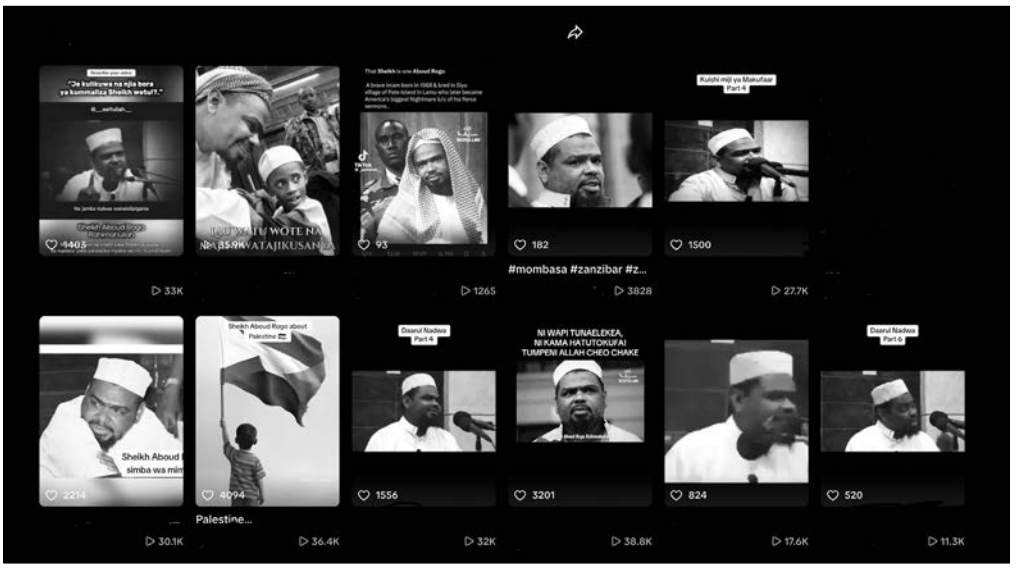

Figure 1: A sampling of videos featuring Aboud Rogo's sermons on TikTok (collected May 2025)

on Allah to overcome one's struggles and even to the importance of Ramadan. Entire lectures by Rogo also appear on Telegram and YouTube. The social media accounts that post this material are almost exclusively Swahili and are naturally catering to individuals across the Swahili-speaking world, including Kenya, Tanzania, parts of Uganda, northern Mozambique, Burundi, Rwanda, and even the eastern DRC, meaning these videos have a wide geographic reach for those who may discover such content online and ultimately find it inspiring.[83]

At the same time, social media channels with direct links to either al-Qaeda or the Islamic State also appear on all aforementioned platforms sharing Rogo's work to this day. For example, al-Shabaab-linked Telegram channels routinely post Rogo's lectures on jihad, fighting nonbelievers, and the fundamental jihadist belief in separation of the world between Dar al-Kufr (infidels) and Dar al-Islam (pious Muslims living under "true" Islamic law). These same speeches by Rogo are also in clips on Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok.[84] One such TikTok account, which is probably linked to al-Shabaab given its proclivity for posting videos from the group,[85] features Rogo speeches on jihad and the Dar al-Kufr vs. Dar al-Islam division in abundance. Another Telegram channel, which posts videos from both al-Shabaab and the Islamic State, hosts Rogo's speeches on the obligatory nature of jihad and necessity of hijra. On a Swahili-language Facebook group that Islamic State supporters run, members likewise quote Aboud Rogo liberally.[86]

Content creators in a very large chunk of Africa, working with hours of freely available content online, are therefore able to create digestible clips of Rogo's radical preachings for viewing and quick consumption by potentially millions of people for little to no cost at all. In doing so, they have not only kept Rogo's legacy alive but also potentially used his lectures to recruit and radicalize an entirely new generation of people into violent jihad.

Beyond the al-Qaeda–Islamic State Divide

Rogo's material is freely accessible online—particularly on TikTok, where creators mix it with more generalized Islamic content as a result of the platform's algorithms. The real-world consequences of this free access became apparent last year when Kenya arrested two individuals who had allegedly recruited people for, interestingly enough, both al-Shabaab in Somalia and the Islamic State in Congo.[87] TikTok videos of Rogo's speeches radicalized at least one of

the al-Shabaab recruits, while they both routinely used Rogo's works in their recruitment activity more broadly.[88] Although ostensibly rival jihadist factions recruited them, the fact that both men could point to Rogo's speeches as a radicalizing factor underscores another key source of Rogo's longevity in the jihadist sphere.

Following the Islamic State's split from the al-Qaeda network and subsequent declaration of a caliphate in 2014,[89] the two jihadist organizations have offered competing models of jihad. At times, they have violently opposed each other, and their respective cadres have battled for influence and control across multiple theaters around the world.[90] As such, both organizations, and their respective branches and affiliates, have largely used their own ideologues, sheikhs, and leaders to promote their own specific brands of global jihad. For example, an Islamic State video will not feature a contemporary al-Qaeda ideologue or leader in a positive light, and vice versa. One set of exceptions exists, however. In their propaganda and recruitment strategies, both groups can claim and use prominent jihadist leaders or ideologues killed before the tumultuous split.

Turning back to Thomas Hegghammer's idea of a jihadi superstar, these men continue to hold outsized importance and relevance within the global jihadi movement, regardless of any current factional splits.[91] For example, members of *both* the Islamic State and al-Qaeda continue to share videos of Osama bin Laden, Anwar al-Awlaki, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi online,[92] and these dead leaders make occasional appearances in official media produced by either global group.[93] That these men were all at one point part of al-Qaeda is irrelevant to today's jihadist scene as both the Islamic State and contemporary al-Qaeda claim to be carrying the torch of global jihad. Rogo is another individual to place on this jihadi superstar list for the same reasons, as discussed above. As a result, he continues to periodically appear in media produced by al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's East African branch, and also routinely appears on the social media channels linked to the Islamic State's so-called Central Africa Province (based in the DRC and Uganda) and Mozambique Province.

Unsurprisingly, Rogo is a regular fixture within al-Shabaab's media and features prominently in any Swahili-language propaganda or Kenya-specific content. This type of content appears to be on a proverbial dial that al-Shabaab can move up or down depending on its needs to reach such an audience, and al-Shabaab has drastically reduced its production of Swahili-language media in recent years. However, when the group does produce Swahili-language material, it typically features Rogo. For example, many videos within al-

Shabaab's "And Incite the Believers" messaging campaign, which was a video series released between 2017 and 2022 showcasing Swahili-speaking foreign fighters from around East Africa, featured Rogo's words.[94] This was also especially true during the lead-up to Kenya's general elections in 2017, when al-Shabaab released two videos featuring Kenyan members of the group lambasting the elections as anti-Islamic, drawing on Rogo's speeches on this very topic to further make the point.[95] In another video related to the 2017 Kenyan elections, al-Shabaab's official spokesman, Ali Mahmud Rage, warned Kenyan Muslims against participating at the polls, again directly quoting from Rogo's speeches.[96] More recently, the group made a 2020 video commemorating al-Shabaab's attack on the Dusit D2 commercial complex in Nairobi the year prior, which again used Rogo's speeches to justify the attacks.[97]

Though to my knowledge no official Islamic State media has featured Aboud Rogo, social media channels linked to the Central Africa Province (ISCAP) regularly promote him.[98] For example, ISCAP previously operated a Telegram channel for its members and supporters that it explicitly named after Rogo and that routinely shared the sheikh's sermons to further inspire and radicalize potential recruits.[99] One ISCAP-affiliated TikTok channel recently used a Rogo speech criticizing democracy to bolster its criticisms of the upcoming January 2026 Ugandan presidential elections.[100] Other Telegram channels or WhatsApp groups used to promote the Islamic State in the Swahili-speaking world also routinely share content related to Aboud Rogo.[101] Members of the Islamic State's Mozambique Province (ISM)[102] are also known to consume Rogo's content. On laptops they recovered from Islamic militants in northern Mozambique in 2021, Rwandan troops found lectures and sermons by Aboud Rogo.[103] The scholars Saide Habibe, Salvador Forquilha, and João Pereira have also found the ISM flooded its social media channels with audio and video of Aboud Rogo's sermons in the past, reportedly using his lectures as material in its own madrasas.[104] The extent to which ISM is known to use Aboud Rogo's material is unsurprising given reports of how influential the sheikh's sermons were to ISM's founders, many of whom were Tanzanian and within Rogo's former milieu, as discussed earlier.[105]

A Lack of Equivalents in Today's Jihadist Space

As noted previously, Rogo was not the only jihadist cleric mysteriously killed in Kenya in the first half of the 2010s. Others, such as Samir Khan,

Ibrahim Ismail, and Abubakr Sharif Makaburi (Ismail and Makaburi being the unofficial successors to Rogo in Mombasa), were also part of the wider al-Qaeda-linked jihadist milieu in East Africa before their deaths in 2012, 2013, and 2014 respectively.[106] However, none had the same rhetorical prowess or network among the region's jihadists as Rogo, and the jihadists therefore have not continuously lionized them to the same degree after their deaths.

Similarly, since Rogo's death, no other prominent jihadist ideologue within the Swahili-speaking world has emerged, leaving a dearth of new voices in this space. The continued relevance of Aboud Rogo's teachings is thus also likely attributable to the simple fact that individuals or groups cannot use anyone else quite as effectively as they can by sharing Rogo's older content to radicalize and recruit.

Both al-Qaeda, by way of al-Shabaab, and the Islamic State, through ISCAP and ISM, have Swahili-speaking sheikhs that sometimes produce content to share for purposes of incitement and recruitment.[107] But while these videos or audios may be effective in the short term for recruiting some individuals, none of these ideologues have achieved sufficient popularity in the Swahili-speaking world to enjoy the staying power that Rogo has. And much as al-Shabaab's Swahili-language media output waxes and wanes, ISCAP is inconsistent in producing propaganda to target a broader East African audience. Though it publishes some Swahili-language material, it still produces most of its local content[108] in Luganda, which limits its reach to Ugandans (I have less insight into ISM's media output in local languages).[109] As such, it is clear that neither al-Qaeda nor the Islamic State are even attempting to find successors to Rogo and are instead content with using his large archive of taped sermons.

It is also quite possible that neither franchise currently feels it has an appropriate successor. While al-Shabaab could theoretically make this case for Ahmad Iman Ali, given his long pedigree of jihadist activity in Kenya and Somalia as well as his personal ties to Rogo, Ali still lacks a certain ferocity in his oratory skills to truly rival Rogo. For the Islamic State, the Swahili-speaking sheikhs in either ISCAP or ISM may also lack a certain scholarly pedigree in addition to lacking Rogo's oratory prowess.

Another potential factor is that Aboud Rogo was most active prior to (and immediately after) Kenya's military intervention against al-Shabaab in Somalia and subsequent crackdowns on Kenyan extremists. This afforded him a degree of freedom (until his killing, of course) that more contemporary jihadist ideologues simply do not have. For instance, more contemporary jihadist sheikhs in East Africa, such as Uganda's Abdul Rahman Faiswal, formerly

of Kampala's Usafi Mosque and himself a former student of Rogo's in Mombasa,[110] have had less ability to freely incite people to jihad and are under more intense government (and often public[111]) scrutiny when making inflammatory remarks. Ugandan authorities raided Faiswal's mosque in April 2018 after he made a series of public pro-jihad lectures, forcing the sheikh to flee the country and cutting short his rise within East African jihadist networks.[112] Ugandan authorities also stated that Faiswal was involved in acts of terrorism and active recruitment for ISCAP, potentially giving him a role similar to Rogo's relationship with al-Shabaab in the mid- to late 2000s.[113] It seems, then, that the lack of any successor to Rogo also likely results from an environment less conducive to such radical rhetoric following East Africa's growing role in the War on Terror.

Conclusion

THIRTEEN YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH, THE KENYAN SHEIKH ABOUD ROGO MOHAMMED continues to be an important figure in the global jihadist scene, especially in the Swahili-speaking world across eastern, central, and southern Africa. Potentially millions of people, both jihadists and generic social media accounts focusing on Islam in Africa, continue to regularly share and consume his sermons, lectures, and teachings in both audio and video formats. Affiliates of both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State share and use his content with the explicit objective of further radicalizing their members and recruiting new ones into their respective folds.

Given that Rogo had direct links to several jihadist insurgencies across Africa, the continent that is today the geographic locus of jihadist violence,[114] it would behoove our wider analytical community to appreciate the sheikh's continued reach and influence. His specific role in the African jihad, arguably beginning in 1998 if not earlier, also underscores the long history of global jihadist organizations on the continent, especially in East Africa. Rogo's history makes it clear that, far from being a new front for jihadists, the current jihadist violence in Somalia, the eastern DRC, and Mozambique is the latest (if perhaps most violent and expansive) effort within a longer history of attempts to establish a foothold in East Africa. In many of these attempts, either Rogo was directly involved or his students and adherents, taking inspiration from his words, carried out his calls for jihad.

While African jihadists continue to revere and follow some of the most prominent global jihadist figures, such as Osama bin Laden, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Anwar al-Awlaki, or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Rogo is one of the few jihadist ideologues, and arguably the only African, who unites all jihadists on the eastern half of the continent regardless of their organizational or ideological splits. More worrying still, even in death, he continues to facilitate the recruitment and radicalization of new jihadists through his prolific online presence.

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108 "Local content" refers to media released directly by the group itself and not through the Islamic State's official channels. ISCAP has recently released media in Swahili (in both Congolese and coastal dialects) and Lingala in the hopes of reaching wider audiences.

109 For example, more recent local media output is largely in Luganda. It mainly decries and criticizes the upcoming Ugandan presidential election in January 2026 as "un-Islamic" and "for the *kuffar*" (infidels), arguing that Ugandan Muslims should not participate. Videos on file with the author.

110 Information provided by Ugandan security source, March 2022; Faiswal was the imam of downtown Kampala's Usafi Mosque starting in at least 2016. Following the raid and subsequent dismantling of Usafi Mosque in early 2018, Faiswal disappeared before being arrested in January 2019 after attempting to join the Islamic State in Mozambique. See "3 suspected Ugandans held in Mozambique over terrorism," *Monitor,* January 28, 2019, https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/3-suspected-ugandans-held-in-mozambique-over-terrorism-1803434.

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Shades of Islamism: A Critical Analysis

Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Walid Jumblatt Abdullah

POLITICAL ISLAM, ALSO KNOWN AS ISLAMISM, IS BOTH A REALITY OF this century and a catch-all label often deployed to delegitimize various forms of Muslim political expression. It has the potency to mobilize supporters and critics alike. In this paper, we explore different shades of political Islam, arguing that it is not a monolithic phenomenon and that it is vital to properly explicate its different shades. We argue for a more nuanced understanding of political Islam by categorizing its varied manifestations. Furthermore, we argue for tailoring policy responses specifically toward each category of political Islam. While states may view political Islam as a security issue, in many cases, such a perception is inappropriate.

This paper contributes to the broader literature on Islamist movements, state-Islam relations, Islam's role in politics, the role of secularism in Muslim societies, and the compatibility of political Islam with modern governance and democracy. Our intended audience includes scholars, policymakers, and religious leaders, particularly those navigating questions of pluralism, stability, and religious authority. We pay close attention to the complex political considerations that drive state responses to Islamism.

While many studies employ various typologies to categorize Islamists, we reject the dominant characterization of Islamists as necessarily power-seeking actors. Oliver Roy, for instance, claims that "Islamists intervene directly in political life and since the 1960s have attempted to gain power."[1] We

align more with the nuanced analysis of Mohammed Ayoob and Danielle Lussier, who dispute the "inactive" nature of Islamists, i.e., the treatment of Islamists as ideologically committed to core Islamist beliefs rather than to political activity. Ayoob and Lussier identify four dynamic categories: vanguard revolutionaries, nonviolent political parties, national resistance organizations, and violent transnational actors.[2] While they define political Islam as the instrumentalization of Islam for political gain, we use the term to refer to individuals and movements committed to belief in the establishment of the Islamic state, broadly defined. Furthermore, we challenge the idea that only Islamists believe in the normative appropriateness of Islamic concepts to solve contemporary problems.[3] In fact, we assert that this belief is widespread among Muslims and is not a unique or distinguishing facet of an Islamist.

We begin by offering a definition of political Islam and the historical context in which Islamism developed. We then consider broader Muslim attitudes toward politics—both secularists and those committed to some form of Islamic state—before narrowing in on a subset of the latter, Islamists, and proposing our novel typology of Islamist actors. We offer these categories as ideal types and recognize that such identities are more fluid and often multifaceted in practice. This is an intellectual exercise in which we reference specific individuals, movements, or groups that embody key aspects of each ideal type category.

However, in doing so, we do not intend this study as a definitive or comprehensive effort to "map" all Muslim political actors in the world, nor do we deny the multidimensional nature of some movements. For example, analysts often treat the Muslim Brotherhood as a monolith, but if one considers the broad array of individuals and political movements this group has inspired and the way many of them have evolved over time, it becomes clear that identity categories such as the ones we propose are neither absolute nor static. Nonetheless, we suggest that this intellectual exercise can inform policy and advocate differentiated approaches toward different categories of Islamism, rejecting a one-size-fits-all solution and noting that not all types of Islamism require a security-driven response.

Political Islam: Understanding the Concept

POLITICAL ISLAM IS A CONTENTIOUS CONCEPT SUBJECT TO VARYING INTERPRETATIONS among scholars and observers. Here, we define political Islam as an ideology that holds that religion and politics are inseparable and that establishment of an Islamic state is a religious obligation of Muslims.[4] Many debate even this definition, particularly the nature and form of any Islamic state, including what it entails and how it should be realized. These debates form the basis of many conceptual disagreements and will be revisited in due course. For adherents, the aspiration to establish an Islamic state lies at the heart of political Islam.

The Quranic concept of *al-Din* underpins this aspiration. It makes clear that Islam is a comprehensive way of life and more than just a religion that tells people about the hereafter.[5] The term *Muslim*—one who submits (to the will of God)—implies a rejection of man-made ideologies. Proponents of political Islam would assert that secularism is a Western concept that arose out of specific historical circumstances.[6] Superimposing secularism on the Muslim way of life would be taking an idea out of context and ignoring the clear Quranic injunctions of the completeness of Islam. This Islamic legal maxim informs the champions of political Islam that "when an obligation cannot be fulfilled without a means, then the means itself becomes obligatory."[7]

Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun), one of the original movements of political Islam, emphasized Islam as a holistic way of life encompassing all dimensions of human existence, including domains typically under the ambit of government. In his understanding, it is not possible to relegate religion to the private sphere as secularism demands, as Islam is not something adherents can practice merely in the confines of their homes and leave out of life-changing realms such as public policy and governance.[8]

The sociopolitical context in which political Islam emerged is also essential in understanding its development. Until 1924, the Caliphate—despite its internal fractures—functioned as one of the last widely recognized symbols of Islamic political authority. The fall of the Ottoman empire, the advent of the modern nation-state in Muslim lands, and colonialism by Western powers introduced unprecedented ruptures. For the first time in Islamic history, there was no unified political authority nominally governing Muslims. More

profoundly, colonialism did not merely alter political control. It was also a totalizing endeavor that brought with it a set of beliefs and worldviews, the most central of which was the ideology of secularism that most Western nations had already accepted as the ultimate political ideal.[9] These ruptures catalyzed new existential concerns among Muslims and shaped the emerging discourse on political Islam.

The political and intellectual crisis that colonialism precipitated elicited a range of reactions from Muslim thinkers. Some argued that the abandonment of the Islamic ethos led to the regression of the *ummah* (community of believers). Within this line of thought, several ideologies emerged. The Salafi-Wahhabi strand advocated a return to the literal meanings, rites, and rituals of Islam as the Prophet and his companions had practiced.[10] Modernist reformers argued that the neglect of independent reasoning, known as *ijtihad* in Islamic jurisprudence, led to the retrograde situation of Muslims.[11] Some of those who emphasized the importance of ijtihad also contended that the failure to keep pace with Western technological advancements left Muslims societies in a vulnerable predicament.[12] The combined effects of colonialism, material decline (relative to the West), and the fall of the Caliphate created the intellectual and political conditions under which political Islam emerged.

As mentioned earlier, the notion of a separation between religion and politics was foreign to the Islamic tradition, and indeed to much of Europe prior to the Enlightenment. In contemporary discourse, the question of whether Islam is compatible with secularism is ubiquitous in intellectual and political circles as Muslims try to reconcile political realities with theological predispositions. Many authors have argued that political Islam is an extremely modern phenomenon.[13] For example, Talal Asad and Humeira Iqtidar argue that Islamist groups such as Jama'at-e-Islami and Jama'at-ud-Dawa in Pakistan are modern responses to state-led secularization efforts.[14]

What Is an Islamic State?

A NOTE IS WARRANTED ON WHAT CONSTITUTES AN "ISLAMIC STATE" GIVEN THE definition of political Islam employed in this paper. The necessity and feasibility of such a state remain debatable. Wael Hallaq argues that an Islamic state is "impossible" to realize in the modern era as the nation-state's founda-

tions, centered on politics and power, are incompatible with the precepts of Islamic governance, which pertain to morality and divine ordinance.[15] On the other end of the spectrum, groups such as Hizbut Tahrir (discussed later in this study) state that it is incumbent upon every Muslim to work toward reestablishing the Caliphate.[16]

Malaysia represents a fascinating case in this regard. While most *ulama* (Islamic religious scholars) in the nation believe Malaysia is an Islamic state, they disagree on what aspects of the state constitute its Islamic nature. Malaysia practices a dual legal system: A modified version of the inherited British secular constitution is the primary legal framework, while a sharia court exists for matters relating to marriage, divorce, and inheritance.[17] There are growing calls by various factions to expand sharia provisions, as most laws remain secular. Yet the claim by many *ulama* that Malaysia is already an Islamic state persists.[18]

Muslim Views of Politics

BEFORE EXPLICATING POLITICAL ISLAM, IT IS HELPFUL TO BRIEFLY DISCUSS THE broader spectrum of Muslim attitudes toward the relationship between Islam and politics, as illustrated in the figure below.

It is possible to broadly categorize Muslim attitudes toward the relationship between Islam and politics into two main camps: those who believe the two are inseparable and those who adopt a more secular stance. While this paper does not focus on secular Muslims, a brief explanation is warranted. Within this category, we may identify two subtypes: hardliners and moderates.

The hardline secularists believe in a version of secularism that is "assertive."[19] Hardline secularists are those who openly and actively restrict the practice of Islam in the public sphere. They advocate for complete privatization of religion and are wary of religious symbols in the public sphere. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's brand of Turkish secularism was a prominent example. Ataturk had a deep disdain for Islam and conventional Islamic symbols. Turkish secularism was famously so militant that it prohibited Muslim women from donning the hijab and replaced the Arabic call to prayer with its Turkish-language equivalent—an act that most ulama widely considered a severe innovation (*bid'ah*).[20]

However, this assertive model of secularism seems to represent a minority view. Most secular-leaning Muslims are moderate and do not display contempt

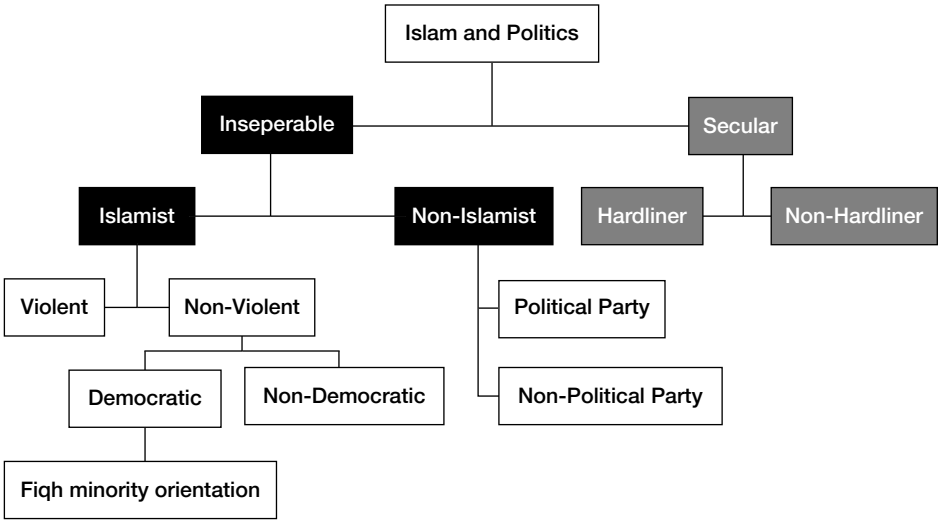

Figure 1. The Spectrum of Muslim Attitudes Toward Islam and Politics

for Islamic beliefs. They believe secularism is more suited for the modern age and Islam should not play a leading role in public policy, especially considering the opportunities that pluralist politics provide for religious minorities. That is to say, many Muslims might wish to avoid living under a strict Islamic state because the Muslim world is itself divided into different sects and movements. For example, non-Salafi Muslims might not wish to live in a truly Islamic state if they feared the Salafists would take control of it and restrict the freedoms of non-Salafists.

Examples of such moderate secular groups in Southeast Asia include groups such as Jaringan Islam Liberal (Liberal Islam Network) in Indonesia, Sisters in Islam (SIS) in Malaysia, and progressive activists in Singapore.[21] What unites them is a commitment to universal human rights, religious freedom, and equality between the various faith groups, including atheists. They argue that a neutral secular state is compatible with Islam and may provide Muslims with greater autonomy, as it guarantees freedom of religion for all faiths. They highlight historical precedents, such as the Charter of Medina—an agreement between the Prophet and his followers on the one hand and various non-Muslim communities upon the arrival of the former in Medina after their migration from Mecca. In their view, even in a predominantly Muslim land, Muslims would be better off under a secular state because they could choose their preferred version of Islam without state interference. Some proponents further assert that no explicit and definitive Quranic or Prophetic injunctions man-

date the establishment of a religious state and therefore there is no prohibition against adopting secularism or a neutral secular state to manage Muslim affairs. These secularists regard Islam as compatible with the contemporary Westphalian state with its foundation of democracy, the rule of law, social justice, equality, freedom, and security for all citizens.[22]

There are also moderate secularists within Muslim scholarly circles. Some are skeptical of political Islam and argue for the acceptance of a secular state. Abdullahi An-Na'im contends that, to be faithful to their tradition in the modern era, Muslims would need to live in secular states that protect freedom of conscience, and only under such conditions can religious choices or practices be meaningful.[23] The influential scholar Bassam Tibi, meanwhile, has been critical of various features that he sees as characteristic of Islamists, including virulent antisemitism.[24] Both An-Na'im and Tibi are moderate secularists, as they do not seek to impose their views on others. They champion their views instead through intellectual platforms and policy advocacy.

We contend that many Muslims fall into another category that is not secular in its ideology per se but is, in effect, accommodating of secularism. Those in the "inseparable non-Islamist" category of Muslims hold that Islam and politics are inseparable, although their views of what this means in practice vary significantly from those of Islamists. We thus treat them as a separate group in our typology (see figure 1 above). These Muslims believe that Islam permeates all aspects of life, but they also do not regard the establishment of an Islamic state as a religious obligation in the way that Islamists do. In this line of thought, Islam can play a role in the public sphere through various forms of nonpolitical *da'wah* (proselytization). Three prominent figures in the modern era that we would categorize in this group are Javed Ahmad Ghamidi (b. 1952), a Pakistani thinker known for his rationalist and modernist interpretation of Islam with significant following among the Pakistani diaspora;[25] Bediuzzaman Sa'id Nursi (1877–1960), a Kurdish-Turkish Islamic scholar and author of *Risala-i Nur*, which guides the Nur movement for spiritual renewal and moral reform;[26] and Fethullah Gulen (1941–2024), a Turkish thinker who was inspired by Nursi and founded his own global Gulen movement.[27]

On balance, one may view Muslim secularists and inseparable non-Islamists as allies and pragmatically aligned in many ways. Muslim secularists categorically reject the idea of an Islamic state entirely, considering it an aberration and harmful to Muslims and Islam, while those in the inseparable grouping do not consider the establishment of an Islamic state obligatory in any way. While both camps may collaborate in advancing Muslim interests

within the social and political domains, they ultimately differ in this ideological regard.

Variations of Political Islam

OUR ESSAY PRINCIPALLY FOCUSES ON ISLAMIST ACTORS RATHER THAN THE NON-Islamists whom we have briefly attempted to categorize. We propose framing political Islam as a spectrum with five categories:

1. deferential passive
2. deferential active
3. Islamist democrat
4. Islamist non-democrat
5. jihadist

The thread that binds all these Islamist groups is their shared belief in the establishment of an Islamic state and the rejection of secularism as a governing philosophy *in principle*. Our spectrum aims to capture a range of views on the immediacy of establishing an Islamic state and the methods that Muslims should deploy in doing so, ranging from the most passive or quietist to the most activist, intolerant, and indeed violent.

However, in practice, some individuals and movements that fall under the first two groups may adapt to living in secular societies without explicitly challenging the overarching political frameworks of these societies, meaning our conceptualization focuses on *ideal types* and what these individuals and movements see as the ideal political order rather than what sort of changes they are agitating for immediately. Moreover, while these categories offer a helpful analytical structure, in reality, individuals and movements often exhibit traits from multiple categories or shift between them as changing contexts and ideological trajectories shape their perspectives.

Beyond this core belief in the benefit of having an Islamic state, Islamists

diverge on many issues, including the ideal extent of Muslim engagement with existing political systems, the nature of democracy, and the relationship with non-Muslims. Importantly, Islamists may belong to any sect, e.g., Sunni or Shia, and may draw from diverse theological orientations, including Salafi, Sufi, or traditionalist strands. This typology focuses narrowly on their orientation toward political order and statehood, particularly the Islamic state ideal. Furthermore, the typology explored in this paper does not attempt to capture other elements of religious belief. As such, it should not be conflated with other descriptive framings, such as "conservative" or "fundamentalist."

1. Deferential Passive

This first category represents the mildest form of political Islam in terms of activism and efforts to transform society along Islamic lines. Notably, many of these actors already operate in Muslim states and societies, which makes it easier for them to justify their passive ideological stance. Others live among Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries, where their passivity stems from various considerations, such as a fear of generating societal and political backlash (including losing political freedoms and opportunities for immigration). Some live in isolation from the larger Muslim communities in their country and lack access and proximity to power and political influence.

In contrast to other Muslims who may believe in the connection between Islam and politics but reject the necessity of a Caliphate (e.g., Javed, Nursi, and Gulen), these Islamists believe that Islam commands the creation of an Islamic state. Yet, while affirming the infallibility of Islam and its comprehensive applicability, including in politics, they refrain from promoting these beliefs in an activist or aggressive manner for practical reasons. Instead they prioritize personal piety. In their view, if most Muslims are practicing, the establishment of an Islamic state will occur naturally. They therefore emphasize encouraging Muslims to adhere to Islamic law in the personal realm, especially emulating the minutiae of the Prophet's practices. In doing so, in their view, Muslims should realize the ultimate goal of the Islamic state, which is to protect and enhance the religious lives and morality of humankind. As a result, such groups become either politically quietist or even apologists for certain regimes. Two significant examples of deferential passive Islamists, although

they are quite different in many regards, are the Jemaat Tabligh and some Saudi Salafi-Wahhabis.

The Jemaat Tabligh, established in India in 1927, is a significant global Islamic group. Its mission centers on promoting individual piety while eschewing politics at the party and governmental levels.[28] Its adherents typically remain apolitical and thus have been given latitude by many governments to continue their activities. In southern Thailand, where many other Muslim groups have to operate with caution, the state supports the Tabligh as it poses no threat to the status quo.[29] Many Muslims throughout the world have had encounters with the Tabligh, either in mosques or in their own homes. The Tabligh sends da`wah missions abroad, encouraging local Muslims to perfect their religious observance by following the *sunnah* (Prophetic example). Interestingly, unlike in traditional da`wah efforts, the Tabligh does not proselytize to non-Muslims and shuns political engagement entirely, which has led to its acceptance in secular countries such as Thailand and Singapore. However, there are notable exceptions to this generally apolitical Tabligh character. In parts of Africa, segments within the Tabligh have transitioned into overt political activism and even militancy.[30] While such cases remain rare within the larger Tabligh movement, they underscore the fluidity of Islamist categories that defy neat classifications.

The other example of deferrential passive Islamists are Saudi Salafi-Wahhabis. Contrary to common depictions that tend to conflate Wahhabism with Muslim terrorism, many Salafi-Wahhabis adopt a stance marked by political reclusiveness. Founded by Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab (1703–92), the Salafi-Wahhabi movement was puritanical and attempted to eliminate alleged ritualistic and theological innovations (*bid'ah*) among the Muslim communities of Arabia. Abdul Wahhab claimed such innovations were not in line with what God and His Prophet had ordained.[31] His legacy was extremely checkered since he issued *fatwas* (religious edicts) that justified violence against fellow Muslims whom he deemed innovators.[32] The Salafi-Wahhabis have a longstanding alliance with the Saudi monarchy, pledging loyalty in exchange for Wahhabism's status as something akin to a state religion.[33] While this royal patronage endures, it does not constitute blanket support. The Saudi state has shunned or even punished Wahhabis who promote political activism.[34]

Nevertheless, for many Salafi-Wahhabis, quietism under a Muslim ruler is not only the judicious choice but the normative Islamic position.[35] The Salafi-Wahhabis draw on various *hadiths* (Islamic oral traditions) to justify their

obedience to a Muslim ruler, insisting that Muslims should be obedient so long as that ruler allows them to practice their faith, regardless of any other shortcomings of the ruler. This stance is not unique to Salafi-Wahhabis and has historical precedent. Among the Prophet's companions, disagreements emerged about how they should react to the tyrannical rule of Umayyad leaders such as Yazid ibn Muawiyah. Abdullah ibn Umar adopted a quietist life, while Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr and Husayn ibn Ali, the latter a grandson of the Prophet, believed it was their religious duty to resist Muawiyah's rule. Over time, Muslim scholars have generally developed a pragmatic stand, typically choosing stability over rebellion and coalescing around the maxim "Sixty years of tyranny is better than a day of anarchy."[36] This quietist position most likely emerged in response to the trauma that the civil wars induced among early Muslims such as Ali ibn Abi Talib (the son-in-law of the Prophet), and Aisha bint Abu Bakr (the Prophet's wife).[37]

In modern times, groups like the Tabligh and Salafi-Wahhabis have extended this quietist position to an extreme by disavowing political involvement or any attempts to challenge state authority. Yet, it is important to recognize that Saudi Salafi-Wahhabis in particular operate within a unique sociopolitical context, one in which the state already embodies many key features of an Islamic polity. Because of this, their relative political quiescence may reflect not only theological conviction but also satisfaction with the existing religious order as they perceive it. In contrast, Salafists operating in more secular or non-Islamic societies may feel greater impetus to engage politically, precisely because the society in which they live is not structured around Islamic norms. This highlights how sociopolitical environments significantly shape the political behavior of these groups.

We also note the dichotomy between Saudi Salafi-Wahhabi postures on domestic and foreign policy. While they maintain a quietist attitude on the domestic front, they have sometimes held an activist stance with regard to foreign affairs, condoning or endorsing jihadist activities overseas. For instance, Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti Ibn Baz (1912–99) issued a fatwa endorsing the jihad against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, thus legitimizing armed resistance as a religious duty for Muslims. His fatwa played a key role in mobilizing support and funding for the mujahideen in the 1980s.[38] The recent social reforms in Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman raise further questions as to how the Salafi-Wahhabi movement will adapt in the long term given the likely tensions between new Saudi state policy and traditional Wahhabi political positions.

2. *Deferential Active*

Deferential active Islamists are primarily within Muslim minority communities in non-Muslim countries. They maintain the theological legitimacy of establishing an Islamic state as a religious obligation. However, they refrain from pursuing it in their immediate, non-Muslim context. They argue that as a minority, it is not obligatory or realistic to achieve Islamic statehood in the immediacy, and many argue that attempting to do so could prove detrimental to the welfare and interests of Muslims and Islam. In this regard, they are not so different from non-Islamists in terms of their willingness to live in a non-Islamic society and respect its laws so long as it protects their religious freedoms. Nevertheless, these individuals can still be considered Islamists insofar as they continue to believe in the superiority of an Islamic state as an ideal.[39] They reject secularism as inherently superior to Islamic rule and, unlike deferential passive Islamists, they actively advocate for policies that they believe will help the Muslim community in their own countries. Moreover, while they reject the more radical Islamist activism of groups such as Hizbut Tahrir that seek to Islamize non-Muslim countries (see section 4, Islamist non-democrats), they support Islamist rule in the Muslim world (e.g., support for the brief Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohammed Morsi in Egypt), viewing the latter as part of a religious duty.

It is sometimes easy to misinterpret these nuances as contradictory, but they actually reveal crucial ideological differences that are shaped by the political and religious conditions in which different communities operate. We contend that deferential active Islamists genuinely believe both that an Islamic state is unnecessary for a Muslim minority in a non-Muslim land and that achieving such a state is a theological obligation in Muslim-majority contexts. The difference is thus contextual, shaped by distinct views of the role and obligations of Islamic governance in different environments.

Deferential active Islamists actively engage in social and political activism to protect both universal human rights and the rights of Muslim communities within existing secular and democratic frameworks. They differ from "deferential passive" Islamists in this activism. A relevant example of such Islamists is in the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association, known as Pergas.[40] The group seeks to develop a resilient, integrated Muslim minority community within a secular, multicultural society through credible leadership of religious scholars. In its 2004 book *Moderation in Islam in the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore*, Pergas explicitly states that although the

idea of an Islamic state is a valid theological position, it is neither obligatory nor realistic for Muslims in Singapore due to their minority status. The organization argues that the focus of da`wah should be preserving and advancing Muslim interests, moral integrity, and active participation within secular and democratic institutions. While Pergas disagrees with secularism ideologically, it accepts Singapore's secular context as necessary for multi-ethnic coexistence and religious freedom. Pergas thus encourages the Muslim community to adapt to modern lifestyles and embrace a moderate Islamic identity that aligns with Singapore's national harmony.[41]

3. Islamist Democrat

The third category is perhaps the most frequently discussed in political science literature. Islamist democrats promote Islam through nonviolent means (with some notable caveats, discussed below) and embrace democracy as a means to this end. They view the pursuit of an Islamic state as a religious duty, especially in Muslim majority countries. Some Muslims may fluctuate between Islamist democrat and deferential active stances if they live in non-Muslim countries. Indeed, both categories are politically engaged. Deferential active Islamists participate in social and political advocacy as civil society actors to strengthen democratic and secular institutions without the intention of pursuing political office, while Islamist democrats actively contest elections, form or join political parties, and present their agendas to the electorate with the long-term goal of establishing an Islamic state.

Islamist democrats operate primarily in Muslim-majority countries, where their prospects of electoral success are more feasible. Prominent examples include the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, or PAS), and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.[42] This category of Islamists justifies political participation by highlighting Islamic sources, such as the Quranic example of Prophet Yusuf asking the king of Egypt for a position in government. By drawing on such precedents, Islamist democrats argue that democratic participation is permissible in Islam.[43] Many such political parties exist in the Middle East, and some of these have won power democratically. Tunisia's Ennahda won power after the 2011 revolution, as did the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, although President Morsi's stint was short-lived due to a 2013 coup.[44]

PAS is emblematic of this ideal type, maintaining a consistent commitment to participate in electoral politics since its inception.[45] Even though PAS has gen-

erally advocated for the establishment of an Islamic state, it has shown enough malleability in its ideological predispositions that it has, at multiple times, entered into formal political alliances with secular and even non-Muslim parties.[46] Since 2018, PAS has doubled down on its Islamic state rhetoric and has adopted an increasingly conservative stance while establishing local electoral strongholds and enjoying some success at the ballot box.[47] Crucially, despite its ideological opposition to the secular government, PAS does not promote overthrowing the government through undemocratic or unconstitutional means.

The example of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and indeed the broader Middle East, is more complex. While many of the movement's advocates focus on securing power through elections, some members of the group have engaged in political violence, and the tendency of authoritarian states in the Middle East to crack down on Islamists has arguably compounded this trend.

The late Egyptian cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1926–2022)—often referred to as the "Global Mufti"—embodies these apparent contradictions. On the one hand, he championed a form of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) for Muslim minorities that emphasized integration and contextual judgment, recognizing that Muslim minorities face unique circumstances that require adaptive religious rulings. Hence, he argued it was not obligatory for Muslims in the West to form an Islamic state based on sharia. With regard to political order *within* the Muslim world, al-Qaradawi was an adherent to the ideas of Hassan al-Banna (1906–49), the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Qaradawi believed Islamist parties should take power through elections. The authoritarian regimes of Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt strongly opposed the Muslim Brotherhood as it presented a threat to the non-Islamist (though hardly secular) system of military rule.[48] Consequently, al-Qaradawi spent much of his life in exile from Egypt. While he never called for jihad against Mubarak's regime, some Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood members shifted into militancy in response to the government's crackdown, while others went into exile but remained committed to advocating for Islamists to seize power peacefully.[49]

Moreover, it is important to again note that Islamist movements and figures can have very different views in the domestic and international arenas. Al-Qaradawi advocated peaceful political participation among Muslims in the Middle East, yet he explicitly supported violent jihad against U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and sanctioned attacks and suicide bombings during the Second Intifada. This reflects a broader pattern among some Islamists who advocate peaceful domestic politics at home while supporting militancy in response to perceived threats from non-Muslims in other countries.[50]

Critics of the Muslim Brotherhood have questioned whether their commitment to elections is principled or merely a means of seizing power that they would then refuse to relinquish. The 2013 coup by members of the Egyptian military cut short Morsi's tenure and thus leaves us only to consider counterfactuals. However, it is probably most accurate to say that the Muslim Brotherhood has been inconsistent in its democratic stance, acting as an Islamist democratic movement at some points while embracing political violence in other instances, thus making them more like the subsequent category of Islamists (non-democrats). This is yet another example of the fluidity among Islamist groups, which defy neat categorizations.

4. Islamist Non-Democrat

For Islamist non-democrats, democracy is anathema to Islam. They regard it as a flawed concept that entrusts governance to the fallible wisdom of the masses and allows easy manipulation by the media, corporate interests, and powerful elites. More saliently, they reject the concept of elections, which the Prophet and his immediate successors did not practice, and forbid partaking in the electoral process. While they typically do not explicitly advocate specific acts of violence in the manner of Salafi-jihadists (discussed further below), Islamist non-democrats seek to achieve their goals through mass mobilization, popular revolution, or even coups d'etat, which are implicitly violent actions that fall outside the norms of electoral processes.

Hizbut Tahrir, founded in Jerusalem in 1953, is perhaps the most prominent example of Islamist non-democrats. The group is committed to the re-establishment of the Caliphate, which it regards as a religious obligation for every Muslim. Its members attribute much of the modern malaise among the ummah to the absence of a central Islamic political authority. Today, Hizbut Tahrir operates in many countries, including Western ones, but with limited popular support among Muslims.

Importantly, Islamist non-democrats are distinct from jihadists since they do not directly engage in violence and their speech often falls under the umbrella of protected speech in liberal democracies.[51] However, there is a need to distinguish between the group's formal stance and the real-world behavior of its adherents. While Hizbut Tahrir typifies nonviolence for the purposes of the categories in this paper, its position along the broader spectrum remains fluid, as members of Hizbut Tahrir or individuals it has radicalized have gone on to

commit acts of terrorism or participate in attempted coups. Moreover, several countries have begun banning the group. Indonesia banned it in 2017 due to its opposition to the state ideology known as Pancasila (which the Indonesian constitution mandates that all organizations uphold).[52] The Indonesian government determined that Hizbut Tahrir's advocacy for establishing an Islamic caliphate and sharia-based governance directly conflicted with the Pancasila.[53] More recently, the United Kingdom banned Hizbut Tahrir in 2024 for its endorsement of and incitement to terrorism.[54]

5. *Jihadists*

Much ink has been spilled on jihadists, and analysts often mistakenly equate the group with Islamists as a whole. The literature on modern jihadism and violent extremism is vast, and entire subfields of security studies and research centers have dedicated themselves to examining its causes and implications. This brief section does not intend to rehash the voluminous literature on this subject but to highlight a few points.[55] First, jihadists believe establishing an Islamic state is necessary and obligatory and consider violent means legitimate and indeed imperative in pursuit of that goal. Second, they represent an overwhelming minority among Islamists. Third, jihadist groups differ significantly in scope and ambition. While al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are pursuing the ambitious—indeed, unrealistic—goal of establishing a global Caliphate, some jihadist groups, such as Hamas, have more limited territorial ambitions. And many groups, such as some in Africa, that emerged as independent insurgencies and later affiliated with al-Qaeda or the Islamic State navigate a complex relationship between global and local dynamics.[56]

Implications of the Analysis

THE ABOVE CATEGORIZATION OF ISLAMISTS CAN HELP INFORM SUITABLE POLICY responses toward the different variations of Islamism. First, as this analysis makes clear, it is neither realistic nor democratic to expect all Muslims to adopt a secular worldview. Political Islam is an enduring reality and is likely to remain so, particularly as secular ideologies such as liberalism continue to re-

veal serious shortcomings and receive criticism from across the political spectrum, even in the non-Muslim world.[57] The rise of populist movements and figures around the globe reflects a broader skepticism toward liberalism, and Muslims are no exception.[58] Furthermore, a significant portion of the ummah deeply believes Islam can and should play a positive role in politics, though not all Muslims globally share this view.

Second, Islamism is not simply a conveyor belt toward jihadism. Empirical realities contradict this erroneous assumption. Many Islamists have remained nonviolent and ideologically consistent over decades, thus debunking the jihadist conveyor belt theory.[59] In fact, many jihadists have animosity toward nonviolent Islamists.[60] The mutual enmity between the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda, for example, is well documented.[61]

Third, the idea that all Islamists are hardcore fanatics resistant to change is also unfounded. Many Islamists are political realists who adapt their strategies to the prevailing political context. Malaysia's PAS abandoned its Islamic state aspirations when it allied with the secular parties Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party) and Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP).[62]

Finally, and most importantly, not all shades of Islamism warrant a security-led response. Each category of Islamism entails different immediate political aims and methods and therefore calls for a differentiated policy approach, as outlined in the following table.

For deferential passive and deferential active Islamists, state intervention is unnecessary. Penalizing these groups would amount to policing thought rather than addressing any illegal conduct. For deferential active Islamists, a social response would be most appropriate to continue engaging with them as civil society actors who accept the political legitimacy and sovereignty of the nation-state.

Political Islam Type	Issue	Policy Response
Deferential passive	Theological	No policy response for secular state
Deferential active	Social	Social response
Islamist democrat	Social/political	Social/political response
Islamist non-democrat	Social/political	Social/political response
Jihadist	Security	Security response

Figure 2. Proposed Policy Responses to the Different Categories of Islamism

Islamist democrats should be treated like any other political party. As long as they operate within constitutional norms and legal frameworks, their participation in democratic elections should be permitted. Banning Islamist parties should not be the first policy option. Excluding them solely on the basis of their Islamist orientation would undermine the principles of pluralism and democratic legitimacy. Furthermore, such social exclusion, ostracism, and marginalization can backfire insofar as such approaches can contribute to individuals' radicalization into violent extremism.[63] At the same time, winning elections does not grant any party, Islamist or otherwise, a blank check. We should judge Islamist parties, like their secular counterparts, not only by how they campaign and mobilize support but also by how they govern, particularly in upholding democratic procedures, respecting the rights of minorities, and protecting the rule of law. Political transitions bring about inevitable new variables, but political leaders and parties are obligated to earn and sustain the electorate's trust after elections. There remains the worrying possibility of Islamist electoral success leading to anti-democratic behavior or authoritarian theocratic rule. Such an outcome is not unique to Islamist parties given other precedents of such takeovers by far-right parties, communist parties, etc. The point here is that, whether in the Muslim world or elsewhere, there is a need for strong institutional safeguards and a vigilant civil society to ensure that political leaders and parties do not subvert democratic processes from within.

To confront jihadists, this paper proposes a triple-pronged strategy. First, prevention ensures removal or mitigation of structural and ideological conditions conducive to radicalization. Second, there should be rehabilitation through deradicalization programs for jihadists in custody.[64] Third, those convicted of violent acts or incitement to terrorism should face legal punishment. This is necessary because terrorism is a serious crime that "carrots" alone cannot address. Military measures may be necessary, as demonstrated in Iraq and Syria, when an international military coalition successfully degraded the Islamic State from a militant group that controlled vast territories to a series of less effective clandestine cells. Similarly, in the years following the September 11 attacks, U.S., NATO, and Afghan military operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan helped prevent al-Qaeda from launching any jihadist terror attack of comparable scale.

The case of Islamist non-democrats, such as Hizbut Tahrir, presents a trickier challenge. Although they do not explicitly advocate violence, their open rejection of democratic norms and the Westphalian nation-state means their ideology seeks to subvert the existing political order, and associates of these

groups have transitioned into jihadism. States must therefore find a nuanced balance between defending free expression and upholding security underpinned by constitutional law and order.

In practice, states can adopt varied approaches. Authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and Central Asia tend to resort to draconian measures against Islamists, such as denying them political space, arbitrarily detaining their members, seizing assets, and even collectively punishing their family members. In contrast, democratic states seem to distinguish between individuals and movements. These governments generally afford individuals their civil liberties while varying their policy responses to Islamist organizations, from proscription (e.g., the banning of Hizbut Tahrir in Indonesia, Germany, and the United Kingdom) to restricted activism with close monitoring (e.g., Australia), to full freedoms (e.g., the United States). Ultimately, the ideational character of these movements should guide appropriate policy responses. These responses should be systematic and community-based, incorporating partnerships with civil society actors across all levels to ensure legitimacy, efficacy, and sustainability.

Conclusion

THE CATEGORIES OF ISLAMISM EXPLORED IN THIS PAPER SHOULD BE UNDERSTOOD AS "ideal" types, constructs that can help delineate distinct trends within political Islam. In practice, however, specific groups or individuals often do not fit neatly into a single category. Their orientations may overlap, shift, or evolve in response to internal dynamics, political context, leadership changes, or ideological reevaluation. Over time, movements may transition across the spectrum, reflecting the fluid and contextual nature of Islamic activism. This paper has outlined different shades of Islamism and called for a more nuanced and realistic understanding of Muslim political activism.

Governments—particularly those upholding freedom of expression—should not reflexively suppress Islamist participation in public life. Such a response would risk violating the foundational principles of liberal democracy and alienate Muslims while undermining potential allies in the fight against true extremism. Many Islamists operate peacefully within the framework of existing political systems, and their ideological commitments are not inherently

at odds with democratic norms. Furthermore, given the variety of worldviews within the Muslim world, there is a pressing challenge to understand these complex paradigms.[65] Muslims generally have different worldviews from non-Muslims. However, governments should not see this as a precursor to Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis[66] but as a pluralism of political thought that liberal democratic societies should be able to accommodate. The challenge for policymakers is to respond proportionately and wisely to different orientations of Islamism, recognizing the ideational, behavioral, and motivational differences between groups.

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Islam as an Instrument of Russia's Colonial Policy

Inal Sherip

Across three regimes—imperial (late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries), Soviet (1917–1991), and post-Soviet (1991–present)—the Russian state consistently institutionalized, coopted, and controlled Islamic authority from the Volga-Ural area to the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Understanding this long trajectory clarifies the nature of contemporary Russian power and its religious policy, including why and how it uses religious infrastructure to legitimize authority and suppress dissent and why independent Islamic scholarship and nationally oriented elites remain structurally constrained. This is especially salient in the fourth year of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, during which time Russia has again leveraged religious narratives and institutions to fulfill its mobilizational and propaganda aims.

The Establishment of the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly

MUSLIM POPULATIONS HAVE LIVED IN RUSSIAN TERRITORY SINCE AT LEAST THE tenth century AD (Islam took root in Dagestan in the eighth and ninth centuries, and Volga Bulgaria adopted it in 922). The early East Slavic principalities' trade and diplomatic contacts with their Muslim neighbors (Volga Bulgaria, the Golden Horde, and Caucasian societies) contrasted with periods of military rivalry with Muslim polities and the gradual curtailment of Muslims' autonomy in the Russian sphere of influence. However, until the late eighteenth century, Russia never exercised any direct, centralized control over Muslims' religious affairs.[1]

The year 1788 marked a turning point in the religious policy of the Russian Empire. Previous methods of engaging with the Muslim population had proven ineffective because governance of the religious sphere had been fragmented and left to the discretion of local authorities. Periods of confessional pressure (e.g., bans on mosques, forced Christianization) had provoked resistance and driven religious life underground. There had been no unified registry or certification of the clergy; communities elected mullahs, but the state did not recognize them. Sharia practices and courts had operated outside the imperial legal framework. Moreover, there had been uncontrolled cross-border religious influence from the Ottoman Empire and Central Asian centers. The Russian state's "missionary policy" consisted of state-backed Orthodox proselytism in the Volga–Ural and steppe via mission schools and brotherhoods, translated catechetical literature, stipends and civil privileges for converts, and administrative pressure on mullahs and mosques. But it had failed to achieve its stated goals: It had mostly produced nominal baptisms with frequent re-conversion to Islam, and there was growing resentment against the government. Similarly, the absence of legitimate intermediaries between the state and Muslim communities had hampered tax collection and military conscription.[2]

There thus arose a need for a structure capable of overseeing the Muslim clergy and implementing policies aligned with state interests. In the spirit of religious equality that began to emerge in the late eighteenth century, the Russian state developed a project to establish a centralized Muslim authority. On September 22, 1788, Empress Catherine II issued a decree "on the appoint-

ment of mullahs and other clerics of the Mohammedan law and on the establishment of a Spiritual Assembly in Ufa for the administration of all clerical ranks of that law in Russia."[3] Thus, Russia founded the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly (OMSA). Its task was to supervise the Muslim clergy throughout the empire, excluding Crimea.[4] The new Muslim spiritual administration was placed in Ufa (within the Orenburg Governorate) rather than in the state capital of St. Petersburg because its designers conceived the model of "official Islam" as a frontier arrangement close to where the empire's principal Muslim communities were concentrated—the Tatars and Bashkirs of the Volga-Ural region as well as steppe populations. Embedding the OMSA within the Orenburg administrative circuit (under the governor-general's oversight) rather than the imperial capital ensured day-to-day control over clerical appointments (e.g., mullahs and qadis), an operational link to local communities, and real influence over religious life in the imperial capital.

Russia partially borrowed the model for this new institution from the Ottoman Empire.[5] The key similarity lay in the creation of a centralized body to oversee the activities of Muslim religious leaders under the control of the secular state—mirroring the Ottoman system, which formally integrated religious institutions into the structure of government.[6] The Russian authorities adopted a hierarchical framework consisting of Islamic legal figures, such as the mufti and qadi, operating under state supervision and appointed these religious officials directly rather than through community election. A significant aspect of this model was deliberate reliance on appointing Tatars and Turkic-speaking peoples, who had already well institutionalized and adapted their Islamic tradition to life within an empire.[7] As a result, the use of Turkic terminology and the intermediary role of the Tatars made the new institution more intelligible and legitimate in the eyes of the Muslim population, creating a stable link between religious life and imperial authority.

Goals and Functions of the Muftiate

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE OMSA WAS A LOGICAL CONTINUATION OF THE RUSSIAN Empire's policy in the late eighteenth century. It aimed to integrate the Muslim population into the administrative system of the state. After a long period of forced Christianization and repression, especially in the sixteenth and sev-

enteenth centuries, a more pragmatic and Enlightenment-inspired approach emerged under Catherine II.[8] Instead of directly suppressing or eradicating Islam, the state chose to institutionalize it and incorporate it into a framework of government oversight.

The Orenburg Assembly became a key element of this strategy. The Russian government subordinated it and, from 1811 onward, placed it under the jurisdiction of the Department of Religious Affairs of the Ministry of the Interior.[9] The state directly appointed the mufti, and the minister of the interior appointed qadis at the mufti's recommendation. The mufti's role became officially known as the mufti of the Orenburg Mohammedan (i.e., Muslim) Spiritual Assembly, and later writers sometimes styled him an "all-Russian mufti" because the Assembly covered Inner Russia and Siberia (although strictly speaking, his authority was not empire-wide, as Crimea and later Transcaucasia had separate administrations).

By design, this structure tethered the Muslim clergy to secular power, making them loyal and making their appointments and policies dependent on imperial oversight. The creation of the Assembly allowed the empire to exercise preventive control over the religious life of Muslims, particularly amid territorial expansion and ongoing rivalry with the Ottoman Empire. It embedded religious authorities, on whom the Muslim population traditionally relied, in the imperial administrative hierarchy. Thus, the muftiate became a mechanism for coordinating the relationship between Muslim communities and the state, ensuring governability, legitimizing imperial authority, and reducing the risk of separatism.[10]

To clarify the degree of this control and institutional integration, it suffices to cite three representative sections from the *Collection of Circulars and Other Directives for the District of the Orenburg Mohammedan Spiritual Assembly, 1841–1901*:

1. "Procedure for Administering the Oath to Mohammedans" (p. 104)

2. "Form of the Oath of Allegiance and of Fidelity to Service" (p. 127)

3. "High Solemnities and Imperial Days on which prayers are offered for the health and well-being of His Imperial Majesty and the Entire August House" (p. 130)

Taken together, these sections regulate oath-taking procedures, standardize formulas of loyalty, and fix a calendar of ritual observance—demonstrating how the OMSA embedded subjects' religious practice in the state's mechanisms of oversight and symbolic mobilization.[11]

Administrative Turn: From Frontier Intermediaries to Domestic Regulators

UNDER ITS FIRST THREE MUFTIS—MUKHAMMADJAN KHUSAINOV (1788–1824), Gabdessalyam Gabdrakhimov (1825–1840), and Gabdulvakhid Suleymanov (1840–1862)—OMSA functioned primarily as a frontier instrument. It certified and dispatched mullahs to the Kazakh hordes, mediated disputes along the Orenburg line, and served imperial objectives in Central Asia and the Caucasus amid rivalry with the Ottoman Empire.[12]

From the 1860s onward, Russia reassigned frontier governance in the steppe to new military-governor generalships and secular courts, narrowing OMSA's external remit, especially after the removal of the Kazakh steppe from OMSA's jurisdiction. As a result, the muftiate shifted its focus to domestic affairs in the Volga–Ural core. This meant routine regulatory functions inside the empire: registering mosques and certifying clergy; overseeing family law such as *nikāh* (marriage contract), *talāq* (divorce), and inheritance; managing and auditing *waqf* property (charitable endowments); supervising curricula and licensing teachers; reviewing petitions and arbitrating intra-communal disputes; and submitting regular reports to the Department of Religious Affairs. In other words, OMSA evolved from an outward-facing frontier mediator into an inward-facing regulator embedded in the imperial bureaucracy.[13]

The selection and social profile of OMSA appointees changed in step. Whereas early muftis were typically Volga Tatar elites with classical Islamic training and local authority, by the mid-nineteenth century, the crown began prioritizing bureaucratic reliability and service credentials over Islamic authority. The Ministry of Internal Affairs consequently preferred administrative candidates (including Tatar landowners) rather than esteemed religious

scholars. Salimgerei Tevkelev, appointed in April 1865, epitomized this turn: A hereditary noble and career military officer, he met the state's expectations for loyalty and administrative discipline. He was later recognized for his service as mufti with several Russian state decorations, including the Orders of St. Stanislaus, St. Anna, and St. Vladimir, First Class.[14]

Imperial Policy on Muslim Education

DURING THE CAUCASIAN WAR OF 1817-1864—IN WHICH THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE'S southward push into the North Caucasus and the armed resistance of local peoples sparked a protracted conflict—the Russian administration placed particular emphasis on the religious education of Muslims. General E. A. Golovin, who commanded the Caucasian Corps from 1837 to 1842, wrote to the war minister, Count Chernyshev, about plans to establish "wherever possible . . . Muslim schools for the training of clergy, through whom we can influence the minds of the people."

In response, Chernyshev supported the idea, noting, "The clergy must be given special protection . . . through courteous treatment, appropriate rewards, and improved financial support, we must seek to align it with our views and interests."[15]

Russia's immediate interests in this war included securing the southern frontier and key passes across the Greater Caucasus, consolidating lines of communication with Transcaucasia (including Georgian lands), limiting the influence of the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Persia, and integrating highland societies into the imperial legal and administrative order.[16] Authorities conceived religious education as an instrument to achieve these aims: by shaping a loyal clergy, standardizing preaching, and instituting control over marital/family and judicial practice, they sought to demobilize resistance, weaken networks of independent religious leaders, and bind communities to the imperial bureaucracy.

In substance, these schools combined basic theological instruction with elements of "civic literacy" necessary for imperial administration: literacy in Russian, arithmetic, and clerical record-keeping (e.g., maintaining vital registers and rolls, formalizing marriages and divorces and inheritance cases), alongside familiarity with required reporting formats and set formulas of loyalty. In

this way, religious education functioned as a tool for suppressing national-liberation movements and incorporating Muslim communities into the imperial order through a clergy that was institutionally dependent on the state.

OMSA in the Late Imperial Period (1880s–1917)

DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR, THE SHEIKH AL-ISLAM OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE (the state's highest religious jurist, head of the ulama, and custodian of fatwas) publicly endorsed the 1914 jihad proclamation. The document cast the conflict as a defensive jihad to protect the Caliphate and Muslim lands and urged Muslims living under Entente control to resist and aid the Ottoman cause. In response, the fifth mufti of OMSA, Mukhammedyar Sultanov (in office 1886–1915), adopted an explicitly pro-Russian stance. He condemned the call to jihad and urged Russia's Muslims to remain loyal to the empire against the fellow-Muslim Ottoman state. For his loyalty and active support of state policy among Muslims, Sultanov received several high decorations, including the Order of St. Stanislaus (First Class, 1888), the Order of St. Anna (First Class, 1896), and, in 1898, the Order of St. Andrew the First-Called.[17]

It is important to consider how Muslim communities viewed OMSA. Overall, attitudes were mixed and pragmatic. In the Volga-Ural core, many communities used the Assembly as a state-recognized channel for registering mosques, certifying clergy, formalizing family-law acts (marriage, divorce, inheritance), defending waqf property, and submitting petitions—thereby checking the arbitrariness of local officials and rival elites. Others criticized it as an instrument of state control, especially as police oversight and censorship tightened. On balance, the institution delivered administrative benefits that many Muslims found useful until the wartime strains and the 1916–1917 crises eroded confidence.[18]

Mukhammed-Safa Bayazitov (1877–1937) was the sixth and last mufti of OMSA, serving from 1915 to 1917, and it was under his tenure that the reputation of OMSA suffered in the eyes of Russian Muslims. Bayazitov was educated at the Muhammadiya madrasa (Kazan) and at the Faculty of Orien-

tal Languages of St. Petersburg University and served as imam and akhund, teaching Islam in military schools.[19] His appointment as mufti, following Sultanov's death in 1915, provoked strong opposition from Muslim intellectuals and members of the Duma's Muslim Fraction, who accused him of being an informant for the Okhrana (tsarist secret police) and of being out of touch with community needs. As a result, an Assembly that the Muslim population had long perceived as a relatively neutral administrative forum became politically contested and lost popular legitimacy. His appointment had come to symbolize a late-imperial crisis of confidence in the model of managing Islam on the eve of the empire's collapse. He was removed and placed under house arrest at the initiative of Muslims in Ufa immediately after the 1917 February Revolution that overthrew the Romanov dynasty.

Stage I of Soviet-Muslim Relations (1917–1926): Tolerance and Pragmatism

IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION, THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT initially demonstrated relative tolerance toward the Muslim clergy. This was part of a broader strategy aimed at exporting the revolution to the countries of the East, many of which were Muslim. However, even during this early phase, repressions against Muslim leaders began to unfold at the local level. One example is the fate of Sheikh Ali Mitaev (1881–1925), one of the most influential Muslim leaders in the North Caucasus during the Russian Civil War.

A Sufi sheikh and respected religious figure in Chechnya, Mitaev entered into an agreement with the Soviet authorities in 1919, offering his support in exchange for the preservation of Islamic autonomy, sharia courts, and religious freedom in Chechnya.[20] Initially, the Bolsheviks accepted these terms, counting on Mitaev's authority among the highlanders to help stabilize the region. Mitaev played a significant role in restoring order—he ended attacks on railways that had been carried out by anti-Bolshevik irregulars, established cooperation with revolutionary committees, and even represented Muslim interests in negotiations with the central government.

By the mid-1920s, however, the Kremlin began to view him as a dangerous political rival because his standing as a Sufi sheikh gave him an independent power base. He could mobilize armed *murids* (Sufi spiritual novices), arbitrate disputes through sharia courts, marshal religious and charitable resources, and negotiate directly with Moscow. In a tightening post-civil-war environment, these functions made him look like an alternative center of authority capable of linking local grievances to broader anti-Soviet networks. On March 8, 1924, authorities arrested Sheikh Mitaev on charges of preparing a counterrevolutionary uprising in the North Caucasus in alliance with Georgian nationalists. They imprisoned him in Rostov-on-Don and repeatedly transported him to Moscow for interrogations, conducting the investigation under strict secrecy. Despite the lack of direct evidence of an armed conspiracy, they declared Mitaev an "especially dangerous element" and sentenced him to the highest penalty: In September 1925, he was executed by firing squad in the central prison of Rostov-on-Don.[21] His death became a symbolic act, the final break between the Soviet regime and those Muslim leaders who had initially supported the revolution, hoping it would bring autonomy and freedom of religion.

Stage II (1926–1943): Mass Repression and Isolation

IN THIS SECOND PHASE, THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT'S RELATIONSHIP WITH ISLAM shifted into open hostility. Under Stalinism—a system suspicious of and hostile to any independent identity or belief—Muslims in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) faced severe repression as both a religious and ethnic minority. The government systematically closed or demolished mosques and arrested religious figures including mullahs, imams, and muftis, then sent them to labor camps or executed them as "enemies of the people."[22]

The state dismantled the legal system of Muslim education, shut down madrasas, and made Islamic instruction impossible even in unofficial settings. Cultural isolation deepened through radical script reforms that severed new generations from their pre-revolutionary written heritage. The state mandated the replacement of Arabic script with Latin and later with Cyrillic script across many Muslim-majority nationalities. It also confiscated books written

in Arabic and Old Turkic from libraries, condemning them as "ideologically harmful."

These repressions reached a climax during the Second World War, even as Stalin simultaneously, and somewhat contradictorily, began conducting new outreach to the USSR's Muslim communities (see below). Amid rising suspicion toward "unreliable nationalities" during the war, the authorities began mass deportations of Muslim ethnic groups. In 1943 they deported the Karachays and Balkars, and in 1944 the Crimean Tatars, Chechens, and Ingush. They sent the Karachays, Balkars, Chechens, and Ingush chiefly to the Kazakh and Kyrgyz republics and sent the Crimean Tatars to the Uzbek republic, while sending contingents to Kazakhstan and Tajikistan as well.[23] These operations, which they carried out under the pretext of "collaboration with the enemy," involved brutal violence and resulted, in aggregate across deported populations, in hundreds of thousands of deaths from exposure, disease, and starvation both during transportation and in special-settlement regimes.[24] By the end of this period, the Soviet Union had not only repressed Islam but driven it from public life—as a religion, a culture, and a form of collective identity.

Stage III (1943–1988): Revival under State Control

EVEN AS SOME MUSLIM MINORITIES SUFFERED HEAVILY DURING THE WAR, IN 1943, Joseph Stalin ordered the establishment of a centralized body for managing Islam in Central Asia—the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (Russian: Духовное управление мусульман Средней Азии и Казахстана, commonly known as SADUM). At the Muslim Congress in Tashkent in October 1943, Muslim leaders called on believers to fight the Nazis; under the banner of patriotism, SADUM raised funds, food, and clothing and provided support to soldiers' families. For his efforts, Sheikh Eshon Babakhan, the first chairman of SADUM, received the Order of the Red Banner of Labor in 1955.[25]

At first glance, this wartime return to legalized Islamic structures seems to contradict the peak repressions and deportations of 1943–1944. In reality, both trends unfolded simultaneously because the state changed the way it

managed religion. During wartime, it treated any uncontrolled religious activity as a security risk and potential conduit for enemy influence (hence the deportations), yet the leadership also recognized that it could mobilize the "Islamic factor" for patriotism at home and for messaging with Muslim countries abroad. In practice, the security and religious-administrative apparatus inverted much of the prewar approach: whereas the NKVD had earlier focused on recruiting already-established clerics, the wartime and postwar pattern prioritized recruiting politically reliable candidates first and then sending them into the few permitted Islamic schools—institutions themselves supervised within the state-security orbit—so that an officially loyal religious elite would emerge from within the system. This shift cleared space by purging or marginalizing prewar, independent religious networks and advancing cadres that Russian leaders had structurally embedded in the new order.[26]

The USSR formalized four territorial Muslim spiritual administrations: the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (1943), the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the North Caucasus (1944), the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Transcaucasia (1944), and—based on the earlier Central Spiritual Administration—the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the European Part of the USSR and Siberia (reorganized and renamed in 1948). Although it officially presented these bodies as independent, they functioned under strict supervision by the state's Council for Religious Cults (from 1944) and, after 1965, its Council for Religious Affairs under the USSR Council of Ministers.[27]

In practice, the leadership of all four administrations operated under constant oversight. For example, the head of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the European Part of the USSR and Siberia (Ufa) was required to

- submit twice-monthly reports to the Commissioner of the Council for Religious Affairs;
- seek approval for personnel appointments within the administration; and
- obtain authorization for travel outside Ufa.[28]

For decades, the only functioning Muslim educational institution in the USSR was the Mir-i-Arab madrasa in Bukhara—an early-modern institution that reopened in 1946 under SADUM. Mir-i-Arab belongs to the Sunni tradi-

tion and follows the Hanafi *madhhab* (school of jurisprudence). Later, the Barakhan madrasa in Tashkent opened as a second step in this supervised revival, but it operated only from 1956 to 1961. Education remained elite and tightly controlled. Admission to a madrasa generally required cooperation with state security, as former mufti and Chechen Republic President Akhmad Kadyrov acknowledged, for example. Among the graduates of Mir-i-Arab were many future state and religious leaders of the post-Soviet space, including Ravil Gaynutdin, Usmankhan Alimov, Allahshukur Pashazade, Ratbek Nysanbayev, Talgat Tadzhuddin, and Sheikh Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad-Yusuf. Foreign students also attended; the first foreign student was reportedly Abdukadir Aminov of China.[29]

Post-Soviet Period

WITH THE COLLAPSE OF THE USSR, THE PEOPLES OF THE FORMER EMPIRE—ESPECIALLY in the Muslim republics—gained hope for genuine freedom of religion, national self-determination, and democratic change. However, the reality proved different. The Kremlin simply adapted old colonial methods to new conditions, continuing to use Islam not as a spiritual value but as a tool of political control and influence. This was especially evident during the Chechen wars (1994–1996 and 1999–2009).

The Russian leadership, which had long-standing and strong ties in the Islamic world, deliberately worked to discredit the national liberation movement of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI). Using these connections, Moscow not only blocked all ChRI attempts to gain international support but also crafted a narrative portraying the Chechen resistance as a terrorist movement. While Chechens fought for their independence and their right to live freely, the global—including Muslim—public began to see them solely as "radicals" and "extremists." Chechen leaders believed in Muslim solidarity and expected the Islamic world to raise its voice in defense of a people subjected to genocide and occupation, but Muslims cruelly dashed these naive hopes. In March 2005, Russian special services assassinated the legitimate president of the ChRI, Aslan Maskhadov—yet just two months later, in June of that year, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) granted Russia observer status.[30]

This was an overt signal: Despite the OIC's declared principles of anti-colonialism and support for Muslim peoples, the Islamic world had chosen to side with the Kremlin—a state that was openly destroying a Muslim region and its political elite. The OIC did not even grant the ChRI observer status although it met all formal criteria. Moreover, at Russia's initiative, it pushed Chechen resistance beyond the bounds of legitimacy, framing the effort as a "global security threat," and viewed the movement's leaders no longer as political representatives but as terrorists. Thus, Moscow not only solidified its position in the Islamic world but also used religious diplomacy to achieve complete isolation of the Chechen resistance. This episode became a symbol of a new stage in colonial policy: religion was no longer simply a tool of domestic control but now also a key tool in the service of Kremlin geopolitics. For those who had hoped for solidarity and support, it marked a period of bitter disappointment and the realization that a more powerful player could weaponize even the Islamic world against them if it served that player's interests.

Present Day

IN 2024, RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN ARRIVED IN GROZNY FOR THE ceremonial opening of one of the largest mosques in the region. The head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, and Chief Mufti Salah Mezhiev accompanied him, reporting to the president that 1,461 mosques were functioning in Chechnya and another 115 were under construction. According to official statistics, Chechnya's population in 2024 was 1,552,866. However, independent estimates suggest that over recent decades, 30%–50% of the population has left the republic due to wars, political repression, poverty, and lack of opportunities.[31] In response to this report, Putin expressed gratitude to the clergy for the "defense of Russia's interests" and, addressing the mufti directly, said, "This is your work, your mission before all our people. You are doing a common cause of enormous importance, no less important than what we saw at the training ground."[32]

Putin's words were telling: Why, in Putin's view, is this "no less important than . . . the training ground"? The Kremlin's political logic relies on security services to shape a cadre of state-managed clergy who—drawing on religious training—select Qur'anic verses and hadiths to legitimate the state's posi-

tion in the eyes of believers. In the context of the war against Ukraine, this role has been especially visible: the mufti of Chechnya, Salah-Haji Mezhiev, publicly called the war a "jihad," "a war for the Prophet and for Islam," and framed Chechen participation as "jihad in the path of God."[33] Supporters of the authorities have invoked precedents from early Islamic history (including analogies to Muslims acting under a Christian ruler, the Negus of Abyssinia), prompting theological debate about whether such a jihad is admissible.[34]

In the Chechen context, critics argue that this analogy does not resolve core contradictions. In the 1990s, Chechen leaders declared jihad against Russia, and part of the population still does not regard the present political arrangement as true reconciliation. There is consequently a persistent distrust of the current mufti among regime opponents, who see his rhetoric as an instrument of state mobilization rather than religious service.[35] Moreover, for many Chechens, the original war is not "over": Akhmed Zakayev leads a government in exile that remains active, and in the first days after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it publicly called for organizing and coordinating Chechen volunteer formations on Ukraine's side.[36] Chechens from the diaspora—especially across Europe and, in some cases, Turkey and the broader Middle East—joined or reinforced units identified with the Ichkerian movement.[37] Against this tide of renewed mobilization and solidarity with Ukrainians against a common adversary, Mezhiev's agitational appeals have had limited persuasive power.

There is also a striking disparity in how the contemporary Russian state treats Islam, which Putin's 2024 visit to Grozny underscored: Whereas Chechnya has more than a thousand mosques, per official statistics, only five official mosques serve Moscow's estimated 4 million Muslims.[38] This disproportion indicates the federal government's particular approach to religious policy in Chechnya. In a region that remains among Russia's leaders in terms of federal subsidies, unemployment, corruption, human rights violations, and acute shortages of quality healthcare and education, the emphasis is not on solving social problems but on the demonstrative construction of religious infrastructure. This turns Islam into a tool for legitimizing power and suppressing dissent, and the clergy into agents of the central government, reproducing the logic of imperial and Soviet colonial policy.

More broadly, the pattern reflects a segmented "confessional management" model in which the state effectively parcels the country into religiously coded regions. Islam is instrumentalized in the North Caucasus to stabilize loyal elites, while the capital is symbolically reserved for the primacy of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Given the long-standing, documented ties between

senior ROC hierarchs and state security organs,[39] the authorities are loath to permit high-profile mosque construction in Moscow, treating it as a reputational blow to the ROC's social preeminence. In practice, resistance to new mosques becomes a channel through which the ROC accrues influence in urban protest moods: It cultivates fear that a mosque will anchor migrant communities, alter the city's ethnic balance, and signal a departure from the "traditional" order. In this narrative, the mosque functions as a visible marker of change, which the ROC uses to reaffirm its centrality in Russia's civil religion.

One of the most illustrative examples of how state authorities allegedly deploy agents and embed them in the religious sphere is Akhmad Kadyrov (1951–2004), the former president of the Chechen Republic who defected to the Russian government at the outbreak of the Second Chechen War. Many consider him a traitor to the Chechen people and his original cause. In an alternative reading, some analysts argue there was no "transformation" at all: From the very start of his religious training—entering a madrasa in late-Soviet Central Asia—he had agreed to cooperate with state security and deliberately embedded himself in the religious sphere. Thereafter, his biography appeared as a sequenced project in which key steps reflected the interests of the security services. Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev publicly alleged in 2004 that "since 1981 Kadyrov cooperated with the KGB," a conclusion he said arose after Ichkerian forces seized Grozny in 1996 and obtained KGB/FSB files.[40]

The milieu in which Kadyrov studied was itself under tight Chekist oversight. Rudnik (Abdul-Rashid) Dudaev was a career officer who rose from a USSR KGB colonel to an FSB major general. Authorities regarded him as a leading specialist on Islam after he spent years supervising Islamic organizations in the Uzbek SSR, precisely when Kadyrov was enrolled at Mir-i-Arab and the Tashkent Islamic Institute. Kadyrov later brought him into Grozny, first as Secretary of the Chechen Security Council (February 2001–November 2002) and then as head of the administration's security apparatus.[41]

In this logic, Kadyrov's subsequent shift to the Kremlin's side was not treachery or betrayal but the fulfillment of his original assignment. For his service to Moscow, he received the title Hero of the Russian Federation. After he was assassinated on May 9, 2004, the state posthumously awarded him the Hero's star, and commemorations followed that year in Moscow—including a street named after him and the erection of a monument in Moscow. Within this interpretation, these actions signified not a celebration of his "betrayal" but the canonization of a model "loyal" Muslim leader whose primary allegiance is to the Russian state.[42]

Conclusion

THE HISTORY OF RUSSIAN GOVERNMENTS' RELATIONSHIP WITH ISLAM IS A HISTORY of systematically using religion as a tool of colonial control. From the Tsarist Empire through the Soviet period and into modern post-Soviet Russia, the central government has consistently exercised close scrutiny and strict control of Islamic clergy and religious institutions. The Soviet Union destroyed the traditional Muslim intellectual infrastructure, closing madrasas, suppressing religious literature, and severing connections to the broader Muslim world. In that infrastructure's place, it built a new system—a managed and "safe" Islam grooming clergy under the watchful eye of security services. The Mir-i-Arab madrasa and its graduates became part of this system; it was they who generally assumed key posts in the spiritual administrations of the USSR, and later in the independent republics.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Muslim republics formally gained independence and began building their own political narratives based on ideas of national revival, sovereignty, and identity. However, the religious sphere in these countries remained largely under Moscow's control. Many religious leaders—from Central Asia to the Caucasus—have ties to the FSB (formerly the KGB) or are direct products of religious institutions that the security services created and oversee. These figures continue to advance policies beneficial to the Russian state, discrediting independent religious movements and hindering the development of a truly independent Islamic theology and nationally oriented spiritual elite. Thus, despite formal independence, the religious sphere in the post-Soviet republics remains heavily colonized.

Islam could have become a source of national mobilization and cultural sovereignty. Instead, Russia has turned it into a tool of manipulation, suppression, and integration into the framework of the "Russian world." Control over the religious space gives the Kremlin not only symbolic but real power in Muslim regions. It enables manipulation of mass sentiment, suppression of protest potential, and the redirection of religious feeling toward loyalty to Moscow rather than local institutions. This is the modern form of colonialism—soft, institutional, but no less effective. Islam in the post-Soviet republics continues to be not a sovereign force but a tool in someone else's geopolitical game.

From the standpoint of canonical Islamic tradition, "Russian Islam" represents in many ways a deviation or even an innovation. Yet it has become so deeply rooted as to become an integral part of the religious identity of Russian

Muslims. As Gustave Le Bon aptly observed, "If it is difficult to impose a new idea, it is no less difficult to destroy an old one."[43] The paradox lies in the fact that what originally developed as a tool of colonial control has over time become a recognized and stable tradition. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to speak of any fundamental change in Islam in Russia today. Rather, one might speak of the potential emergence of more morally authoritative and respected religious leaders—not appointed by the state but representing the believers themselves.

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