

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point



# CTCSENTINEL

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FEATURE ARTICLE

## NYPD vs. Revolution Muslim

The inside story of how the NYPD defeated the radicalization hub  
JESSE MORTON AND MITCHELL SILBER

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## Five Years After the Boston Marathon Bombing

WILLIAM WEINREB AND HAROLD SHAW

# Contents

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## FEATURE ARTICLE

### 1 NYPD vs. Revolution Muslim: The Inside Story of the Defeat of a Local Radicalization Hub

JESSE MORTON AND MITCHELL SILBER

---

## INTERVIEW

### 8 A View from the CT Foxhole: Five Years After the Boston Marathon Bombing

NICHOLAS TALLANT

---

## ANALYSIS

### 15 The Islamic State's Lingering Legacy among Young Men from the Mosul Area

SCOTT ATRAN, HOSHANG WAZIRI, ÁNGEL GÓMEZ, HAMMAD SHEIKH, LUCÍA LÓPEZ-RODRÍGUEZ, CHARLES ROGAN, AND RICHARD DAVIS

### 23 Challenging the ISK Brand in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Rivalries and Divided Loyalties

AMIRA JADOON, NAKISSA JAHANBANI, AND CHARMAINE WILLIS

### 30 The British Hacker Who Became the Islamic State's Chief Terror Cyber-Coach: A Profile of Junaid Hussain

NAFEES HAMID

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## FROM THE EDITOR

Between 2006 and 2012, two men working on opposite sides of the struggle between global jihadis and the United States faced off in New York City. Jesse Morton was the founder of Revolution Muslim, a group that proselytized—online and on New York City streets—on behalf of al-Qa`ida. Mitchell Silber led efforts to track the terrorist threat facing the city as the director of intelligence analysis for the NYPD. After serving a prison sentence for terrorist activity, Morton now works to counter violent extremism. In our feature article, they tell the inside story of the rise of Revolution Muslim and how the NYPD, by using undercover officers and other methods, put the most dangerous homegrown jihadi support group to emerge on U.S. soil since 9/11 out of business. As the Islamic State morphs into a ‘virtual caliphate,’ their case study provides lessons for current and future counterterrorism investigations.

Five years ago this month, terror came to Boston, and Boston stood strong. Nicholas Tallant interviews William Weinreb and Harold Shaw on the lessons learned. Weinreb stepped down as Acting United States Attorney for the District of Massachusetts in January 2018. He was the lead prosecutor of the 2015 investigation and trial of Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. Shaw has served as the Special Agent in Charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Boston Division since 2015.

Between July and October 2017, a team of researchers conducted field interviews with young Sunni Arab men coming out from under Islamic State rule in the Mosul area. The resulting study by Scott Atran, Hoshang Waziri, Ángel Gómez, Hammad Sheikh, Lucía López-Rodríguez, Charles Rogan, and Richard Davis found that “the Islamic State may have lost its ‘caliphate,’ but not necessarily the allegiance of supporters of both a Sunni Arab homeland and governance by sharia law.” Amira Jadoon, Nakissa Jahanbani, and Charmaine Willis examine the evolving rivalry between the Islamic State and other jihadi groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Nafees Hamid profiles Junaid Hussain, a hacker from the United Kingdom, who until his death in August 2015 was the Islamic State's most prolific English-language social media propagandist and terror ‘cybercoach.’

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## CONTACT

Combating Terrorism Center

U.S. Military Academy

607 Cullum Road, Lincoln Hall

West Point, NY 10996

Phone: (845) 938-8495

Email: [sentinel@usma.edu](mailto:sentinel@usma.edu)

Web: [www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/)

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*Cover: New York City Police Department*

*Counter Terrorism Unit officers patrol in*

*Times Square on May 5, 2010. (Timothy A.*

*Clary/AFP/Getty Images)*

# NYPD vs. Revolution Muslim: The Inside Story of the Defeat of a Local Radicalization Hub

By Jesse Morton and Mitchell Silber

**Between 2006 and 2012, two men working on opposite sides of the struggle between global jihadis and the United States faced off in New York City. One was the founder of Revolution Muslim, a group which proselytized—online and on New York streets—on behalf of al-Qa`ida. The other led efforts to track the terrorist threat facing the city. Here, they tell the inside story of the rise of Revolution Muslim and how the NYPD, by using undercover officers and other methods, put the most dangerous homegrown jihadi support group to emerge on U.S. soil since 9/11 out of business. As the Islamic State adjusts to its loss of territory, this case study provides lessons for current and future counterterrorism investigations.**

The Revolution ended on a dusty street outside a mosque in Casablanca, Morocco. The sun was setting in late May 2011 when Moroccan police cleared the streets and stopped and arrested Younus Abdullah Muhammad (aka Jesse Morton, the co-author of this article) as he was on his way home to his wife and two young sons. The officers told the man who had been one of the most prolific recruiters for al-Qa`ida in the United States, “You have a problem. It is not with Morocco but with America. You are wanted as American al-Qa`ida, and we’re sending you home.”<sup>1</sup> A few months earlier, a jury in the Eastern District of Virginia had indicted Younus Abdullah Muhammad for incitement to terrorism, and the United States had requested his extradition from Morocco.<sup>2</sup>

The indictment of Younus Abdullah Muhammad capped a six-year international investigation that began in New York City but touched four continents. It required the deployment of four deep undercover officers, a team of detectives, intelligence analysts, and confidential informants as well as close partnerships with multiple federal agencies and international allies.<sup>3</sup> It was an investigation that co-author Mitchell Silber supervised for the New York City Police Department Intelligence Division.

The disruption and destruction of the Revolution Muslim terror network was of critical importance. Through its violent ideology

*Jesse Morton was the founder of Revolution Muslim and a former jihadi extremist. After serving a prison sentence for terrorist activity, he is now an executive officer at Parallel Networks, a United States-based nonprofit dedicated to combating violent extremism. Mitchell D. Silber is the former Director of Intelligence Analysis at the New York City Police Department and is currently an adjunct professor at Columbia University’s graduate School for Public and International Affairs.*

and prowess in radicalization and recruitment in the West, the network was connected to almost 20 American and British terrorists, with plots that included a September 2011 attempt to fly a remote-controlled plane strapped with explosives into the Pentagon, a March 2010 plan to kill a Swedish cartoonist who satirized the Prophet Muhammad by Colleen LaRose (aka Jihad Jane), the May 2010 stabbing of a British member of Parliament, a Christmas bomb plot in 2010 against the London Stock Exchange, the January 2009 targeting of the Chabad-Lubavitch headquarters in Brooklyn, death threats against the creators of South Park in April 2010, and a November 2011 lone-actor bomb plot in New York City.<sup>4</sup> One member of the Revolution Muslim network was killed in a drone strike in Yemen, where he had joined al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Several attempted to leave the United States to fight for al-Qa`ida Core and al-Shabaab between 2007 and 2011, and some joined the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria during 2013 and 2014.<sup>5</sup> All in all, there were at least 15 plots, arrests, or kinetic military actions related to members of the Revolution Muslim network worldwide.<sup>6</sup>

And at the center of Revolution Muslim was its founder and leader, Younus Abdullah Muhammed, aka Jesse Morton. As U.S. Attorney Neil MacBride noted in 2012, “Jesse Morton operated Revolution Muslim to radicalize those who saw and heard his materials online and to incite them to engage in violence against those they believed to be enemies of Islam. We may never know all of those who were inspired to engage in terrorism because of Revolution Muslim, but the string of recent terrorism cases with ties to Morton’s organization demonstrates the threat it posed to our national security.”<sup>7</sup>

Revolution Muslim was a virtual terrorist group before the term ‘virtual caliphate’ was used by some to describe the Islamic State following its loss of territory in Iraq and Syria. As a result, analyzing the history, operations, and means employed by the New York City Police Department (NYPD) in thwarting Revolution Muslim offers essential insights in understanding the challenges now presented by the Islamic State.

The NYPD Intelligence Division’s effort to disrupt, dismantle, and destroy the Revolution Muslim network and radicalization hub was multi-faceted and required a sustained effort over more than six years. It is useful to examine this effort by breaking it down into five different phases: 1) Identification phase—detecting the threat/network; 2) Investigation and Penetration phase—beginning the investigation; 3) Intelligence Collection and Analysis phase—understanding the threat; 4) Crushing the Network phase—arresting and prosecuting; and 5) Loose Ends phase—pursuing members on the periphery of the network who later activated. At a time when some believe the Islamic State appears to be morphing into a virtual caliphate, it is the authors’ hope that this analysis provides lessons for future counterterrorism efforts.

## 1. Identification Phase: Detecting the Threat/ Network through Digital HUMINT

Starting from scratch in late 2002 with little experience or know-how, the NYPD created the first “cyber intelligence unit” in any metropolitan police force anywhere in the world. The Intelligence Division had learned quickly that the internet was becoming an important tool of terrorist organizations. Al-Qa`ida and its affiliates were beginning to communicate their ideology digitally, and these messages were translated into English and shared via online discussion boards. The internet was rapidly becoming a source of radicalization, a place where already radicalized individuals around the world could communicate securely with one another in online “echo chambers,”<sup>a</sup> forming “virtual” jihadi clusters. The internet had also become a threatening source of information on bomb-making material, explosive devices of all kinds, and manufacturing techniques, thus obviating the need to travel to locations like Afghanistan for this type of training.

As a result, over time, the NYPD developed a cadre of detectives, fluent in a wide range of languages from Arabic to Urdu, who spent their days online looking for postings and websites that promoted terrorism. Because of their diverse ethnic backgrounds and native language capabilities, they could interact under ‘legends’<sup>b</sup> or fake identities and communicate with aspiring terrorists in a convincing way, even in private chatrooms like Telegram predecessor Paltalk. These “digital undercover officers” would identify persons of concern, and if investigative thresholds were met, an inquiry would begin involving the digital undercover, a civilian intelligence analyst, and a detective working as a team on the case.

It was one of these teams that in December 2007 detected the split within a New York City-based Islamist organization, the Islamic Thinkers Society (ITS), which gave rise to Revolution Muslim. Younus Abdullah Muhammed along with Youssef al-Khattab split off from ITS to create the new group because they felt the Islamic Thinkers Group was not extreme or active enough.<sup>8</sup>

The NYPD had been closely monitoring ITS activities both online and in New York City. ITS was essentially the U.S. branch of a salafi-jihadi support group called al-Muhajiroun, which had been banned by the British government in the wake of the July 7, 2005, London bombings.<sup>9c</sup>

Largely unwelcome in New York City mosques, ITS organized provocative events, like the desecration of the American flag, in neighborhoods populated by a Muslim majority as well as in public

spaces such as Times Square.<sup>d</sup> The group operated with impunity in the United States and was perceived as an extreme fringe group.

As an NYPD intelligence report noted at the time, the split between ITS and Revolution Muslim concerned the NYPD, which correctly understood the fracture as a faultline that could result in an even more extreme splinter organization. NYPD Intelligence Division analysts noticed at the time that ITS had begun “to fragment into a handful of small, overlapping groups, most of whom [were] distancing themselves from ITS leadership.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the NYPD team assessed that “former members of ITS who are distancing themselves [from the group] are inherently more volatile and pose a greater threat to security.”<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Investigation and Penetration Phase: Beginning the Investigation

When it came time to open a new investigation, legal oversight and approval was crucial. The NYPD is bound by the U.S. Constitution and Federal Court Guidelines called the Handschu Guidelines; these provide the overarching boundaries within which the NYPD and Intelligence Division leadership is obligated to work. Legal staff, including the Deputy Commissioner of Legal Matters, were required to provide final approval to open any new investigation regarding “political activity” when it was determined that a group or individual’s activity crossed the legal threshold.

As Revolution Muslim finalized its split with ITS, the NYPD opened up an active investigation into the group because of the “reasonable suspicion of links to unlawful activity,” as per the Handschu regulations.<sup>12</sup> Once this occurred in early 2008, the NYPD could begin the process of inserting a deep undercover officer or confidential informant into Revolution Muslim. One NYPD undercover officer had already penetrated ITS by this time. ITS and Revolution Muslim were two of the highest profile investigations within the NYPD Intelligence Division between 2005 and 2011.<sup>13</sup>

The NYPD Intelligence Division Undercover (UC) program, whose origins date back to Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt and the fight against the Black Hand crime syndicate in 1905,<sup>14</sup> is unique in the world. As previously noted, it consists of young officers—“typically 22-26 years old—almost all born abroad or first generation, all U.S. citizens, and all with native fluency in a variety of languages. Since 9/11, the cadre has consisted of men and women with roots in over a dozen countries, mostly South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa ... These rookies enter the Department via the Intelligence Division rather than the Police Academy. Hand chosen, they [are] smart, highly motivated, and fully understanding of the complexity of what they [are] about to do as professionals.”<sup>15</sup>

As UCs, they never enter an NYPD facility. They go through an intense six-month training program run by the undercover unit it-

a This phenomenon was discussed in the NYPD’s 2007 monograph “Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat,” p. 37. The echo chamber is “virtual networks of like-minded individuals around the world who reinforce the individual’s beliefs and commitment and further legitimize them.”

b A legend is a spy or undercover officer’s claimed background or biography.

c Al-Muhajiroun (The Emigrants) was designated a terrorist salafi-jihadi organization in the wake of the July 7, 2005, London underground and bus attack and was linked to international terrorism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism. The group operated in the United Kingdom from January 14, 1986, until the British government announced an intended ban in August 2005. The group became notorious for its September 2002 conference, “The Magnificent 19,” praising the 9/11 attacks.

d On June 8, 2005, the ITS publicly desecrated and ripped up an American flag on the street in New York City during a rally on 74th Street and 37th Avenue in Queens. This event, which its members called “Operation: Desecrate American Flag,” was videotaped by the Islamic Thinkers Society and can be seen on the internet. The group’s five-minute video begins with a man saying in English, “Just to show where our loyalty belongs to, you see this flag here? It’s going to go on the floor [sic]. And to us, our loyalty does not belong to this flag, our loyalty belongs to Allah.” Another speaker refers to the mandate for “Islam to dominate over all other religions, to dominate the world, even though the non-Muslims may hate it.” “Islamic Thinkers Society desecrates flag,” The Investigative Project on Terrorism, June 8, 2005.



*A screen capture from a video posted to YouTube by Revolution Muslim showing Younus Abdullah Muhammad (aka Jesse Morton) preaching on 43rd and Broadway in New York City on May 1, 2010.*

self, usually in hotel rooms or locations far from New York City. The training class consists of one student at a time, and instructors are often former UCs who understand the professional and personal issues that might arise when a person lives full-time as someone other than him/herself. The pressure on the UCs, their handlers, and their managers is intense as the stakes are high—to the UC and the investigation they are involved in.<sup>16</sup>

The UCs are a cadre of officers who have blended naturally with the persons, clusters, and organizations under investigation. They were critical in thwarting a number of cases, including one of the 15 Revolution Muslim-linked cases called the “Arabian Knightz.” In this case, Mohamed Alessa and Carlos Almonte, both of New Jersey, were arrested in June 2010 on their way to Somalia to join al-Shabaab, a terrorist organization to kill individuals whose beliefs and practices did not accord with their ideology. Both Alessa and Almonte were associates of Younus Abdullah Muhammad and members of the Revolution Muslim organization.<sup>17</sup>

As Almonte and Alessa’s plan to join al-Shabaab came together, a remarkable 23-year-old NYPD undercover officer of Egyptian background was invited to join them after he spent months engaging with them. Subsequently, a joint NYPD-New Jersey Joint Terrorism Task Force operation was conducted. After the arrest of Almonte and Alessa at JFK Airport while on their way to Somalia via Egypt, the case became public. As per Intelligence Division policy, the UC’s parents and his girlfriend (later his wife) had no idea he had been living a separate life as an NYPD Intelligence Division UC for the previous four years.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, the NYPD ran an operation that required cooperation from both the U.S. ambassador in Pakistan and the Pakistani government to disrupt a New York City member of the Revolution Muslim network from joining al-Qa`ida in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. When Staten Island resident Abdel Hameed Shehadeh traveled to Pakistan in 2008 for jihadi training he was turned back at the airport by Pakistani authorities based on intelligence provided by a different NYPD undercover officer. Shehadeh had

volunteered his plan to the undercover officer who was part of the Shehadeh cluster investigation in a car less than 24 hours before his scheduled departure to Islamabad.<sup>19</sup><sup>e</sup>

Another backbone of the Intelligence Division operations involved using confidential informants (CIs) to get close to those persons, clusters, or organizations under investigation. Since its post-9/11 restart, the Intelligence Division understood and stayed firmly committed to the policy of avoiding any action that might be interpreted as entrapment. Division management at all levels knew this would be a first line of defense in prosecution of a terrorist case.

Entrapment was indeed the initial defense strategy in the case against another of the 15 Revolution Muslim-linked cases, Jose Pimental of New York City, a self-radicalized internet disciple of AQAP’s Anwar al-Awlaki and Revolution Muslim.<sup>20</sup> According to the statement of facts when he ultimately pleaded guilty, Pimental had been in contact with Younus Abdullah Muhammad, volunteering to him that he was a big fan of Revolution Muslim.<sup>21</sup>

Pimental was arrested on the evening of November 19, 2011 by members of the NYPD bomb squad as he finalized the construction of three homemade explosive devices in an apartment in Washington Heights.<sup>22</sup> His plan had been “to assassinate members of the U.S. military returning from active duty in Afghanistan.”<sup>23</sup>

The multi-year investigation of Pimental by the Intelligence

<sup>e</sup> “According to court filings and the evidence introduced at trial, in early 2008 Shehadeh devised a plan to travel to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan in order join al-Qa`ida or the Taliban. In furtherance of his plan, on June 13, 2008, Shehadeh flew on a one-way airline ticket from John F. Kennedy International Airport to Islamabad, Pakistan. After Pakistani officials denied him entry, Shehadeh told investigators from the FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) that he had traveled to Pakistan to visit a university. However, the true purpose of Shehadeh’s trip was to wage violent jihad against United States military forces.” “Staten Island Man Convicted of Making False Statements in A Matter Involving International Terrorism,” U.S. Attorney’s Office, Eastern District of New York, March 25, 2013.

Division required two confidential informants and an undercover officer.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Intelligence Collection and Analysis Phase: Understanding the threat

The Analytic Unit of the department's Intelligence Division was created in 2002 as part of the city's response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks.<sup>25</sup> Police Commissioner Raymond W. Kelly tasked former CIA official and NYPD Deputy Commissioner of Intelligence, David Cohen, with the responsibility to create a robust civilian analyst cadre embedded in the department. The proviso was that they come from the best schools and have relevant backgrounds.<sup>26</sup>

The unit was a unique experiment among traditional law enforcement organizations as it comprised more than two dozen civilian experts—lawyers; academics; former corporate consultants and investment bankers; veterans of the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, and the Council on Foreign Relations; and graduates of top national security graduate school programs at Columbia, Princeton, Georgetown, Tufts, and John Hopkins, among others.<sup>27</sup> Yet, it sits at the heart of a law enforcement agency.

The Division hired its first of many civilian analysts in 2002 to help identify the “dots,” connect the “dots,” and then interpret what they meant and where they led. Bridging the cultural gap between civilian and uniformed personnel was critical to the success of the Intelligence Division.<sup>28</sup> This was helped by the management decision that, for operational security reasons, the reporting of each investigative unit—whether the undercover unit or those handling confidential informants—was compartmented from one another. As a follow-on decision, at the working level, only the civilian analyst(s) involved in an investigation was authorized to see the reporting from all CIs and UCs involved in that case. It therefore fell to analysts to collate the information, analyze it, identify gaps, and set intelligence collection requirements for both the UC and CI programs. This empowerment of the civilian analysts helped make them full partners with the investigators.

The unit's work was based on unclassified, open source research; its own investigative findings; and analysis of daily operational reports filed by the UCs and CIs. A team of analysts assessed, vetted, and tracked Revolution Muslim's links both within the United States as well as overseas and made key judgements about its likely trajectory that seem quite prescient today.<sup>f</sup>

Over the course of the next decade, the NYPD analysts worked with federal agencies and international partners as those international links became more relevant. For example, in 2010, the analytic unit identified that Revolution Muslim was in contact via

f Some of these key judgments from late 2007 included: “While not known to be in the planning stages of any violent activity at present, ITS nonetheless poses a security risk as a possible incubator, and due to its members' links to individuals of concern overseas [like Jamaican extremist cleric Sheikh Abdullah al Faisal];” “the primary split of concern is between ITS core members and a newly emerged group called Revolution Muslim, organized by Yousef al Khattab and Jesse Morton, that views Jamaican extremist cleric Sheikh Abdullah al Faisal as their spiritual leader and Emir;” “Shaikh Faisal has a storied history of radicalizing young men and is credited with having helped radicalize Germaine Lindsey, one of the 7/7 bombers. He was convicted under terrorism charges of incitement in the United Kingdom for having urged his congregants to kill unbelievers.” See “The Islamic Thinkers Society: Case Study and Assessment,” NYPD Intelligence Division – Intelligence Analysis Unit, 2008.

chat rooms and email with like-minded individuals in the United Kingdom and then passed that intelligence through a direct NYPD partnership with the British Metropolitan Police, which led to the arrest of Bilal Zaheer Ahmad, an extremist blogger from Wolverhampton.<sup>29</sup>

Bilal Zaheer Ahmad had been provided the password to Revolution Muslim's website by Younus Abdullah Muhammad and given permission to post messages. In November 2010, Ahmad praised Roshonara Choudhry for attempting to kill a British member of parliament over his support for the Iraq War. He also posted a list of 383 members of parliament who had voted for the Iraq War, along with suggestions on how to get in to see them and a link to a store selling a weapon similar to that used in Choudhry's attack. Ahmad told Morton that the purpose of the post was to “make those MPs fearful.”<sup>30</sup>

Intelligence sharing between the NYPD and British police and intelligence services also contributed to the December 2010 arrests of British Revolution Muslim acolytes Mohammed Chowdhury, Shah Rahman, Gurukanth Desai, and Abdul Miah. The group were planning to attack the London Stock Exchange, utilize mail bombs, and launch a “Mumbai-style” atrocity in the United Kingdom.<sup>31</sup>

### 4. Crushing the Network: Prosecution and Arrest

Despite the arrests of members of the extended Revolution Muslim network between 2008 and 2010 in the United States and overseas, the group remained resilient and viable. Its leader, Younus Abdullah Muhammad, continued to recruit and radicalize Westerners to al-Qa`ida's ideology and terrorism. He helped provide content for and distribute an online English-language magazine, Jihad Recollections, and then an al-Qa`ida-sponsored imitator to it, Inspire, which was first published in the summer of 2010. The primary creator and editor of both publications was Samir Khan, a former member of the Revolution Muslim network who had moved to Yemen to join al-Awlaki in 2009.<sup>32</sup>

Khan, a former Maspeth, Queens, resident was a member of Revolution Muslim, despite having moved to North Carolina. Before he departed the United States for Yemen in 2009, he came to meet with Revolution Muslim leadership in New York City.<sup>33</sup> He met with Younus Abdullah Muhammad and other Revolution Muslim members, including an undercover NYPD officer who had penetrated the core of Revolution Muslim (a different officer from the two UCs previously mentioned). Indeed, the night before Khan departed secretly for Yemen from JFK Airport, he even slept over at the UC's apartment.<sup>34</sup>

It took a unique triple partnership between the NYPD Intelligence Division; the Eastern District of Virginia and its Assistant United States attorney, Gordon D. Kromberg; and the Washington Field Office of the FBI to crush the Revolution Muslim network via prosecution and arrests. The New York FBI office and United States Attorney's Office from the Eastern and Southern districts had declined to pursue the broader matter of the Revolution Muslim network.<sup>35</sup>

The opportunity to prosecute the case in Virginia presented itself when a young Revolution Muslim convert in Northern Virginia, Zachary Chesser, published a death threat on Revolution Muslim's website against the creators of the TV show “South Park” for an episode which they regarded as mocking the Prophet Muhammad. The threat provided the addresses of the creators and urged online readers to “pay them a visit.”<sup>36</sup> Chesser also posted online a hit list

of people for violent extremists to ‘take out’ and a message from al-Awlaki that explicitly called for the South Park creators’ assassination.<sup>37</sup>

As Younus Abdullah Muhammad noted, “I had given Chesser backdoor access to the site, though I wondered about his judgment. I saw the death threat and I thought, Oh, no. I’m dead. It was as a direct result of this that in the spring of 2011, a jury in the Eastern District of Virginia indicted me for incitement to terrorism, and the U.S. requested my extradition from Morocco where I had moved to teach.”<sup>38</sup>

By the summer of 2010, Revolution Muslim began to fracture. Chesser was arrested on July 21, 2010, when he attempted to travel to Somalia to join al-Shabaab. He was charged with providing material support to al-Shabaab and later also pleaded guilty to communicating threats and soliciting violent extremists to desensitize law enforcement, a quite innovative terrorism charge. Four days after Chesser’s arrest, Younus Abdullah Muhammed fled to Morocco, where he resided until his arrest on U.S. charges on May 26, 2011.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, Samir Khan, now in Yemen with AQAP and al-Awlaki, had been authorized by Younus Abdullah Muhammed to post materials on the Revolution Muslim website, even while he was in Yemen with AQAP. The previous year, the two had collaborated on two articles for the first two online editions of Jihad Recollections.<sup>40</sup>

Back in July 2010, Younus Abdullah Muhammed had posted the first issue of Inspire, the English-language magazine supporting al-Qa`ida, on the Revolution Muslim website. The magazine included an eight-page article titled “Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom,” with detailed instructions regarding the construction of an explosive device.<sup>41</sup> This very same article would subsequently be used as the recipe for the explosive devices in a series of terrorist plots in the West. These included the Tsarnaev brothers’ attack on the Boston Marathon in April 2013 as well the bomb attacks in the Chelsea district of New York in 2016 and the tunnel to the Port Authority in 2018 by Ahmad Khan Rahimi and (allegedly) Akayad Ullah, respectively.<sup>42</sup>

The next blow to the extended Revolution Muslim network came from the sky on September 30, 2011. Although he was not the primary target, Samir Khan was killed in a U.S. drone strike along with al-Awlaki, in al-Jawf, a province in northern Yemen bordering Saudi Arabia.<sup>43</sup>

## 5. Loose Ends: Members of the Network on the Periphery Who Later Activated

A number of ‘lone actors’ connected to the Revolution Network have become involved in terrorist activity. For example, Rezwan Ferdous of Ashland, Massachusetts, was charged in September 2011 with plotting to attack the Pentagon and U.S. Capitol using large remote-controlled aircraft filled with C-4 plastic explosives. In February 2010, Ferdous emailed Younus Abdullah Muhammed asking for counsel regarding his duties as a Muslim and whether martyrdom operations were proper practice. Younus Abdullah Muhammed replied that martyrdom operations must be judged by intention but can have “enormous benefits [sic] in a war of attrition.”<sup>44</sup>

Another case involved Colleen R. LaRose, aka “Jihad Jane,” of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. She was charged in March 2010 with a variety of terrorism-related offenses, including plotting to kill Lars Vilks, a Swedish cartoonist who has been the subject of several death threats based on his artwork depicting the Prophet Muhammad. According to the statement of facts in his guilty plea,

Younus Abdullah Muhammed “notified Sheikh Abdullah Faisal, a Muslim cleric convicted in the United Kingdom of soliciting murder, that LaRose was a subscriber to Revolution Muslim YouTube accounts.”<sup>45</sup>

Yet another example was Antonio Benjamin Martinez of Baltimore, Maryland, who was arrested and charged with plotting to bomb a military recruiting station in December 2010. One month prior to his arrest, Martinez viewed a video of Usama bin Ladin and multiple terror training camp video clips on the Revolution Muslim website.<sup>46</sup>

Other terrorism cases in the Islamic State era have also had connections to Revolution Muslim, demonstrating how effective network proselytization efforts can have an effect that goes beyond any single conflict.

It was recently revealed that at least three Americans who went to fight in Iraq and Syria for the Islamic State had been in contact with Revolution Muslim before its demise.<sup>47</sup> Two of the individuals in question were a married couple, John and Tania Georgalias, who traveled to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in September 2013.<sup>48</sup> Tania left after a few days, but John Georgalias went on to become a leader in the Islamic State. The third American who traveled to join the Islamic State was Russell Dennison, who was heavily influenced by Revolution Muslim and Younus Abdullah Muhammed directly.<sup>49</sup>

Another American who became involved in terrorist activity on behalf of the Islamic State after contact with Revolution Muslim was Nicholas Young, who was recently sentenced to 15 years in prison for material support of the Islamic State.<sup>50</sup> Young had in-person contact with Revolution Muslim member Zachary Chesser, frequented the Revolution website, and participated in the Authentic Tauheed Paltalk online chat room connected to the group.

## Lessons Learned for the Virtual Caliphate Era

The Revolution Muslim network investigation was one of the highest-profile investigations at the NYPD Intelligence Division between 2007 and 2011. This helped dismantle the most dangerous and influential terrorism network in the United States during this time period.<sup>51</sup> Since its inception, many had dismissed Revolution Muslim as amateurish. Yet the group developed a sophisticated and effective methodology for promoting “open source jihad,” incorporated new social media techniques and mediums to advance online radicalization and recruitment, promoted English-language al-Qa`ida propaganda, and experimented with covert communications across a transnational network.

As a local radicalization hub, Revolution Muslim took advantage of the free speech environment in the United States to unambiguously radicalize and mobilize Westerners to participate in terrorism. As a transnational network, it sought to enmesh its activity with that of existing jihadi terrorist groups like al-Qa`ida, al-Shabaab, and AQAP.

Federal prosecutor Gordon Kromberg, who prosecuted the cases of Younus Abdullah Muhammed and other prominent figures at the core of Revolution Muslim, stated, “It is amazing from the perspective of time to look back at Revolution Muslim. In our pleading we listed ... 15 different defendants ... who engage[d] in terrorism or attempted to engage in terrorism [and] all [of whom] were connected to Revolution Muslim.”<sup>52</sup>

As New York City Police Commissioner, Raymond W. Kelly, commented, “Fortunately, NYPD Intelligence Division detectives

were in a position to learn exactly how Morton used the Internet to conspire to solicit murder, and how he encouraged others to solicit the murder of an artist whose material he deemed offensive. His guilty plea was the result of NYPD's monitoring of Morton's activities, combined with the investigative and prosecutorial expertise of the FBI and the U.S. Attorney for Eastern District of Virginia, made for a strong case, in addition to a strong partnership.<sup>53</sup>

As the Islamic State loses control of its terrain in Syria and Iraq, it is likely to evolve into more of a transnational virtual caliphate, which is what one set of researchers have defined as "a radicalized community online - that empowers the global Salafi-jihadi movement."<sup>54</sup> In doing so, it would revert to a small group of violent activists who seek to mobilize adherents through the multi-faceted use of online mediums. In short, it would resemble Revolution Muslim, but on a much larger scale.

If past is prologue to the future, there are valuable insights to be gleaned from the effort to combat Revolution Muslim. One lesson of the effort to combat Revolution Muslim is that countering a fluid terrorist organization, like a virtual Islamic State, will require the ability to predict and mimic the network's rapid adaptations. One of the reasons most of the plots linked to Revolution Muslim were thwarted, was that the NYPD successfully integrated undercover officers into the heart of both the Islamic Thinkers Society and Revolution Muslim, providing critical human intelligence (HUMINT) about those individuals who planned to operationalize their ideology and the rapid shifts in the expression of that ideology.<sup>55</sup>

The increased use of digital HUMINT, comprised of digital undercover officers and informants who can navigate the dark web and private communication channels of WhatsApp and Telegram will be vital, particularly if a virtual Islamic State relies more heavily upon encrypted operational instructions than Revolution Muslim did. This will require the sustained development and devotion of additional resources to this effort by federal and certain local law enforcement and intelligence organizations, as well as networked

coordination with overseas partners.

A second key lesson of the effort against Revolution Muslim is that the effort to counter virtual jihadist recruitment will be an ongoing struggle, and law enforcement and intelligence should not over-emphasize the collapse of any particular group. Revolution Muslim emerged out of the collapse and re-forming of earlier groups that were part of a larger network. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State both expanded upon Revolution Muslim's efforts even as the group itself fell apart.

With the 2017 arrest of Jamaican extremist cleric Abdullah Faisal in Jamaica (as a result of an NYPD investigation), the preachers that al-Muhajiroun, ITS, and Revolution Muslims' circles once revolved around have been mostly removed from the playing field.<sup>5</sup> Their removal is important, the template Revolution Muslim pioneered remains viable for other terrorist groups to adopt, use, and weaponize to deadly effect despite the group's disbandment in 2011.

Consequently, while the Islamic State appears to be defeated on the battlefield in Syria and Iraq and its appeal diminished, the group's continued threat should not be underestimated.

Relegated to primarily operating in the virtual realm, the Islamic State could morph into an almost virtual entity, with minimal need for a geographic footprint. This almost completely virtual caliphate, not unlike Revolution Muslim, "would manifest itself in the form of an expanded, transnational terrorist threat from dispersed but loyal operators," as United States Central Command Commander General Joseph Votel has argued.<sup>56</sup>

As Revolution Muslim demonstrated, even a virtual organization with a dispersed network has the ability to inspire deadly attacks worldwide. **CTC**

g Al-Muhajiroun founder Omar Bakri Mohamed remains imprisoned in Lebanon, and two other leading figures in the group—Anjem Choudary and Mohammed Mizanur Rahman (aka Abu Baraa)—each received a sentence of five and a half years in 2016.

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: Five Years After the Boston Marathon Bombing

By Nicholas Tallant

*William Weinreb stepped down as Acting United States Attorney for the District of Massachusetts in January 2018. He was the Lead Prosecutor of the 2015 investigation and trial of Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. In 2016, Weinreb received the Attorney General's David Margolis Award for Exceptional Service—the highest honor in the Department of Justice—for his role in investigating and prosecuting Tsarnaev. Weinreb previously served as First Assistant U.S. Attorney, Counsel to the U.S. Attorney, and Deputy Chief of the National Security Unit. He also served as the Coordinator of Massachusetts' Anti-Terrorism Advisory Council. He has served as an Assistant U.S. Attorney since 1995—in the District of Massachusetts since 2000 and in the District of Columbia in 1995-2000. Weinreb graduated cum laude from Harvard Law School.*

*Harold Shaw has served as the Special Agent in Charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Boston Division since 2015. Shaw previously served as the Special Agent in Charge of the Counterintelligence and Intelligence Divisions of the New York Division. From 2011 to 2013, he served as Assistant Special Agent in Charge within the Counterterrorism Division of the New York Division. Shaw has served with the FBI since 1999, primarily in the New York Division. During his tenure at the FBI, he has investigated a variety of international and domestic terrorism matters, including the USS Cole bombing and the September 11, 2001, attacks. Shaw earned a Bachelor of Science degree from Norwich University. Prior to joining the FBI, Mr. Shaw served as an officer in the U.S. Army for more than nine years.*

*The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of the Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy, Department of Defense, or U.S. Government.*

**CTC:** April 15th marks the five-year anniversary of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing. The term “Boston Strong” surfaced quickly in the attack’s aftermath to describe the unified response. Independent reports point to the well-developed and planned incident management procedures as a particular strength.<sup>1</sup> How have these preparations changed since 2013, whether in Boston specifically or for other similar events nationwide? And how does that relate to the broader changes in the nation’s counterterrorism capabilities since 9/11?

**Weinreb (USAO):** We had been preparing for an event like the Boston Marathon bombing ever since 9/11. Boston was affected by 9/11 in a special way because two of the planes originated from here. As a result, many of the victims were from here. The chief lesson we learned from 9/11 was the importance of coordination, collaboration, information sharing, and being prepared to tackle the next

event together and work seamlessly.

One important change since 9/11 is that the U.S. Attorney’s Offices around the country, particularly the larger ones, have increased their level of resources and expertise devoted to national security threats. When 9/11 occurred, we didn’t have any attorneys in the Boston U.S. Attorney’s Office whose expertise or whose responsibility was in anti-terrorism or other national security matters. Now we have seven full-time lawyers dedicated to just that one area. All of us are expected to be experts not only in counterterrorism but also in illegal export enforcement, espionage, misuse of classified information, and other areas. That’s a big change.

When the Boston Marathon bombing occurred, there were already a number of us who were very experienced at doing counterterrorism cases. We immediately co-located with the FBI. We knew how to assist in the investigation, getting the information that was needed using the kinds of tools that only prosecutors have access to, like grand jury subpoenas, search warrants, and 2703(d) orders—orders that allow you to get certain telephonic or email communications. We were part of the investigation from the very first day and continued to be part of it even after the suspect was in custody.

**Shaw (FBI):** I was serving in the Counterterrorism Division at FBI Headquarters, as a lead detailee to the CIA, during the Boston Marathon bombing. When talking about the importance of the greater Joint Terrorism Task Force concept, in that capacity, I was briefing updates on the attack to the Director of the CIA on a daily basis. Looking at how we as the FBI and the greater Intelligence Community have evolved since 9/11, you now have an FBI agent, embedded in Langley, briefing the Director of the CIA on what was happening in Boston. You see how the world has changed in terms of information flow, interconnectedness, and interdependence.

I often use Massport [Massachusetts Port Authority] as an example of an agency that has evolved and adapted, specifically from being impacted by a terrorist attack. On a daily basis, Massport conducts a daily intelligence briefing tailored to threats with all of its critical stakeholders, including the FBI Boston Division. This began immediately following 9/11 and continues to this day. They understand the importance of information sharing, preparation, and consistently looking for what could have been missed. Are we as coordinated as we need to be? As for lessons learned from 9/11, they still live it today in terms of the importance of sharing information, specifically regarding the terrorism threat. That’s what it takes to proactively get in front of an attack.

**Weinreb (USAO):** The U.S. Attorney’s Office—along with all the other federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies that have a stake in terrorism prevention and response—had been coordinating closely and doing tabletop exercises, planning out how we would respond to the next event, since 9/11. When the Marathon bombing occurred, everything came together seamlessly. All the relevant

agencies and state and local law enforcement officers knew where to go and what to do. Control of the various crime scenes moved seamlessly from the first responders to state and local law enforcement, who were there immediately on the ground, to the FBI and federal law enforcement, who were responsible for the long-term investigation.

Every time you have an event like the Boston Marathon bombings, you see what lessons you can learn from it. We did do quite a number of after-action reports to see what we could learn and how we could improve. In many ways, the lesson we learned was that we had prepared well. We needed to keep doing what we had been doing.

**Shaw (FBI):** One takeaway is a term often used in the military—train as you fight. We rely heavily on the use of table-top exercises. In some instances, we conduct Command Post Exercises to ensure communications work and are coordinated as necessary. We ensure interconnectivity, not only with our databases and systems, but also by having the right people assigned and trained to support our Joint Intelligence Center or prepared to participate in an FBI or partner agency Tactical Operations Center. Within our office, any time we can capitalize on even a smaller scale operation, whether arrest or search, we make sure we are including our partner agencies as appropriate to get the greatest benefit. That has proven to really build the interconnectivity to be able to deal with larger scale events.

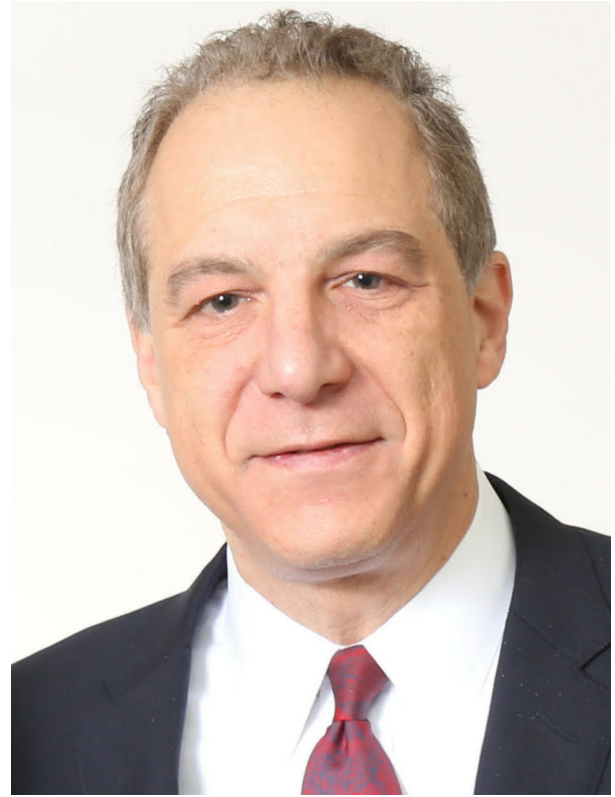
The other takeaway is the importance of intelligence. Prior to 9/11, it's not necessarily that the FBI didn't use and push intelligence, but we didn't do it well *enough*. In today's threat environment, we're really trying to stop something before it happens. The investigative side alone is not going to get you where you need to be. It's the ability to not only develop, analyze, and share intelligence but also to integrate intelligence into all of our operations—and efficiently move this information to fusion centers and other departments. Whether in the planning for the marathon or other special events, we share intelligence and develop an intelligence assessment—a Special Event Threat Assessment.

It's really critical to look both domestically and internationally. An example I often use is Manchester. What changed in terms of that attack? An attack on egress. Historically, law enforcement has done a very good job of hardening events in advance of the event itself, whether it be a playoff game at Gillette Stadium, fireworks on the Esplanade, or the Boston Marathon. The concern now is whether we're doing as good a job of assessing the threat post-event. Does everybody leaving the marathon getting on the "T" [subway] become vulnerable? Now, with changes in tactics, considerations need to be made and a plan implemented on how we're addressing crowds after the event. It's a potential vulnerability.

A final development after 2013 has been better engagement with the private sector and private security firms. Gillette Stadium has been a perfect example of this integration.

**CTC: How has the evolving terrorism threat influenced preparations for this year's marathon?**

**Shaw (FBI):** The planning starts almost immediately after the marathon for the following year. It's a synergy between federal, state, and local partners as well as the private sector. With the marathon, the Boston Athletic Association has embraced the need for and the significance of a good, coordinated security plan.



*William Weinreb, former Acting U.S. Attorney for the District of Massachusetts (USAO)*

A marathon has complexities in comparison to, say, Boston's 4th of July Esplanade fireworks celebration. Those are fixed and finite areas. There's a direct and practical way to harden them. Now, look at 26.2 miles for the marathon. A number of different departments—whether law enforcement, emergency management, fire, or private sector entities—all support the event in one way or another. Along a route of that expanse, it's a significant lift to not only secure but harden it. How do we appropriately disperse investigative and tactical resources? No one agency necessarily has the investigative, response, or tactical resources to cover 26.2 miles. We have developed a comprehensive plan, which is better integrated to more quickly respond to certain areas along the route. That all has to be worked out well in advance, whether it be emergency response, investigative, tactical, bomb, or evidence response.

One of the biggest changes in the past few years is the use of a vehicle as a terrorism device. In support of the marathon, more departments are bringing out heavy equipment and sand trucks to shut down access points or corridors potentially vulnerable to vehicular attacks. As part of the security planning process, a lot of time and effort goes into assessing potential weaknesses or vulnerabilities and how we best counter these threats. Specifically, those were lessons learned from attacks in Nice and New York.

As an emerging and developing threat, we are continually concerned about a potential attack through the use of a UAV [Unmanned Aerial Vehicle]. The FBI is consistently working with our partners on how to best determine what technologies are available and how we must coordinate with the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] and others who manage airspace to best address the possible threat.



*Harold Shaw, Special Agent in Charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Boston Division (FBI)*

**Weinreb (USAO):** The security for the Boston Marathon these days is absolutely first-rate. There are some legal mechanisms in place to prohibit UAVs in certain areas. The Coast Guard has the authority to prohibit UAVs in certain circumstances in areas within its jurisdiction. The FAA can prohibit them within areas within its jurisdiction. The law regarding UAVs is still evolving. If it becomes problematic, then we would press to make sure we have the legal authority to neutralize any threat.

**CTC:** Given the sheer number of marathon spectators in 2013, many people fleeing the area left bags, backpacks, and packages on the ground. How does that complicate incident response and evidence collection?

**Shaw (FBI):** The chaos needs to be managed as best as possible, but there is a process. First and foremost, we have to secure the area and assess the next threat. In some instances, the greater concern is not only the potential for a secondary or tertiary device; there have also been far more complex attacks seen globally, with everything from a VBIED [Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device] to an active shooter to separate suicide bombers. We have to factor all these in while moving as quickly as possible to render aid to the victims.

Initially, our goal is not necessarily the painstaking and detailed effort of evidence collection. It's ensuring the area is safe and secure. Even to allow our emergency first responders—whether EMS or fire—into the area, it has to be secured first. You want to evacuate the wounded as quickly as possible but want to do it in a fashion that isn't going to compromise or impact the crime scene.

For all those bags, backpacks, and packages, we do all that we can to identify the owners, as we know they are potential witnesses, victims, or even possibly subjects.

**Weinreb (USAO):** For every single item on the scene, at the time you're collecting it, you don't know whether it's going to be important evidence or not. So everything has to be collected in a certain

manner, catalogued, tagged, and so on. It's very labor-intensive and time-consuming. Of course, people will also want those things back, so then there is a process down the road to reunite people with their belongings.

**CTC:** About 72 hours after the bombing, the FBI released the pictures of two suspects, enlisting public help to identify the Tsarnaev brothers.<sup>2</sup> Can you address the trade-off between soliciting public help and working behind the scenes to identify suspects? How do you manage the immense outpouring of information from the public once help is solicited?

**Shaw (FBI):** It's a fine line. Oftentimes, we know it's not only the public watching, but also the subjects, conspirators, or facilitators. It's a balance to get information out and request public assistance for any information they may have. But, you're also potentially tipping off the perpetrators or the conspirators. Unfortunately, the more information that gets into the media, it's also providing intelligence for those conspirators to react. The other issue is—based on the way it's portrayed in the media—that it may cause a panic or concern within the community. Needless to say, a lot of thought, coordination, and discussion amongst your partners goes into how to manage the message and what is shared through the media.

After some great work, analysis, and exploitation, the pictures that we had of the subjects were crystal clear. However, as the case goes, the first time we fully identified Tamerlan Tsarnaev was after the quick-capture fingerprint at the morgue.

**Weinreb (USAO):** You always want to try to control the investigation to the extent possible. That often means holding information close. Particularly, you don't want to reveal any information that will taint witnesses. For example, if you release a picture of somebody you think is a suspect, a witness who might have seen the actual person might now think, "Oh, I must have seen it incorrectly because this is what the person looks like." Then, their memory becomes cloudy or may be affected by the picture you released. Generally speaking, you don't want to risk that.

In addition, we were concerned that if we released the photos, the bombers would know that we were on to them. They might decide the jig was up and that it was time to make a last stand. On the other hand, you don't want to go too long without making the pictures public and essentially crowd-sourcing the identification process. The ultimate goal is to determine who they are before they decide to regroup and commit another offense or flee the country or any number of things that would be bad for public safety. It's always a tough choice that involves balancing many competing concerns.

**Shaw (FBI):** There are competing interests. The team really didn't have a choice because the media was going to release them. When you have a large task force and are sharing information freely and transparently, information gets out.

There's always greater benefit to transparency. We've found that throughout the years. The real challenge is that we have to value and understand that different stakeholders have different responsibilities. As we are moving on the investigation, political leaders, governmental officials, and law enforcement representatives all have responsibilities to their communities. And, their communities are looking for information about what is going on. So, it's striking the appropriate balance on what needs to be disseminated in the best

interest of the community, public safety, and the investigation.

Another concern, especially today, is attacks that have spawned other attacks. While not necessarily copycats, we're mindful that successful attacks have the potential to motivate other individuals, who are on the path of radicalization, to react or mobilize to violence.

The Boston Marathon bombing, in particular, was one of the first really big cases where the FBI and our law enforcement partners were deluged with digital evidence. By the end of case, we had collected 28 terabytes of information. Specifically, after the pictures were published—within those first 24 hours—we had 10,000 online tips, 10,000 videos, and 113,000 images that were sent to us. In addition, there were 250 million visits to the FBI.gov website to look at the pictures. How did we handle that within a 24-hour period? We needed to triage it. We have a transfer system where we can intake information and get it down to our headquarters. There, 150 agents and analysts were standing by to exploit and analyze it. What pictures or images were relevant? What's a real video or still image that was actually taken at the scene?

You're not only looking at this information for lead or intelligence purposes, you're also looking at it for evidentiary purposes. Did you go through all of it? Is there information that helps you identify a co-conspirator? Is there information that might be exculpatory to individuals who may not have been involved? That was a huge lesson learned from the Boston Marathon bombing. Looking at a picture or a video, it's really some compelling evidence. Although scouring through digital media can be laborious and challenging on a number of accounts, it can be invaluable evidence and really move a case along.

**Weinreb (USAO):** When you are prosecuting a case with that quantity of information, the easiest and safest way to ensure the defense is getting any potentially exculpatory information is simply to share all that information with them. That way, they have everything. If there's exculpatory information in there, they have it. That was, by and large, what we did in this case. When it came to these massive quantities of information, like the hundreds of thousands of photos and all the videos, they were digitized. We put them on hard drives and shared them with the defense, so they had the same access to them that we had.

Of course, the government is just as interested in uncovering exculpatory information as in identifying inculpatory information. If we find any, we share it with the defense. I do believe that every single photo and every video was looked at by somebody on the investigative team at some point over the two years between the bombing and the trial. It requires a huge amount of resources, and it may not be necessary to obtain a conviction, but we'd rather have as much information as possible and get the evidence that is both inculpatory and exculpatory, rather than not have it at all.

**CTC: The manhunt for the Tsarnaev brothers throughout Boston was a particularly notable feature of the 2013 event. Some cite it as the first real test of post-9/11 interagency coordination. We witnessed a similar search for the San Bernardino suspects in 2015. How have procedures evolved since 2013?**

**Shaw (FBI):** The biggest difference between the Boston Marathon and the San Bernardino attack was the duration of the manhunt following the respective incidents. Once the threats were mitigated in

San Bernardino, the FBI and its partners could more quickly move from crisis management to investigative and evidence collection efforts. In Boston, there were a series of different crises that needed to be contended with, including the initial attacks, fugitive hunt, and follow-on attacks on a law enforcement officer and private citizens.

Interagency coordination has improved for a number of different reasons. First, all of our partners fully understand the threat, its "real" impact on the community, and that we're all on the front lines when defending the public we serve. Second, we depend on each other and value the skills each agency brings to the table. A great example is our bomb technicians go through the same FBI-sponsored training in Alabama. Now, with the same training, it's easy to interchange parts when you have a bombing issue, but more importantly, relationships are built from the ground up. We rely on the skills each brings to the table. I couldn't be prouder of the quality of the partnerships seen across the Boston law enforcement community. Having been attacked, facing the demands of crisis, and understanding the reliance we all have on each other's agencies has aided in fostering critical partnerships across the region.

One of the more important points is that all of our partners here in Boston fully recognize that we are going to "win or lose as a team." Especially during any post-incident assessment or after-action review, we all understand there is room for improvement without casting blame or fault. Was sharing as efficient as it could have been? What was missed? What could have been done better?

We all understand our roles, responsibilities, and how we can best leverage each other's capabilities. We, as a law enforcement community, also understand the importance of incident command and how to capitalize on the unified command structure in crisis. For example, if a significant attack or event were to occur right now in Boston, Commissioner Evans [Boston Police Department] is leading the response and crisis. I know my role. I'm standing side-by-side with him, supporting him, and bringing all my resources to bear. It does not matter whether it is a counterterrorism event or not, we will be there to assist. If, through the initial response and investigation, it looks to be a terrorism-related matter or other federal violation, the FBI will take the investigative lead but continue to work alongside the Boston Police Department as part of the unified command.

**CTC: A May 2017 *CTC Sentinel* article by Frank Straub discussed the unique risks faced by local patrol officers being the first to respond during terror incidents.<sup>3</sup> He focused on the San Bernardino and Orlando incidents, during which high-powered weapons and explosive devices played a role. Boston witnessed very similar patrol officer involvement during the search. Can you comment on those challenges, particularly when terrorism is suspected?**

**Shaw (FBI):** It's a timely question because over the last two weeks, we've had the FBI's On-Scene Commander for the Pulse nightclub shooting [Orlando] and the former Assistant Director in Charge of the Los Angeles Division who managed the San Bernardino attack meet with our law enforcement partners to discuss some of the challenges that they faced. From my perspective, it's one thing to share after-action reviews, it's another to bring those individuals who were part of the events to share and discuss the challenges they faced. It offers the opportunity—whether for our chiefs or tactical operators—to ask questions of those individuals that actually went

through it. Yes, it is more than likely a local problem first. They are the first responders. They are the first people that are going to have to address the threat. In both of these incidents—Pulse and San Bernardino—the threats were mitigated by the effective response by our state and local partners.

The reality is that none of us are ever going to have the resources to do it all on our own. For a protracted event, such as Pulse [Orlando], additional teams were brought in, such as FBI negotiators, and were prepared to take over as needed. Anytime there is a suspicious package, that's a collaborative effort. It's not only the Boston Police Department or Massachusetts State Police bomb squads rolling out. There's an immediate interface with the FBI Special Agent bomb technicians that there's a potential device out there. Based on the initial assessment, we'll provide the necessary resources, whether it be bomb, evidence, or JTTF investigative support.

It's probably the most difficult job when you, as a patrol officer, come across the information that a person may be a subject of interest following a terrorism incident. They were possibly involved in committing a terrorist attack, so what do they have to live for now? Believe me, the FBI is keen to provide any and all available intelligence—whether photos, identifiers, or license plates—to the regional fusion centers, JTTF partners, and respective departments.

**CTC:** There were reports in the press that the Tsarnaev brothers and Pulse nightclub shooter were all known to law enforcement. Similar reports have surfaced following terror attacks overseas as well. Can you discuss the challenges faced in preventing attacks?

**Weinreb (USAO):** Many of the challenges will be quite familiar. We live under a legal system in which people cannot be restrained. You can't restrain their liberty or take away their rights just because you fear that they may commit a crime.

When we get wind of the possibility that somebody is a potential terrorist, we investigate it to the extent the law allows. The FBI has some pretty elaborate sets of rules that limit to what degree they can pry into somebody's life—to what degree they can investigate them—based upon the mere suspicion of terrorist activity. The degree to which they can investigate is commensurate with the information that they have and the nature of the threat. It's somewhat the same for us in the U.S. Attorney's Office. We have certain legal tools that are available to us only if we have probable cause to believe that the person has committed a crime, and oftentimes, we don't have probable cause.

A couple of the investigative challenges we face that have been in the news recently are encryption and the inability of law enforcement to get into locked cell phones. Another challenge is people who are on the internet or in other forums espousing radical extremist beliefs of one type or another. We can't take action against people merely because of their beliefs, even if experience has shown that people with those beliefs sometimes later commit terrorist acts. People can think and say what they want. Only when they mobilize and actually begin to plot and plan or actually prepare to engage in an attack can you step in and do something about it.

**Shaw (FBI):** Relative to these instances, even when the FBI does have information about certain individuals, it doesn't necessarily mean that we can mitigate the potential threat via an arrest. Intelligence can often drive a case, as can sophisticated techniques used throughout the investigative process. We are continually discerning

the degree of threat, building evidence, working with our U.S. Attorney's Office, and devising strategies on how best to mitigate that threat through arrest or other means. We are continually looking for the most efficient and effective way to address the threat. In some instances, it might be through an interview; in others, leveraging the capabilities of a local police department. It's an ongoing struggle to stay in front of the threat and find the best ways to prevent incidents from occurring.

Ongoing assessment is key. We are bound by the rule of law and our Constitution. After investigating and assessing the threat with some individuals, you may not necessarily have enough to continue with a case. Cases are built on predication, and we don't keep cases open indefinitely. We're not only focused on protecting and securing the country from terrorist threats. We're equally as concerned about protecting and maintaining the civil liberties and protections of the American people. If the intelligence or the evidence developed does not support the continuation of an investigation, we will move to close that investigation and will reassess if new intelligence or information develops.

**Weinreb (USAO):** Unlike the 9/11 attack, which was preceded by a lot of planning and preparation and a lot of communication among the people that were involved, these days people often radicalize and then mobilize to violence extremely quickly without much communication with others—sometimes with no communication with others—with few resources and with little planning. There are not that many opportunities to apprehend them.

One of the best ways to find out if people are up to something is, believe it or not, to just go and ask them. If you talk to them, a lot of people will voluntarily tell you things. One thing will lead to another, and you'll find out useful information that can really benefit you in an investigation. These are completely voluntary interviews called "knock and talks."

**Shaw (FBI):** One major change that came out of FBI Boston was routine and periodic reassessments of past counterterrorism cases. During high-threat periods—whether an upcoming special event, significant holiday, a domestic attack, or an attack overseas—we'll conduct comprehensive assessment scrubs. We go back and revisit some of these assessments—which are previous reporting of suspicious activities or threats that do not reach the threshold of a fully predicated investigation. The threat has become more dynamic and ever-changing, and unfortunately, the "flash-to-bang" or radicalization-to-mobilization period has shortened for many of these subjects. We continue to reevaluate if world events or some other catalyst will drive somebody to mobilize to violence? Based on past attacks, someone usually knows something, sees something out of the norm, or—as a by-stander—may have a critical piece of information.

Modes of radicalization have dramatically shifted over the past 10 to 20 years. As of recent times, many of the individuals prone to supporting terrorist causes or potentially involved in future U.S. attacks do not even have to travel overseas. At one point, travel was a critical tripwire that helped us discern if somebody was truly committed to joining or supporting al-Qaeda, AQAP, al-Shabaab, ISIS, or Hezbollah. Now, the new dynamic is that the same radicalization can occur simply through online correspondence. Overseas travel is still an important indicator, especially now with foreign fighters who may be leaving Syria or Iraq. However, just as concerning are those individuals that don't need to travel to conduct jihad or be

involved in jihad. They can do it by engaging with like-minded folks online.

**CTC:** Once Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was apprehended, some public debate surrounded the decision to read Tsarnaev a Miranda warning. Some questioning occurred before the Miranda warning under the warning’s “public safety exception.” Can you discuss the Miranda “public safety exception” and the impact of that determination?

**Weinreb (USAO):** The “public safety exception” reflects a balancing of individual rights under the 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment against the needs of the public for public safety. What the Supreme Court said was that the 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment “right to remain silent”—just like every Constitutional right—is not absolute. Sometimes, it has to give way to a compelling government interest. When a terrorist attack occurs, the danger may not be over. There may be other terrorists, other bombs or other people who were part of the plot who may be ready to continue once the suspect has been captured. When the circumstances suggest that is possible, then there is a compelling public interest in getting answers to those questions that overrides the person’s 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment rights. That’s the basis of the public safety exception.

One of the difficulties of doing a public safety interview is knowing how many questions you can ask before you have to stop—when the Supreme Court would say that you have asked enough questions to safeguard the public such that the person’s 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment rights once again outweigh the public’s need to know. In order to make the decision correctly, you need input both from the investigators—in this case, the FBI were most familiar with the facts and what the dangers to the public were—and the lawyers, the NSD [National Security Division], and parts of the Department of Justice that are experts in this area. This ensures that this is a proper situation in which to do “un-Mirandized” questioning and helps identify what questions are permissible to ask and how long the questioning can go on. It’s absolutely an area where you would want to have input from as many people with knowledge and expertise as possible.

**Shaw (FBI):** “Quarles”<sup>a</sup> or the public safety exception is used solely to obtain information on an ongoing threat. Our goal at that point in time is to get any needed information to stop an ongoing threat to life. It’s very limited in scope. It doesn’t necessarily go into the greater history of the case. Once it leaves that sphere of what’s still a threat, it stops. Miranda kicks in.

I can still remember back to Faisal Shahzad, the Times Square bombing, and being part of that. With any bombing or terrorist attack, the bigger issue will be determining what other devices are out there. Does the threat continue? Are there other attacks planned? For example, did the individual booby trap the residence in which he was staying? Does the car he drove have an explosive device? Are there co-conspirators who have a follow-on attack planned? That is the scope.

**CTC:** Tsarnaev was successfully convicted in 2015 of using a

weapon of mass destruction in addition to 29 other counts. This successful prosecution is another distinct feature of this event. How does that particular WMD charge change the nature of the case if at all? And are there other notable features of the case’s prosecution?

**Weinreb (USAO):** Using a weapon of mass destruction is not a crime that is charged every day. Even when it’s charged, it is not often that the case goes to trial. And it’s usually only at a trial where the fine points of the law and what the requirements are for proving a violation of it are hashed out.

That was particularly true of another of the statutes that we charged a violation of—one called “bombing a place of public use.” That was a statute that, I believe, had been charged only a couple of times before, and none of those cases had gone to trial. That was one where we had to make new law when it came to what that statute required us to prove.

The case involved another law—called “using a firearm or explosive device during and in furtherance of a crime of violence resulting in death”—that is not often charged. In a situation like this, you have a combination of bombs and guns, and you have people not just getting hurt, but actually being killed. That raised some novel legal questions as well.

This case really combined many elements that are not often found together in a criminal case. You had a crime that affected thousands and thousands of people. Hundreds were injured. Seventeen were maimed. Four were killed. It involved terrorism. It involved the use of weapons of mass destruction. Because it was a capital case, it implicated all the issues that were involved in capital cases, of which there are many.

There was a challenge to the venue of the case—whether it could lawfully be tried in Boston or not. That was a major issue during the pre-trial proceedings. There were witnesses who were all over the world who had to be found and safely brought to the U.S. to testify on behalf of the defense. That was a particular feature of the case. There were really a lot of interesting and difficult challenges in this case from a prosecutor’s standpoint.

**Shaw (FBI):** From the law enforcement side—whether us in the FBI or our partners on the JTTF—our role and responsibility is conducting a full and comprehensive investigation, the collection of evidence, and the timely sharing of intelligence. We will process, analyze, exploit and collect as much information as possible to advance that case or support a potential prosecution. We’ll have to attest to that evidence at trial. It’s the U.S. Attorneys that make the determination on how the case is going to be charged based on the information developed through the course of our investigation.

**Weinreb (USAO):** Most challenging was making sure we did the right thing by the victims, that we gave them an opportunity to tell the world what had happened to them, and that we got the full accounting out. There had been so much in the press that was heard by people in bits here or bits there. Very few people understood how it really all unfolded from beginning to end or really understood the magnitude of the harm that it did to people who were victimized by it. We felt a real special responsibility to tell that and to allow the victims to tell it in their own words.

**Shaw (FBI):** The victims of these horrific crimes are always with us. We seek to bring justice to those who have been impacted through

<sup>a</sup> *New York v. Quarles* was a 1984 decision by the United States Supreme Court regarding the public safety exception to the Fifth Amendment requirements of the Miranda warning.

compassion, sensitivity, and diligence in our work. As tragic as the Boston Marathon bombings were to this city, our country, and our friends around the globe, it was a seminal moment for those of us within the Greater Boston law enforcement team. It made us better, more connected, and driven to stop the next potential attack from happening. Our workforce, JTTF, and partners could not be more committed to proactively identifying the next threat and mitigating

it with speed, thoroughness, and through lawful means. We take the threat of terrorism personally. We've been attacked, and we know how it feels. When you've been through it, you also understand the importance of working together, the reliance on sound and trusting partnerships, and the need to efficiently share information with the goal of stopping an attack before it occurs. **CTC**

## Citations

- 1 Herman Leonard, Christine Cole, Arnold Howitt, and Philip Heymann, "Why Was Boston Strong? Lessons from the Boston Marathon Bombing," Program on Crisis Leadership and Program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management, Harvard Kennedy School, April 3, 2014.
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# The Islamic State's Lingerin g Legacy among Young Men from the Mosul Area

By Scott Atran, Hoshang Waziri, Ángel Gómez, Hammad Sheikh, Lucía López-Rodríguez, Charles Rogan, and Richard Davis

**After expulsion of Islamic State forces from Mosul, Iraq's government declared the country "fully liberated" and the Islamic State "defeated." But field interviews and non-threatening psychological experiments with young Sunni Arab men from the Mosul area indicate that the Islamic State may have lost its "caliphate," but not necessarily the allegiance of supporters of both a Sunni Arab homeland and governance by sharia law. These continued supporters of some Islamic State core values appear more willing to make costly sacrifices for these values than those who value a unified Iraq. Nearly all study participants rejected democracy, and expressed unwillingness to tradeoff values for material gain. Thus, rather than relying on implementation of Western values or material incentives to undercut (re)radicalization, the findings suggest that alternative interpretations of local society's core values could be leveraged as 'wedge issues' to better divide groups such as the Islamic State from supporting populations.**

**F**rom July to October 2017, the authors conducted in-depth, one-on-one interviews, including evaluation on a series of psychological measures, with young Sunni men just coming out from under Islamic State rule in Mosul, Iraq, and the surrounding region. To a significant degree men like this are likely to shape and be affected by the post Islamic State political and security landscape in the region. The goal was to better understand how people who had lived under the Islamic

*Scott Atran is research director in anthropology at France's National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), research professor of public policy and psychology at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor), and research fellow at the Changing Character of War Centre (University of Oxford). Hoshang Waziri is a research fellow at ARTIS International. Ángel Gómez is Professor of Psychology at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (Spain). Hammad Sheikh is a postdoctoral fellow in psychology at the New School for Social Research (New York). Lucía López-Rodríguez is an assistant professor of psychology at the Universidad de Almería (Spain). Charles Rogan is presidential assistant at ARTIS International. Richard Davis is Professor of Practice at Arizona State University and a research fellow at the Changing Character of War Centre (University of Oxford).*

*All authors participated as researchers under the auspices of ARTIS International.*

State perceived: 1) the Islamic State's rule; 2) the Islamic State's political and insurrectional prospects following military defeat by the Iraqi Army and allied militia with aid from an international coalition dominated by the United States and Iran; 3) their own political future; and 4) their willingness to make costly sacrifices for their primary reference groups and for political and religious ideals.

The multidisciplinary and multinational team of researchers has been working on the frontlines of the fight against the Islamic State since the beginning of 2015.<sup>a</sup> In their research with frontline combatants in Iraq (peshmerga, Iraqi Army, Sunni Arab militia, Kurdistan's Workers' Party (PKK), and captured Islamic State fighters), the authors employed an initial set of psychological measures to gauge willingness to make costly sacrifices.<sup>1</sup> In these frontline studies, whose results the authors' replicated in more than a dozen online studies among thousands of Western Europeans outside the conflict zone, the authors investigated two key components of a theoretical framework they termed "The Devoted Actor" to better understand people's willingness to make costly sacrifices.<sup>2</sup>

The Devoted Actor framework integrates research on "sacred values" that are immune to material tradeoffs—whether religious or secular, as when land or law become holy or hallowed—and "identity fusion," which gives individuals a visceral feeling of oneness and invulnerability to a primary reference group to which they belong.<sup>3</sup> The authors found three crucial factors common to those devoted actors most willing to make costly sacrifices: The first was commitment to non-negotiable sacred values and the groups that the actors are wholly fused with. The second was readiness to forsake kin for those values. And the third was devoted actors' perception that the spiritual strength of their own group (often interpreted as heartfelt commitment to the group's values) outweighed their perception of the group's material strength or that of its enemies (often interpreted in terms of manpower and firepower). The authors showed that, in extreme conflicts, expressed willingness to act in defense of core values can trump cost-benefit calculations, with implications for policy decisions relevant to improving the political and security outlook in a particular region.

More generally, these prior studies, as well as the new results presented here, are part of a series of investigations intended to inform policymakers and the public about recent findings from

a Pre-study interviews with policymakers in the United States and Europe and field studies in IDP camps in the Mosul region of Iraq were carried out with support from the Carnegie Corporation. Development of the theoretical framework for exploring willingness to make costly sacrifices for the sake of material interests versus abstract ideals and values, and experimental validation of that framework and associated measures outside of the conflict area, was supported by the U.S. Air Force Office of Scientific Research and the National Science Foundation. Psychological measures were developed with support from the U.S. Office of Naval Research.

social science research on the relative importance of material interests versus abstract ideals and values, which can help determine individuals' willingness to make costly sacrifices in geographic "hot spots." The research methodology does not involve general attitudinal surveys or form-filling questionnaires. Rather, the authors employ a theoretical framework developed in the course of research in conflict zones around the world, using a series of dynamic measures (described below) to tease out that framework so as to identify pathways to and from individual and collective violence and to better understand potential implications for policy.

To prepare for this post-Islamic State research, the authors elicited policy-relevant questions from the following policymaking groups in order to help provide responses grounded in empirical research with both practical implications and theoretical scope: the U.S. military (active and recently retired), members of the United States Congress, the White House, HMG Daesh Task Force and Stabilisation Unit, France's Conseil Supérieur de la Formation et de la Recherche Stratégiques, Germany's Ministry of Defense, European Union leadership in Brussels, the United Nations Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee, and the Arab Barometer. The following general research and policy questions emerged:

- What do people coming out from under Islamic State rule think of the Islamic State in the recent past, at present, and in terms of the future?
- What do they think of a unified Iraq?
- What political future do they want?
- What would they tolerate?
- What could appeal to them to prevent emergence of a violent successor to the Islamic State?

Following initial piloting of questions and measures with a preliminary sample, a second set of 70 interviews with Sunni Arab men (average age of 23.81, ranging for 18 to 30 years) were carried out in five camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Khazer and Debaga camp complexes). Located between Mosul and the Kurdistan region of Iraq, the camps were managed by the Kurdistan Regional Government with the assistance of a variety of international NGOs.<sup>b</sup> After some time spent with each prospective interviewee (chosen as randomly as feasible while walking through the camps) to acquire informed consent that also ensured anonymity, the authors proceeded to the interview, which lasted on average about two hours and allowed for justifications of responses and other reflections on life under the Islamic State, in the camps, and prospects for the future.

Because in-depth interviews in conflict zones require considerable time (including hours spent daily going to and from the field sites), and are otherwise challenging, samples tend to be much smaller than with standard surveys and questionnaires. For this reason, and to ensure both theoretical and methodological generalizability, the authors have validated all measures with populations in other conflict zones, as well as from entirely different cultural contexts outside of conflict zones.

The results that follow suggest that although the Islamic State

has now lost almost all Sunni Arab lands in Iraq, perhaps a considerable segment of the present generation of young Sunni Arabs continues to share with the Islamic State its most sacred value, measured in terms of willingness to make costly sacrifices for it: namely, strict belief in sharia as the only way to salvage and govern society. The individuals sampled tended to describe strict sharia as God's guarantee of justice and freedom, and the only way to eliminate oppression and corruption. Whereas the Islamic State's foreign fighters may have truly fought for this, at least in initial perceptions, some interviewees believe that mission was undermined by local Islamic State elements. A majority of participants also believe that the United States, and fully half of the sample believe that Iran, caused or helped the Islamic State to turn against their people, the Sunni Arabs, in order to divide and subjugate them.

The authors found a significant divide between those who support a unified Iraq versus those who simultaneously support both an independent Sunni Arab homeland and sharia rule, with no appreciable support for democracy from either side. The overwhelming majority believes that democracy brings only destruction. Those who support a Sunni Arab homeland and sharia expressed greater willingness to sacrifice for this cause than those who support a unified Iraq.

The implication is that there may be a good portion of young Sunni Arab men in the region that still adhere to some of the Islamic State's core values—above all, the absolute rule of sharia law.

A possible policy implication emerging from the preliminary results is to focus on failures of the Islamic State and other jihadi groups in the region to live up to basic tenets of sharia as indicated by the authors' sample of young men. These included the perception that the jihadis had failed to create solidarity among all walks of society, protect guests who do not intend to harm their hosts, and avoid divisions within the Muslim community (*fitna*) caused by misinterpretations. It also included the sense the Islamic State had misapplied sharia, and failed to prevent civil war within the Muslim community (the data suggest that only fear of civil war could cause people to appreciably relax adherence to their particular interpretation of sharia).

The conclusions and possible policy implications of this study are, of course, tentative given the limited population sample and pending confirmation through further field studies. However, reliable results from even this initial stage of investigation of the post-Islamic State socio-political horizon may help to provide researchers and policymakers some grounding to build upon amid the ongoing turbulence.

## The Overarching Narrative

**1. Initial Popular Support for the Islamic State "Revolution" (*al-Thawra*).** Most of the participants who had lived under Islamic State rule in the region told the authors that most people among the Sunni Arab population initially welcomed the Islamic State as a glorious "Revolution" (*al-Thawra*) devoted to implementing Allah's rule in the form of sharia law to protect the Sunni people. When asked about what people in the community thought was good about the Islamic State, only seven percent ( $n = 5$ ) answered "nothing." The great majority (93 percent,  $n = 65$ ) mentioned the "good" that the Islamic State did, at least at the beginning of its rule, especially with defense, commitment to religion, implementation of sharia, and provision of security, stability, and a sense of freedom (primarily owing to open roads with no checkpoints in Islamic State-ruled

b These include the Norwegian Refugee Council, REACH, Terre Des Hommes, the World Health Organization, the Danish Refugee Council, UNICEF, UNFPA, the International Organization for Migration, Emergency Health Care by Kuwait Government, QANDIL, Médecins Sans Frontières, and the International Medical Corps.

areas):<sup>c</sup>

*“There was freedom to move anywhere, no identity cards, no checkpoints,” one young man said of the first months of Islamic State rule. “The Iraqi Army used to humiliate us at checkpoints and take money to let people pass. [The Islamic State] let young people feel freedom. They rebuilt bridges and schools.”<sup>d</sup>*

*“But then [the Islamic State] lied,” he went on. “They told everyone that there would be a general amnesty, that there would be no punishment for people who followed sharia. Then they broke their promises. They would dig into people’s past. They killed former army officers and police and anyone with an important position in the [former] government, first terrifying them, then taking money from them, later executing them.”*

Others were more inclined to excuse the Islamic State, ascribing its increasingly brutal behavior to the pressure on them from coalition attacks and airstrikes. Some of the interviewees saw a clear difference between the foreign fighters’ dedication to the caliphate and the locals’ lack of commitment. The foreign fighters were much more committed, one young man told one of the authors, because “they believed in the cause; that’s what they came for, and they were willing to die for what they came for. Some walked the streets with [suicide] belts to show they were ready to die.” He also explained that their salaries from the Islamic State were meager compared to what Iraqi Army and peshmerga soldiers receive. In the words of one Kurdish soldier involved in the offensive to retake Mosul, “the *muhajireen* [foreign volunteers] of Daesh [Islamic State] fight to die.”

The authors even met a number of Sunni Arab militia commanders, currently fighting with the Iraqi Army and peshmerga,

c There was also a modest rise in Mosul’s standard of living, confirmed by European government sources.

d Study participants tended to support the imposition of collective prayers and *zakat* (charity) as creating social solidarity, but also the requirement that women wear the *niqab* (face covering) in public. The physical and juridical subordination of women represents a fundamental clash with Western values and interventions not readily reconciled at present, and also with regard to (lack of) tolerance of minorities and their equality before the law. As in Afghanistan, perceived foreign forcing of gender equality incites intense and often violent opposition, and is a constant motivator of local insurgency. Historically, Mosul has been a center of Sunni Arab nationalism, rooted in social and religious conservatism. For example, Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahab, founder of the Wahabi movement and a spiritual icon for the Islamic State, studied Islam and salafism in Mosul. The Islamic State legitimized sharia as a governing system. This came in the wake of Saddam Hussein’s intense Faith Campaign to Islamize society, especially the army and educational system, which began in the 1990s in an effort to undermine tribal loyalties and enlist Sunni Arab support across the region in opposition to Sunni rival Saudi Arabia, Shi’a Iran and the Judeo-Christian West. Participants who selected sharia as their most sacred value, and favored it over their family, were asked how they saw other “People of the Book” (*Ahlu al Kitab*), especially Christians. Participants stated that Christians must pay poll tax (*Jizya*) as sharia demands. When we asked about Yazidis their answer, as one participant typically put it, was: “We will not kill them but we will make them to convert to Islam.” Insofar as the Islamic State did ask Yazidis to become Muslims before it started massacring them, this position is not contrary to the Islamic State’s.

who acknowledged initially welcoming the Islamic State. These commanders, often members of tribal elites, only switched sides when the Islamic State turned to class warfare, inciting less privileged tribesmen to seize the elite’s property and kill them (although such seizures required the Islamic State’s permission and were taxed). Many of these dispossessed elites and their kinsmen want blood revenge, adding to the threat from Shi’a militias a dangerous potential for internal conflict among post-Islamic State Sunni Arab communities in Iraq.

Overall, despite an end-state perception of the Islamic State as corrupt, brutal, and hypocritical (see Figure 1), the authors found lingering support and respect for what people thought the Islamic State stood for at the beginning.

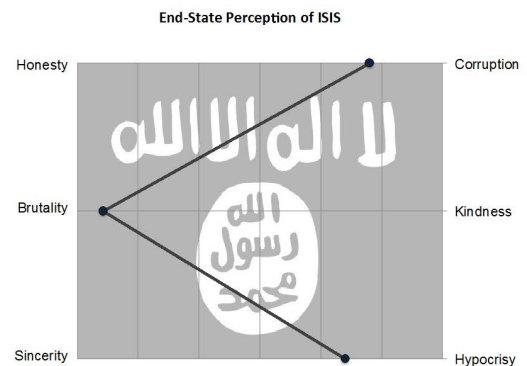


Figure 1. Perception of the Islamic State at the end of its rule as fairly corrupt, brutal, and hypocritical. Means were significantly far from the theoretical midpoint of a bipolar scale (perceived closeness to Honesty vs. Corruption, Brutality vs. Kindness, and Sincerity vs. Hypocrisy),  $t(69)$ , all  $ps < .001$ .

**2. The United States and Iran turned the Islamic State to their own advantage, to destroy the Sunni Arabs.** A majority of participants believe that two countries, the United States and Iran, helped the Islamic State (see Figure 2). More than one in four believe that Turkey also helped the Islamic State. The most common claim with regard to alleged assistance is that “America helped IS with money and arms.” Other repeated claims include “America created IS” and “America saved IS leadership.” Iran, too, is viewed by some as having created the Islamic State and having sent soldiers to the group “to fight against Sunni and Iraqis.”

For most, Iran (94 percent,  $n = 64$ ) and America (89 percent,  $n = 62$ ) conspired against Iraq, in general, and Sunnis, in particular, to divide, humiliate, and subjugate them, and even to “eliminate our religion.” Also cited is the notion of U.S. revenge against the Sunni Arabs in particular, and Iraq in general, for the insurgency against U.S. occupation of Iraq after 2004 and for the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. Turkey, a country of mostly Sunni non-Arabs, is viewed as helping the Islamic State in order to bolster its influence with Sunni Arabs and counter the influence of Kurds (also Sunni non-Arabs) by “opening its borders to foreign fighters,” “letting most remaining IS leaders flee to Turkey,” and by “taking care of wounded IS” to fight another day.

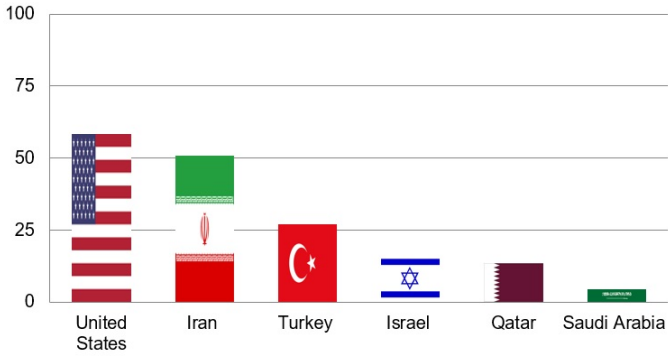


Figure 2: Countries perceived to have helped the Islamic State

**Experimental Measures and their Relationships**

**Identity Fusion**

Identity fusion refers to a visceral feeling of connectedness with a group that predicts extreme pro-group behavior and that has been assessed by pictorial, verbal, and dynamic methods. Here, the authors probed identity fusion among the interviewees with family, friends, Muslims generally, Sunni Arabs, and tribe by using a dynamic display on a touchscreen device. Participants were shown a circle representing the self (“me”) and another circle at some distance representing the group of interest, which was displayed using a flag or another identifying pictorial representation. They then could reduce the distance between these circles (up to a complete overlap) to the position best reflecting their relationship with the group (Figure 3). Only people who chose a position where the two circles representing the self and the given group fully overlap are considered fused with the group. (Hence, although the instrument is continuous, the resulting measure is dichotomous, non-fused vs. fused.) Previous experiments in a wide range of cultural contexts and conditions show that people who indicate that their relationship with the group is best reflected by the two circles completely overlapping think and behave in ways different from those who choose any other option:<sup>4</sup> they wed their personal identity (“who I am”) to a unique collective identity (“who we are”), perceiving the personal and social identities as a single identity.

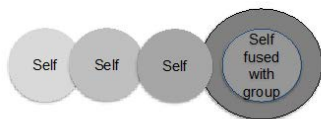


Figure 3: Static representation of dynamic identity fusion measure

As in other contexts, the authors found that fusion with family is most prevalent. Fusion with the tribe was least common in the sample, and fusion with the Sunni community was positively correlated with fusion with tribe,  $r = .37, p < .001$  (Figure 4).

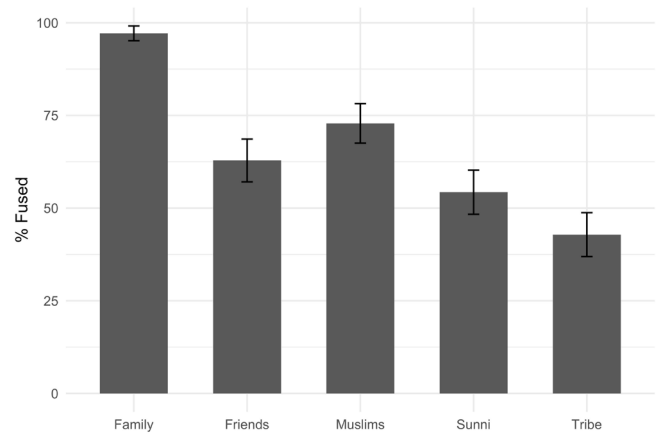


Figure 4: Identity Fusion. Percent of participants fused with family, friends, Muslims generally, Sunni Arabs, and tribe.

**Costly Sacrifices**

Participants were asked to what extent they would agree with a number of sacrifices in defense of each of four values: democracy, sharia, independent Sunni homeland/region, unified Iraq (Figure 5). The sacrifices were: lose job or source of income to defend the value, go to jail; use violence; die; and let their children suffer physical punishment. People were willing to sacrifice most for sharia and least for democracy.

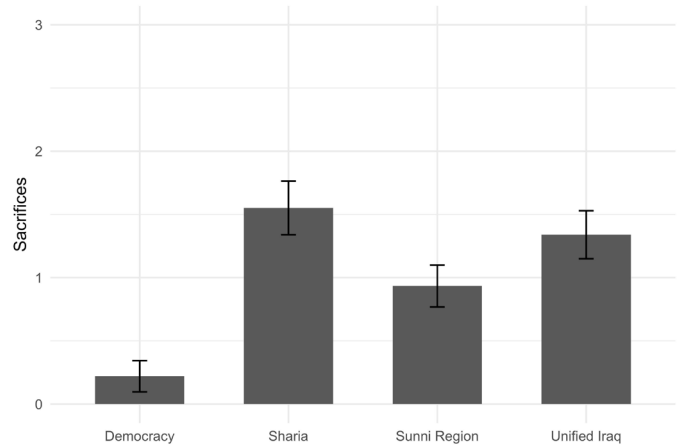


Figure 5. Willingness to Make Costly Sacrifices for Values: 0 = strongly disagree to 3 = strongly agree. Combined sacrifice set (Cronbach’s alphas .74 to .98, all reliable) included lose job or source of income to defend the value; go to jail; use violence; die; let my children suffer physical punishment).

**Tradeoffs**

Participants were then asked if they would accept different tradeoffs (money for personal housing, or getting a [better] job, homes or jobs for the community, preventing a civil war, obeying their leader) to forsake an independent Iraq, sharia, or an independent Sunni region (Yes/No). Almost no participants would accept money for housing or a job (Figure 6). People are most concerned about avoiding a civil war, although more than 40 percent of participants would not compromise on sharia even to avoid civil war. Obeying the leader, which is more consistent with preference for authoritarian government than democracy, appears as important as providing jobs and homes for the community.

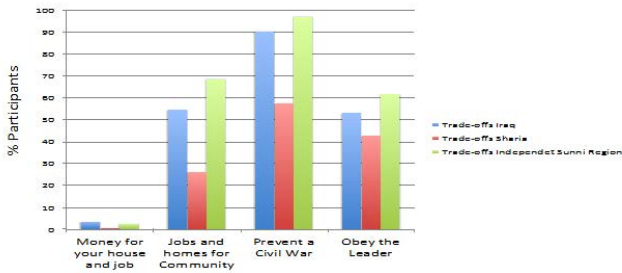


Figure 6. Tradeoffs for Values (independent Iraq, sharia, independent Sunni Arab homeland). Few people were willing to trade off their values for money or personal gain, but significant numbers were willing to trade off their values to prevent civil war (although over 40 percent were unwilling to trade off sharia to this end).

### Sacred Values

Sacred values are defined as ideas, preferences, or beliefs that people refuse to measure along material scales, typically evidenced by a refusal to trade them off for economic (e.g., money), social (e.g., status), or other material benefits. Refusal to contemplate the first two of the given tradeoffs was taken as an indicator of a sacred value. The authors then asked participants to choose their most sacred value among sharia, unified Iraq, independent Sunni region, and democracy (Figure 7).

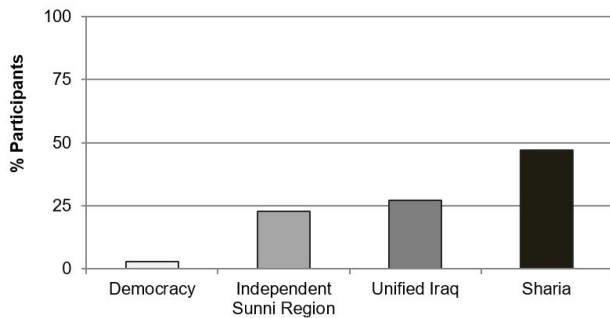


Figure 7. Sacred Values. Percentage of participants who chose the specific value as the most sacred (i.e., unwilling to trade off values or any material advantage) among sharia, unified Iraq, independent Sunni region, and democracy

Nearly half of participants considered sharia their most sacred value, about one in four considered a unified Iraq, and nearly the same number considered an independent Sunni region to be their core value. Only two people claimed democracy as the most important sacred value. The authors then tested participants' expressed willingness to make costly sacrifices for their values (again, sharia was most worthy of sacrifice and democracy least).

### Perceived Group Cohesion

The authors tested a new measure of group cohesion that involved a choice between a loosely packed group of circles (representing group members) separated from one another, a somewhat compact group of circles touching one another, and a highly compact group of circles all stacked together in a regimented manner (Figure 8).

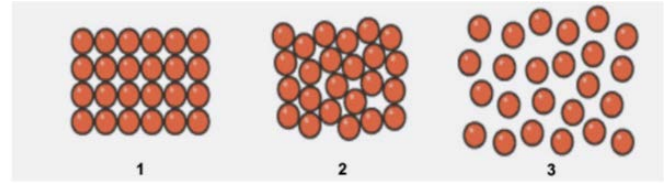


Figure 8. Measures of Group Cohesion: 1 = Strong, 2 = Moderate, 3 = Weak (Divided)

More than half of the participants (58 percent) considered the Sunni Arab community to be divided internally (no cohesion). Nearly half considered the Iraqi government to be divided (46 percent) and only a third considered the Islamic State to be divided (33 percent). In other words the Islamic State was perceived as more cohesive than either the Iraqi government/state or the Sunni Arab community (Figure 9).

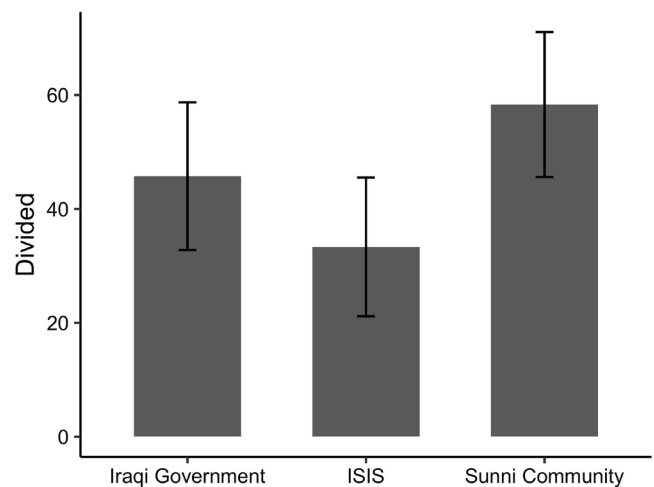


Figure 9. Perceptions of Group Division "Divided" indicates the percentage of participants who chose the dot pattern indicating least cohesion for each of three groups (Iraq, the Islamic State, Sunni Arabs).

### Spiritual Formidability versus Physical Formidability

In the authors' earlier study with frontline combatants in Iraq, they found that both avowedly religious Islamic State fighters and avowedly secular PKK fighters (the only force that held fast against the Islamic State onslaught in summer 2014) did not see physical formidability as important. They argued that most important was spiritual formidability (*ruhi bi ghiyrat*, in Arabic and Kurdish). Thus, the authors adapted measures of physical formidability to spiritual formidability, comparing the relative impact of physical and spiritual formidability on willingness to fight (Figure 10). This earlier field study with frontline combatants demonstrated the external validity of spiritual formidability measure. Overall, frontline combatants (peshmerga, Sunni militia, Iraqi Army, PKK, the Islamic State, al-Qa`ida/Jabhat an-Nusra) judged the United States high in physical formidability but low spiritually, while judging the Islamic State low physically but high spiritually.

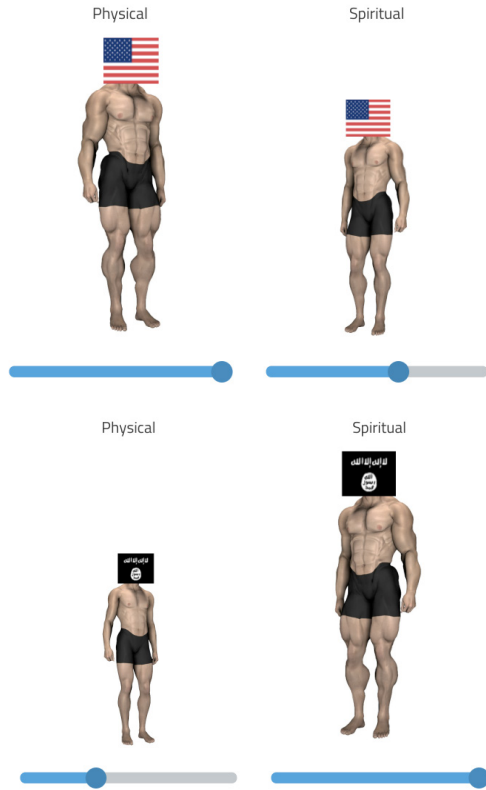


Figure 10. Average Judgment of Spiritual Formidability versus Physical Formidability of United States versus the Islamic State by frontline combatants using touch-screen slider on a tablet (based on results in Gómez et al., 2017)<sup>e</sup>

In the post-Islamic State Mosul sample, the gap between physical and spiritual formidability is also highest for the United States versus the Islamic State (Figure 11). U.S. forces were perceived as physically the strongest but were among the spiritually weakest. Iran and the United States were the only factions whose physical formidability trumped their spiritual formidability. The Iraqi Army, Shiite militia, peshmerga, and the Islamic State were considered the strongest in spirit; and only the physical prowess of the Iraqi Army matched its spiritual prowess, with both being relatively high. By contrast, ratings of the Iraqi Army by frontline combatants before the retaking of Mosul were much lower, especially spiritual strength. The perceived spiritual formidability of the Islamic State was also relatively high, but lower than the authors previously found among frontline combatants before the group lost Mosul. Participants perceived the Sunni community as having the lowest spiritual strength; however, those most inclined to see (and lament) the Sunni community's post-Islamic State spiritual decline were liable to be in favor of establishing a Sunni homeland ( $r = -.25, p = .05$ ), which some participants justified as a means to overcome the community's current perceived weakness.

<sup>e</sup> To illustrate how the measure was used in the field, in this case by a peshmerga fighter, see video available at <https://youtu.be/FjKu9Gt-FbY>. The viewer will see that the measure was readily understood and easily manipulated.

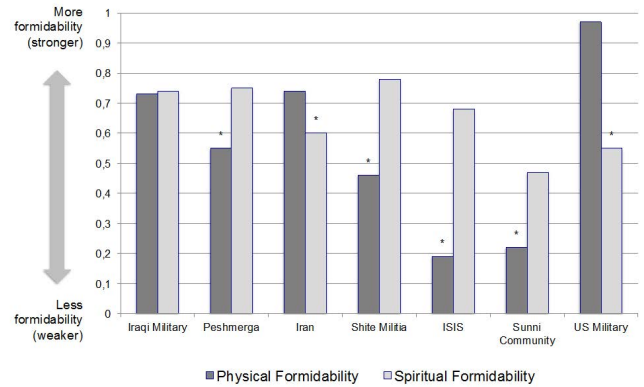


Figure 11: Perceived Spiritual vs Physical Strength by Civilians coming out from under Islamic State rule, 2017. An asterisk (\*) indicates significant differences between physical and spiritual formidability ( $p < .001$ )

Overall, whereas physical formidability was not related to cohesion, spiritual formidability was positively related to cohesion; that is, negatively correlated with inner division (opposite of cohesion): for the Islamic State,  $r = -.32, p = .01$ ; for the Iraqi Government,  $r = -.44, p < .001$ ; for the Sunni community,  $r = -.25, p = .05$ . In other words, the higher perceived spiritual formidability of each group, the higher the perceived cohesion.

**Commitment to Values versus Groups**

In earlier research in North Africa and Europe, the authors found that fusion and sacred values were independent predictors of willingness to make costly sacrifices, including fighting and dying, but their interaction maximized such willingness.<sup>5</sup> Yet when push comes to shove, which takes precedence—commitment to one's primary reference group or commitment to one's sacred value? In order to answer this, participants were asked to choose between sacred values and fused groups using a dynamic measure for choosing between Value and Group.

The authors focused on the most important group and most important value that each participant had previously indicated. Most people indicated family as their most important group and sharia as their most important value (as might be expected from evolutionary theory). Thus, the main dilemma was to choose between family versus sharia (Figure 12). Most people choose commitment to group, especially the family, over any value (as found in the authors' previous online studies of Western Europeans noncombatants). Those who chose value over group were also more willing to make sacrifices for the value than those who chose group over value (consistent with the authors' previous findings for some frontline combatants in Iraq).<sup>f</sup>

<sup>f</sup> For each given value, the authors regressed sacrifices on sacredness and fusion (with different groups). Sacredness positively predicted sacrifices for all values ( $ps < .01$ ); however, fusion did not predict sacrifices for any value, no matter the group.

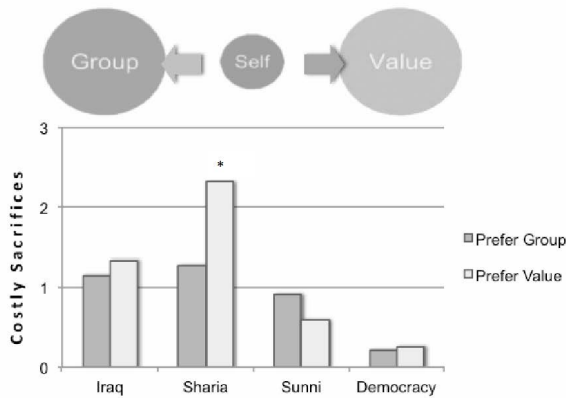


Figure 12. Group versus Value. Most people choose commitment to their most important group (which was most often the family) over any value; however, those who chose value over group (most often when sharia was the value) were more willing to make greater sacrifices for the value than those who chose group over value. The asterisk (\*) indicates a significant preference for sharia over any group ( $p < .001$ )

### Supporters of a Unified Iraq versus supporters of a Sunni Arab Homeland under Sharia

Support for an independent Sunni Arab homeland is negatively correlated with democracy,  $r = -.28$ ,  $p = .02$ , and sharia is also negatively correlated with democracy,  $r = -.24$ , and  $p = .04$ . Sharia is positively correlated with independent Sunni region,  $r = .23$ ,  $p = .05$ , but not with a unified Iraq. Participants who simultaneously value both a Sunni Arab homeland and sharia also are more fused with Sunni Arabs,  $r = .23$ ,  $p = .05$ ; more willing to sacrifice for Sunni Arabs,  $r = .50$ ,  $p < .01$ , and sharia,  $r = .43$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and less willing to sacrifice for a unified Iraq  $r = -.25$ ,  $p = .04$  and democracy,  $r = -.30$ ,  $p = .03$ . Sunni homeland and sharia supporters also perceive the United States as having low spiritual strength,  $r = -.27$ ,  $p = .03$ , as with Iran as well  $r = -.28$ ,  $p = .03$ , and supporters of a Sunni homeland and sharia also tended to suggest in justifications that the current military advantage of the United States (and to a lesser extent Iran) would not long endure owing to a lack of sustaining spiritual power.

Perhaps most important for policy planners seeking to maintain cordial relations with the region is that participants who value both an independent Sunni Arab homeland and sharia show the least support for democracy,  $r = -.33$ ,  $p < .01$ , and these people are more willing to make costly sacrifices for these values than those who support a unified Iraq.

### Conclusion

*"America wants to impose democracy only to divide the Sunni people; [the Islamic State] gave us hope with sharia."<sup>g</sup>*

On December 9, 2017, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared victory over the Islamic State, claiming that its defeat was "won with our unity and determination."<sup>6</sup> Yet, this study's participants still perceive a comparable measure of unity and determination for the Islamic State, at least in the sense of being relatively cohesive (more so than the Iraqi government/state itself) and spir-

itually formidable (which the authors' frontline studies indicate is a predictor of "will to fight"). Moreover, results intimate that a significant number of supporters of a Sunni Arab homeland and sharia likely still adhere to what they at least initially perceived to be Islamic State core values. For example, nearly two-thirds of supporters of both a Sunni Arab homeland and sharia (32 percent of all participants) indicated that sharia was the Islamic State's most cherished value. Moreover, the underlying conditions of political and confessional conflict that caused people to initially embrace the Islamic State have not appreciably changed in people's minds.

Indeed, there are numerous reports from participants and others of Islamic State remnants regrouping: for example, under the mantle of *Jaysh Ahrar al-Sunnah*, or Army of the Sunni Freemen.<sup>h</sup> In Kirkuk militants have carried out more than a dozen monthly guerilla-style attacks since their putative defeat. When asked if people expect the Islamic State to be completely eliminated, almost all of the participants emphatically answered "no." When asked what will become of the Islamic State, answers revolved around two main themes: 1. It will operate as secret Islamic State cells or Islamic State-like groups, and 2. The Islamic State will wage insurgency again with its old tactics, such as bombings, assassinations, and small hit-and-run attacks.

The people who supported the Islamic State were Sunni Arabs who lived in Iraq's Sunni Arab nationalist heartland. Many still believe that the Sunni Arabs should control Iraq, and the Shi'a should be subdued or expelled. Now that the Shi'a-dominated Iraqi Army, backed by the United States and Iran, has overcome the Islamic State and taken control of Iraq, what may be a significant and committed portion of these people want their own homeland, and they want it grounded in sharia law as Sunni Arabs understand it (a strict and extreme version of which was preached and practiced by the Islamic State).<sup>i</sup>

The United States and its allied coalition, however, are committed to a unified Iraq and, in principle, to democratic rule. Post-Islamic State coalition efforts are focused on supporting forces willing to commit to a unified Iraq. Today, these forces include Iraqi Shi'a (who now control the government) and some Sunni Arabs willing to work with the government. Militarily, the forces for a unified Iraq side have the material advantage in manpower and firepower. But what may be a critical finding is the apparent willingness of supporters of both sharia and a Sunni Arab homeland to make greater sacrifices than those who support a unified Iraq. This points to

h Participants told the authors that high-level Islamic State personnel can readily bribe their way out of capture and detention, whereas low-level associates of the group, likely including some of the participants themselves, were often just members of the local working population. As before, Islamic State intelligence about the local situation likely involves placing operatives or cultivating informants in a variety of common occupations, such as sellers of goods in stalls and shops near privileged targets and sources of information (e.g., near police stations, municipal buildings, courts, popular markets, sites of NGO and foreign aid activities, among other pursuits), and so forth.

i Participants were especially wary of Shi'a Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). On March 8, 2018, Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi issued a decree granting PMF the same rights and salaries as the Iraqi Army. PMF comprise some 50 militia groups, totaling about 150,000 fighters, most trained and backed by Iran (and often directed by Iran's Quds Force, the Revolutionary Guards' extraterritorial arm). Although the decree subjects PMF to Iraqi military law, it actually says nothing about integration with the Iraqi Army or about relinquishing operational command or control of its heavy weapons to the Iraqi Army.

g These were the words of one of the young Sunni male participants in the study.

the possibility that a Sunni-based insurgency for the sake of sharia-based society may well reemerge to compete with forces backing a unified Iraq, particularly because those forces are viewed as threatening Sunni Arabs and their young people's yearning for a corruption-free society under strong leadership.

One important theory-based but practical implication of this research is that appealing to spiritual values may be more effective than appealing to material values in motivating people to carry out actions (including sacrifices) to help improve the political and security situation in Iraq.

The research also suggests that spiritual values could be leveraged as 'wedge issues' to divide groups such as the Islamic State from supporting populations. This could be done by focusing on violations of sharia and traditional Sunni practices, including: behaviors that create divisions within society (*fitna*) and undermine the social solidarity of the community, killing foreigners just because they're foreigners especially if they were previously accepted as a local guest (*dhif*), harming women and children, and so forth.<sup>j</sup> Focusing on the spiritual values that participants believed they initially shared with the Islamic State but which they feel the Islamic State subsequently distorted or corrupted represents perhaps the least costly means to fragment support for the Islamic State and to foster cohesion amongst those who oppose the Islamic State.<sup>k</sup>

j What makes religious law, and the universal religions generally, so adaptable over vast expanses of time and cultural contexts, is their open-texturedness, allowing for a vast range of reinterpretation depending upon ever-changing events and interests in the here and now (and a chief occupation of weekly preaching by imams, priests and rabbis). Scott Atran and Jeremy Ginges, "Religious and sacred imperatives in human conflict," *Science* 336:6,083 (2012): pp. 855-857.

k No messaging is effective in a social vacuum. Al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State demonstrated the importance of intimate community service engagement with personal social networks, and adaptation of positive messaging to local needs and aspirations. This approach contrasts with the negative mass messaging featured in many Western public diplomacy approaches to "counter-narratives." For a telling analysis, see Elisabeth Kendall, "War-torn Yemen may attract jihadi fighters from Syria and Iraq," *Financial Times*, February 27, 2017.

Nevertheless, it would be counterproductive to rely exclusively on negative or mass messaging, as implied by one former imam who recruited for the Islamic State but claimed to have left because the Islamic State "violated sharia and Islamic tradition." He told the authors that: "The young who came to us were not to be lectured at like witless children. We have to provide a better message, but a positive one." He went on to say that the message needs to be in a cultural frame that inspires them "from within their hearts."

The Islamic State may have lost its 'caliphate,' but it has not necessarily lost the allegiance of supporters of both a Sunni Arab homeland and sharia to its core values, especially faith in strict sharia law. Unless the underlying conditions of political and confessional conflict that caused people to initially embrace the Islamic State appreciably change in the direction of mutual tolerance, and those core values can be reconfigured to accommodate that change, the specter of the Islamic State will likely endure. Appeal to a Golden Age revived in a glorious future—so unlike the distressing present and much of the recent past—will continue to have a powerful attraction for the region's Sunni Arab population. The results suggest such an appeal and attraction needs to be leveraged rather than denied so as to forestall the emergence of a violent successor to the Islamic State.

Without the laborious development of institutions that underpin democratic governance of the kind that took Europe and the United States more than two centuries to foster, democracy may not in the foreseeable future be very good at adjudicating across tribal, ethnic, and confessional boundaries and conflicts (any more than in family matters). The focus on wedge issues, at least for local populations in Iraq and the wider Levant, might better target the promotion of interpretations of sharia and recognition of Sunni Arab cultural preferences that are tolerable to other confessional and national allegiances in the region. **CTC**

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# Challenging the ISK Brand in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Rivalries and Divided Loyalties

By Amira Jadoon, Nakissa Jahanbani, and Charmaine Willis

**The launch of the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) brand in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region in 2014-2015 attracted droves of opportunistic and disgruntled militants from local groups. But the arrival of a new entrant in a crowded space also threatened existing groups' regional power and resources, leading to the inception of multiple rivalries, as evidenced via expressions of leaders' disapprovals and warnings toward ISK between 2014 and 2017. A close look at the incompatibilities between ISK and its rivals suggests continued resistance by groups whose relevance and resources are directly threatened by ISK's mission of a global caliphate.**

Expanding into new operational theaters can be a rewarding yet risky venture for transnational terrorist groups. Establishing a meaningful presence in a new region often depends on a new entrant's ability to build alliances, especially in militant-saturated areas like Afghanistan and Pakistan. Excessive rivalries, however, can get in the way. Islamic State Khorasan's (ISK) arrival in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region in 2014-2015 triggered a number of defections from regional militant organizations and individuals eager to exploit the ISK brand.<sup>1</sup> A notable tide of pledges of allegiance (or *bay`a*) followed, which included six Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leaders who publicly expressed their commitment to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2014. Other groups' reactions ranged from pledging *bay`a* to offering general support or remaining neutral.<sup>2</sup>

However, ISK's attempts to set up shop in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region by poaching discontented militants and establishing links with opportunistic leaders of local groups has also met resistance, often resulting in bloody clashes. Most notably, ISK militants have continually clashed with Taliban fighters in Afghanistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan (FATA).<sup>3</sup> In 2015, a cycle of violence between the groups resulted in ISK militants beheading 10 Taliban members in Nangarhar, which was sub-

sequently met with a surprise attack by Taliban fighters on Islamic State supporters in Mohamand Agency.<sup>4</sup> ISK fighters retaliated a week later by brutally killing several Taliban leaders and publicizing scenes of their killings online.<sup>5</sup> Ongoing fighting between the two groups has caused much destruction and displacement of local families.<sup>6</sup> The fighting continued in 2018 when the Taliban attempted to recapture areas in Jawzjan controlled by Qari Hekmetullah, a former Taliban commander who defected to ISK<sup>7</sup> and was recently killed in a U.S. airstrike.<sup>8</sup>

ISK's linkages with and recruitment from local battle-hardened jihadi groups with local know-how is likely to determine the group's longevity and lethality in the region. An escalation of rivalries between ISK and competing groups, however, is likely to affect the overall trajectory and nature of terrorism in the region. Rather than simply resulting in self-destruction, rivalries between groups can induce splintering and outbidding as well as result in the emergence of increasingly radical militant leaders.<sup>9</sup> In an attempt to better understand the rivalry landscape, this article takes a bird's-eye view to highlight enmities between ISK and key regional groups as evidenced via expressions of disapprovals and warnings toward ISK between 2014 and 2017. In addition, the article sheds light on the incompatibilities between ISK and its rivals by analyzing the extent to which these groups have divergent goals and targets. This article is not necessarily an exhaustive assessment of all the groups in Afghanistan-Pakistan that may have reservations about ISK's mission, strategy, and tactics. Rather, it seeks to highlight the incompatibilities between ISK and prominent groups in the region, which have publicly criticized ISK.

## A Hostile and Incompatible Message

The core message of ISK, disseminated via a variety of media platforms, includes the pursuit of an international jihad in the Khorasan Province,<sup>a</sup> including the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. It establishes the Islamic State as the legitimate leader of a transnational *ummah* whereby all followers pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi as the caliph. Central to the Islamic State's vision of a caliphate is gaining control of physical territories, or *wilayat*, which includes Khorasan as the "blessed battlefield."<sup>10</sup> Propaganda by the Khorasan branch remains true to the Islamic State's *takfir*<sup>b</sup> message and calls for attacks on not only other sects such as Shi'a and Sufis but also on other Sunni sects that do not strictly adhere to the Islamic State's ideology.<sup>11</sup> Nationalist movements are framed as anti-caliphate movements; the Taliban are branded as "filthy nationalists"<sup>12</sup> while Kashmiri militant groups are mere "agents of Pakistan."<sup>13</sup> Various ISK propagand-

*Dr. Amira Jadoon is an assistant professor at the Combating Terrorism Center and the Department of Social Sciences at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. She specializes in international security, economic statecraft, political violence, and terrorism. Nakissa Jahanbani and Charmaine N. Willis are Ph.D. students at the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy at the University at Albany, SUNY. Jahanbani's research focuses on states that support terrorist and insurgent groups, and political violence more broadly. Willis studies comparative politics and international relations, with an emphasis on contentious politics and region-building.*

a The Khorasan province includes Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well Iran, Central Asia, and parts of China.

b *Takfir* is the practice of labeling other non-conforming Muslims as apostates (excommunication). A *takfiri* is a Muslim who practices *takfir*.

da materials express hostility toward the apostate state of Pakistan, and call on its followers to target the Pakistani Army.<sup>14</sup>

The aforementioned characteristics that are the essence of the ISK brand also make it inherently incompatible with the underpinnings of key regional players. Of course, adopting the ISK brand is an attractive option for groups seeking to enhance their reputation and connect to a grander cause. But ISK’s message delegitimizes and threatens autonomous groups with limited goals such as the Afghan Taliban and Laskar-e-Taiba (LeT), who are dominant players in their respective spheres of influence and enjoy the Pakistani state’s passive or active support. Leaders of the Afghan Taliban and LeT have little interest in establishing a global caliphate or antagonizing the Pakistani state. Other groups operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan space are having a harder time picking sides; for the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and TTP, the arrival of ISK has resulted in internal turmoil and splintering amongst their leadership.<sup>15</sup>

Examining open-source reporting and analysis between 2014 and 2017, the authors identified six ‘rival groups’ of ISK (i.e., groups that directed inimical statements toward the latter). These are LeT, Jamaat-ud-Dawa, Afghan Taliban, Haqqani Network, IMU, and TTP.<sup>c</sup> The data for this article was collected by reviewing relevant newspaper reports, academic articles, and policy reports (published between January 2014 and December 2017) to compile a list of militant groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region that had any affiliation with ISK. They then focused their analysis on those groups whose leaders had publicly written or spoken negatively about ISK. Such statements included direct warnings to ISK, reaffirmations of preexisting loyalties, and criticisms of ISK’s brutal tactics (discussed further below). The authors used such statements as a basis to delve deeper into select cases to understand the sources of incompatibilities between each group and the ISK brand. Figure 1 indicates whether a rival group publicly criticized ISK in a given year between 2014 and 2017 whereas Figure 2 indicates if there were any reports of a rival group’s members defecting to ISK in a given year between

c Amongst these groups, commanders of IMU and TTP have disagreed on their support for ISK.

		2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>Group Leadership Opposed to ISK</b>	Lashkar-e-Taiba		✓		✓
	Jamaat-ud-Dawa			✓	
	Haqqani Network				
	Afghan Taliban		✓		
<b>Group Leadership Divided</b>	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan			✓	
	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan		✓		

Figure 1: Rival Groups: Years in Which Leaders Publicly Criticized ISK

2014-2017.<sup>d</sup>

		2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>Group Leadership Opposed to ISK</b>	Lashkar-e-Taiba			✓	
	Jamaat-ud-Dawa		✓	✓	
	Haqqani Network			✓	
	Afghan Taliban		✓	✓	✓
<b>Groups with Divided Loyalties</b>	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan		✓		
	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan	✓	✓		

Figure 2: Rival Groups: Years in Which Members Were Reported to Have Defected to ISK

### Rivalries and Divided Loyalties

A closer examination of ISK’s rivals suggests that groups unsympathetic toward ISK fall into two main camps: a) those whose central leadership collectively does not want ISK in their backyard, and b) those whose leadership has divided loyalties. In general, recent research suggests that violent rivalries between groups are generated by civil conflicts, drug trafficking, state sponsorship, and ethnic motivation.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, such factors define the milieu of jihad in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. The more granular approach of ISK’s rivals identifies five key factors that make ISK an undesirable entity for some:

- ISK’s territorial ambitions encroach upon existing spheres of influence of dominant groups;
- ISK’s strategy to poach militants from other groups via defections directly threatens the resources of targeted groups;
- ISK’s tendency to instigate sectarian violence to establish a transnational caliphate derails existing groups’ more limited nationalist agendas that are not necessarily *takfiri* in nature;
- ISK’s message disrupts preexisting traditional loyalties or alliances in the region;
- ISK’s vehement criticism of the Pakistani state threatens the passive or active support that some of its rival groups are afforded by elements within the Pakistani state.

d The information in Figures 1 and 2 is based on an analysis conducted by the authors of media reports obtained via open sources, including but not limited to Lexis-Nexis, news stories, and think-tank reports. Figure 2 depicts defections from only those groups that have expressed criticism of ISK in some capacity (indicated in Figure 1), rather than all groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region whose members may have joined ISK. Based on the information available at this period, the authors are unable to quantify the exact number of defections from each group. Therefore, they are only able to indicate whether any defections were reported. All groups in the categories “Group Leadership Opposed to ISK” and “Groups with Divided Loyalties” are considered to be rivals of ISK. The key distinction between the two sub-categories reflects the general degree of cohesion amongst the leadership of each group in opposing ISK. Groups in the latter category have experienced factional divisions with different views on whether to join or oppose ISK. Groups in both categories have experienced individual-level defections to ISK as indicated in Figure 2.

## Not in My Backyard: The Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network

Since being toppled from power in 2001 during the U.S.-led invasion, the Afghan Taliban remains the dominant insurgent group in Afghanistan and a major threat to the Afghan government and Western forces within the country. Its main leadership structure, the Quetta Shura, has been based in Quetta, Pakistan, since 2001, and the Pakistani intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence directorate, is believed to have maintained ties with the group, even post-2001.<sup>17</sup> A recent report indicated that Taliban fighters have full control of at least 14 districts and are openly active in another 263; this makes them operational in an area inhabited by 15 million civilians.<sup>18</sup> The Taliban primarily seeks to rid Afghanistan of U.S. and NATO forces, and establish a Taliban-controlled government with sharia law. Moreover, the group has long-standing ties with al-Qa`ida; in 2015, the Taliban publicly accepted al-Zawahiri's pledge of support.<sup>19</sup> While the Afghan Taliban have maintained a reputation for being internally cohesive, the group has not been immune to internal divisions. In particular, the revelation of the death of the Taliban leader Mullah Omar in July 2015 split the group into two main blocs.<sup>20</sup>

In 2014, ISK began an active recruitment campaign in 25 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, and the Afghan National Defense and Security force began to report more frequent encounters with Islamic State-affiliated fighters.<sup>21</sup> In 2015, Islamic State recruitment gained momentum in Afghanistan as Taliban fighters defected to al-Baghdadi.<sup>22</sup> A former Taliban commander, Abdul Rauf Khadim, who was appointed as the deputy of ISK, set up his own group in Helmand and Farah, offering financial incentives to Taliban defectors.<sup>23</sup> The Haqqani Network, closely linked with the Afghan Taliban, initially attempted to maintain a neutral position toward ISK as long as it stayed out of its stronghold of Loya Paktia.<sup>24</sup> The Haqqani Network is considered to be a semi-independent but critical component of the Afghan insurgency with long-standing relationships with other groups such as the LeT, al-Qa`ida, and TTP.<sup>25</sup> Sirajuddin Haqqani, who runs the Haqqani Network, is also the second in command within the Afghan Taliban movement.<sup>26</sup> Reports of defections from the Haqqani Network emerged in 2016, when senior commanders were said to have taken sides with ISK as well as with the breakaway Taliban faction led by Mullah Rasul.<sup>27</sup>

While the Haqqani Network has not issued an independent statement against ISK, the Taliban made its collective disapproval clear. After many failed negotiations between the Taliban and ISK through private channels to resolve tensions and violent clashes, in 2015, the Taliban leader Akhtar Mohammad Mansour issued a public statement to Islamic State. The statement warned Islamic State leadership against dividing the Afghan movement and poaching its members, and also threatened to react to its behavior. The statement was released on the Taliban's official website, the Voice of Jihad.<sup>28</sup> In retaliation, then Islamic State spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, accused the Taliban of being allies of the Pakistani state, warning the Taliban to either repent or become a target of the Islamic State.<sup>29</sup> With regard to the splinter Taliban faction (also known as the High Council of Afghanistan Islamic Emirate),<sup>30</sup> Mullah Rasul made it clear in 2015 that while he did not oppose the Islamic State operating in other countries, it was not welcome in Afghanistan.<sup>31</sup>

## Why Don't They Get Along?

Several factors drive the severe hostility between the Afghan Taliban (and its close ally, the Haqqani Network) and ISK. ISK's claims on the Afghanistan-Pakistan region as a fundamental part of its transnational caliphate delegitimize the existence and purpose of the Taliban whose primary focus is liberating Afghanistan from Western 'occupation.' The Taliban holds limited nationalist goals and generally steers clear of targeting other sects. Further, the Taliban and the Haqqani Network are widely believed to be allies of the Pakistani state, for whom they serve as useful instruments of foreign policy, and have much to lose by jeopardizing this relationship by aligning with ISK. Open recruitment for the Islamic State eventually culminated in clashes with the Taliban and led to the collective public warning issued to the Islamic State leadership. Reportedly, the Haqqani leadership has played an important role in assisting the Taliban in targeting Islamic State affiliates.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the rivalry between the Taliban and ISK runs wide and deep; a powerful ISK not only directly threatens the Taliban's sphere of influence and resources, its anti-nationalist and sectarian mantra directly clashes with the Taliban's regional goals. In addition, links between the Taliban and al-Qa`ida have endured despite years of war, which reinforces the rivalry between the Afghan Taliban and ISK.<sup>33</sup>

## Not in My Backyard: Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jamat-ud-Dawa

Lashkar-e-Taiba was founded in 1990 and Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), the group's political wing, was formed 12 years later. JuD has long been viewed as the political and charity front of LeT, or simply an alias of LeT. JuD, however, has denied that it is a front for LeT.<sup>34</sup> While LeT operates over a fairly broad area in South Asia, and JuD in Pakistan's northern provinces, both groups' operational focus remains Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>35</sup> The primary goal of LeT continues to be the liberation of Indian-administered Kashmir and its merger with Pakistan.<sup>36</sup>

LeT spokesman Mehmood Shah first made a statement dismissing links with the Islamic State in 2015, emphasizing LeT's goals of liberating Kashmir and claiming that links between LeT and ISK were propaganda generated by the Indian Army to delegitimize the Kashmiri jihad.<sup>37</sup> In mid-2017, the emergence of Islamic State flags in the Kashmir Valley once again led LeT's Mehmood Shah to condemn the Islamic State in a public statement sent to a local news agency emphasizing that, "ISIS is an anti-Islamic terrorist organization."<sup>38</sup> Hafiz Saeed, the leader of LeT, explicitly labeled groups such as al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State as terror groups, clearly in an attempt to distance LeT from transnational jihadi movements.<sup>39</sup>

JuD has also tried to distance itself from the Islamic State. In early 2016, JuD released an open letter to the public via social media denying any links with the Islamic State. In its view, 'Daesh' has harmed the cause of Islam and considers JuD an enemy.<sup>40</sup> It appears that this letter was specifically in response to rumors of JuD members defecting to ISK. In mid-2016, JuD's spokesman Attiqur Rahman Chohan remarked that some of the group's personnel had been attacked in a mosque in Peshawar, specifically due to JuD's public rallies in Malakand during which JuD had expressed support for the Pakistani Army and criticized the Islamic State.<sup>41</sup>

## Why Don't They Get Along?

There are both material and reputational factors that form the basis of LeT's incompatibility with ISK. Officially announced as a branch



*Afghanistan/Pakistan (Rowan Technology)*

in February 2016,<sup>42</sup> the formation of the Islamic State in Jammu and Kashmir directly encroaches upon LeT's sphere of influence, as does its sectarian stance and anti-Pakistan propaganda. LeT, a dominant terrorist organization in Kashmir and in South Asia, has an enduring relationship with the Pakistani state, and refrains from targeting other Muslim sects. In fact, LeT actively defends its connections with the Pakistani state and counters arguments of Deobandi<sup>e</sup> groups who justify attacks on Pakistani civilians.<sup>43</sup> As such, any affiliation with the ISK brand could seriously harm LeT's mutually beneficial relationship with the Pakistani state. Moreover, the Islamic State has attempted to poach militants' from both LeT and JuD, and has hurled direct criticism at LeT. In 2015, the Punjab Counter Terrorism Department dismantled an Islamic State aligned group in the city of Sialkot, which was believed to be a breakaway faction of JuD.<sup>44</sup> More recently, Islamic State propaganda has specifically called for supporters to abandon militant groups

in Kashmir which act on behalf of the Pakistani state.<sup>45</sup>

Since LeT/JuD are not organizationally linked to al-Qa`ida or the Afghan Taliban at a strategic level,<sup>46</sup> their hostility toward ISK is primarily driven by the threat the group poses to their independent agenda and influence in the region. An effective campaign by ISK can potentially result in a loss in LeT/JuD's members and resources, and adversely affect their reputation and sway in the region.

### **Divided Loyalties: Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan**

The IMU was founded in 1998 with the intention of replacing the secular Uzbek government with sharia law and establishing Islamic rule throughout the region.<sup>47</sup> It is one of Central Asia's largest and most violent organizations, with connections to other prominent terrorist organizations in the region, including the Haqqani Network, TTP, and al-Qa`ida.<sup>48</sup> Over time, the IMU turned its gaze away from Tashkent, pledged allegiance to the Taliban leader Mullah Omar<sup>49</sup> and focused on areas surrounding their base in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.<sup>50</sup> In 2013, Afghan and Coalition forces reported significant cooperation and joint operations between the Taliban and the IMU in northern Afghanistan.<sup>51</sup> More broadly, an increasingly repressive regime has fanned militant salafism in Uz-

<sup>e</sup> Deobandi is a revivalist movement within Sunni Islam, originating in India. Deobandis fall under the Hanafi school of Islam. See Luv Puri, "The Past and Future of Deobandi Islam," *CTC Sentinel* 2:11 (2009).

bekistan, and boosted the supply of Uzbek fighters to both Afghanistan and Syria.<sup>52</sup>

Signs of an internal split within the IMU and disenchantment with the Taliban became visible in 2014.<sup>53</sup> In a statement dated November 2014 and first circulated in March 2015, IMU's emir, Omar Ghazi called into question whether Mullah Omar was still alive and officially recognized al-Baghdadi as caliph.<sup>54</sup> Upon the confirmation of Mullah Omar's death, the IMU aired their grievances with the Afghan Taliban, which it accused of collaborating with the Pakistani intelligence.<sup>55</sup> On August 6, 2015, Ghazi and a large group of IMU fighters pledged allegiance on camera to the Islamic State.<sup>56</sup> In acknowledgement of Ghazi's pledge, the Islamic State released a video featuring an Uzbek fighter in Iraq congratulating the IMU on its decision.<sup>57</sup> Around this time, IMU fighters already in Syria were absorbed into the Islamic State, and many relocated from Afghanistan to the Syria theater.<sup>58</sup> The defecting faction of Ghazi took hundreds of IMU members with it,<sup>59</sup> who eventually suffered significant losses after becoming embroiled in clashes with the Taliban in November 2015.<sup>60</sup> The subsequent killing of Ghazi, however, renewed unrest within the IMU, and commanders who had trailed him regrouped again under the banner of IMU.<sup>61</sup>

By June 2016, a 'new' IMU publicly denounced ISK, reaffirmed its loyalty to the Taliban and al-Qa`ida and criticized ISK.<sup>62</sup> This IMU faction emphasized their ongoing relationship with the Taliban and referred to al-Baghdadi only as an emir of the Islamic State group rather than a caliph of all Muslims. Thus, Ghazi's allegiance to ISK resulted in the emergence of a new IMU faction, one that has been vocal about its loyalty to the Taliban. By mid-2016, the majority of Central Asian fighters in Syria were believed to be mostly aligned with al-Qa`ida.<sup>63</sup>

Internal turmoil and uncertainty within the IMU has not yet abated. There appear to be continued disagreements amongst IMU members as to whether to join the ISK movement or to remain loyal to al-Qa`ida.<sup>64</sup> In early 2017, there were reports that an IMU faction in Afghanistan under Commander Abdul Haq Samarkandi, was working closely with an IMU religious leader, Abu Dher al-Barmi, who had cooperated with the Islamic State in Syria.<sup>65</sup> There are also reports that al-Qa`ida has actively encouraged growth of the loyal IMU faction in opposition to the one which is leaning toward the Islamic State.<sup>66</sup>

### Why Are They Divided?

The main attraction of ISK for defecting IMU jihadis appears to be the uncertainty of their future if they stay aligned with the Taliban rather than switch allegiance to ISK. The Taliban have nationalistic aims, a general policy of non-interference in neighboring countries and the possibility to reach a political settlement with the Afghan government.<sup>67</sup> ISK, however, intends to expand into Central Asia. Given IMU members' migrant status within the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, it makes sense why the notion of a borderless jihad would be more to IMU's liking.<sup>68</sup> The Islamic State has been building up its presence via recruitment efforts inside Uzbekistan in 2016 and 2017, which could be especially appealing to IMU commanders.<sup>69</sup> As such, IMU members are likely to be more willing to align with ISK if doing so can reinvigorate their presence in Uzbekistan, such as by channeling IMU fighters from Syria. However, given the material and reputational demise of the Islamic State in the Middle Eastern theater, a majority of the fighters returning to Afghanistan, regardless of their prior affiliation, may well choose to align with the

Afghan Taliban instead of adopting the ISK brand. Finally, because the IMU has been subjected to military operations by the Pakistani military,<sup>70</sup> ISK's hostility toward the Pakistani state does not endanger any state-provided benefits for the IMU. Instead, it can help facilitate IMU's violent campaign against Pakistani security forces.<sup>71</sup> Taken together, the above dynamics suggest that divisions amongst IMU members are likely to remain in the short and medium-term as commanders and fighters assess the pros and cons of aligning with ISK. Sustained divisions amongst the IMU in the long term however will likely dissolve the IMU brand into its competing factions.<sup>72</sup>

Overall, ISK's mission of establishing a global caliphate and its sectarian tactics do not contradict the goals of IMU, in ways that it does for LeT or the Afghan Taliban. Nor does the presence of ISK encroach upon any territorial turf of IMU—as it mostly operates within Afghanistan. On the contrary, aligning with a rising ISK not only has the potential to revive the IMU brand but also provides it with an enduring political platform, which extends beyond the nationalistic goals of the Taliban. As such, the opposition of the IMU faction, which has thus far resisted joining ISK, appears to be largely rooted in its preexisting loyalties with the Afghan Taliban and al-Qa`ida.

### Divided Loyalties: Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

The TTP is a loose alliance of multiple militant factions, which first formed in 2007 in a united front against the Pakistani military. Its primary stated goals are to overthrow the government, establish sharia in Pakistan, and combat Coalition forces in Afghanistan.<sup>73</sup> Increasingly, the group has also targeted Shi`a and other minorities in Pakistan.<sup>74</sup> The group remains one of the most lethal groups in Pakistan. Between 1989 and 2012, the total number of civilian killings by non-state actors within Pakistan tallied up to 2,122.<sup>75</sup> Of these, 70.2% were attributed to various factions of the TTP at a total of 1,490.<sup>76</sup> Based in Pakistan since its founding, the group moved its headquarters to Afghanistan in 2017.<sup>77</sup>

The very nature of the TTP makes it more vulnerable to internal disagreements and splintering. The TTP is unique from the groups discussed above in that it was created in opposition to the Pakistani state (although there were intermittent peace talks), and the group remains highly active in conducting terrorist activity against Pakistani security and civilian institutions. Since 2009, the TTP has been consistently targeted by the Pakistani military.<sup>78</sup>

In 2014, the TTP ran a propaganda and recruitment campaign for ISK.<sup>79</sup> Rampant internal discord and Pakistani military operations resulted in members of the Fazullah-led TTP joining ISK, including TTP leaders from the Orakzai, Kurram, and Khyber regions.<sup>80</sup> Internal disputes combined with an anti-Pakistan stance gave some key TTP leaders sufficient reason to be at the forefront in pledging allegiance to ISK. However, despite the pledge of allegiance by six TTP commanders (including TTP's spokesman Shahidullah Shahid who was subsequently sacked from his position), TTP's Umer Khorasani denied the defection of the complete group to ISK and reaffirmed TTP's allegiance to Mullah Umer.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, in May 2015, a 60-page statement released by the TTP disputed al-Baghdadi's claim to be the head of a caliphate and sought to illuminate his erroneous ways.<sup>82</sup> The essay criticizes the Islamic State's overreach and strategy of fighting multiple enemies concurrently, as well as the destruction of shrines. Instead, it praises al-Qa`ida's leadership.<sup>83</sup>

## Why Are They Divided?

The TTP stands out as a highly attractive ally for ISK, given its status as the most lethal group within Pakistan. One of the primary areas of select TTP's factions' overlap with ISK (and disagreement with the Afghan Taliban) is their target selection: the Pakistani state and minorities. A series of state military operations unleashed between 2007 and 2009 in FATA resulted in internal strife within the group, while the army simultaneously negotiated with leaders who had splintered from the core group.<sup>84</sup> Under the leadership of Hakimullah Mehsud,<sup>85</sup> the TTP intensified its attacks on Pakistani security and intelligence, as well as on Shi'a and Ahmedi communities.<sup>86</sup> This radical element within the TTP has framed the Pakistani state in terminology reminiscent of that used by ISK. In 2012, Hakimullah Mehsud called Pakistan "a slave of the U.S.," which could not make independent agreements.<sup>87</sup> TTP members who subscribe to this aggressive stance against the Pakistani state and view targeting minorities as fair game are likely to perceive greater advantages by siding with ISK than remaining aligned with the Taliban.

On the flip side, some factions' points of divergence with ISK may stem from their preexisting loyalties with the Afghan Taliban and al-Qa'ida, as well as a willingness to work with the Pakistani state. To counter the increasingly anti-Pakistan factions within the TTP, Pakistan played a role in nurturing its relationship with Mullah Bahadur and Maulvi Nazir.<sup>88</sup> The Mullah Nazir group was more closely linked to the Afghan Taliban and focused primarily on activity within Afghanistan.<sup>89</sup> While Nazir was killed in 2013, his successor Bahawal Khan continued collaborating with the Pakistani military. TTP members who fall in this camp are likely to resist being subsumed by ISK.

Thus, the division between TTP factions that have defected to ISK versus those that have remained loyal to the Afghan Taliban seems to be a continuation of organizational disputes about the future of group, which includes their strategy toward the Pakistani state. Factions that remain staunchly anti-state and engage in sectarian violence are most likely to continue defecting to ISK.

On the other hand, TTP commanders who remain critical of ISK's approach are the ones who likely see better survival prospects by siding with the currently dominant Afghan Taliban, with the potential to reconcile with the Pakistani state.

## Conclusion

Clashes of local militants with ISK affiliates, as well as ongoing defections in the swirling militant landscape of Afghanistan-Pakistan, are likely to continue into the foreseeable future. As a new entrant, ISK aims to break into a militant web composed of groups with divergent goals, targets, and tactics as well as decades-long relationships between them. Rivalries triggered by ISK's arrival are likely to intensify as Islamic State's territorial losses in Syria and Iraq push fighters into the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, and local groups compete to recruit or retain fighters. Recent evidence of violent clashes between ISK and the Afghan Taliban and both groups' continued violence against state and civilian targets amidst an ongoing war in Afghanistan are warning signs of a deteriorating security environment. Governments seeking to negotiate with non-state actors in such an environment should be especially aware of competing groups' incentives to engage in violent attacks to derail negotiations or peace talks.

An improved understanding of the dynamics surrounding the flow of militants and leaders between groups and localities can be useful in devising strategies to stem escalating violence. On one hand, defections will continue as ISK sustains its campaign to lure groups with any overlapping goals or targets, while promising a more lucrative jihadi career to individual militants. On the other hand, it can be expected that there will be continued resistance against ISK by groups whose relevance and resources are directly threatened by ISK's mission of a global caliphate. The sheer diversity of the groups entangled in rivalries, loyalties, and defections calls for a cooperative regional security strategy, one that draws on the collective security apparatus of multiple governments in the region. **CTC**

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# The British Hacker Who Became the Islamic State's Chief Terror Cybercoach: A Profile of Junaid Hussain

By Nafees Hamid

**Until his death in a U.S. drone strike in August 2015, Junaid Hussain was the Islamic State's most prolific English-language social media propagandist, working to incite and guide sympathizers in the United Kingdom, United States, and beyond to launch terrorist attacks. Before joining the jihad in Syria, Hussain was part of a hacking collective in the United Kingdom, focusing much of his attention on perceived injustices against Muslims. In many respects, he was well integrated into British society with his family home in a leafy suburb of Birmingham. A spell in prison contributed to his radicalization and his decision to move to Syria, where he married fellow extremist Sally Jones.**

Junaid Hussain became the Islamic State's chief English-language cyber influencer during his short tenure with the group. In addition to directly plotting attacks with recruits, he inspired others, disseminated sensitive information, and captured the attention of the media. He became the face of a new cyber-savvy version of jihadism. His behavior was so threatening to coalition nations that he became the first hacker in history to be killed by a drone strike.

This profile is the culmination of interviews conducted by the author and his research team with Junaid Hussain's friends, ex-hacking associates, family friends, an ex-prison inmate, his former lawyer, senior U.S. and U.K. security officials, people he spoke to online while he was in Syria, access to transcripts of those private conversations, U.S. and U.K. court documents, and news reports.<sup>a</sup>

a The interviews were conducted in the United Kingdom in London, Bedford, and Birmingham, and in the United States in Washington, D.C. and Las Vegas from July 2016 to February 2017. Contact with interviewees was made in some cases via cold calling or emailing and in others cases through snowball sampling whereby one verified individual referred others to the research team. When relationships needed verifying, the author requested supporting documents such as message transcripts, photographs, or verification via third parties. All interviews except two were conducted under the condition of anonymity.

*Nafees Hamid is a research fellow at Artis International, an associate fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—the Hague, and a Ph.D. candidate in the Security and Crime Science department at the University College London. His research includes ethnographic interviews, survey studies, social network analysis, and psychology and neuroscience experiments with mostly European members of jihadi organizations, their friends and family, supporters of such networks, and the general communities from where they originate. Follow @NafeesHamid*

## A Politicized Kid from a Leafy Suburb

Junaid Hussain (born circa 1994) was a second-generation British national whose family hailed from the Pakistani side of Kashmir. When he was growing up, his family lived in the Small Heath district of Birmingham, an area heavily populated by South Asians with the second-highest crime rate in Birmingham.<sup>1</sup> Before he became radicalized, Hussain's family moved out of that area and into Kings Heath, an area often touted as a highly desirable place to live in the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> It was while living in this leafy neighborhood that Hussain's worldview changed.<sup>b</sup>

His father was a respectable member of the British Pakistani community. He ran private hire cabs in the Birmingham area when Hussain was growing up. The senior Hussain was considered an "honorable," "hardworking," and "well-spoken" man by family friends interviewed by the author.<sup>3</sup> Junaid Hussain, in contrast, seemed to be a person of few words.

Junaid Hussain's friends, including individuals who interacted with him in Syria, paint a picture of a reserved yet passionate young man. According to a family friend who knew Hussain from a young age, "Hussain wasn't somebody you had a lot of interaction with ... he wasn't that kind of an outgoing person as such, he was of limited words ... always seemed withdrawn like, you know, when somebody has a lot on their mind and ... they're really into deep thought ... he wasn't one to hold conversations for long periods of time on any particular topic so it was very sort of piecemeal and short, unless he was talking about technology and then he'd have more of an attention span."<sup>4</sup>

This sentiment was echoed by a friend who primarily got to know Hussain in the months before he left for Syria. "When you just tried to have small talk with him, or try to get to know him, he would shut down sort of. But when it came to topics he was passionate about, he really came to life."<sup>5</sup>

His personality did not seem to alter much when he went to Syria. Dilly Hussain (no relation to Junaid Hussain) is a U.K.-based journalist and activist, and one of the few people who interviewed Hussain via Skype video when he was in Syria.<sup>6</sup> When asked to describe Hussain, he said, "I could describe him in three words: he was polite, he was very smart, and he was passionate ... He wasn't a chatterbox though. When it came to politics, he would be very talkative, very outgoing, very defensive. But areas pertaining to his past ... I'd get one-word answers or a handful of words."<sup>7</sup>

## A Hacker Known as TriCk

Even before he reached his teenage years, he became involved in online hacking. Hussain felt more comfortable interacting with the

b This is according to a family friend who knew Junaid since childhood and a friend who knew him since 2009. Author interview with both men, July 2016.



world from behind a computer screen rather than face to face. According to a friend who knew Hussain from when he was 15 years old to the time he left for Syria, “You couldn’t really see too much of his emotions, unless he was online ... He was quiet in real life. He was louder online. I’d say he was more himself online than in real life.” When his hacktivist friends who never met him in real life but chatted with him on a daily or weekly basis were asked to describe his personality, they all described him very differently than those who knew him offline. “One-hundred percent outgoing, extroverted, funny, witty. But most of all, extremely caring and compassionate,” one such hacktivist said.<sup>8</sup>

Hussain’s foray into the hacking world stemmed from a need for retribution. In February 2012, around two years before he arrived in Syria, Hussain gave a revealing interview to the website Softpedia. He described how at the age of 11 someone hacked into his account for a game he was playing online. “I wanted revenge, so I started Googling around on how to hack.” Hussain was unable to get his revenge, but it did set him down a path of skill-building. “I joined a few online hacking forums, read tutorials, started with basic social engineering and worked my way up ... I lurked forums, met people, asked questions, from then I moved onto hacking websites, servers, etc.”<sup>9</sup>

As his hacking skills developed, so too did his taste for political activism. “When I was 15, I became political. It started from watching videos of children getting killed in countries like Kashmir & Palestine. I wanted to know why this was happening and who was doing it, there was loads of questions in my head,” Hussain told Softpedia.<sup>10</sup> Hussain’s passion for politics would take him out of his house and onto the streets. As early as 2009, he was protesting in the streets for the plight of the Muslim people. “It was mostly against EDL stuff,” said Hussain’s friend, referring the British right-wing group, the English Defense League.<sup>11</sup>

While Hussain was clearly passionate about the suffering of the Muslim people, he was not particularly passionate about Islam. “I wouldn’t say he was particularly a very religious young man. Nothing ever showed to me that he was, you know, praying five times a day or a devotee as such. He probably went to the mosque a few times on different occasions,” said a family friend who knew him since childhood. “No, just a bitterness towards the suffering in Kashmir, Palestine, Iraq—those sort of places.”<sup>12</sup>

However, his time alone on his computer would send him down a rabbit hole of conspiracy theories. As he told Softpedia, “I browsed the net, read books, watched documentaries, etc. I was getting more and more into politics, I started researching deeper into stuff like the Free Masons, Illuminati, The Committee of 300, etc. It made me angry, it changed the way I lived my life and the way I saw the world. I then started using hacking as my form of medium by defacing sites to raise awareness of issues around the world and to ‘bully’ corrupt organizations and embarrass them via leaks etc., which is how I got into hacktivism.”<sup>13</sup>

Hussain was not alone in his ‘hacktivism.’ He got a group of hacktivists together, many who shared similar political leanings though not necessarily the same ethnicity. “I was in a couple of hacking groups & underground forums which were slowly becoming dead and inactive so I created my own site pOison.org (was 15 at the time), and TeaMpOisoN was formed from there.”<sup>14</sup>

TeaMpOisoN was a band of eight hacktivists made up of teenagers and young adults mostly from the United Kingdom.<sup>15</sup> Hussain’s hacktivist pseudonym was TriCk,<sup>16</sup> and the other members went by

the pseudonyms of iN&SaNe, MLT, Phantom~, CORPS3, f0rsaken, aXioM and apOcalypse.<sup>17</sup> In the early days of TeaMpOisoN, members collaborated with various other groups such as the ZCompany Hacking Crew. Both groups identified as pro-Palestinian and pro-Kashmiri, and they collaborated on hacks against those they perceived as the enemies of Muslims. For example, in December 2010, posts began to appear on Facebook groups that were deemed Zionist, right-wing, or anti-Islamic, which said “On the evening of the 31st of December 2010 (New Years Eve), TeaM POisoN and ZCompany Hacking Crew will clean up Facebook.”<sup>18</sup> And indeed, on New Year’s Eve, hundreds of Facebook group pages run by organizations like the English Defense League (EDL) went blank. Hussain and members of ZHC took credit for the hack, which was followed shortly thereafter by hacks against Mark Zuckerberg’s<sup>19</sup> and then French President Nicolas Sarkozy’s<sup>20</sup> Facebook pages. It is unclear if Hussain or TeaMpOisoN was involved in these latter hacks.

Cyber attacking local right-wing groups remained a focus of Hussain’s through the beginning of 2011. In February 2011, EDL’s website was apparently hacked by Junaid Hussain, as evidenced by a message and pictures of Palestinian protestors and Israeli tanks. The message’s headline stated “Hacked By TriCk aka Saywhat? - TeaMpOisoN.” The message stated:

*“I am an extremist, I try extremely hard to hack websites to raise awareness of issues, I’m a terrorist, I terrorize websites & servers, But the EDL are extremists too, they try extremely hard to kick Muslims out of the UK, and they are terrorists, they terrorise local Muslim communities & businesses - Myself & the EDL are both extremists & terrorists, but why do they want to kick me out? Because I follow a certain religion? I was born in UK, my skin colour may not be the same as yours but my passport colour is...”*<sup>21</sup>

Hussain then claimed to have personal information of EDL leaders and supporters and threatened to release the information, which he eventually did.<sup>22</sup>

By mid-2011, Hussain started to up the ante of his hacking exploits. In June of that year, TeaMpOisoN posted former British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s address book online.<sup>23</sup> The hack was accomplished by accessing a Blair advisor’s personal email account and then copying the contacts.<sup>24</sup>

In the months that followed, TeaMpOisoN would claim multiple hacks, including on Blackberry for cooperating with authorities during rioting in several cities in England in the summer of 2011;<sup>25</sup> defacing Croatia’s NATO website;<sup>26</sup> breaching a (potentially outdated) United Nations Development Programme server;<sup>27</sup> making questionable claims about hacking U.K. Ministry of Defense email accounts;<sup>28</sup> collaborating with ‘Anonymous’ and other groups to leak a database with 26,000 credit card details that they claimed were obtained from a hack of Israeli websites in support of pro-Palestinian and Occupy movements;<sup>29</sup> and many other claimed hacks against news agencies and political entities.

One of TeaMpOisoN’s most publicized attacks came in April 2012 when they launched a phone-based denial-of-service (DOS) attack against the United Kingdom’s Counter Terrorism Command’s hotline. The attack caused the office’s telephone lines to be bombarded by a robotic voice that repeated “Team Poison.”<sup>30</sup> Hussain later revealed that the calls and recording were routed through a compromised server in Malaysia.<sup>31</sup> Hussain then himself called the offices

the next day to taunt the CTC representatives, introducing himself as TriCk while speaking in an affected American accent before uploading the audio of the conversation to the TeaMpOison YouTube channel.<sup>32</sup> In a more impressive feat of hacking, TeaMpOisoN was able to record and upload<sup>33</sup> a call between a CTC representative and another agency where the former tells the latter that their office was barraged with over 700 calls from the hackers. Later court hearings would reveal that it was 111 calls on seven different phone lines over three days.<sup>34</sup>

Immediately after the attacks, Hussain, under the pseudonym TriCk, released a statement explaining his motivations:

*“The reason behind the recent phone denial of service ... was because of the recent events where the counter terrorist command and the UK court system has extradited Babar Ahmad, Adel Abdel Bary & a few others to be trialled in the US, and we all know how the US treats innocent Muslims they label as terrorists, e.g. - Aafia Siddiqui ... Babar Ahmad is a British Citizen who has been detained in the UK for 7 years without trial he received 149,395+ petitions to be put on trial in the UK and not the US, but they ignored the petition and have extradited him, what’s happened to democracy? Adel Abdel Bary has been in prison for 12 years in the UK, apparently he received a phone call from Osama years ago therefore they imprisoned him claiming they had a tape of the call but there was never a witness to prove it or show the tape, if I (TriCk) was to call George Bush would they lock George Bush up for receiving a phone call from a cyber-terrorist / hacker? ... all the allegations against these guys have taken place in the UK, therefore they should be trialled in the UK and not the US. The US is calling it a “global war on terror” which in my opinion is a cover up for “global war on Islam” – the real terrorists are the guys sitting in 10 Downing Street and the Whitehouse.”<sup>35</sup>*

In February 2012, Hussain bragged about his imperviousness to law enforcement, saying “100% certain they have nothing on me ... My real identity doesn’t [SIC] exist online – and no I don’t fear getting caught ... I don’t fear prison.”<sup>36</sup> In another interview published on April 12, 2012, just after the CTC phone hack, he doubled down on those sentiments. “I fear no man or authority,” he stated.<sup>37</sup> Within a few hours, authorities arrested him.

### Prison and Radicalization

When barrister Ben Cooper first met his client at Westminster Magistrates’ Court in London on April 16, 2012, Hussain’s composure was a far cry from the blustering bravado he projected in his interviews. “He was shocked and frightened by the experience of being brought to court for the first time,” Cooper told the author. “He was very reserved, very meek, very softly spoken, and he came across a very unassuming, even humble young man.” The charges against him related to Tony Blair’s PA email hack and the CTC attack (though hacking of Nicholas Sarkozy’s emails was also brought up by prosecutors<sup>38</sup>).

Cooper was able to get Hussain bail that day, but given the seriousness of the allegations, the case was sent to Southwark Crown Court. Hussain would spend 104 days on curfew while his prosecution proceeded. Despite his harsh anti-establishment rhetoric, in this period he took advantage of the U.K. education system to complete three A levels and secure admission to London Metropolitan

University to study computer forensics.<sup>39</sup> His subject choice could have indicated a desire to ‘go clean,’ or, conversely, to get better at covering his trail to ensure his black hat<sup>c</sup> hacking would not lead to him getting caught again.<sup>d</sup>

Hussain did not contest the charges against him. He admitted his wrongdoing and pleaded guilty under the Computer Misuse Act<sup>e</sup> for the email hack and for disrupting the CTC phone lines. Cooper’s arguments for a reduced sentence emphasized 1) the fact that Hussain was admitting and showing remorse for what he had done thus demonstrating his good character;<sup>f</sup> 2) that a prolonged sentence could jeopardize his placement at university; and 3) that he had a supportive family. His father, in particular, stood by his son. As Cooper put it, “[Hussain] looked scared right from the start, to be honest, and for that reason, his father attended court on every occasion to offer his full support. And so I made clear to the judge that this is a teenager who had strong parental support, a father who is standing by him, a father who is working hard, very responsible, good father, who clearly wasn’t aware of what his son was doing at the time of committing the offense when he [was] only 15.”

Cooper also was aware that an extended prison sentence could have a detrimental impact on Hussain. “I was inviting the court to find alternatives to custody including the prospect of suspending the sentence, really to avoid the scenario of him spending months alongside hardened serious criminals, many of whom may be inside for violent offenses ... I was concerned because of his peculiar character. He wasn’t someone who was particularly comfortable in social situations. He was clearly someone spending a lot of time in his room on his computer and not interacting normally with society... that he was someone who was vulnerable to such environments and capable of being exploited.”<sup>g</sup>

- c In the hacking world, black hat hackers are criminals or wrongdoers who carry out unconsented hacks. White hat hackers are those who conduct ethical or consented hacking to improving cybersecurity for people or organizations who hire them. Grey hat hackers are those who engage in both activities. For overview, see Paul Gil “What are ‘black hat’ and ‘white hat’ hackers?” Lifewire, January 22, 2018.
- d The latter explanation could fit with his implied intentions of joining an organization as a white hatter and then switching to black. “I have personal plans that will lead to a certain organization getting [expletive]-ed, so I’d have to be employed by them first and then [expletive] them up internally, and that’s what I’m aiming to do.” Eduard Kovacs, “Hackers around the world: It’s no TriCk, he’s among the best in the world,” Softpedia News, February 8, 2012.
- e According to Ben Cooper, this meant he admitted to “effectively infiltrated computers that he wasn’t allowed access to and then altering those computers by obtaining information from them.” Author interview, Ben Cooper, July 2016.
- f According to Ben Cooper, “he wrote a letter himself to the judge, pleading his case for leniency as did his father and his brother. And so they are all putting across strong accounts of his positive characteristics and, you know, what a good brother he was, what a good son he was.” Author interview, Ben Cooper, July 2016.
- g Ben Cooper has defended many people from the hacktivist community (Anonymous, LulzSec, etc.) and stated that Hussain’s personality fit the typical profile. “They are often highly vulnerable, troubled individuals who lack social skills, and who very often suffer from autism and often severe autism, Asperger’s syndrome and that reflects the obsessive computing misconduct ... [anarchism] often runs with it. Conspiracy theories are common too. And so there is often a form of political protest behind it. And often it’s not a single political line, it can be a form of political expression in a range of different issues.” Author interview, Ben Cooper, July 2016.

The judge ultimately settled for a lenient sentence. On July 27, 2012, he was given two consecutive sentences of three months for each of the crimes he was charged with, leading to a six-month sentence. However, the judge took into account the 104 days that Hussain spent on curfew, which reduced his sentence by 52 days, making it just over a four-month sentence with the possibility of only serving 50 percent of the sentence in prison and then early home release. “The judge could have given him a much longer sentence, and the authorities would have allowed him to do so,” Cooper says. “[The judge] was understanding of the mitigation and wanting to try to help him by keeping this sentence as short as possible... the judge was hoping that, because of the timing of the sentence, [Hussain] would still have been able to potentially start his university course in the autumn if he was released early.”

Cooper and Hussain last saw each other immediately after the sentencing. “He would be going to Feltham Young Offender’s Institution. And he would have been alongside a whole range of criminals there ... he certainly looked scared,” recalls Cooper. “When I heard about what eventually happened with [Husain], I was concerned that the sentence had been counter-productive. I thought that if I had just kept him out of prison maybe things could have been different.” Hussain was eventually given early home release in mid-September 2016<sup>40</sup> having served only a month and a half in prison.

Prison appears to have been a watershed period for Hussain. Prior to his incarceration, Hussain had labeled himself an “extremist” and a “cyber terrorist” and appeared to see himself as fighting against perceived injustices toward Muslims worldwide, but he had described his political views as closer to anarchism and showed no support for political Islam.

It appears that it was in prison that his political views began to move in an Islamist direction. A prison inmate who was incarcerated with Hussain but did not have much interaction with him told the author’s research team that he witnessed him spending time in prison with a well-known “radical Islamist” group.<sup>41</sup> According to Dilly Hussain, who spoke to Hussain twice over Skype and many times over Facebook Messenger while he was in Syria, “I do know that he met individuals in prison. He didn’t say who, but he did say that he did speak to individuals in prison who he said made him enlightened.”

After Hussain was released from prison, his black hat hacking from the United Kingdom seemed to come to a stop. In January 2013 in an interview with Softpedia, he revealed that prison made him see things differently, and so he launched a website called *illSecure.com* that provided “a legal and safe platform for ‘security experts’ and ‘hackers’ to test and develop their skills in a friendly competitive lawful environment,” Hussain said.<sup>42</sup> “There’s currently no organization that helps security experts and hackers to channel their skills down a legal route, so most people go down the illegal route without thinking of the consequences.”<sup>43</sup> The website offered 17 challenges that allowed individuals to develop their hacking skills.

His friends revealed that after his release, Hussain spent some of his time doing university coursework and became increasingly involved in posting political commentary on Facebook and attending protests related to issues regarding Muslims. “He was also posting things on Facebook related to Palestine or Kashmir or the EDL,” said one friend who attended protests with Hussain.<sup>44</sup> Another exclusively online friend of Hussain said, “He was always online, like



*Junaid Hussain’s Twitter profile photo*

24/7. You could send him a message anytime of the night or day and he would respond.” This same friend also stated that after prison, “he did start looking at Islamic points of view as well. He would talk about what Islam says about certain things like Day of Judgment and in terms of Israel as well. He would send me videos randomly, and I’d watch it and then we’d have a little discussion after it, give our points of view. Then maybe a week later, he’d send me another video. And so it was becoming a religious focus as well.”<sup>45</sup>

In addition to posting his political thoughts on Facebook, Hussain increased his offline activism. Friends saw him attend more rallies in Birmingham. One EDL rally in Birmingham in July 2013 led to skirmishes when some counter-protestors calling themselves the Muslim Defense League rushed at riot police.<sup>46</sup> Hussain was one of the counter-protestors arrested that day for suspicion of violent disorder.<sup>47</sup> Another friend told the author<sup>48</sup> that Hussain posted a video on Facebook of him running from police. He was released on bail pending further investigation. West Midlands police later decided not to pursue any charges.

His arrest appears to have further hardened Hussain’s views. According to one of Hussain’s friends, after the arrest, Hussain started posting on Facebook “some extreme ideology kind of stuff like ‘if you’re gonna do something, do it properly, or just don’t, blah blah.’ It wasn’t too violent in that sense, but it was kind of worrying.”<sup>49</sup>

### **Joining the Jihad in Syria**

It was while Hussain was on bail that he left for Syria. It is not exactly clear when he left for Syria, but most sources interviewed by the author said it was sometime in late 2013. “He posted on Facebook when he got to Syria. He said two days after leaving [the United Kingdom] he ended up in Syria ... He was saying how he dodged Turkish guards, and they were shooting at him,” according to one online friend.<sup>50</sup>

The details of Hussain’s crossing into Syria and how he linked up with the Islamic State are unclear. After joining the group, he took up the *kunya* Abu Hussain al-Britani. Friends of Hussain told the author<sup>51</sup> that soon after arriving in Syria, Hussain deleted the Facebook account through which they were communicating with him but then later opened new Facebook and Twitter accounts, where he got in touch with some of them again. Some reported that he tried to convince them to join him in Syria. They also say that he did not initially mention the name of the group that he had joined.

Around the time that Hussain made his way to Syria in late 2013,

so did<sup>52</sup> his bride-to-be, Sally Jones, a British woman 25 years his senior who had converted to Islam. Jones and Hussain started a romantic relationship online while they were both living in the United Kingdom. It is not clear if they ever met in person before arriving in Syria.

Jones had had a turbulent life. She was born in Greenwich, southeast London. Her parents divorced, and her father committed suicide when she was 10 years old.<sup>53</sup> She dropped out of school at age 16, worked various jobs, and in the 1990s eventually became a singer and guitarist for an all-female punk rock group called Krunch. She had her first son in 1996 (the father of that child died three years later), and her second son from a subsequent relationship, Jojo, was born in 2004.<sup>54</sup> She would eventually move to Chatham, Kent, where she lived in council housing with her two sons. Her then neighbors said that she was unemployed and on welfare.<sup>55</sup> Jones would be duped into revealing more of her journey via Twitter and Kik messenger to a *Sunday Times* journalist who posed as a potential recruit, a fictional 17-year old named Aisha.<sup>56</sup> The first of two publications following the interview unmasked Sally Jones to the public.<sup>57</sup> During those conversations, Jones said that she converted to Islam in May 2013 after starting an online relationship with Hussain.<sup>58</sup> When she came to Syria, she brought Jojo with her. She claimed that it was on her very first day in Syria that she married Hussain and Jojo converted to Islam.<sup>59</sup>

Jones was not the only pre-existing contact Hussain had when he traveled to Syria. He also had contact with Adbel-Majed Abdel Bary, who had previously been a London-based rap artist known as Lyricist Jinn or L Jinny. Bary would later gain notoriety because of his extensive social media use and speculation in the British press that he was possibly a member of the British Islamic State hostage holding unit dubbed The Beatles,<sup>60</sup> even though no credible evidence materialized to support that latter claim. A mutual friend of both Hussain and Bary told the author that they had known each other in the United Kingdom through the music scene.<sup>61</sup> In fact, the two men appeared in a music video together filmed in the United Kingdom before they left to Syria.<sup>62</sup>

In February 2014, Bary tweeted the following: “Me & Abu Hussein al britani got kidnapped /tortured by FSA/IF scum they stole our 4 ak’s and a 7mm, my vechile & our phones and cash.”<sup>63</sup> It was the first public mention of Hussain’s presence in Syria. It is not clear who traveled to Syria first, but according to their mutual friend, it is plausible that, through online contact, one could have motivated the other to venture there.<sup>64</sup>

Where exactly this “kidnapping” of Hussain and Bary took place is not clear, but there is a possible clue in a tweet by Sally Jones on August 10, 2014: “Alhamdulillah me and my husband made it to the Islamic State after being stuck in Idlib for 7 mnths & are now living in the khilafah.”<sup>65</sup> If accurate, this would place Hussain and Jones somewhere in Syria’s Idlib Province from roughly January to August 2014 before making their way to Raqqa, the Islamic State’s de facto capital at the time.

### Islamic State Cybercoach

Around the time they settled in Raqqa, the couple was unmasked. Hussain’s identity was revealed by the British *Sunday Times* newspaper on June 15, 2014,<sup>66</sup> and Jones was unmasked six weeks later on August 31, 2014,<sup>67</sup> by the same publication. Their story would turn to tabloid fodder. His hacking past, her rocker past, their age differences and online love connection all added to a gossipy nar-

rative. Hussain and Jones (who went by the *kunya* Umm Hussain al-Britani and Sakinah Hussain) did not shy away from social media. They tweeted regularly, varying from quoting religious texts, to trolling other Twitter users, to taunting the Islamic State’s enemies, to encouraging more people to migrate to Islamic State territory, to calling for specific acts of domestic terrorism in the United States and United Kingdom.<sup>68</sup> Twitter and Facebook shut down their accounts regularly, but they opened new ones immediately and continued their messaging.<sup>69</sup>

Hussain played the role of an online jihadi propagandist and recruiter. In addition to publicly tweeting, he was also open to having potential recruits contact him via various messaging apps that he listed along with his contact information on his Twitter profile.<sup>70</sup> Despite his hacking background, Hussain’s initial operational security was surprisingly poor. Until his death, his Twitter profile listed Kik messenger as a way to contact him. At the time, Kik was commonly used by Islamic State members, but it was rated by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a non-profit organization that defends digital civil liberties, as one of the least secure messaging platforms.<sup>71</sup> Skype was considered equally as insecure,<sup>72</sup> and yet he used it to speak with people as well.<sup>73</sup> His operational security seemed to improve with time; screenshots that the author reviewed of conversations between him and potential recruits<sup>74</sup> did show that by summer 2015, when someone contacted him on Kik, he instructed them to switch to Surespot, an online messaging app that, unlike Kik at the time, offered end-to-end encryption.

Hussain became a founding member of an English-language online recruitment collective within the Islamic State made up of a dozen members who the FBI dubbed “The Legion” and the “Raqqa 12.”<sup>75</sup> Other notable members included fellow British nationals Reyaad Khan from Cardiff, Raphael Hostey from Manchester, as well as the Australian Neil Prakash. Together, this band of propagandists reached thousands of English speakers around the world through their public posts and attempts to groom and inspire potential attackers via one-on-one online contact.

Hussain was linked to many attempted terror plots in the United States and the United Kingdom. His popularity in both pro-Islamic State networks and Western media made him a magnet for extremists reaching out to online recruiters like himself. One example was Ohio college student Munir Abdulkader, who reached out to Hussain and fell under his guidance in spring 2015.<sup>76</sup> After discouraging Abdulkader from coming to Syria, Hussain instructed him to kidnap a member of the U.S. military and to record his killing. Hussain then switched gears and told him to attack a police station near Cincinnati. After Abdulkader boasted to Hussain about his skills on the shooting range, Hussain responded: “Next time ul be shooting kuffar in their face and stomach.”<sup>77</sup> Abdulkader was arrested before he could carry out his shooting spree and sentenced to 20 years in prison.<sup>78</sup>

In mid-May 2015, Hussain was also in contact with one of a group of three individuals in New England who plotted to kill, after conversations with Hussain, the organizer of a “draw Mohammed contest” in Garland, Texas.<sup>79</sup> Their contact with Hussain and purchases related to their intended attack eventually caught the attention of police surveillance, leading one to die after he tried to attack the police with a knife as they approached him in a parking lot, another to plead guilty, and the third to be found guilty at trial.<sup>80</sup>

In addition to directly plotting attacks, Hussain also corresponded with, encouraged, and facilitated would-be attackers.

Twenty-year-old Justin Nojan Sullivan received encouragement and instructions from Hussain to film his planned mass shooting in North Carolina and Virginia.<sup>81</sup> Hussain may have been involved from Islamic State territory in another attack in Garland, Texas, where two men opened fire, but were killed by police,<sup>82</sup> at the “Draw Prophet Mohamed” contest; Hussain boasted to his Ohio recruit mentioned earlier, Abdulkader, that he helped direct the attack.<sup>83</sup> Hussain also reportedly had correspondence with Zahid Hussain who plotted to target a high-speed train line between London and Birmingham with an IED.<sup>84</sup> He was in contact with a teenager in Australia who planned to carry out a “Boston bombers”-style attack in Melbourne.<sup>85</sup> He also corresponded with and encouraged Junead Khan of Luton to carry out an attack on U.S. soldiers stationed at U.K. bases.<sup>86</sup>

While Hussain was considered the head of the “Islamic State Hacking Division” (ISHD), it is not clear how much hacking, if any, he personally conducted while in Syria. He did, however, exploit the hacking efforts of others. One example involves Ardit Ferizi, a 20-year-old from Kosovo with a troubled past and mental health issues who was studying cyber security in Malaysia.<sup>87</sup> Sometime around June 13, 2015, Ferizi hacked a server that hosted a U.S. retail company’s database of tens of thousands of consumers’ personally identifiable information (PII).<sup>88</sup> Searching through PII that included .gov or .mil email addresses, Ferizi culled the list to 1,351 military or government personnel. The culled list was electronically transmitted by Ferizi to Hussain that same day. On August 11, 2015, under the banner of the ISHD, Hussain published the list in a document with a tweet stating “we are in your emails and computer systems, watching and recording your every move, we have your names and addresses, we are in your emails and social media accounts, we are extracting confidential data and passing on your personal information to the soldiers of the khilafah, who soon with the permission of Allah will strike at your necks in your own lands!”<sup>89</sup> Ferizi was arrested by Malaysian authorities in October 2015 and extradited to the United States the following January, where he was convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison in September 2016.<sup>90</sup>

Former senior U.S. and U.K. security officials told the author that it was Hussain’s recruitment efforts, propaganda dissemination, attack plotting and inciting, and sensitive information leaking that made him a high-value target for coalition forces.<sup>91</sup> According to media reports, his name appeared as number three on the Pentagon’s target list.<sup>92</sup> And on August 24, 2015, he was killed in a U.S. drone strike.<sup>93</sup>

The exact circumstances of Hussain’s death are uncertain. According to one report, Hussain was using his stepson, Jojo, as a human shield as drones flew overhead in Raqqa. Then late one night, he left an internet café alone and was killed by a U.S. Hellfire missile as he was crossing between two buildings.<sup>94</sup> Another version of the story claims that U.S. and U.K. signals intelligence agencies cracked Hussain’s encrypted messages, thus helping to locate him.<sup>95</sup> This caused Islamic State fighters to suspect that their trusted messenger app, Surespot, had been compromised, and they started aban-

doning the app, ripping out GPS transmitters, with some avoiding digital communication in general.<sup>96</sup> Another version states that he clicked on a compromised hyperlink sent to him by an “undercover agent,”<sup>97</sup> and in a slight twist, another version states that the hyperlink was sent by a former hacktivist friend.<sup>98</sup> A former hacktivist friend purported to out himself in a series of tweets in which he remorsefully stated that he had “helped [the FBI] MURDER him,”<sup>99</sup> though the veracity of this claim cannot be verified.<sup>h</sup>

Around the same time as Hussain’s death, many other members of the “Legion” were killed.<sup>100</sup> After Hussain’s death, Jones continued his habit of tweeting threats and trying to inspire new attacks. Jojo is believed to have appeared in a propaganda film released on August 26, 2016, that showed a child matching his description executing a Kurdish fighter.<sup>101</sup> While there was speculation that Jones and Jojo were killed in a U.S. airstrike outside of Raqqa in June 2017,<sup>102</sup> their deaths have not been confirmed, and their status is unknown.

## A Deadly Legacy

Junaid Hussain’s death marked the first time a hacker was considered enough of a threat to be killed by a drone strike.<sup>103</sup> But the value he brought to the Islamic State extended beyond his practical skill sets; his recruitment was a symbolic victory for the Islamic State as well. Hussain represented a different profile from the uneducated petty criminals looking for redemption from Europe’s marginalized neighborhoods. He was smart, educated, tech savvy and even, by some measures, socially well integrated. His profile alone could inspire others like him that they too have a place in the Islamic State’s ranks.

“There are people here that secretly admire him,” said a family friend in Birmingham, “he took on Tony Blair, then helped ISIS wage a war against the world and went out in a blaze of glory. Some people believe, ‘hey, more power to him.’”<sup>104</sup> Whereas other friends are less impressed by him. “My attitude is, if he really did what they say he did, he deserved to die,” a former hacktivist friend said.<sup>105</sup> His friends echoed that sentiment, “we don’t really talk about him anymore,” said one friend.<sup>106</sup>

The greatest toll his legacy took was likely on his family. “I saw his father at some events after he went to Syria. You could tell he was in pain ... they don’t come out much anymore, like [Hussain] brought shame on them,” said a family friend. “Their home was even vandalized.”<sup>107</sup> When a member of the author’s research team approached his father for an interview request in July 2016, he politely turned it down, offering only that they were trying to turn the page and not let his son’s legacy define them. **CTC**

h The author’s research team interviewed three hacktivists in September 2016 who knew both Hussain and the hacktivist who claimed to help the FBI kill him. They said they believed the claim of the hacktivist who said he worked with the FBI, but they were not able to furnish any evidence to bolster his claim.

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