JIHADIST GOVERNANCE AND STATECRAFT

DEVORAH MARGOLIN AND AARON Y. ZELIN
EDITORS

Jihadist Governance and Statecraft

COUNTERTERRORISM WORKSHOP 2024

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Cover image: In Somalia, al-Shabab gives *zakat* (alms) to the poor in the form of goats.

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THE ROAD FROM STATE CAPTURE TO STATE-BUILDING

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Devorah Margolin and Aaron Y. Zelin
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About the Workshop

On January 10, 2024, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy convened a workshop on jihadist governance and statecraft, the fifth in recent years to be organized by the Institute's Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. Prior strategy sessions focused on the following themes: five lines of effort against the Islamic State (2015), the group's external "provinces" (2016), how al-Qaeda survived a decade of challenges (drones, the Arab uprisings, IS) (2017), and the use of nonkinetic counterterrorism tools (2021).[1]

This one-day strategy session, which included both scholars and practitioners and operated according to the Chatham House Rule, was organized around three concepts (later sections of this volume) encompassing Sunni and Shia jihadist governance: (1) Why Do Jihadists Govern? (2) The Road from State Capture to State-Building, and (3) Contending with the Challenges of Jihadist Governance. This tripartite structure facilitated a rich exploration of jihadist governance and statecraft and the threat it poses to the broader Middle East as well as Western countries, including the United States.

In addition to panel discussions on these topics, the workshop featured off-the-record opening remarks by senior U.S. administration officials from the National Counterterrorism Center, Department of Treasury, and Department of State as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross. The introduction, which offers background content and a summary of each of the workshop's conclusions, is followed by in-depth papers and statements-for-the-record.

NOTES

1 "Taking the Fight to ISIL: Operationalizing CT Lines of Effort Against the Islamic State Group," symposium, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2, 2015, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/taking-the-fight-to-isil-operationalizing-ct-lines-of-effort-against-the-is; Katherine Bauer, ed., *Beyond Syria and Iraq: Examining Islamic State Provinces*, Policy Focus 149 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2016), http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beyond-syria-and-iraq-examining-islamic-state-provinces; Aaron Y. Zelin, ed., *How al-Qaeda Survived Drones, Uprisings, and the Islamic State*, Policy Focus 153 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2017), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-al-qaeda-survived-drones-uprisings-and-islamic-state; and "Strategy Session on Non-Kinetic Counterterrorism Tools," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 8, 2021, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/strategy-session-non-kinetic-counterterrorism-tools.

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Positions listed were those held at the time of the workshop. The opinions of the authors do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editors of this volume or the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

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Abbreviations

AAH	Asaib Ahl al-Haq
AQAP	al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ARS-A	Alliance for the Reliberation of Somalia–Asmara Wing
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
BARMM	Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
BIFF	Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters
GPC	General People's Congress
HI	Hizbul Islam (also spelled Hizb al-Islam)
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICU	Islamic Courts Union
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IS	Islamic State
ISEA-PH	Islamic State East Asia–Philippines
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (previous name for IS)
ISSP	Islamic State Sahel "province"
JABISO	al-Jabhatul Islamiya
JNIM	Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin
KH	Kataib Hezbollah
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces (aka al-Hashd al-Shabi)
SFG	Somali Federal Government
SPC	Supreme Political Council
TFG	Transitional Federal Government

Introduction

■ Devorah Margolin and Aaron Y. Zelin

In the aftermath of 9/11, policy attention focused intensely on safe havens and alternatively governed spaces, with an emphasis on al-Qaeda and its branches in places like Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia. Over the past two decades, the challenge has become much broader and more complicated, encompassing jihadist governance, statecraft, and consolidation of power. Jihadist groups from a variety of political, religious, and ideological backgrounds now participate in different forms of territorial control and governance. Policy solutions, in turn, go beyond mere military strategy or financial sanctions, touching upon state bureaucracy, local economies, alliances, diplomacy, and power competition among local, regional, and global actors. The difficulty of crafting appropriate and effective policies is complicated further by the need to consider distinctions between Sunni and Shia jihadist governance, ideological variations within each stream of violent Islamism, power dynamics, and other subtleties of governing circumstances.[1]

Officials in the international community often assume that jihadist groups engaging in governance and statecraft are more moderate or seemingly pragmatic, and less interested in the violence that once drove their movements. Yet recent events, highlighted by Hamas's unprecedented attack on Israeli civilians sixteen years after its transition into governance, demonstrate a contrary reality:

that jihadist groups often use their control of land and populations to recruit and finance violent attacks, while in some cases simultaneously striving for legitimacy. Alongside Hamas, groups including Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, and the Yemeni Houthis are attacking the United States and Israel notwithstanding their experience as governing actors. Recently, groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula have likewise engaged in external operations campaigns, and entities like al-Shabab (Somalia) and Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM, in the Sahel) are increasingly involved in local or regional violence.

Jihadist governance and statecraft have emerged in different shapes and forms in recent decades, which is why this compilation presents case studies from across the world reflecting this variety, including Hamas (Palestinian territories), al-Hashd al-Shabi (aka Popular Mobilization Forces, Iraq), Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Syria), Hezbollah (Lebanon), the Houthis (Yemen), the Islamic State (multiple areas), and the Taliban (Afghanistan)—along with JNIM, al-Shabab, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and others. These groups do not always top the news cycle or even U.S. policy challenges, but understanding their role and approach casts light on the broader challenge of addressing jihadist governance in its various incarnations.

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE WORKSHOP

The workshop presentations generated spirited discussions which yielded what can be distilled into seven general conclusions about jihadist governance:

1. **There is no uniform type of jihadist governance.** Despite falling under the same broad umbrella, the cases explored here showcase a diversity of jihadist actors and governing models, with decisions appearing to be influenced by three key factors: context, competition, and interpretation. This in turn creates a spectrum of implementation, with some groups operating within existing political institutions while others create their own. This also means that some groups strive for international legitimacy while others do not. For instance, Hezbollah operates its governance project adjacent to (and embedded in) the Lebanese state, the Taliban's Islamic Emirate

controls the full state and acts like a typical contemporary authoritarian regime with theocratic elements, both the Islamic State and the Houthis have run totalitarian theocratic states, and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's civil apparatus—the Syrian Salvation Government—runs its governance project as a hybrid between the Ottoman politics of the notables and a modern authoritarian technocratic state.[2] Each of these actors is influenced by its local context, competition within that institutional environment, and interpretation of violent Islamist ideology.

2. **Almost all jihadist groups involved in governance seek to control populations, apply their ideology, and extract resources (e.g., taxation, national resources, agriculture).** From creating and implementing laws to collecting taxes, jihadist groups use governance to establish power, which they in turn hope will attract personnel and facilitate stability and resilience. Yet as almost all the cases in this volume show, governance requires some sort of buy-in from the populations being governed. Different groups use carrots or sticks and sometimes both to achieve this, with research indicating a correlation between a population's buy-in and the success of the governing actor.[3] Jihadist governing actors—like all governing actors—are in many ways accountable to the populations they govern, even if this accountability does not reflect patterns in a liberal democracy.
3. **The path from terrorist actor to governing entity is neither straight nor one-way.** While some groups leave violence behind completely in order to govern, others never turn away from violence. Many groups, in fact, face a split between those more "moderate" elements who want to govern and more radical elements who want to continue carrying out violence. Thus, despite the conventional wisdom that jihadist groups engaging in governance and statecraft are seemingly more pragmatic, they may contain elements advocating a return to violence and could well tread that path again.
4. **Local and institutional contexts help inform decisions in jihadist governance.** A jihadist actor will operate in different ways based on its local rivals as well as its regional connections and transnational orientation, with such factors either encouraging or inhibiting certain types of violence. Hezbollah, for example, may be the crown jewel of Iran's proxy network—with its secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, on the leadership council of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—but the Lebanon-based group's decisionmaking is not wholly subservient to Iran's Ayatollah

Ali Khamenei. It also factors in how an action might reverberate in the Lebanese political context. Understanding that jihadist governing actors do not operate in a vacuum is vital to creating effective policy to counter them.

5. **Historical context and lessons learned can help determine the level of pragmatism espoused by a jihadist group when it becomes a governing actor.** Some of the groups discussed during this workshop governed for longer periods, some for shorter, and still others (e.g., AQAP) have lost and regained power. In the Afghan context, since the 2021 U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban's Islamic Emirate continues to hold fast to its restrictions related to girls' and women's education, yet it has shown much more willingness to work within the international system and with non-Muslim governments than in the late 1990s, during its first governance project. Thus, historical context can better explain a group's move toward a more flexible or rigid interpretation of jihadist ideology.

6. **Jihadist governance does not emerge out of thin air.** Most of the actors discussed in this volume were originally responding to some vacuum within their society. This could involve lawlessness or undergovernance, such as with al-Shabab in Somalia, or an attempt to outcompete another actor to demonstrate "cleaner, corruption-free" governance, as with Hamas against the Palestinian Authority in Gaza. The lack of an alternative or competent governance structure has also figured in the relatively recent rise of HTS, which has used the provision of services to cement its position in Idlib and present itself as the only option available to the people of Syria's northwest.

7. **One cannot disaggregate a group's underlying raison d'être from its day-to-day rule over a proto-state, semi-state, or more fully formed state.** Likely the most provocative and essential question to emerge from the workshop is whether jihadist governance differs from rule by other rebel groups guided by different ideologies. Whereas all the groups discussed here embrace jihad as fundamental to their worldview and use the language of jihad when framing their fighting activity, their actual governance structures and behavior appear to mirror those of nonjihadists. Thus, whether the notion of "jihadist governance" even makes sense likely lies in the application of these groups' ideology to their daily political activity and proto–foreign policy.

This last question inevitably leads back to the reason behind the workshop: Could one understand Hamas's actions on October 7 without understanding its underlying views of the legitimacy of jihad and resistance or its anti-Semitic worldview in relation to Israel? After seventeen years running the Gaza Strip, the group certainly does not appear to have moderated or renounced violence. In the case of the Islamic State and its predecessors, moreover, external operations around the world might have appeared antithetical to setting up a sustainable "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria. Yet to disaggregate the group's use of violence from its state-building project would contradict the alignment of both with its original and ultimate goals.

As such, the editors of this volume and the authors whose chapters follow showcase how every case is unique and how jihadist governance cannot be addressed with a "one size fits all" solution. Each follows different modes of governance, different ideological interpretations, and different timelines. Yet jihadist groups do not operate in isolation either. They are instead products of their institutional environments, and they learn from and are influenced by outside actors. Thus, lessons can be gleaned that draw from their convergences and undermine their divergences.

CONTENTS OF THIS VOLUME

The first entry in this volume, from Damon Stevens, summarizes how the U.S. government views the current threat landscape vis-à-vis different jihadist groups involved in various governance projects. The text then turns to its first formal section, on why jihadists govern, opened by Marta Furlan's comparison of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Thereafter, Christopher Anzalone presents a "deep dive" into the ebb and flow of al-Shabab's governance in Somalia over the past fifteen years, Matthew Levitt gives insights into Hezbollah's shadow governance in Lebanon, and Ayse D. Lokmanoglu identifies the differences in the economic policies of the Islamic State (in Iraq and Syria) and the Taliban's Islamic Emirate (in Afghanistan).

The second section shows how different jihadist actors participate in state-capture and state-building processes. Haroro J. Ingram opens by explaining how

this has occurred with the Islamic State in the Philippines, both when it controlled territory and in its quest to do so again. Then Michael Knights probes how, in the past decade, Iran-backed Shia militia groups have effectively taken over the Iraqi state, Devorah Margolin explains Hamas's complicated relationship with its governance project in Gaza before October 7, and Baraa Shiban expounds on the Houthi police state in Yemen.

The third and final section sets the challenges of jihadist governance in the context of local, regional, and international security and policy. It begins with insights from Matthew Bamber-Zryd on how the International Committee of the Red Cross carries out humanitarian engagement with different jihadist groups globally. Aaron Y. Zelin then provides a comprehensive look at how, since retaking Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban's Islamic Emirate has attempted to build international legitimacy through its diplomatic campaign. Wassim Nasr follows with a sobering example of the failure of Western military policy in the Sahel region and how it has bolstered both al-Qaeda and IS efforts in Mali. Finally, Megan Stewart demonstrates the ways in which jihadist governance is not necessarily unique when compared with other rebel governance projects.

NOTES

1 Jihad in its most basic understanding means to struggle or strive, which in daily life can mean being a better Muslim, purifying the soul, or making the world a better place. Within modern violent Islamist groups, however, jihad refers to military struggle and thus violent action; this is the sole connotation used in this volume given the groups under review, their aims, and their use of the term.

2 For the Ottoman notables system, see Albert Hourani, "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of the Notables," in *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. William R. Polk and Richard L. Chambers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 41–68.

3 Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mampilly, eds., *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

The Current Terrorist Threatscape

■ Damon Stevens

As we approach the twenty-year anniversary of the National Counterterrorism Center's establishment, I am thankful for the opportunity today to express our sincere appreciation for the impactful work of The Washington Institute and all our partners across academia and the policy institute community who contribute to this broad counterterrorism (CT) enterprise that was built and has achieved significant successes during the past two decades.

The United States, with the help of our partners, has successfully reduced many terrorist safe havens, degraded illicit financial networks that fund terrorist activities, and fragmented the ISIS [aka Islamic State] and al-Qaeda networks. With our allies and partners, we remain focused on proactively managing a very diverse threat environment, even in the midst of other national security priorities. This reinforces the importance of sustained attention and pressure on our adversaries as we seek to remain disciplined and focused against the clearest threats to the homeland and the United States abroad.

The Hamas attacks of October 2023 are a reminder that we need to sustain this agile CT architecture that can protect against the most pressing threats, while also enabling us to pivot to others when our national security interests demand it. Reflecting on these recent events, I will focus my remarks on three policy and planning considerations for all of us to focus on across the public and private

spectrum of the CT enterprise as we collectively work hard to ensure that CT does not become the number-one U.S. national security priority again:

1. Understanding and adapting to an evolving terrorism threat;
2. Maintaining the U.S. Government's ability to warn of and respond with agility to terrorist threats; and
3. Fully understanding and adapting to the CT capabilities and limitations of our partners.

1. UNDERSTANDING AND ADAPTING TO AN EVOLVING TERRORISM THREAT

As terrorism threats, tactics, techniques, and procedures evolve, the United States must adapt to ensure that we can continue to identify, disrupt, and respond to terrorist activities. The Hamas attacks on Israel and their aftermath—one of the most consequential events for the global terrorism landscape since 9/11—have galvanized a diverse set of reactions from terrorists and violent extremists across the ideological spectrum, who are exploiting the conflict for their own causes.

In monitoring the impacts of last October's events, we remain vigilant about threats to innocent civilians from lone actors inspired by Hamas's attacks or other groups' calls for terrorism. Meanwhile, we remain concerned about Iran and its proxies, given their ability to generate attacks in the Middle East against U.S. persons and facilities there and to attack targets that could have significant escalatory consequences. Additionally, hierarchically organized groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS are seeking to capitalize on this moment to unify supporters and organize for violence.

Terrorist threats globally have also evolved in recent years, with changes in technology that have made it easier for adversaries to plot attacks, radicalize new followers, and recruit beyond borders. Terrorists are also experimenting with more sophisticated tools—including drones, chemical weapons, and artfully concealed improvised explosive devices—to further spread violence and fear that require innovation to counter.

Amid these developments, our terrorist adversaries maintain the intent and capability to pursue and inflict devastating human and economic tolls, sometimes with little warning, that can be a strategic distraction to our other national priorities. Therefore, it remains as important as ever that we monitor and maintain CT pressure on the full spectrum of terrorism threats.

2. MAINTAINING THE U.S. ABILITY TO WARN OF AND RESPOND WITH AGILITY TO TERRORIST THREATS

Transitioning to my second point, the Hamas attacks are a reminder of the criticality of maintaining key CT warning capabilities and responding with agility. The United States has consistently demonstrated this agility in rapidly shifting resources and capabilities to counter identified threats or respond post-attack. However, obtaining sufficient warning is the single most critical element to provide time and space essential for an effective response.

The Hamas attacks also highlight the warning challenge, as even when the United States and U.S. persons and facilities overseas are not specifically targeted, a terrorist attack can still result in the deaths of our citizens and have escalatory effects with significant implications for U.S. and global security.

As the U.S. government continues to monitor and evaluate the threat landscape, our partners and our community will continue to identify and deploy critical, whole-of-government CT capabilities that can best mitigate the risk of terrorists advancing attacks against the U.S. homeland and U.S. persons and facilities overseas.

3. UNDERSTANDING PARTNER CAPABILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

For my last point today, I want to quickly underscore the importance of fully understanding our partners' capabilities and limitations in monitoring terrorists and maintaining CT pressure against the greatest terrorism threats facing the United States. This is particularly important because our partnerships around the globe have been and will continue to be critical to our CT successes.

Where critical gaps exist, the United States, in cooperation with our partners, must consider mitigation efforts to minimize the threat of terrorism. This also means adapting to evolving global dynamics. For example, we are reevaluating partnerships in West Africa following the region's coups and global developments that have resulted in changes to our collaboration opportunities there.

CLOSING REMARKS

In closing, now more than ever, we recognize that we must remain agile and attentive to the diverse challenges posed by global terrorist networks, state involvement with terrorism, lone or loosely connected violent extremists, and terrorist innovation. This has become especially true as the United States faces a growing range of other national security challenges, from the increasing strength and assertiveness of strategic competitors such as China and Russia, to climate change, to the emergence of new cyber threats and disruptive technologies.

In addition, the Israel-Hamas conflict is a stark reminder that we must collectively pursue innovative approaches to collection and analysis to ensure CT efforts remain effective, efficient, and fully integrated. We must be careful to preserve key aspects of the CT architecture to address an inherently unpredictable range of terrorist adversaries, even as we confront a myriad of other national security challenges that play out both overseas and here in the United States.

WHY DO JIHADISTS GOVERN?

A Comparative Study of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Governance

■ Marta Furlan

Following the Arab Spring of 2011, an unprecedented number of jihadist armed groups managed to exploit the turmoil to insert themselves into the fight for power, conquer territories, and eventually introduce their own practices and structures of governance.[1] While instances of territorial conquest and civilian rule by jihadist groups had been observed prior to 2011 in places such as Iraq and Somalia,[2] following the Arab Spring the phenomenon of jihadist governance expanded.[3]

Acknowledging this trend, it becomes important to explore the reasons why jihadist armed groups have an interest in participating in activities of governance.

A LOOK INTO THE DRIVERS OF REBEL GOVERNANCE

Before attempting to understand the reasons that drive jihadist armed groups toward governance, it is helpful to explore why armed groups in general have an interest in governing.

While not all armed groups have the willingness—or have the capacity—to provide governance, most armed groups that bring a populated area under their control by means of force do attempt to introduce new social, political, and economic structures and establish a social contract with the population.[4]

The reason why they do so is that governance allows armed groups to derive crucial benefits: they increase their own legitimacy among the target population (both vis-à-vis the state and vis-à-vis other rival armed groups, if present); they enhance their credibility as a political (rather than exclusively military) actor toward domestic as much as international audiences; they get access to material resources (money and equipment) and supporters (fighters, members, ideological sympathizers); they can put into practice their ideology and worldview.[5]

A JIHADIST INTEREST IN GOVERNANCE

From the writings of some of the most prominent jihadist ideologues and strategists, it is apparent that the jihadist interest in, or at least attention to, governance predates the Arab Spring.

As early as 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri wrote to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi about the importance of governance to secure popular support: since the most important weapon is the support of the masses, jihadists must fight for the people's "hearts and minds" and must do so by performing governance activities.[6] In a later writing, he expanded on those points, arguing that the jihadist movement must work with the masses and provide services to win the people's confidence.[7]

Not dissimilarly, around 2006 Abu Bakr Naji argued that, when waging jihad, the support of the masses is fundamental.[8] Once the government collapses and a situation of chaos ("savagery") emerges, the jihadists must offer security and justice, provide food, medical treatment, education, and establish sharia as a source of law and justice, among other activities.[9]

Prior to that, Abu Ubayd al-Qurashi also wrote about the importance of establishing "parallel governmental institutions…to give a degree of legitimacy to the revolutionary army and at the same time breaking the government's monopoly on legitimacy."[10] On a similar note, Abdel Aziz al-Muqrin noted that as the jihadists conquer territories, they should encourage popular support by introducing a parallel government inclusive of hospitals, sharia courts, and broadcasting stations.[11]

What emerges from the writings above is that over the past two decades, jihadist leaders have been devoting growing attention to the subject of governance,

considering the establishment of practices and structures of civilian administration a critical component of their broader insurgent effort. Specifically, jihadist leaders have come to recognize governance as an effective strategy to gain credibility and legitimacy among the people and ultimately introduce sociopolitical systems built on sharia (as interpreted in the jihadist doctrine).

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

To assess how jihadist armed groups navigate the transition from theory to practice in matters of governance, two interesting groups are al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

As instability, insecurity, and a power vacuum befell Yemen in the wake of the Arab Spring, AQAP's leader Nasser al-Wahishi saw an unmissable opportunity for his group to build the long-desired Islamic emirate.[12] Despite the reticence voiced by Osama bin Laden, who believed that AQAP should proclaim an Islamic state only if it had the actual capacity to provide for the people's safety, financial well-being, food security, and healthcare,[13] AQAP proceeded to conquer some territories in southern Yemen.

Upon conquering territories, the group did attempt to provide some governance. In fact, as we read in two letters that Wahishi wrote in May 2012 to his counterpart in Mali, AQAP's leader was aware that if the jihadists want to hold territory, establish an Islamic emirate, and impose sharia, they must navigate governance.

At that time, however, the group could invest only limited resources in governance. As noted by AQAP's Sheikh Abu Zubair Adil al-Abab, "We lack the administrative staff and financial resources that would make us able to provide services to the people."[14] Faced with those constraints, AQAP focused on governance as an instrument for the enforcement of its doctrine: it applied a strict version of sharia, imposed *hudoud* punishments, and sidelined deeply rooted tribal customs and practices.[15] While AQAP also attempted to offer some infrastructure projects (e.g., establishing electrical lines), these were very limited. In this climate, it did not take long for the group to lose any sympathy among the people and be removed from power.

Once AQAP reconquered portions of southern Yemen in 2015, it somewhat revised its approach to governance. While the group certainly did not lose interest in applying its doctrine, it adopted a more gradual approach on that front. Rather, it sought to devote more efforts to governance activities that would attract the popular support and acceptance necessary for the sustainability of AQAP's jihadist polity. Until being defeated militarily in 2016, AQAP provided the people under its control with a governance apparatus that included a judicial system more attuned to the local context, a framework that allowed for the pretense of local involvement (the Hadrami Domestic Council), and public services such as water and electricity.

As much as AQAP engaged in governance, it also increased and enhanced its publication of materials that depicted the ways in which AQAP allegedly improved the lives of the people, to the point that publicizing community development works became the main media priority of AQAP. This was evident in AQAP's al-Athir media agency and *al-Masirah* newspaper, as well as on Twitter.

HAYAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM

Following its intervention in the Syrian civil war, HTS (then known as Jabhat al-Nusra) focused on consolidating its military position and did not initially engage in governance. Rather, its involvement in governance efforts emerged around mid-/late-2012, possibly because of the influence of Ahrar al-Sham,[16] which testifies to the extent to which jihadist groups learn from their own experiences (as in the case of AQAP) as much as from each other.

HTS's engagement in governance was well justified by its leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, who already in 2013 maintained that only by providing the people with public services and goods is it possible to gain the popular support that is needed to establish an Islamic emirate.[17]

Initially, HTS's engagement in governance took place in the context of joint structures with other groups, whereby efforts and responsibilities were distributed across different factions. Over time, however, HTS's governance became increasingly unilateral, as Jawlani saw it as instrumental to assert his group's direct and hegemonic control.[18] As in the following years, HTS consolidated its position in the northwestern province of Idlib, and the group's participation in governance

activities expanded further (while also becoming more complex through the introduction of the Syrian Salvation Government).

However, what is especially interesting in the case of HTS is that for Jawlani's group, governance is not only an activity in which to engage to obtain support among the local population and establish hegemonic control; rather, as HTS has been distancing itself from al-Qaeda and has been presenting itself as the embodiment of a sui generis jihadist "third paradigm,"[19] governance has also become an activity in which HTS engages in an attempt to obtain international recognition (and removal from the lists of terrorist organizations).[20]

In other words, HTS has been using the provision of governance to cement its position in Idlib and present itself as the only option available to the people of Syria's northwest. At the same time, it has been using the provision of governance to present itself on the international scene as a legitimate and credible political actor as well as to spread the image of a locally oriented (rather than transnational) group committed to providing for civilians under its control.

This is apparent in some of Jawlani's most recent interviews, in which he repeatedly emphasized governance. In an interview from late January 2020, Jawlani underlined that his group is exclusively focusing on governing the territory under its control, rather than on transnational jihad, as many detractors suggest.[21] In a subsequent interview from February 2021, he again reiterated that "people would immediately think that [HTS] is a movement that engages only in fighting. They would never imagine that this movement is also capable of building or running institutions in a country."[22]

CONCLUSION

Over the past two decades, jihadist ideologues and strategists have been devoting growing attention to the subject of governance, considering civilian administration a central component of their broader effort to eradicate "apostate" regimes and establish in their stead pure jihadist polities. However, it is also important to appreciate the nuances between different jihadist groups. While most of them, such as AQAP, see governance as an instrument to consolidate territorial control, entrench themselves among the local population on whose support they depend,

and apply their own doctrine, others, such as HTS, engage in governance also to obtain some degree of recognition in the eyes of international audiences, whose support (or at least acceptance) they see as fundamental to their long-term survival.

NOTES

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A Retrospective and Future Look at al-Shabab's Governance

■ Christopher Anzalone

Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahedin (al-Shabab) emerged in a Somalia wracked by a long and bloody civil war following the ouster of the country's longtime authoritarian president, Mohamed Siyad Barre, in 1991. Today, al-Shabab continues to exercise territorial control and varying degrees of governance across much of southern, western, and central Somalia, particularly in the Middle and Lower Juba, Middle and Lower Shabelle, Hiran, Bay, Bakool, Galguduud, and Mudug regions, with a smaller presence in Puntland. The organization prioritizes both its ongoing military insurgency together with its civil governance activities because its senior leadership's desired end goal is the construction of an "Islamic state" across all the Somali ethnic-majority regions in East Africa, which taps into the idea of a Greater Somalia that has supporters among a diverse array of Somalis and not only supporters of al-Shabab.[1] The jihadist-insurgent group has continuously governed territory since 2008, when it started to capture large swaths of land from the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in the aftermath of the collapse of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in January 2007—in the wake of a major Ethiopian invasion and occupation of parts of Somalia. By 2008, al-Shabab's governing processes and structures were beginning to take shape in the public sphere, with insurgent leaders highlighting them as central goals internally and to local populations.

When it emerged as a fully independent organization from the ashes of the ICU umbrella in 2007, al-Shabab was not the only armed group fighting the TFG and Ethiopian, and later African Union, forces. In Mogadishu, militias from the powerful Hawiye clan had also taken up arms and al-Shabab also faced competitors in the Islamist field, chiefly Hizbul Islam (HI), a coalition of four militias largely based around particular clans and subclans. To outcompete its Islamist rivals, al-Shabab sought to broaden the geographical scope of its operations, diversify the domestic societal and external groups (including foreign fighters) from which it recruited and drew support, and tap into the power of selected symbols as part of its claim to historical, social, and religious legitimacy.

Al-Shabab's main Islamist insurgent rival was the HI coalition, a fractious umbrella for four clan-based militias: the Alliance for the Reliberation of Somalia–Asmara Wing (ARS-A), led by Hassan Dahir Aweys, the Ras Kamboni Brigades, led by Hassan Abdullahi Hersi "al-Turki," al-Jabhatul Islamiya (JABISO), and the Anole or al-Furqan Forces. HI was riven with internal disagreements over political and military strategy and factional competition for power, preventing it from fully unifying as a cohesive organization, and it never paid as much attention to forming civil governing processes and institutions as al-Shabab did.[2] By the end of 2009, HI ceased to operate as an integrated force, as HI leaders and commanders began working toward different goals.[3] HI groups' reliance on their own clans/subclans in recruitment also limited the geographical areas of operation their fighters could be used in without upsetting existing clan dynamics.[4]

Al-Shabab formed short-lived alliances with other Somali Islamist armed factions, including Hassan al-Turki's Ras Kamboni in 2008 to take the port city of Kismayo and HI in 2009 in and around Mogadishu and the Lower Shabelle region. However, these alliances had short shelf lives, with al-Shabab reneging on its 2008 deal to share the governing of Kismayo and interspersing periods of cooperation with clashes with HI throughout 2009–10.[5] After suffering key defections, including by Mohamed Mohamud Ali "Dulyadayn" and Hassan al-Turki, and battlefield defeats at the hands of al-Shabab, much, though not all, of what remained of HI was forcibly subsumed by al-Shabab in December 2010.[6]

AL-SHABAB'S TERRITORIAL PROTO-STATE PROJECT, 2008–23

Unlike its main Somali Islamist rivals, al-Shabab prioritized, and continues to do so, the development of civil governing processes and infrastructure to complement its military insurgency, indeed seeing the former as one of the primary goals of the latter. In 2008, as the group captured more and more territory, its leaders traveled around newly captured towns to deliver speeches to local communities outlining the main contours of the new insurgent order. For example, in November 2008, al-Shabab founding members and, at the time, key leaders Ibrahim al-Afghani and Mukhtar Robow publicly addressed locals in the towns of Merca and Janale in the Lower Shabelle region, discussing al-Shabab's planned implementation of a new system of "law and order" centered on a harsh interpretation of Islamic law and penal codes, chiefly the "set"/*hudoud* punishments.[7] Justice, as defined by al-Shabab, was only achievable through the implementation of "God's law" (*shariat al-rahman*) after over a decade of destructive civil war.[8] There continues today to be fluidity between al-Shabab's military/insurgency and civil governance operations, with many insurgent officials playing roles in both.

Though local civilians do not have final say in how al-Shabab exercises its claim to governing authority, the insurgent group does not entirely dismiss local views, seeking instead to build cooperative arrangements with local power brokers including clan elders and local religious preachers and scholars (*ulama*). In order for the group to retain territorial control, al-Shabab relies on winning, at a minimum, the acquiescence of local residents and notables to the group's continued presence and governance activities. The group does not need full-fledged, enthusiastic support to thrive in a local area, it only needs to prevent open rebellion through localized negotiations and dealmaking, particularly with local clan/subclan groups. Al-Shabab attempts to influence clan politics and internal structures by backing pro-insurgent voices within clans, including backing its own preferred elders and peace mediators and maintaining a clan outreach committee and tasking its Politics and Provinces Office, headed by Hussein Ali Fidow, with maintaining connections within local communities and clans/subclans.

A key part of al-Shabab's claim to legitimacy as a governing force is its public enactment of "law and order," in comparison to the predatory lawlessness into which it emerged in 2007 after the collapse of the ICU. In its crackdowns on

banditry, armed robbery, theft (the three collectively classified under the *hudoud* category of *hiraba* and "spreading corruption in the land"/*mufsid fil-ard*), and implementation of strict "moral" codes of behavior in areas under its control, al-Shabab relies on the *jaish al-hisba*, an armed force it uses as both police and a morality enforcement force. Target audiences for the *jaish al-hisba*'s enforcement actions are criminals as well as local civilian populations and other domestic and international audiences, including diaspora communities.

At times, al-Shabab has held some of its own members to account for offenses, even executing some insurgents after insurgent courts passed down rulings of "punishment in kind" (*qisas*) for homicide offensives. In April 2010, for example, an insurgent court ordered the execution, which was carried out, of an al-Shabab fighter for killing a local civilian in the Lower Shabelle region after his family rejected a financial settlement (*diyyah*).[9] A similar execution took place in Bakool in April 2008.[10] In 2011, when it was facing severe battlefield and political pressure, al-Shabab instituted a special grievances response (*mazalim*) court to hear complaints against insurgent officials and members, tying it to the longer history of mazalim courts in Islamic history, including in Iberian Muslim states and the Ottoman Empire.[11]

Tapping into the power of symbols, al-Shabab, despite its theological and creedal rejection of Sufism, portrays itself as the inheritor of the anti-colonial "jihad" legacies of Somali proto-nationalist heroes, chief among them Muhammad Abdullah Hassan (dubbed the "mad mullah" by exasperated British colonial officials in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), Hassan Barsane, and Bashir Yusuf, all of whom were affiliated with Sufi orders. Al-Shabab regularly describes its commanders and rank-and-file fighters as the descendants of the mad mullah's dervishes, his warrior followers with whom he forged an independent state (the "dervish state") between 1899 and 1920. Al-Shabab divorces these figures from their Sufi backgrounds, emphasizing entirely their "*mujahid*" credentials in fighting against British, Italian, and Abyssinian/Ethiopian imperialism and colonialism.[12] Other jihadist insurgent groups have done similar things in the Caucasus vis-à-vis Imam Shamil and in West Africa with Usman dan Fodio.[13] Al-Shabab continues to seek to propagate its interpretation of history and Islamic theological, creedal, legal, and political thought through a network of insurgent-run schools, institutes, and other educational institutions and training camps targeted at local civilians, particularly children and local notables.

Al-Shabab, even during periods when it is facing intense battlefield pressure, such as 2011–14 and a series of offensives since the summer of 2022 by the Somali Federal Government (SFG) and allied clan militia "Ma'awisley" forces in the Galmudug and Hirshabelle federal member states, continues to prioritize its governance operations, doubling down on them even as it pursues a flexible and asymmetric military strategy against its many enemies. Throughout 2023 and the first two months of 2024, the group's taxation, court system, *jaish al-hisba* operations, monetary and material aid distribution, medical clinics for people and livestock, and, most recently, flood relief committee operations continue.[14] Al-Shabab continues to invest a significant amount of human and other resources in its proto-state project, rivaling the capabilities of the SFG and the Somali federal member state administrations, which will make it much more difficult to uproot from many local areas until the SFG is capable of providing regular and reliable security for civilians and, as importantly, offering governance alternatives in multiple fields, including education and justice provision, to those of the insurgents.

The views expressed here reflect solely those of the author and not of the U.S. Marine Corps, Department of Defense, or any part of the U.S. government.

NOTES

1 Al-Shabab's leaders also have a long history of claiming to want to participate in the founding of a new "caliphate," though their focus, in terms of actions, has been and remains primarily aimed at their domestic proto-state-building project. The concept of a Greater Somalia sees the separation of Somali ethnic majority regions in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti by British, Italian, French, and Abyssinian/Ethiopian imperial powers as something that should be reversed, joining together all of East Africa's Somali populations in a single state.

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Hezbollah Shadow Governance in Lebanon

■ Matthew Levitt

In many of his speeches, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah highlights the system of shadow governance the group established parallel to Lebanon's weakened political system and its inadequate social governance structures. He has even gone so far as to say that Hezbollah's existence as a political and militant entity is strengthened by this parallel governance program, which provides the group both popular support and means of illicit funding to finance social and religious programs that make the group part of the fabric of Lebanese society. Hezbollah today has the best of both worlds—with members holding cabinet positions and seats in parliament, it is very much a part of the Lebanese state even as it remains an independent group that operates apart from the state.

By design, Hezbollah is not the de facto governing authority in Lebanon, which serves the group's purposes. By virtue of Hezbollah not being an official government institution, it avoids the accountability that typically comes with holding elected office. It continues to function as an independent militia while maintaining its influence in Lebanon's parliament and developing a shadow economy built on a system of political patronage. This shadow economy has allowed Hezbollah to develop a "shadow citizenry" from whom it draws political support and a measure of authority, allowing the group not only to increase its power and

influence but simultaneously to undermine the legitimacy of the Lebanese state. In regions it controls—primarily in southern Lebanon, parts of Beirut, and the Beqa Valley—Hezbollah provides social services, jobs, and welfare support to its followers, fostering dependency on the group's institutions and making it the de facto enforcer of a system that encourages political patronage.

When it comes to financing, Hezbollah's unique position allows it to participate in both licit and illicit economies, running entities as diverse as narco–money laundering enterprises abroad and environmental NGOs at home, each in the service of the group's shadow economy and militant operations. The group's social service activity provides day jobs for its members, a means to raise and launder funds, and places to spot and recruit new members. Hezbollah members see this social service activity as "an act of resistance of jihad that is integral to Hezbollah's struggle against Israel and the West" that further builds a "culture of resistance" within the country's Shia community. Due to it being the only militia to maintain its arms following the 1989 Taif Accord, Hezbollah maintains its position as the sole enforcer of this corrupt political system built on sectarian patronage and criminal intent.

In the two decades since Hezbollah first began participating in government, the group's members have held many positions in parliament and a variety of Lebanese ministries, where they have the power to influence—or disrupt—the Lebanese political process and key government decisions. The group takes credit for the actions of the ministries under its control, but is never held to account when the government fails to provide key services. Hezbollah even weaponizes the discontent many Lebanese feel with their elected leaders, swaying them to Hezbollah's cause as a member of the "shadow citizenry." Hezbollah leverages its position as a hybrid political actor with one eye toward governance and the other toward terrorism, which allows it to make decisions about war and peace independent of the Lebanese state.

This type of activity may be most prevalent in the group's activities along the Blue Line—the UN-demarcated border between Israel and Lebanon. Hezbollah frequently violates United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701—the UN resolution that officially laid out an end to hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah and established the mandate for the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in 2006—by setting up tents on the Israeli side of the Blue Line, allowing other

terrorist groups like Hamas to launch attacks on Israel from its stronghold in southern Lebanon, and intentionally damaging the security barrier to cross into Israeli territory. The group's special forces, the Radwan, are frequently seen operating along the Blue Line and conducting training operations—the group even published a six-minute video in July 2023 commemorating Lebanon's 2006 war with Israel by simulating an assault on an Israeli military base.[1] In the wake of the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on southern Israel, Hezbollah initiated a campaign of near-daily shelling of Israel in support of Hamas, a fellow ally of Iran.

Additionally, Hezbollah is well known for frequently interfering with UNIFIL operations along the border, even going so far as to kill an Irish peacekeeper named Sean Rooney in December 2022.[2] A Lebanese military tribunal charged five Hezbollah militants with the crime; only one of the accused was ever arrested—Mohamad Ayyad—though he was released on bail less than a year later, in November 2023.[3] In April 2024, four UN peacekeepers were injured by a roadside bomb reportedly placed there by Hezbollah.[4] Hezbollah also often enjoys the protection of the Lebanese Armed Forces, who use their authority to deny UNIFIL access to key areas in southern Lebanon, further demonstrating the ways in which Hezbollah takes advantage of and embeds itself within the country's corrupt political and economic system. The group even invents its own cover for its disruptive activity along the Blue Line, using a Hezbollah cover organization and environmental NGO called Green Without Borders to build structures and conduct surveillance along the Lebanese border with Israel.

This type of antagonistic behavior often pushes Lebanon into diplomatic rows it would otherwise have had no involvement in. During the summer of 2022, Hezbollah interfered in maritime negotiations between Israel and Lebanon by threatening to attack a rig located in Israel's Karish natural gas field and later launching three drones to surveil the vessel.[5] In April 2023, Hezbollah set up two tents on the Israeli side of the Blue Line, prompting a flurry of negotiations to avoid war over the illegal military outpost. Hezbollah parliament members inevitably weighed in on the debate, warning Israel to "shut up and walk back" the demand to remove the tents if it wanted to avoid war.[6] As the group's near daily shelling of Israel since October 7, 2023, underscores, Hezbollah makes life-and-death decisions for all Lebanese without consulting the government or the people of Lebanon.

As a type of corrupt "shadow government," Hezbollah's position in the Lebanese parliament and many of its ministries allows it to influence or even completely disrupt activities of the state with which it does not agree. The investigation into the 2020 Beirut port explosion, which resulted in at least 218 deaths and $15 billion in property damage, was impeded by Hezbollah officials from the beginning. The explosion called into question the relationship between Hezbollah and Syria's Assad regime, for which the group reportedly imported the tons of ammonium nitrate that detonated in August 2020, and also the corrupt political system that allowed for such a blatant disregard for basic safety precautions. Hezbollah officials obstructed the investigation by threatening judges, launching a disinformation campaign, and attempting to usurp the investigation altogether.[7] A senior Hezbollah security official later connected to the Beirut port incident, Wafiq Safa, was designated by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in 2019 for his role in exploiting Lebanese ports and borders to allow Hezbollah officials to travel freely and smuggle goods.[8] In doing so, Safa not only endangered his fellow Lebanese but also diverted millions of dollars in tax revenue away from the country's free-falling financial system. The Lebanese political system, its ranks propped up by a large number of Hezbollah officials, allows the group's actions to go unquestioned and its crimes unpunished as it functions as both a part of and above the system.

Despite not completely controlling Lebanon, Hezbollah is undeniably an influential actor in the region that exemplifies the spectrum of governance upon which many jihadist actors fall. By virtue of having members in the government and a blocking third in parliament, Hezbollah is in a position to prevent the state from being able to deter or contain Hezbollah's actions. With the country experiencing several political and economic crises, few in Lebanon have any interest in a war with the country's southern neighbor. Contrary to the general lack of appetite for war in the country, Hezbollah ratcheted up tensions in recent years, continuing to escalate its aggressive behavior along the Blue Line and provoking conflict with Israel.

It is likely that other terrorist actors like Hamas will attempt to imitate the Hezbollah model, in which an extremist group latches onto the institutions of a failing state to exert power and influence to serve its own interests. This parallel governance strategy has allowed Hezbollah to survive as an armed group for decades after the Taif Accord required all Lebanese militias to disband and

disarm.[9] This approach has entrenched Hezbollah in many of Lebanon's key state institutions, afforded it considerable influence in parliament, and allowed it to use the cover of official action to protect its members from political pressure or judicial investigation. The group's social welfare activities have resulted in a vast network of support from the Lebanese "shadow citizenry" that benefits from Hezbollah's healthcare, educational, and civil services. Hezbollah serves its and Iran's interests first and the Lebanese people's second, further exemplifying the degree to which the group has undermined the state and its institutions, weakened the rule of law, and prevented the Lebanese government from serving the population that put it in power.

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Economy and Islamist Governance: The Cases of the Islamic State and the Taliban

■ Ayse D. Lokmanoglu

Monetary economics plays a vital role in state governance due to its involvement with money management within national borders, thus legitimizing state sovereignty. The fabrication of monetary economic policies can be as foundational to nation-building as shared language and media. Historically, states have unified to amass, allocate, and safeguard wealth, reinforcing their legitimacy. Conversely, insurgent groups have effectively managed wealth in their proto-state domains, enhancing their perceived legitimacy, even with transient territorial claims.

THE ISLAMIC STATE

Examining cases like the Islamic State (IS), which lost its territorial foothold, and the Taliban's governance of Afghanistan illustrates the intersection of Salafi-jihadist ideology and economic policy amid the constraints of global financial systems. Islamist monetary economics challenges conventional financial systems, emphasizing socioeconomic equality and accurate value assessment and rejecting interest rates. Islamic banking operates a dual system, conforming to Islamic principles against the global economic backdrop.[1] Some nations claim

sharia-compliant systems, substituting interest with fixed fees, while Islamic banking assets exceed $1.8 trillion globally, adhering to international norms.

Despite Quranic guidance on economic policy, practical implementation is complex, with the no-interest mandate and currency valuation particularly challenging. Operating a sharia-based monetary system in today's interconnected financial environment is nearly impracticable, often necessitating an almost autarkic economy (e.g., Iran).

Insurgent wealth management often results in a mutually beneficial dynamic that bolsters economic stability and governance strength while redistributing wealth to local populations. Insurgents employ this strategy, integrating even illicit economies, to assert economic competence and consolidate governance systems, thus competing with state legitimacy. The Islamic State is one terrorist group that has controlled territory and population, thus incorporating wealth management and monetary economics into its governance. However, to "perform" its Islamic governance, the group had to apply a sharia-based monetary system, which in the case of IS becomes more complicated as the group is further trying to reject the Western notion of statehood and rejecting borders. Thus, IS, within its propaganda, embraced a very radical sharia-based monetary economics, which included the rejection of fiat currency and interest rates, while in reality it was operating using the currencies it rejected on paper.

IS has used economic narratives as propaganda, condemning Western financial practices and advocating a precious-metal-based currency system. For example, one article in the group's weekly *al-Naba* periodical insists that Western governments "print what they want, and they determine the value of those papers, and then link them to other countries where their currencies are paper."[2] The group portrays Western economies as exploitative, with the Middle East's "infidel governments" complicit in America's economic strategies. For example, when developing the case of the United States as the enemy, a chief reason for IS opposition is the "addiction to an unwise, unnecessary, and bankrupting interventionism that is the main motivator of the international Islamist movement, a phenomenon which was fathered and is still nurtured by the West's so-called 'allies and friends,' Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, etc."[3] One of the tools available for this purpose is valuing the dollar at arbitrarily high levels and manipulating gold values. *Al-Naba* describes such processes in the following terms:

> The dollar today is thirty times less than its value against gold since the dollar peg trick was exposed...while the value of silver against gold has only declined by a third during the same period. Gold remains the broadest refuge for fugitives from the fluctuations of the dollar price. Then at any sign of an economic crisis, we find that gold prices increase (by their terms), so that the owners of the money are quick to give away their dollars and they cling to safe gold; when the crisis ends, they buy back the dollars so that they could invest in the market.[4]

The Islamic State's propaganda contrasts with its reality, as it relies on foreign currencies for revenue through taxation, oil sales, and illicit activities. The organization's media campaigns promote an Islamic financial ethos, yet its revenue is substantially derived from noncompliant economic practices. This dichotomy presents a legitimacy crisis for IS, as it must reconcile its ideological stance with the practical needs of governance and economic survival.

The contradiction between the Islamic State's propaganda and actual practices arises from the group's reliance on foreign currencies. As IS took over regions, it required funds for conflict and to provide for the populace, obtaining income through taxes, levies, rent, oil sales, and even human trafficking.[5] Given the Islamic State's status as an active terrorist group, it is challenging to trace its exact financial operations. Research indicates a stark difference between the group's publicized Islamic financial principles and its actual reliance on prohibited economic activities. Despite using communications to legitimize regime and economic management, the group's main economic effectiveness came from establishing stable but illicit revenue streams, crucial for bolstering military and governance and providing welfare and services to the people under its control. This resulted in a legitimacy crisis, as the group's financial operations often contradicted its ideological statements, although these operations significantly supported its governance.

THE TALIBAN'S ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN

The economic landscape of Afghanistan under the Taliban's administration presents a unique case study, differing significantly from the IS approach, primarily due to the Taliban's inheritance of an operational central bank and a circulating

national currency. Upon seizing control of the Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), the Taliban faced immediate economic isolation as a consequence of U.S. sanctions that froze the bank's assets.[6] This disconnection from global financial markets has compounded the challenges of transitioning Afghanistan's economy toward sharia compliance.

According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), in its July 2023 quarterly report to Congress, the DAB continues to lack political independence, which is critical for the credibility and functionality of a central bank.[7] Despite SIGAR recognizing certain economic indicators showing signs of improvement—such as a slight decrease in inflation to[8]–0.95% in April 2023, a stabilization of the currency at 87.5 Afghanis to 1 U.S. dollar, and a reduced currency depreciation rate to 1.6% from the pre-Taliban period—Afghanistan still faces high unemployment rates and significant economic hurdles.

In the case of implementing Islamic governance, similar to IS, the Taliban did publicize the DAB plans to implement full sharia-based monetary economics. The acting governor of DAB, Hedayatullah Badri, in his speech at "Strategies for the Impending Economic Slowdown and a Post-Oil World: Through Economic Diversification and Leveraging Islamic Finance," held in Bahrain in November 2023, stated:

> DAB is committed to fully Islamizing Afghanistan's banking and financial sector, with the aim of eliminating interest and other illicit practices. Presently, all forms of interest-based transactions are prohibited, and all the conventional banks will be converted into Islamic banks…diligent efforts are being made to [establish] interest-free banking…in Afghanistan.[9]

According to the statement, Badri further "elaborated on the importance of ensuring that financial products offered by Islamic banking adhere to sharia standards not only superficially in terms of their form, but also fundamentally in terms of their types."[10]

COMPARING THE TWO SYSTEMS

Unlike nonstate militant groups such as IS, the Taliban, because they assumed control over a central bank and an established national currency, are compelled to comply with international monetary and economic regulations. This includes maintaining the integrity of the existing fiat currency and engaging in trade with recognized currencies worldwide. The economic challenges faced by such an entity primarily stem from its lack of international recognition and the consequential need to ensure the political independence of its central banking system, in this case the DAB. In juxtaposing the financial strategies of IS and the Taliban, one observes a fundamental tension between ideological purity and practical governance. While both entities espouse a strict interpretation of sharia economic principles, the realities of state-building in a globalized world necessitate a degree of economic pragmatism.

For IS, the creation of a "caliphate" involved not just the seizure of territory but also the establishment of a viable economic system. The group's approach was marked by a bold rejection of conventional financial systems, particularly the fiat currency, which it viewed as anathema to Islamic teachings; instead, IS promoted gold dinar and silver dirham, currencies rooted in Islamic tradition. However, this stance was more symbolic than practical, serving as a tool for propaganda to differentiate its model from Western capitalist structures and appeal to historical Islamic governance. Despite an ideological stance against fiat currency, the Islamic State's actual financial operations were heavily reliant on the very currencies it denounced. IS collected taxes, sold oil, and engaged in various forms of smuggling, all of which required participation in the global financial system the group purportedly rejected. This contradiction underscores the challenge of applying strict Islamic principles in a complex, interconnected economic landscape.

The Taliban's situation presents a contrasting case. Upon assuming power, the group inherited a functioning central bank and a national currency already part of the global financial system. While the Taliban have similarly voiced their intent to establish a sharia-compliant financial system, they face the immediate practical challenge of operating within a global economic order that does not recognize their governance. This has resulted in a precarious economic situation,

where they must navigate international sanctions and the realities of governing a population needing basic services and economic stability.

Both IS and the Taliban have faced the task of translating their strict Islamist ideologies into workable economic policies. This has often meant a selective application of sharia law, where certain principles are upheld in public rhetoric while economic necessities compromise others. The complexity of this endeavor is further compounded by the need to garner both local support and international legitimacy, all while maintaining the ideological commitments that underpin their claim to power.

The economic measures of these groups are instructive for understanding the broader implications of Islamist governance in the modern world. They illustrate the difficulties of reconciling a return to historic economic models with the demands of contemporary statecraft. For policymakers and scholars, these cases provide valuable insights into the interplay between ideology, economics, and governance in conflict-affected regions.

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THE ROAD FROM STATE CAPTURE TO STATE-BUILDING

The Evolving Threat of Pro–Islamic State Groups in the Philippines: Context, Competition, and Cascading Risk

■ Haroro J. Ingram

The anomalous achievements of the Islamic State in establishing its proto-state across Iraq and Syria a decade ago set a misleading standard for assessing the threat potential of Islamic State affiliates.[1] As terrorist threats have slid down the list of national security and foreign policy priorities, policymakers have tended to consider the "state capture" and "state-building" potential of jihadist groups as the crucial benchmark in assessing threats. Of course, state capture and state-building are vitally important markers along the guerrilla governance spectrum, signaling that critical intent and capability thresholds have been passed. However, the spectrum is incomplete without inclusion of its precursory marker: "state destabilization." Indeed, groups that have escalated their operations through the state capture threshold to engage in state-building will almost inevitably have built their campaign on the foundations of prolonged state destabilization activities.

Pro–Islamic State groups in the Philippines are a useful case study in prolonged guerrilla operations to destabilize established authorities. Since the 2017 Marawi siege, pro–Islamic State groups in the Philippines have not made a serious effort to capture and control a city.[2] Nevertheless, the various groups broadly operating under the Islamic State East Asia banner highlight how jihadist groups with little chance of building a state—that is, crossing the *tamkin* (consolidation) threshold—can still have potentially seismic impacts at local, national, and regional levels.[3]

This analysis begins by arguing that context, competition, and cascading risks are vital considerations for assessing, preventing, and responding to the escalating campaigns of guerrilla politico-military and propaganda activities. It then applies context, competition, and cascading risks as a basic framework through which to assess the threat profile of the Islamic State East Asia–Philippines (ISEA-PH),[4] before offering some additional reflections on the group's evolution based on field experiences in the Bangsamoro region.[5] This short paper concludes by outlining key policy and programmatic implications of its findings.

CONTEXT, COMPETITION, CASCADING RISK

Three considerations are crucial for not only assessing the guerrilla operations of rebel groups but narrowing the focus of policy and programmatic activities on critical vulnerabilities and force-multiplying opportunities. The first is context, which refers to the major psychosocial and strategic factors that characterize the operating environment and, of particular importance, those factors most frequently leveraged by politico-military actors. This potentially encapsulates an enormous range of contextual factors, from local and national politics, history, and demographics to culture, geography, and socioeconomics.

The second is competition, which refers to the politico-military contest between the guerrillas and their conventionally superior adversaries. The resulting asymmetric competition is characterized by dual contests for control and meaning. The former is characterized by adversarial efforts to implement a competitive system of control via politico-military activities designed to control territory, resources, and the population.[6] The latter contest is characterized by a clash of competing systems of meaning via communications and other influence activities.[7] Guerrillas seek to progress through the state destabilization, state capture, and state-building spectrum via escalating phases of politico-military and propaganda activities.

The third is cascading risk, which refers to the potential ripple effects that guerrilla operations seek to trigger as their operations progress. To overcome conventional disadvantages in the early stages of their campaign, guerrilla operations use politico-military and propaganda activities to degrade the advantages of their stronger foes, exploit their vulnerabilities, incite overreactions, and

encourage strategic missteps. It is vital for practitioners to identify triggers of cascading risks and the efforts necessary to prevent the dominoes from falling.

PRO–ISLAMIC STATE GROUPS IN THE PHILIPPINES

The Islamic State East Asia–Philippines is a broad banner under which are a variety of groups and factions. These pro–Islamic State groups operate almost exclusively across the territories of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). The most significant Islamic State–aligned groups in the BARMM are factions of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in the Sulu archipelago, factions of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) in Maguindanao del Norte and Sur, and the Dawlah Islamiyah (aka Maute-ISIS) in Lanao del Sur. Almost ten years since the first pledges by Filipinos to the Islamic State's "caliph," there has never been any meaningful centralized command-and-control across the various pro–Islamic State groups.[8] While individuals have been identified as the emir of the Islamic State's East Asia "province," this was a largely symbolic title that was probably important only to the extent that it satisfied the Islamic State's criteria for being a formal province. For the most part, pro–Islamic State groups in the Philippines have tended to contain their activities to a specific geographic area and recruitment to the dominant ethnolinguistic group therein.

CONTEXT: THE STRUGGLE FOR PEACE IN THE BANGSAMORO

Decades of Moro struggle for autonomy in the southern Philippines, the peace process between the Philippines government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in 2019, and the autonomous region's first elections in May 2025 are the major defining features and contextual levers.[9] The temptation to interpret the presence of pro–Islamic State groups in the Philippines as a product of global forces centrally directed by the Islamic State needs to be avoided. In the case of ISEA-PH, it is more accurate to argue that these pro–Islamic State groups have exploited those global forces for local means and ends.

In a sentence, pro–Islamic State groups are desperate to derail the Bangsamoro peace process and collapse the new Bangsamoro autonomous government. The overwhelming focus of their politico-military and propaganda activities is

obsessively on this goal. The reality is that ISEA-PH is under immense pressure and hamstrung by critical vulnerabilities that make it very unlikely that the groups under its banner will cross the state-capture, let alone state-building, threshold. However, ISEA-PH still has the potential to be a significant destabilizing influence, especially in the BARMM's most vulnerable communities. As the region enters the final twelve months before its first scheduled election, ISEA-PH will actively try to exploit opportunities to spark and fuel chaos.

COMPETITION: PEACE AND GOVERNANCE SPOILERS

The focus of ISEA-PH's struggle is against the new Bangsamoro government and the Philippines government, especially the army and police. There have also been clashes between ISEA-PH groups and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.[10] Regarding the competition for control, pro–Islamic State groups have been contained to a prolonged campaign of guerrilla operations aimed at state destabilization. An ultimately failed attempt to control the city of Marawi in 2017 is the only attempt at state capture with the intent of state-building by any part of ISEA-PH.

Regarding the competition for control, the focus of pro–Islamic State groups across the BARMM has been as peace and governance spoilers. While defectors have suggested that some camps are meant to be run as micro-states, essentially to act as prototypes for expansion as the group ascends its campaign phases, these efforts sound rudimentary at best and mostly aspirational.[11] The objective for now is to fuel the conditions for collapse leading to the autonomous region's first elections in May 2025.[12]

Regarding the competition for meaning, the recruitment and propaganda activities of pro–Islamic State groups largely focus on exploiting the politics of dashed expectations. Local propagandists and recruiters frequently leverage feelings that peace dividends have not substantively delivered or that the character and trajectory of the new region is misguided and corrupt. The thousands of former combatants currently being decommissioned as part of normalization or defectors from other armed groups are a major focus of pro–Islamic State group recruitment efforts.[13]

To be clear, pro–Islamic State groups are deeply unpopular and the people of the

Bangsamoro are desperate for peace and stability. But decades of history prove that in the aftermath of failed peace efforts in Mindanao, increasingly violent militant groups have emerged. Communities living amid constant lethal violence tend to hedge their support for as long as possible during times of uncertainty to ensure that they are on the right side of a momentum shift in who becomes the dominant political group. ISEA-PH has little interest in state capture or state-building. For now, acting as spoilers, being ready to exploit chaos, and then convincing the population a momentum shift is imminent will suffice.

CASCADING RISK: CONFRONTING THE PROJECTS OF THE "TYRANTS"

Cascading risk is arguably the crucial factor in the Philippines, and unlike in many policy circles, the Islamic State appears to understand the high stakes that are involved. After the December 3, 2023, Marawi City bombing, the Islamic State's *al-Naba* declared: "Strategically, the Philippines is not just an island located in the far east of the world; rather, it is an area of the global conflict that is still drawing closer day after day between the tyrants of China and America… the presence of the mujahedin there is…a foothold for Muslims to confront the projects of the tyrants."[14]

For decades, the Philippines military has fought Moro rebellions in the south. But now, owing to the most promising opportunity for peace in living memory and Chinese aggression in the West Philippine Sea,[15] the Ferdinand Marcos Jr. administration intends to reposture the Philippines armed forces from a focus on internal security operations to territorial defense.[16] However, if the Philippines armed forces are dragged into the south on stability operations, the nation may need to abandon those plans, putting into jeopardy Philippines national security, the country's ability to deal with regional threats, and its contributions to security agreements, including U.S. regional strategy.

ADDITIONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE EVOLVING ISEA-PH THREAT

Last year, a local civil society organization surveyed over a hundred defectors mostly from the Dawlah Islamiyah group in Lanao del Sur. While a more detailed breakdown of the data and its implications will be released in a forthcoming

publication by those researchers, two findings were shared with the author and are worth highlighting here:

- First, a profile emerged from this data of the typical male recruit to the Dawlah group in Lanao: undereducated, semirural, impoverished, and almost always brought into the group via face-to-face engagement with a recruiter or a group member with whom they share kinship or friendship ties. Most respondents acknowledged the presence of foreigners and/or indicated that leaders were in direct communication with foreigners. Respondents also acknowledged the important role that women play in the group,[17] especially as an underground support mechanism, echoing a growing body of research.[18]

- Second, the most common reasons for leaving the group according to the defectors was (1) hardships associated with everyday life in the group, (2) a sense that the group's leaders, its jurisprudential justification, and/or strategic focus was misguided, and (3) concerns that their families were suffering. The defectors' responses also seemed to give weight to anecdotal reports that the hotspots for recruitment in the province had shifted from areas south of Lake Lanao to the borderlands with neighboring provinces.

CONCLUSION: POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

The perpetual challenge for policymakers and practitioners is how to identify the signal from noise and to then use that understanding to manage risks, exploit adversary vulnerabilities, and leverage force-multiplying efforts. First and foremost, the key to preventing the realization of cascading risks is to prevent the toppling of the first domino. Peace and stability must be upheld in the Bangsamoro region. To achieve this, sober, data-informed analysis must provide the foundations for the type of nuanced understanding of peace spoiler threats necessary to devise effective preventive- and counter-measures. However, even the most accurate and timely data collection systems will be ineffectual if policymakers and practitioners do not have an adequate understanding of the playbook Islamic State affiliates are required to apply in practice.[19] At a bare minimum, practitioners should be aware of the core strategic principles of the Islamic

State's insurgency approach and the operational indicators of strategic transitions through its campaign phases.[20] The best planned and implemented actions, policies, and programs will fall short if unaccompanied by a steady drumbeat of public messaging that is laser-focused on managing expectations and leveraging "say-do" gaps.

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Shia Jihadist State Capture in Iraq

■ Michael Knights

Is today's Iraq an example of jihadist governance? I would argue yes. The militant factions that form the core of the country's ruling bloc, the Coordination Framework, are self-confessed members of a transnational jihadist front known as the "axis of resistance."[1] Their objective is to expand the Islamic Revolution that began in Iran in 1979 and to protect all the existing extensions of their so-called Shia project—the Islamic Republic of Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemen-based Ansar Allah, and the Iraqi terrorist groups and militias of the Coordination Framework.[2]

Since using judicial capture to manipulate the 2021 election results in Iraq—turning electoral defeat of the Coordination Framework into victory in forming the government[3]—the Coordination Framework's subsequent monopolization of all branches of the Iraqi government has been unprecedented in the country's post-2003 history.[4] The Coordination Framework rules with a level of unchecked authority that Iraq has not seen since the days of Saddam Hussein. They control the prime minister—the hardworking but inconsequential public-sector manager, Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, who is openly disparaged by Tehran's allies in Baghdad.[5] The real powers are three warlords, each closely tied to Iran, at the top of the Coordination Framework: U.S.-designated terrorist Qais al-Khazali, the head of the Iran-founded Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) militia;[6] former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki; and the leader of the Iran-founded Badr Organization, Hadi al-Ameri.[7]

The Coordination Framework controls the speakership of the parliament and

its most vocal and powerful lists, Fatah and State of Law.[8] The Coordination Framework controls the judiciary through the militia-captured head of the courts, Judge Faeq Zaidan.[9] The conventional military (army, counterterrorism service, navy, air force) and the intelligence services are being rapidly penetrated and contaminated by Iran-backed terrorist and militia groups.[10] The terrorist-led Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)[11] are a parallel military that has been built on the model of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and they are then fastest-growing armed force in Iraq.[12] Ministry officials are being replaced on the orders of terrorist and militia groups on a daily basis.[13] Governors are being appointed by the Coordination Framework, including notorious U.S.-designated terrorists.[14] This is a clean sweep of all the centers of power in Iraq—except perhaps the religious authority of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who is aging and whose power base is under challenge from the Iran-backed terrorist and militia groups.

For background, readers might wish to explore all the above issues in depth in the author's December 2023 report in the West Point Combating Terrorism Center's journal *CTC Sentinel*, "Iraq's New Regime Change: How Tehran-Backed Terrorist Organizations and Militias Captured the Iraqi State."[15] A very detailed examination of the PMF—which remains largely relevant and updated even today—is the author's 2020 study *Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces*.[16]

THE SPECTRUM OF SHIA JIHADIST GOVERNANCE IN IRAQ

In this short analysis, the spectrum of different militia actors will be splayed out and examined on the basis of their involvement in governance and state capture. An influential model introduced by Chatham House in February 2021 suggested that Iraqi militias can be categorized as "parochial" (militias focused primarily on political and economic activities such as Badr and AAH)[17] or "vanguard" (militias focused primarily on resistance activities, such as Kataib Hezbollah, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada).[18]

As Militia Spotlight noted as long ago as an October 2021 *CTC Sentinel* article,[19] those distinctions are much less apparent when Tehran-backed militias are investigated in detail. Most of the so-called vanguard are highly active in the "parochial" business of state capture and asset stripping, including all the different

wings of Kataib Hezbollah (KH).[20] Conversely, there are almost no purely "parochial" militias within the Coordination Framework: as the authors noted in their October 2021 *CTC Sentinel* piece, AAH and even Badr sometimes act more as "drivers of rhetorical and kinetic escalation due to their domestic political and factional needs" as self-styled resistance (*muqawama*) players.

It is more useful to think of the parochial-vanguard distinction as a sliding scale or spectrum. At one end, there are less transnational, more parochial terrorist and militia players who have a very strong focus on governance and state capture—with the primary objective of asset stripping the state. In Iraq, these include the most voracious termite-like movements such as Badr and AAH, which have the best grasp of illicit commercial activities.[21] At moments of high drama, such as the current Gaza war, they profess to being passionate members of the axis of resistance,[22] but their involvement in terrorism is nonetheless mostly nonkinetic—as facilitators, financers, recruiters and rhetorical agitators.[23]

At the other end of the spectrum are the most transnational, least parochial terrorist and militia players, who care relatively little about what occurs in Iraq—except that the Shia project succeeds. Their involvement in governance can be very limited, with Nujaba (for instance) only participating in minor ways in business and ministry functions, and focusing instead on niche parts of the PMF and penetrating the intelligence services.[24]

Interestingly, Lebanese Hezbollah and its Iraqi partners (such as Kataib al-Imam Ali) are very parochial in the Iraqi environment—focusing almost entirely on business and state capture, and not at all on counter-U.S. "resistance" operations.[25] Iraq is a cash cow to the Lebanese members of the axis of resistance—often to the annoyance of Iraqi factions such as Badr.[26]

Iraq's Kataib Hezbollah does not seem to be able to fully make up its mind and has effectively split into two wings:[27] one more parochial and one more vanguard, though the two remain tightly connected. The more parochial wing, led by Abu Fadak,[28] is focused mainly on controlling the PMF (and its $2.6 billion annual budget) and developing construction and contracting businesses linked to the PMF.[29] The planned Muhandis General Company was one such commercial spin-off, modeled on the IRGC's Khatam al-Anbia conglomerate.[30] Abu Fadak and Badr leader Hadi al-Ameri regularly cooperate on business ventures, import customs evasion, and dollar diversion to Iran.[31] At the same time, Abu Fadak's elite PMF

intelligence and drones directorates play an important role in terrorist attacks on U.S. and Gulf Arab targets.[32] A KH parliamentary wing, Hoquq, also tends toward the parochial.[33] A KH and AAH propagandist is the senior media advisor to Prime Minister Sudani.[34]

The other wing of KH—led by Abu Hussein[35]—has more pronounced vanguard tendencies, and has undertaken numerous anti-U.S. attacks in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan before and especially since the Gaza crisis began.[36] This wing has members in parliament and concentrated in PMF units, especially within security and intelligence roles.[37] Where the Abu Hussein wing is involved in economic activities, they are largely smuggling-related, including illicit oil exports and real estate scams.[38]

IRAQ: GAME-CHANGING CASH COW OF THE IRAN THREAT NETWORK

The sobering reality is that the members of the axis of resistance, or "Iran threat network," arguably pose a far more complex and impactful challenge than any other set of jihadist groups engaging in governance today, largely because of the raw size of the resources under their control as they take control of the world's fifth largest oil producer.[39] Instead of setting up small Potemkin caliphates with miniscule funding capacity,[40] the Iran-backed groups penetrate and puppeteer recognized state structures that have the capacity to borrow on international markets, sell oil and gas (in dollars), and control sovereign wealth funds.[41] In Lebanon and Yemen, the Shia jihadist networks control very distressed economies,[42] while in Iran and Iraq they control world-class energy producers, each with huge potential in the fields of trade and manufacturing.

Control of Iraq, in particular, is a potential game changer for the Iran threat network. *Muqawama* control of Iraq's government—currently without even a notional sharing of the spoils with Muqtada al-Sadr[43]—puts the Iraqi militias into a league of their own as the economic powerhouse of Iran's partner forces. Iran's longest-serving proxy, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iran's newer Yemeni partner, the Houthi movement, are economic minnows compared to the Iraqi state. The Coordination Framework–led government's first budget is the largest in Iraq's history: $153 billion in annual spending for three consecutive years, a roughly 50 percent increase from the last authorized Iraqi budget from 2021.[44] In contrast, expected spending from a bankrupt Lebanon was under $2 billion in

2022,[45] and the country went $72 billion further into debt due to massive financial losses since 2021. The Houthi enclave in Yemen also has a measly budget of around $2 billion per year.[46]

What the Iran threat network just gained is, in effect, a new Iran—but one that is not sanctioned by the United States. For counterterrorism analysts, the effective loss of the Iraqi state to Tehran-backed terrorist groups and militias to an unprecedented degree is pregnant with implications, especially in the fields of counterterrorism threat financing. In general, the intelligence resources dedicated to counter-threat financing in Iraq should be greatly boosted because of the order-of-magnitude increase in the funds that might be available to the axis of resistance due to the Iran-led bloc's inheritance of uncontested control of a three-year program of $459 billion in approved government spending. In the first year alone, a terrorist-run Iraq hired over 700,000 civil servants, which is a level of largesse unavailable at any point to al-Qaeda or the Islamic State.[47]

Any major Iraqi company working in a key industry (e.g., oil exports) that has received significant contracts since October 2022 should be thoroughly investigated, especially if they previously had no track record in the sector where they have been awarded work by the Sudani government. Oil smuggling originating in or passing through Basra's offshore areas requires very close monitoring by the United States, because (as noted earlier) the Iraqi government is no longer effectively keeping watch. Close investigation is warranted in the case of the Iraqi Oil Tankers Company, the General Company for Ports in Iraq, and all companies involved in refining, oil transportation, vessel management, and ship-to-ship transfers in Iraqi waters.

Another necessary focus area is the project to build a Khatam al-Anbia–type conglomerate, perhaps in component pieces initially and with efforts made to better hide its existence.[48] Major company formation (especially when the PMF is involved), investment licenses, and land grants should all be closely watched by the U.S. Department of the Treasury, anti-corruption and anti-terrorism watchdogs, and citizen journalists.[49] In particular, great attention should be paid to the development of PMF- or militia-owned complexes near Iraq's borders—facing Saudi Arabia, in western Anbar, or elsewhere probably functioning as large free-trade zones or logistical transshipment sites but ideal for dual use as advanced conventional munitions storage and launch locations.[50]

Engagement of Iraqi government organs should be much more carefully vetted due to extraordinary and accelerating penetration of these agencies by U.S.-designated terrorist organizations, U.S.-designated human rights abusers, and U.S.-designated corrupt actors.[51] The most important is the need to pay more attention to the judiciary. Analysts should focus much more effort on Faeq Zaidan and other senior and midlevel judges, working on a smart assumption that the late KH head Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis probably did not plant just one seed in the judiciary (Zaidan) but many.[52] U.S. security assistance to Iraqi security forces must also be reassessed in light of the new and significant *muqawama* penetration of agencies such as the Iraqi National Intelligence Service, Counter Terrorism Service, and Baghdad International Airport.[53]

JIHADIST GOVERNANCE IN IRAQ AND GREAT POWER COMPETITION

Jihadist governance can also include foreign policy. From a great power competition perspective, Iraq falling under the control of anti-U.S. forces should be an issue of great significance and growing interest. The most vocal anti-U.S. resistance leader in Iraq, Akram Kaabi, is now a welcomed visitor in Moscow since 2022,[54] and the relationship between the Iraqi *muqawama* and Russia rapidly bloomed after the *muqawama* wholeheartedly supported the invasion of Ukraine.[55] The Russian embassy in Baghdad has continually deepened these ties, particularly since the Gaza crisis began, providing opportunities to exploit Iraqi anger to weaken U.S. "soft power" in Iraqi society. The Iraqi *muqawama*'s role in supporting anti-U.S. operations in Syria is an obvious initial point of collaboration, and at least one effective anti-U.S. attack in Syria—the killing of an American at the Rmelan Landing Zone in March 2023—has contained hints of Russian support for a lethal "offset action" to pay the United States back for its provision of lethal support to Ukraine.[56]

More focused on economic fruits, China has also created deep inroads with the *muqawama* factions, receiving their support for China's Belt and Road Initiative subprojects in Iraq, for Chinese oil-for-infrastructure loans, and for preferential—often corrupt—Chinese access to energy contracts.[57] The Development Road initiative,[58] ports and railroad projects, plus any digital payment, oil barrel management, and offshore vessel tracking systems should be closely watched as vectors of Chinese support to Badr and AAH companies, with significant threat financing potential.[59]

NOTES

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Retreating from Legitimacy: Hamas's Engagement in and Disengagement from Governance

■ Devorah Margolin

Jihadist groups have taken over or built institutions in alternatively governed areas using a variety of methods. Some use violence, while others coopt existing political systems. Some become full governing actors, while others utilize aspects of governance to further their agenda without accepting full accountability to local populations. Hamas remains a unique case, as it is one of the few jihadist actors that entered governance—at least initially—through elections. While many assumed that Hamas would use its governance to gain legitimacy, the group instead entrenched itself in a system of control, while never relinquishing its ultimate goal of destroying Israel.

Hamas's Muslim Brotherhood roots are a vital component in understanding how the group has garnered internal and external support over the years, both before and after becoming a governing actor. As a Brotherhood-inspired group, it has focused on revolution from below, using existing political structures and establishing social services to gain and maintain popular support. Hamas has even engaged in aspects of modern political systems, including participation in the 2006 Palestinian elections, in hopes of creating a government eventually ruled by sharia.[1] In using a bottom-up approach to governance efforts, Hamas has sought to frame its "Islamization" of society as a choice driven by Palestinian populations living under its control. But despite this framing, Hamas has resorted to applying pressure and violence upon civilian populations on numerous

occasions in order to achieve its goals of a "traditional" Islamic society and to deter dissent.

In 2022, Hamas celebrated its thirty-fifth anniversary and its fifteenth as a governing actor. Despite continuingly calling itself a resistance organization, Hamas had made a seemingly smooth transition into governance and in some ways gained much of the international legitimacy it had long craved. To many, this anniversary marked Hamas as a moderate organization, one that had turned away from its more violent roots. Thus, for a group that long sought to transition into legitimate governance, the group's decision to launch the October 7 attack constituted a major deviation in strategy. Examining the group now in 2024, we understand that through its governance, Hamas was seemingly faced with an ideological crisis: support its constituency in Gaza, or exploit its control over Gaza to build the infrastructure necessary to support its true goal of attacking Israel.

GOVERNANCE: A PATHWAY TO LEGITIMACY?

From its foundation in the 1980s until the mid-2000s, Hamas operated as both a social movement and terrorist actor.[2] It used its social movement to establish its future governance, and won hearts and minds by providing social services to men, women, and children in the undergoverned Palestinian arena. Hamas sought to bolster its international standing and legitimacy through gaining local support from the entirety of its constituency.[3] In fact, one very underestimated (and underdiscussed) part of Hamas's strategy has been its gendered policies, which are seemingly some of the most inclusive of any jihadist actor.[4] For example, Hamas organized events on women's issues predating its governance role, and in 2003 it established the Islamic Women's Movement in Palestine as a way to emphasize women's involvement in the organization.[5] These gendered policies are based on its Muslim Brotherhood–inspired ideology, and its worldview for how to gain (and maintain) power using a bottom-up approach.[6]

In January 2006, Hamas participated in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections as part of the Change and Reform bloc, featuring both men and women on the ballot. Hamas won 74 out of the 132 seats,[7] and its electoral success signified the first time an Islamist group democratically took power in the Arab world.[8] Following the elections, Hamas and Fatah initially reached an agreement to form a national unity government, but the two groups soon thereafter descended

into deadly fighting, resulting in Hamas's takeover of Gaza in June 2007.[9] Thus, two entities began to govern the Palestinian people: Hamas ruled Gaza, and the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority governed the West Bank.

In 2007, after Hamas wrested control of Gaza by force, it faced an ideological crisis: it could govern Gaza and address the needs of the Palestinian people, or it could take advantage of the resources it controlled in Gaza and use its territory to attack Israel. The organization understood that these two goals could not be achieved in tandem. While some expected Hamas to curb its violence or be coopted by governance demands, it instead invested in societal radicalization to the detriment of Gazan citizens. Hamas's leaders asserted that the group's participation in elections did not mean it had moderated its position calling for the destruction of Israel. Rather, Gaza was to be a launchpad to further this goal, not a distraction from it.[10]

TAKING OVER EXISTING INSTITUTIONS AND BUILDING NEW ONES

After taking over the Gaza Strip, Hamas assumed control predominantly over preexisting institutions. In addition to Hamas parliamentarians, who took on public-facing roles, Hamas took advantage of the benefits governance offered to deliver educational and social service programs.[11] Both Gazan men and women worked on Hamas's payroll as police, teachers, doctors, and administrators, among other roles.[12] Hamas's female members, including its all-female branches and female parliamentarians, helped provide a level of credibility to the group's state-building agenda.[13] However, behind the facade of Hamas's purportedly inclusive workforce and political agenda, women were incorporated into Hamas in order to serve female constituents and perform enforcement functions men were unable to do. For example, women serving in Hamas's police force, while wearing uniforms adhering to Hamas's dress code, primarily worked on cases involving other women.

Some of its takeover of existing institutions had more nefarious implications, as Hamas used this to instill its "culture of resistance" in Gaza society.[14] For example, it used television, radio, and the internet to disseminate its messaging both domestically and abroad,[15] and it established youth summer camps to indoctrinate the next generation.[16] In addition to these changes, Hamas continued to run social services—some more traditional than others.[17] For example, it

sponsored weddings that matched up young men and women and provided stipends for them to start their lives.[18] A critical component of Hamas's ideology has been transforming the ethno-political Palestinian struggle into a religious conflict, which allows the group to inspire Palestinians to reject any sort of compromise or peaceful solution to the ongoing conflict. Overall, Hamas ruled Gaza through force, restricted media access, and cracked down on Fatah and other groups that tried to organize there politically.[19]

Interestingly, Hamas did not just take over old institutions, but it also created new ones. For example, its military wing began to operate more openly and became institutionalized within Gaza.[20] Hamas also established new rules for society; as a governing actor, it became inseparable from the institutions it ran. Hamas controlled international aid entering Gaza,[21] and paid salaries of government workers, sometimes even controlling the payment of Gaza government workers by external state benefactors like Qatar.[22] Hamas also developed the necessary bureaucracy to collect taxes, customs duties, and bribes, as well as engage in extortion and racketeering schemes, through which the group raised significant funds. Eventually, Hamas's income from local governance of Gaza dwarfed its external funding from its main state benefactor, Iran.[23]

Hamas's governance allowed it to implement its ideology on local populations under its control. For example, in 2013, Hamas codified into law what it was already encouraging in practice: excluding male teachers from girls' schools and segregating classes by gender after age nine.[24] Hamas framed this decision as driven by conservative Gaza society, and as a way to protect the "modesty" of women and girls. For example, Hamas has argued that while it is a religious obligation for women to wear a hijab, women retain the choice of wearing it, and the obligation cannot be forced upon them. But in order to assist in the internalization of its ideals of an Islamic society, Hamas exerted pressure through "virtue" campaigns, including in 2010, 2016, and 2021, that sought to discourage so-called Western behaviors.[25] Hamas framed this as a "population-driven" transformation of Gaza, explicitly as a "choice," though a genuine choice often did not exist.

Despite the community-driven framing of societal transformation under Hamas, the group has faced resistance to its so-called encouragement of men and women to adopt traditionalist behaviors. For example, female lawyers themselves challenged a 2009 ruling by a Hamas-appointed judge mandating that female lawyers

wear a hijab and *jilbab* (a loose-fitting full-body garment). The female lawyers argued that the ruling had no basis in law, and in response to pressure, Hamas withdrew the decision.[26] Additionally, protests erupted in February 2021 after a ruling from a Hamas-appointed Higher Sharia Council judge that required women to gain permission from a male guardian to travel outside of Gaza. In response to the protests, the court rewrote the law to only allow men to petition the court to prevent a woman from traveling.[27] In addition to pushback against the aforementioned judicial rulings, Gazans protested against Hamas in 2019 and 2023 for poor living conditions, both of which Hamas met with violent suppression.[28] Notwithstanding such protests, Hamas has not tolerated any genuine challenge to its governance, even from other jihadist groups.[29]

A NEW, LEGITIMATE HAMAS?

Some have argued that governance forced Hamas to moderate, often pointing to its May 2017 charter update, "Document of General Principles and Policies."[30] While the document adopted a seemingly more moderate tone and represented a "rhetorical shift," it was just that. In the document, Hamas sought to present itself as a centrist alternative to global jihadist organizations like the Islamic State and secular nationalist groups like the Palestine Liberation Organization, and excluded reference to its Muslim Brotherhood roots. In addition to Hamas acknowledging—in writing—the possibility of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 ceasefire lines, it stated that it believed in "managing its Palestinian relations on the basis of pluralism, democracy, national partnership, acceptance of the other, and the adoption of dialogue."[31]

But this so-called moderation appeared to be Hamas's attempt to widen international support when it faced multiple, simultaneous challenges: an extremely poor economic situation and ongoing energy crisis in Gaza and strained relations with Egypt, in addition to others. Beyond rhetoric, Hamas's actions at that time also exhibited a clear indication that the group had no intention to curb its hardline militant activities. Despite its slightly muted rhetoric in recent years, resistance has remained a core principle for Hamas, which noted the following in its updated 2017 document: "Resistance and jihad for the liberation of Palestine will remain a legitimate right, a duty, and an honor for all the sons and daughters of our people and our *umma*."[32]

As it stood in 2022, thirty-five years after its founding, Hamas persisted in seeking international legitimacy, emphasizing what it considered to be its most admirable qualities. These included its supposed democratic rule (despite the lack of elections in Gaza), promotion of gender inclusivity, Islamization of society supposedly supported by Gazan citizens, and multi-language-messaging approach aimed at reaching local and international audiences. Many appeared distracted by Hamas's seemingly more moderate approach to governance and embrace of change in certain contexts.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In the lead-up to October 7, Hamas's governance practice demonstrated a more thoughtful consideration that its local decisions could have global consequences, compared to other governing jihadist groups.[33] For a group that had long pushed back against its designation as a terrorist organization and touted its role as a governing actor, the decision to launch the October 7 attack marks all the more of a pivot.

Hamas is and remains a unique case study. Its Muslim Brotherhood bottom-up approach helped aid the group's initial electoral success, and signified the first time an Islamist group democratically took power in the Arab world—that is, until the group violently took control less than a year later and refused to hold any further elections.

Governance itself forced Hamas's hand in an ideological crisis, caught between governing and serving the needs of the Palestinian people in Gaza and its goals of violently destroying Israel through force—and the group chose the latter. Hamas used its role as a governing actor to entrench itself in a system of control, while never relinquishing its ultimate goal of Israel's destruction. Hamas has remained committed to its original goal throughout its entire existence: violent struggle against Israel by any and all means necessary, with itself at the helm of Palestinian leadership. While the repercussions of Hamas's attack on October 7 persist, and will continue to for some time, the attack makes astoundingly clear that any illusions surrounding Hamas's legitimacy as a governing actor have been shattered.

NOTES

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The Houthis' Governing Structure

■ Baraa Shiban

The Houthi militant group has consistently focused on bolstering its military capabilities by importing new weaponry and technology, aiming to maintain a perpetual advantage over its adversaries. The Houthis' power structure is highly centralized, relying on unwavering allegiance from a militant network devoted to the movement's leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi. Abdul-Malik relies on a close circle of trusted advisors who have stood by him since the outset of his conflicts with Yemen's central government in 2004. Beneath him lies a web of militias known in Yemen as the "supervisors network."

These supervisors first came to public attention following the Houthis' seizure of the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, in September 2014. Rather than seeking to place their members in governmental roles, the Houthis marginalized institutional influence, favoring the supervisors instead. Their governing structure has oscillated between a supervisory role and direct control of state apparatuses. They have also formed temporary alliances with Yemen's former ruling party, the General People's Congress, to garner political legitimacy and benefit from the technocratic expertise accumulated by the GPC over three decades of governance.

The Houthi governing structure has undergone various phases since September 2014. Despite forming alliances and appointing their members to government positions, the supervisors remain the cornerstone of their governing system.

This paper will delve into the different phases of the Houthi governing structure, examining the roles and levels of influence enjoyed by the supervisors network. For clarity and differentiation from the internationally recognized government, based in Aden, the Houthi-led administration will be referred to as the "Sanaa government."

THE FOUR PHASES OF THE SANAA GOVERNMENT

After the events of the Arab Spring in 2011, the Houthis established a political council in Sanaa and started to refer to themselves as Ansar Allah (Partisans of God). The aim of the political council was to appeal to the young activists who joined the uprising against former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The council aimed to recruit left-leaning activists and liberal voices to appeal to the young progressive constituents of the uprising. In the years between 2011 and 2014, the Houthis started to organize trips for the newly recruited activists to visit Lebanon and Iran, reflecting their aim to shift their political ideology to draw sympathy for the Houthis' cause.[1] The political council represented the Houthis during the National Dialogue—the post–Arab Spring national convention tasked to negotiate Yemen's new constitution and the transitional process.

After taking control of the Yemeni capital in September 2014, the Houthis marginalized the political council to the benefit of a new entity called the revolutionary council. This was the Houthis' first phase of governance. The revolutionary council was headed by Mohammed Ali al-Houthi[2]—a senior commander within the movement and a cousin of Abdul-Malik. Mohammed Ali started to appoint militants to supervise the executive branch of government. These militants were subsequently called supervisors. The Houthis wanted to maintain the camouflage of government while having the ability to intervene and influence policy; in other words, to wield power without responsibility. Alongside the executive supervisors, the Houthis deployed security committees. Those are militants roaming the streets and neighborhoods and tasked with monitoring any form of dissent and preventing any kind of mobilization against the Houthis. In the first months of the Houthi takeover, the officials within the executive complained about constant interference, threats, harassment, and intimidation that paralyzed the cabinet.[3] Effectively, the Houthis created a parallel structure alongside the government.

The second phase began on February 6, 2015, when the Houthis announced a new declaration, dissolving the government and the Yemeni parliament. The declaration announced the creation of a new entity, the Supreme Revolutionary Council,"[4] headed once again by Mohammed Ali al-Houthi. The newly formed council assumed the powers of the Yemeni presidency and became effectively the new governing body in Yemen. The council had fifteen names, including non-Houthi figures, but the members gain their influence from how close they are to Abdul-Malik al-Houthi and his inner circle. In the first and second phases, new figures surfaced as individuals with huge levels of influence despite not having formal positions or being appointed by the newly formed council. These names include Abdulkhaleq al-Houthi, aka Abu Younis,[5] the Houthi leader's youngest brother and one of the main commanders who stormed the Yemeni capital in September 2014. Another influential figure is Abdullah al-Hakim, aka Abu Ali al-Hakim[6]—one of the Houthis' most senior commanders, whom they relied on to take control of the intelligence apparatus.

The former president, Saleh, who was still the head of the GPC, had declared his intention to enter an official alliance with the Houthis following the Saudi-led-coalition intervention in the Yemeni civil war in March 2015. Saleh, who still at the time had influence in the military and the executive branch of government, pressured the Houthis to dismantle the supervisors network and appoint a new government in place of the Supreme Revolutionary Council. He also asked the Houthis to recall parliament in order to gain a form of legitimacy for the new government. The Houthis eventually agreed to Saleh's demands and declared the formation of the Supreme Political Council (SPC) in August 2016.[7] This inaugurated a political coalition between the Houthis and the GPC and what can be regarded as the third phase in the Houthis' governing structure.

The SPC was headed by Saleh al-Sammad, a close advisor to Abdul-Malik al-Houthi and a tribal figure from Saada governorate—where the Houthi movement originated. The agreement with the GPC was to rotate the council leadership between the two groups. The SPC appointed a new government, which sought approval from parliament.[8] A new government was established in Sanaa to be an alternative executive body to the internationally recognized government based in Aden.

The GPC attempted to use its experience to gain constitutional legitimacy and called on the parliament to resume its duties. The coalition quickly saw cracks, and tensions with the GPC surfaced. Instead of dismantling the supervisors network, Mohammed Ali al-Houthi continued appointing supervisors and running the network in parallel with the SPC.[9] The Houthis also started appointing their members to key military positions, including Abu Ali al-Hakim, who was named head of military intelligence.[10] Parliament was ineffective and had no power to scrutinize or question Houthi ministers. The GPC-appointed prime minister had no power and had to operate under the authority of the supervisors. Mohammed Ali al-Houthi appointed a general supervisor for each governorate, effectively assuming the governor's authority.[11] Under the general supervisor, dozens of other supervisors operate with different roles and tasks. The Houthis also introduced changes to public education to better align it with Houthi ideology.[12] Tensions with the GPC escalated until Saleh announced an end to the coalition and a severing of ties with the Houthis on December 2, 2017.[13] Houthi militants fought against Saleh-backed forces in the streets of Sanaa and killed him on December 4, 2017, effectively becoming the undisputed rulers in northern Yemen.

The fourth phase witnessed the GPC splitting between those departing the Houthis and others who continued working under the SPC. The Houthis did not rotate the leadership of the SPC and started to officially replace GPC governors with Houthi supervisors. Even after the killing of Saleh al-Sammad by a Saudi-led-coalition airstrike in April 2018, the Houthis appointed Mahdi al-Mashat,[14] a Houthi figure with close personal ties to Abdul-Malik al-Houthi. This phase also witnessed members of the Houthi family being appointed to official positions. Abdulkhaleq al-Houthi was appointed as the military commander for the central military zone, including Sanaa and its surroundings, in February 2018.[15] Abdulkarim al-Houthi—Abdul-Malik's uncle—was appointed minister of interior in May 2019.[16] The Houthis focused on appointing figures to serve as governors, while the cabinet continued to represent the GPC and other political entities. The composition of the cabinet does not, however, represent power sharing with the GPC or other groups, as the power and influence under the Houthis has totally shifted from the formal executive body (cabinet) to the informal structure (supervisors). (For appointments by political affiliation over 2015–24, see figures 1 and 2.)

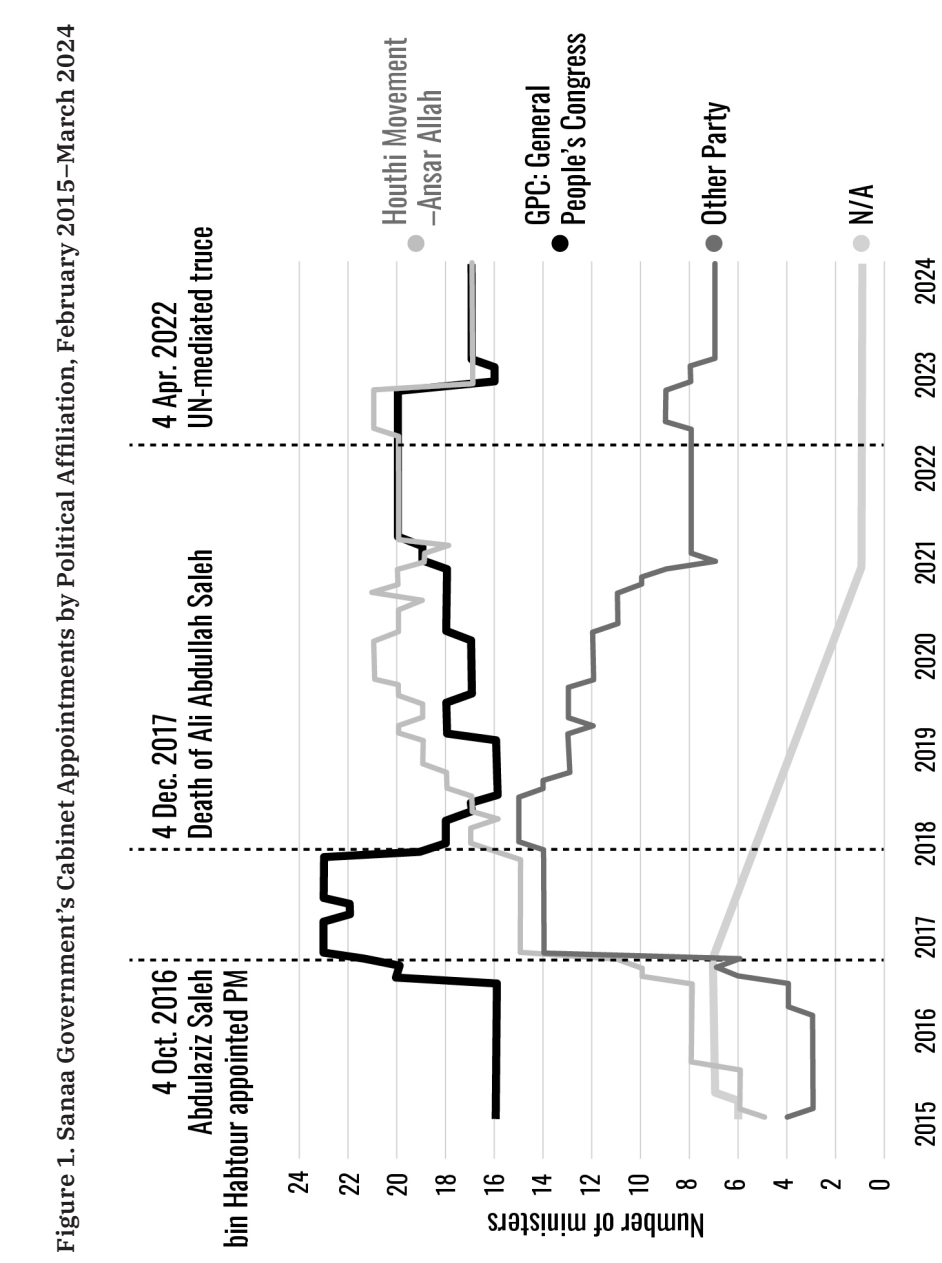
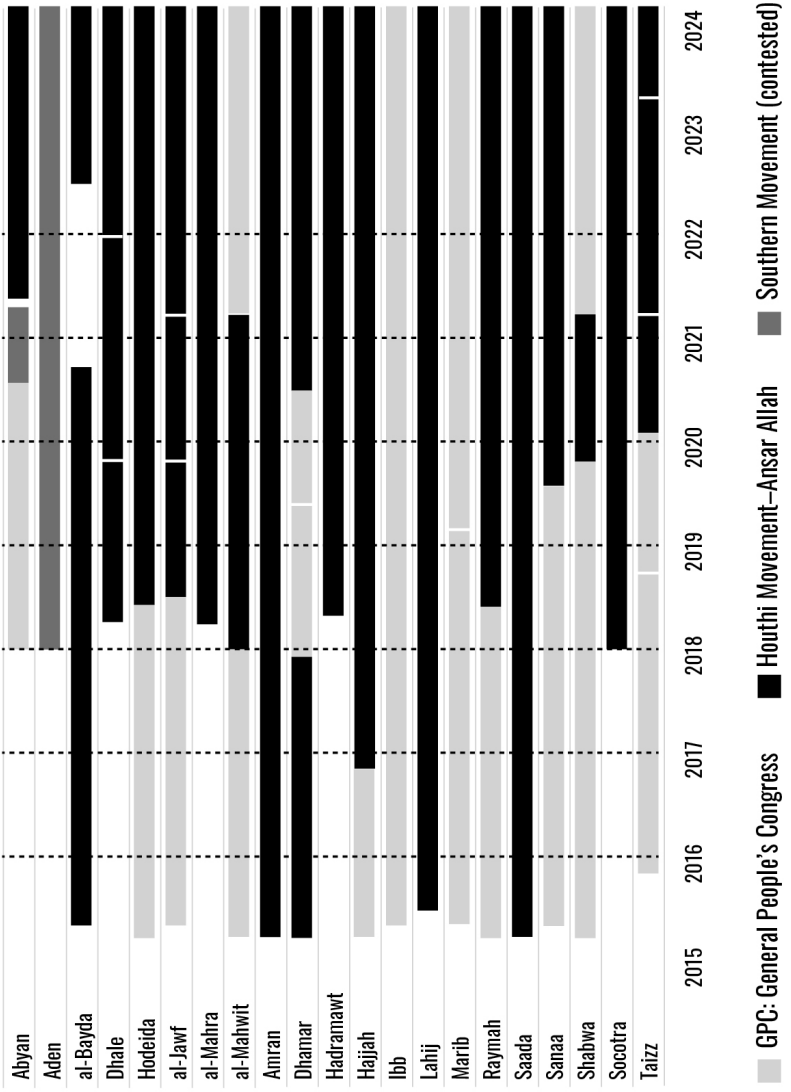


Figure 1. Sanaa Government's Cabinet Appointments by Political Affiliation, February 2015–March 2024

Figure 2. Sanaa Government's Governor Appointments by Political Affiliation, February 2015–March 2024



Source for figures 1 and 2: Graphics produced specifically for this paper with Luca Nevola and Andrea Carboni, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED).

SUPERVISOR TYPES, ROLES, AND LEVELS OF INFLUENCE

The supervisors network is complex, and there are no rules or clear guidelines defining its relationship with the public. The supervisor's main role is to run the territory or entity for the benefit of the Houthi movement. In the territories they run, lower-level supervisors might clash with one another, similar to how drug cartels clash over turf and revenue. A supervisor's level of influence relies on how close he is to the Houthi leader's inner circle. In general, supervisors who have family ties with the Houthi family or have established relationships due to intermarriage are more influential than other supervisors. A supervisor who joined the Houthis during the six wars of Saada (2004–10) has more influence than a supervisor who joined after 2011. The Houthi family claims to be descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, and members are referred to in Yemen as Hashemites. Hashemite families will generally have more influence than non-Hashemites, who do not claim to descend from the Prophet. Consequently, a Hashemite supervisor is more influential than a non-Hashemite supervisor.[17]

There are five main types of supervisors:[18]

1. **Security supervisors**, who serve as the backbone of the network and recruit "watchers"—informants who monitor neighborhoods and report to security supervisors about any form of dissent. Security supervisors have armed militants who roam neighborhoods and have unlimited authority. These are usually appointed by Mohammed Ali al-Houthi or the Houthi leader himself. Usually, the Houthis do not announce the names of the security supervisors and refer to them using aliases. Lately, more security supervisors operate under the authority of Abdulkarim al-Houthi, due to his direct relationship with the Houthi leader.
2. **Social supervisors**, who interact with social and tribal figures to keep them in line with Houthis objectives. These supervisors also recruit tribal members to join the Houthis military and security apparatus.
3. **Educational supervisors**, who recruit from schools, mosques, and universities to ensure the Houthis have a constant influx of new fighters. They also oversee the introduction of changes to the educational curriculum to bring them in line with Houthi ideology.
4. **Cultural supervisors**, who organize Houthi public events and religious gatherings. Their aim is to indoctrinate the public with Houthi ideology.

5. **Financial supervisors**, who oversee taxation and ensure that the movement has enough resources to maintain recruitment and build its military capabilities. These supervisors have to keep passing revenues up the chain of command.

As explained before, the structure is complex, and there are no clear guidelines to prevent conflict between the supervisors' roles. As an example, a cultural supervisor usually collects funds from the public to organize Houthi events. These funds are collected from businesses and shop owners who cannot voluntarily choose not to contribute. The same shop owner will also have to pay taxes set by the financial supervisor—and so on.

CONCLUSION

Since their takeover of the Yemeni capital, the Houthis have established an informal structure that has eroded the formal state apparatus. The informal structure is based on a complex patronage network, with the Houthi family at the top. This informal structure will be a major obstacle to a durable political settlement for the Yemeni civil war. A power-sharing agreement might change the Sanaa government, but the supervisors network remains the power broker and will be unlikely to hand over the power it gained during the last decade. The supervisors are also a new financial elite who apply state revenues to the benefit of the Houthi movement.

The supervisory system is designed to fill three main tasks:

- **Active recruitment.** Supervisors need to ensure recruitment to keep building up the Houthis' military force.
- **Indoctrination programs.** The Houthis use mosques, schools, universities, and even public events for their cultural courses as part of an indoctrination campaign to shift public values and beliefs to align with Houthi ideology.
- **Revenue collection.** To achieve the previous two tasks, supervisors must maintain an ongoing stream of revenue. Such revenue consists of state funds that are supposed to build infrastructure and deliver services to the public. The Houthis' approach to the state is not to govern or to deliver for the public, but rather to use the public and the state as tools to achieve their ideological goals.

NOTES

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CONTENDING WITH THE CHALLENGES OF JIHADIST GOVERNANCE

Humanitarian Engagement with Jihadist Groups

■ Matthew Bamber-Zryd

WHY DOES THE ICRC ENGAGE WITH JIHADIST GROUPS?

The International Committee of the Red Cross engages with all parties to a conflict to access populations in need living in areas controlled by all parties, including armed groups.[1] Persons living under the control of armed groups often face specific vulnerabilities and complex needs, and the ICRC estimates that there are approximately 195 million persons living under the control of armed groups. A significant proportion of these persons live under the control of jihadist groups.

Engagement with armed groups is essential for the ICRC to fulfill its humanitarian mission and carry out activities to alleviate and prevent the suffering of people living in areas controlled by armed groups. The ICRC therefore engages with jihadist armed groups as it does with other armed groups. These jihadist groups, however, represent a significant proportion of all armed groups of humanitarian concern worldwide and come with their own set of challenges. According to our internal mapping of our engagement with armed groups,[2] approximately a third of all armed groups of humanitarian concern in 2023 use Islam as a frame of reference, and 15 percent of all groups of humanitarian concern are affiliated with jihadist groups. Over the past year, we have seen that there has been an expansion of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State into new areas, particularly in the Sahel, creating additional humanitarian concerns.

CHALLENGES OF ENGAGEMENT WITH JIHADIST GROUPS

In general, the ICRC has lower levels of contact with jihadist armed groups compared to other non-jihadist groups. In 2023, we successfully engaged with approximately half of jihadist groups. This compares to our successful engagement with 70 percent of other armed groups. This engagement with jihadist armed groups is varied and ranges from an operational dialogue on security to the raising of protection concerns and visiting detainees held by these groups.

Several challenges with jihadist armed groups impact the ICRC's success in engaging with these groups; I will just elaborate on three of these challenges here:

1. **Jihadist groups' reluctance and ideological standpoint on humanitarian engagement.** In general, armed groups are willing to engage with the ICRC. This is less clear-cut for jihadist groups, however, where we find that almost half of jihadist armed groups are reluctant to speak to us. Various reasons, including ideological distrust of humanitarian organizations, may cause this reluctance. Humanitarian organizations are sometimes portrayed and viewed by jihadist organizations as being Western entities, potentially engaged in espionage activities and complicit with the states with whom they are often in conflict. As a consequence of this reluctance, some jihadist groups may not allow humanitarian organizations to enter their territory or permit persons living under their control to accept aid provided by these organizations.

   This viewpoint, however, is not identical among all jihadist groups. Different groups affiliated with the same central jihadist organizations can have divergent opinions on engagement with the ICRC and other humanitarian organizations. This divergence reflects the importance of local dynamics on jihadist groups, who often choose to engage with humanitarian actors for their own reasons, even if this contradicts decisions or judgments taken by the central jihadist leadership.

2. **Many jihadist groups are involved in active armed conflict and have unstable territorial control.** Suppose a jihadist armed group is willing to engage with the ICRC. However, many jihadist armed groups are frequently involved in armed conflict with shifting lines and changes of leadership,

which make sustained engagement, necessary for providing assistance to areas controlled by armed groups, very challenging.

As with other types of armed groups, the ICRC has greater success with those jihadist groups that have sustained territorial control over an area and engage in some governance activity. This is the most significant indicator of success with a jihadist group, often because it gives us more time to build the necessary, sustained relationships that are required to negotiate humanitarian access with a jihadist group.

3. **State-imposed obstacles.** A final challenge for humanitarian engagement with jihadist armed groups is obstacles imposed by the state in which the jihadist group operates. State-imposed obstacles negatively impact engagement with more than 80 percent of jihadist armed groups. Despite their potential international legal obligations, many states try to prevent the ICRC from fulfilling its mandate and gaining access to areas controlled by jihadist groups or to the groups themselves. This is for a myriad of reasons, including potentially their distrust of the ICRC or not being willing to give legitimacy to a jihadist group.

   The increase of counterterrorism legislation at both the domestic and international levels further complicates this, acting as a significant legal obstacle for both the ICRC to engage with armed groups and provide assistance in certain areas.

ENGAGEMENT WITH JIHADIST GROUPS: CHALLENGING BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE

Finally, I would like to say that engagement with jihadist groups is challenging but not impossible, reflected in the ICRC's ability to engage with approximately half of jihadist groups. Two factors are worth highlighting which are very important to this success:

- The ICRC has invested significantly in engaging in dialogue with Islamic religious circles to explore and develop the links between Islam and international humanitarian law, which is one of the approaches used to engage with jihadist groups. This is one way the ICRC can speak to jihadist groups and influential persons in a way that is more relevant to their motives and experience.[3]

- Local dynamics remain exceptionally important when engaging with jihadist groups. We have seen the increased localization of jihadist armed groups—whether they are affiliated with al-Qaeda or the Islamic State—whereby local factors play a more significant role in the potential for engagement compared to centrally mandated decisions. In particular, due to the sustained engagement of the ICRC over decades in communities that are contested by jihadist groups, members of local jihadist groups often have prior experience with the ICRC or other humanitarian organizations, which can help facilitate our engagement with these groups.

NOTES

1 For a broader discussion on why the ICRC engages with armed groups, see the following position paper: "ICRC Engagement with Non-State Armed Groups," March 2021, https://www.icrc.org/en/document/why-engaging-non-state-armed-groups.

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Looking for Legitimacy: The Taliban's Diplomacy Campaign

■ Aaron Y. Zelin

Unlike in the prior two decades, when the Taliban's power derived from its insurgency and armed forces, the group is now making greater use of a key instrument of state: diplomacy.[1] This is a natural continuation of the negotiating skills it garnered while working out its 2020 peace and withdrawal agreement with U.S. officials during meetings in Qatar. It is also an underappreciated aspect of statecraft that lends more credence to jihadist actors within the international system, even if there remains skepticism. It is a tool that the Taliban has now used to showcase that it is willing to have dialogue with a variety of world actors without actually changing its authoritarian and theocratic rule in Afghanistan locally, by relying on diplomatic-style speak to cover for inadequacies and areas of concern such as women's rights and roles within society.[2]

Since the Taliban took over Kabul in August 2021, the group has sought international recognition for its Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. When Taliban forces first held the country from 1996 to 2001, only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates recognized their rule. Today, no government has officially done so. Yet while no country has officially recognized the new government established after the group recaptured Kabul, the Taliban is far less isolated today than it was during its first iteration.

Similar to other states, the Islamic Emirate has regularly promoted its meetings

with foreign officials since it took power in mid-August 2021, using official government and media websites and X/Twitter accounts. These encounters covered a wide range of issues, including humanitarian aid, governance assistance, economic opportunities, industrial investment, and religious exchanges. In other words, despite not being de jure recognized, the Taliban is de facto recognized—its Islamic Emirate has been steadily acknowledged via numerous noncommittal acts. Additionally, a number of countries have since called for the Islamic Emirate's international recognition: in March 2022, Turkish foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu called for international recognition of the Islamic Emirate, while Malaysia's special representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Afghanistan, Ahmad Azam, stated similarly in July 2022. Moreover, in March 2022, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov argued that it should be granted a seat at the United Nations.[3]

WHO IS MEETING WITH THE TALIBAN?

Between taking power in August 2021 and February 22, 2024, the Taliban has publicly announced 1,382 diplomatic meetings with at least eighty countries, or 1,582 meetings if one includes each country's mutual presence at a multilateral event (see tables 1 and 2).[4]

Table 1: Top Ten Countries That Have Engaged the Islamic Emirate

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF ENGAGEMENTS
China	215
Turkey	194
Iran	169
Qatar	135
Pakistan	118
Uzbekistan	84
Russia	69
Turkmenistan	63
Japan	60
Saudi Arabia	54

Table 2: Top Ten Western Countries That Have Engaged the Islamic Emirate

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF ENGAGEMENTS
European Union	42
Britain	33
Norway	31
United States	20
Germany	12
Italy	11
France	8
Netherlands	8
Switzerland	6
Sweden	4
Canada	4

Western engagement with the Taliban has generally taken place at multilateral events, while states from other regions have favored bilateral meetings. This trend highlights the continued Western discomfort with the group beyond international forums focused primarily on humanitarian aid. However, there have been exceptions and increasing willingness to engage bilaterally, especially from the European Union, Norway, and Britain. In contrast, China has met with Taliban officials more often than any other country, illustrating how the Islamic Emirate's return has a great power competition angle that transcends the West's focus on potential counterterrorism ramifications. Foreign Minister Wang Yi and other Chinese officials have been careful to emphasize their policy of noninterference in Afghanistan. On March 24, 2022, Wang planted a commemorative tree at the Taliban's Foreign Ministry compound "in hopes of a prosperous Afghanistan."[5] Since then, much of Beijing's engagement has been related to business opportunities through the Afghanistan-China Business Association, an organization whose mission reportedly focuses on helping Chinese companies invest in Afghan industries (e.g., antiquities preservation, coal and copper mining, infrastructure, oil and gas extraction, slaughterhouses) while bringing Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative.

WHERE ARE THEY MEETING?

Although most of the Taliban's diplomatic meetings have taken place in Kabul, the second most-used venue has been Doha, Qatar (see tables 3–5 for sites of Taliban engagement).[6] This is not necessarily surprising, since Qatar developed close relations with the Taliban due to Doha's role in facilitating the U.S. withdrawal agreement from Afghanistan. Doha has served two purposes for the Islamic Emirate's legitimacy efforts. First, it has been where Western nations can engage the new government more comfortably without granting it as much legitimacy as going to Afghanistan would do. Second, and more importantly, from a broader legitimacy-building perspective, Doha has provided a platform for the Taliban to ingratiate itself with many other countries' local embassies in a way not possible in other countries or within its own—most notably, through independence day or other national celebrations of these various countries.

Table 3: Top Ten City Locations Where the Taliban Has Engaged Other Countries

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF ENGAGEMENTS
Kabul (Afghanistan)	690
Doha (Qatar)	225
Islamabad (Pakistan)	62
Tehran (Iran)	50
Beijing (China)	46
Tashkent (Uzbekistan)	26
Ashgabat (Turkmenistan)	21
Moscow (Russia)	18
Istanbul (Turkey)	15
Kazan (Russia)	15
Canada	4

Table 4: Top Ten Country Locations Where the Taliban Has Engaged Other Countries

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF ENGAGEMENTS
Afghanistan	715
Qatar	225
Pakistan	71
China	65
Iran	62
Turkey	55
Russia	37
Uzbekistan	35
Turkmenistan	23
Saudi Arabia	15
Canada	4

The following countries have engaged with the Taliban only in Doha, many primarily through invites to Islamic Emirate diplomats to attend their independence and national holiday celebrations: Burkina Faso, Canada, the Czech Republic, Georgia, Ghana, Greece, Guinea-Bissau, Hungary, Liberia, Malawi, Mexico, Nigeria, Paraguay, Rwanda, South Korea, Spain, Tanzania, and Uganda.[7] This means that more than 20 percent of the countries engaging the Taliban do so linked to diplomatic niceties, highlighting how Qatar is helping normalize the Taliban's Islamic Emirate with a broader swath of the international community.

Table 5. Western Engagement with the Taliban in Kabul

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF ENGAGEMENTS
European Union	29
Norway	20
Britain	11
Italy	4
Switzerland	3
Germany	2
Sweden	2
United States	2
Australia	1
Austria	1
Denmark	1

While most Western countries remain apprehensive about engaging the Taliban in Kabul so as to avoid giving it added legitimacy, more recent signs suggest that direct Western engagement has occurred as well. In January 2022, for instance, Norway hosted Taliban Foreign Ministry officials in Oslo, which created opportunities for greater international dialogue with Western countries along with Japan, Qatar, and Turkey.[8] Likewise, other Western nations have begun to work with the Taliban on development, humanitarian, and business opportunities:

- In March 2022 and October 2023, respectively, Swiss and Australian investors met with the Taliban's minister of mines and petroleum about investment opportunities.[9]
- In May 2023, the Taliban's Ministry of Water and Energy and the Danish Cooperation Institute signed a memorandum of understanding on joint implementation of water development projects.[10]
- In November 2023, the German company Contra met with the Taliban's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum about potentially providing technical and professional training needed by the Afghan mining sector, and in

February 2024, the German companies Rock Green and Alfa Tec met with the Taliban's deputy minister of water and energy regarding cooperation on potential investments in water and energy projects.[11]

- Between September and December 2023, Italian companies and Italy's charge d'affaires to Afghanistan met with the Taliban's minister of mines and petroleum about assisting on marble mining operations, and received approval from the deputy minister of agriculture and livestock to operate agricultural projects in various Afghan provinces; both also met with the ministers of public health and the economy about providing basic health services along with humanitarian and emergency aid for Afghan citizens returning from abroad.[12]
- Since May 2022, Norway has been the most active Western country engaging with the Taliban on various projects, most notably on humanitarian aid, education, food provision, economic opportunity, governance capacity-building, and drought-related water projects to remediate the effects of climate change. As of late September 2023, Norway had provided $70 million to those programs since the Taliban returned to power.[13] The Norwegian Committee for Afghanistan is also assisting with irrigation, while checking dams, canals, and springs in the Kapisa sub-river basin.[14] In many of the meetings, Norway's ambassador raised issues related to women's rights, education, and employment, yet the Taliban has continued to ignore or obfuscate on these issues.
- In August 2022, the Sweden-based Master Bigrene International Company met with Afghanistan's Ministry of Water and Energy about investing in energy production projects from coal sources, water dams, and the implementation of solar power projects.[15] The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan also met with the minister of economy in January 2023 about implementing health and education projects in remote areas of Afghanistan.[16]
- In March 2022, representatives from Switzerland pledged their full support and cooperation in the financial and banking sectors with Afghanistan's Central Bank (Da Afghanistan Bank).[17]
- In July 2023, Britain's charge d'affaires met with Afghanistan's minister of higher education about areas where the UK can cooperate and assist the ministry.[18] British investors from different companies met with the Taliban's minister of mines and petroleum about investment opportunities

in June 2022 and September 2023, and a joint American-British company did so in November 2023.[19]

The Austrian far-right Freedom Party also met with Taliban officials in late September 2023, potentially exemplifying the horseshoe theory of extremism, given that the Austrian party does not want Afghan refugees residing in Austria, while the Islamic Emirate wants all Afghans to return home to build a true Islamic society.[20]

Taliban engagement has expanded even further over the past two and a half years, likely due to attendance at multilateral forums, which also shows the leadership's greater integration into the international system and the various diplomatic venues where countries engage.[21] So far, the Taliban's Islamic Emirate has attended these forums:

- **China.** Tunxi Neighboring Countries Meeting, China–South Asia Cooperation Forum, Trans-Himalayan Forum, China's Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation
- **Russia.** Kazan Forum, Astrakhan Forum
- **Qatar.** Qatar Economic Forum, Doha Forum
- **Turkey.** Antalya Diplomatic Forum
- **Uzbekistan.** Tashkent International Conference
- **Netherlands.** World Local Production Forum

The Taliban has also worked closely with both the Saudi Organization of Islamic Cooperation and Qatari Union of Muslim Scholars, illustrating its deepening ties with international Islamic entities. All of these different forums enabled the Islamic Emirate to cultivate relations with states that it may not have engaged with before while deepening relations with those it has already met with.

These engagements have led the Taliban's Islamic Emirate to devise its own forum that debuted in late January 2024, Afghanistan's Regional Cooperation Initiative, and includes China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. According to Taliban officials, "The meeting was mainly aimed at discussions and talks on establishing a region-centric narrative aimed at developing regional cooperation for a positive and constructive engagement between Afghanistan and regional countries."[22] How the Taliban parlays this into

something over time remains to be seen, but it shows that the Islamic Emirate is at the very least trying to appear as a normal government that acts in accordance with international norms and operates similarly to other countries.

UNEVEN SUCCESSES

The Taliban's various diplomatic efforts have led to more countries reopening their embassies in Kabul, while also allowing the Islamic Emirate to have varying presences at embassies and diplomatic missions abroad, however unevenly thus far. Specifically, as of February 22, 2024, eighteen countries/entities have reopened their embassies in Kabul since the Taliban takeover: Azerbaijan, China, the European Union, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, and Uzbekistan. China remains the only country to have recognized the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as the legitimate successor to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2004–21) and the only country that has accredited a Taliban-appointed ambassador. That said, Taliban appointees for embassy charges d'affaires have been accredited by Iran, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Russia, and Turkmenistan. The Taliban's Islamic Emirate has also been handed control of the embassies in Qatar and Malaysia, the missions in India, and the consulate-general in Dubai (UAE).

Despite the gap between countries willing to reopen embassies in Afghanistan versus those willing to grant the Taliban a diplomatic presence in their own territory, the overall trend is telling: the group is much less isolated than it was in the late 1990s, even if official recognition is not coming as quickly as the Taliban's leaders would like.

RECOGNITION IS A FAIT ACCOMPLI

These and other developments indicate that the formal step of granting the Taliban de jure recognition is only a matter of time for some countries. At least a few such announcements can be expected in the near to medium term. Unlike the first time the group was in power, it is now far more connected to the international system. Eighty countries have shown some level of engagement with

Taliban authorities, and de facto recognition—acknowledging a new regime via noncommittal acts, without making it eligible for a seat at the United Nations—has become an accepted reality. Therefore, the Islamic Emirate's diplomatic efforts have allowed for a level of normalization within the international system even though it has yet to provide basic rights to women or to grapple with its past and current support for other jihadist actors internationally (al-Qaeda) or regionally (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan). Thus, while fighting may have helped the Islamic Emirate win its country back, diplomacy has allowed it to be an accepted international actor, even if it remains to be recognized officially.

NOTES

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West Africa After the Era of Absolute Western Deterrence

■ Wassim Nasr

Russia had a good opportunity to test Western resolve in Syria in 2013, after Syrian president Bashar al-Assad crossed U.S. president Barack Obama's "red lines" regarding the use of chemical weapons without consequence.[1] A few months later, in 2014, Crimea was invaded and annexed by the Russian Federation without any notable consequences for President Vladimir Putin.[2] Those two major tests of Western resolve and diplomacy led the Russian president to directly involve his army in Syria in 2015,[3] backing Assad and making Moscow's first comeback in the Middle East, and therefore on the world scene, since the fall of the Soviet Union. This relatively small military intervention helped bolster a faltering Syrian regime. Russian interventions on the African continent, both direct and covert, and full-blown war in Ukraine followed in later years.

Russian involvement on African soil opened a new era of competition between world powers, though not to be compared or confused with the cold war era competition. The Russian Federation does not have the political weight or the capacities of the former Soviet Union and is proceeding as one actor among many, ranging from China to Turkey, Iran, Israel, and others. One of the major factors that allowed Moscow to make an easy comeback was the maintenance of military ties with many African countries through the 1990s until now, via elites who studied or trained in former Soviet republics or via its military industry and arms

sales.[4] This process was encouraged, at times, by Western powers that saw it as merely a commercial relationship and a way of buying cheap low-tech weapon systems for their African allies in the so-called war on terrorism.

THE STRATEGICALLY BLINDING WAR ON TERRORISM

The war on terrorism has a strategically blinding effect since it presumes that allies, partners, or even foes of Western powers have the same counterterrorism agenda as Paris, London, Washington, or any other Western capital bound by its own public opinion on this matter—or else, it presumes that terrorist actors can at least be overwhelmed by Western military power or outsmarted by its diplomacy. Such assumptions have led to many misunderstandings regarding the reality of counterterrorism efforts or their perception by local partners and actors, whether in the Levant, Afghanistan, or in conflict zones of the African continent.

One of the most telling examples of this strategic blindness, or at least miscalculation of priorities, played out in Iraq during the war against the Islamic State. There, the United States accommodated the international coalition it led with a de facto alliance with offshoots of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which provided dispensable manpower in place of Western boots on the ground and the associated political backlash that can result from high casualties. The U.S. administration turned a blind eye when Iraqi militias like Kataib Hezbollah were seen equipped with M1A1 Abrams main battle tanks and when the IRGC's Qods Force commander, Gen. Qasem Soleimani, paraded among his men on the outskirts of Amerli in 2014 under U.S. air cover.[5] The same Kataib Hezbollah fighters are today harassing U.S. forces almost daily and being hit in return; and the same Soleimani was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Baghdad in January 2020. After the territorial defeat of the Islamic State, the Popular Mobilization Forces did not dismantle and local Shia militias grew emboldened for use as a tool of Iranian influence in Iraq, Syria, and all the way to the Israeli borders during the post–October 7 Gaza war.[6]

The Iraqi example is only a reminder. The war on terrorism lens also has a distorting effect on the ongoing power struggle in Africa. The French and therefore Western setback is not about military capacities, which outweigh those of Russia on the continent, but instead about clear objectives and the tools at hand to

achieve them. When the Wagner Group first set foot in Africa, it did so on Libyan soil to help the warlord Khalifa Haftar against his various enemies, among them the jihadists of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Benghazi and Darnah.[7] This particular aspect of Wagner's involvement against jihadists was blinding enough to put France on his side and against the legitimate Tripoli-based government that it recognized. The Libyan officer, a former CIA asset, had plans that went way beyond counterterrorism, as did Wagner and Russia. Overlooked and underestimated by Paris, Wagner forces quickly moved south, ousting the French from the Central African Republic. This was Wagner's (and therefore Russia's) first political-economic success on the African continent.[8]

While Western powers and France helped militarize several African governments through counterterrorism programs, these backfired with the advent of military coups, and Russia worked through Wagner or else more directly to help juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger maintain power.[9] The easy removal of Niger's President Mohamed Bazoum in July 2023 is the latest example in this regard but might not be the last. Therefore, the U.S. move to maintain its Agadez drone base and counterterrorism cooperation with the new junta clearly responds to tactical imperatives, and was even encouraged by some French and European decision-makers, although there is no strategic endgame to such an enterprise. Paris tried the same stunt without any success when sustaining either diplomatic, military, or intelligence channels in both Mali and Burkina Faso, all the while making important political and diplomatic concessions over the years. Therefore, it was not surprising to see the new junta revoke the defense treaty with the United States,[10] and it will not be surprising to see some actual partners of Western powers in Africa shift alliances toward Moscow or Beijing, either of which might be more willing to grant "advantages" the West is no longer willing to grant. Chad's threat in this regard should be taken very seriously.[11]

A POWER STRUGGLE LEADING TO DE FACTO POLITICAL AND SECURITY VOIDS

With the French military presence withdrawn and the United States no longer flying drones over Niger, the Islamic State's Sahel "province" (ISSP) and Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), the Sahel branch of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), are both seizing opportunities to broaden their military activity in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The latest JNIM attacks on the outskirts

of Bamako, the Malian capital, and high-level activity elsewhere in the country prove that despite victorious communiqués by the ruling junta, al-Qaeda jihadists can still move and act unchecked. The situation in Burkina Faso is also worsening daily, and the latest attack on the Djibo barracks in November 2023 proves that al-Qaeda militants have the freedom to move and the capacity to gather in numbers, despite highly publicized sporadic drone attacks by the armed forces. Since the coup against President Bazoum in Niger, all negotiation channels—once very useful on critical issues likes hostages, either foreign or local, or deconfliction—have been cut, and JNIM is involved in territorial competition with ISSP. Whether the targeted forces are government or government-affiliated—one of the latest attacks occurred less than seventeen kilometers from the capital, Niamey[12] —both groups aim to be first to reach newly accessible territories since the French departure.[13]

JNIM has succeeded in recruiting over the years beyond its Arab and Tuareg components, including into the Fula communities of central Mali and Burkina Faso—whose members constitute most of its manpower and are paying the highest price of the multiple ongoing wars—and beyond. In the current war between the two groups, JNIM is preventing ISSP from going further south into countries around the Gulf of Guinea and from recruiting more extensively beyond Fula tribes in Niger. This new reality should also call into question the ultimate efficiency of targeted killings, since Amadou Kouffa in Mali and Jafar Dicko in Burkina Faso, two of the most important HVTs (high-value targets), are the two JNIM leaders preventing ISSP from recruiting further south. However, killing HVTs is a lottery, with unknown results in the long run, that may play out positively or negatively for JNIM or ISSP.

GOVERNANCE

After more than a year of combat and massacres, and now freed from French military pressure, ISSP consolidated its activity in the triborder region and secured a stronghold in the Menaka area of Mali. The group is attempting to govern beyond harsh implementation of sharia applied to local criminals, or "spies" and "sorcerers," as described in Islamic State propaganda and communiqués.[14] Campaigns to provide medicine to villagers, including in Ansongo, and Arabic-language flyers distributed in Menaka's villages and mosques with the

goal of explaining the group's aims and dogma can be assessed as rudimentary governance (identical flyers were distributed in Syrian towns and villages in 2013).[15] After gaining adherence based on the IS Levantine playbook, the Sahel branch is trying to win hearts and minds just as the group did in its early days in Iraq and Syria. For the first time since its establishment in the Sahel in 2015, ISSP has the capacity to enact a siege on a major Malian town, Menaka.

JNIM, for its part, is applying lessons from its past failed attempts at governance in northern Mali (2012). The group unified four jihadist factions under the leadership of Iyad Ag Ghali and since 2016–17 has implemented more-adaptive shadow-governing processes. The ongoing war with ISSP, even though lost in Menaka—along with the military push by Bamako toward Tuareg strongholds and the loss of the symbolic town of Kidal to the junta by mainly Tuareg rebel groups—is discrediting the rebels and fueling recruitment to the al-Qaeda offshoot.[16] A similar peak of recruitment occurred during the bloodiest periods of the combined operations between the Malian armed forces and Wagner in central Mali during the first half of 2022. Enhanced military efforts and local recruitment can be paired with accommodating some religious and tribal figures while putting military and economic pressure on others. The many months-long siege of Timbuktu has seen such dynamics.

NEW DILEMMAS FOR WESTERN POWERS

This situation should push Western powers—especially the United States, France, Britain, and Germany, but also the EU—to question the policy of maintaining counterterrorism as an absolute priority and thus involvement with rogue juntas against jihadist factions at all costs. This evolving situation can be seen as an opportunity to explore new ways (or dust off old ones) to exit the war of terrorism that has marked the first two decades of our century.

While it is quite clear that the Islamic State and its worldwide offshoots, including the most active ones Africa, are nowhere near a political process that would include negotiating with local governments or foreign powers, a territorial stronghold could constitute an imminent threat to Western interests and nationals in Africa and abroad. By comparison, it is quite interesting to see that one of the two most important al-Qaeda offshoots, JNIM—as confirmed by AQIM's

head, Abu Obaida Yusuf al-Annabi—has stated officially that the group's war in Africa would not extend to French soil.[17] The jihadist group, which was notorious for taking Western hostages, effectively closed this dossier when freeing three Italian nationals in early 2024.[18] Even though kidnappings could still be on the group's agenda, this "evolution" of JNIM should be assessed in the context of the evolving Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria,[19] while also bearing in mind the context of Hamas's October 7 attack against Israel.

Many questions arise: Should Western powers abandon the idea of full partnerships with juntas and risk the growth of both JNIM/AQIM and the Islamic State in the concerned countries? Should the main security focus shift toward bordering countries like Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Togo, and Benin, and—if so—for what kind of cooperation? Most important, while concerned African societies seem to prefer a culturally conservative path, should Western powers acknowledge and accommodate this shift, accept it, and maybe admit that vocally preaching "universal" values can be counterproductive in terms of political influence when confronted with local realities? These questions are especially pertinent if Western powers, particularly France and the United States, are not willing to secure the rule of their African allies against all odds.

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Jihadist Governance Is Not Unique When Compared with Other Rebel Governance Projects

■ Megan Stewart

What are the challenges that jihadist rebel groups' governance poses? What makes these challenges unique to jihadist groups? To answer these questions, I compared jihadist rebel groups' governance to other types of rebel groups and the governance they provide. In particular, I drew comparisons from historical cases of leftist and nationalist groups that provided similar governance to many jihadist groups today.[1]

Ultimately, after making these comparisons, I could not ascertain any challenge that jihadist groups' governance uniquely posed relative to governance by other types of rebel groups. Rather, one governance challenge generally—the ability for civilians to access goods and services—might be especially pronounced among jihadist groups but is not unique to them.

Here, I describe several possible challenges posed by rebel governance and explain why they are not unique to jihadist rebel groups. I then explain why civilian access to goods and services might be the most acute challenge posed by the governance of jihadist groups and why this particular challenge will likely intensify over time. I conclude by suggesting that if governance by jihadist groups presents unique and specific challenges, one way to address them is to consider the conditions that give rise to such groups.

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A common argument in existing scholarly works is that rebel groups govern because governance attracts resources and personnel to the organization.[2] As a result, groups providing governance grow stronger and more resilient. What this means for jihadist rebel groups is that when they govern, they become a more formidable military foe. With this conventional wisdom, one might surmise that a challenge rebel governance poses is that it creates well-resourced and successful jihadist groups.

This conventional wisdom, however, does not always pertain.[3] Sometimes, governance by rebel groups is not desired by civilians under groups' control. In other cases, rebel governance by groups like the Islamic State or the Chinese Communist Party elicited violent resistance from civilians.[4] Civilian reactions to governance vary not only between rebel groups but also within areas under the control of the same organization.[5] In short, simply because jihadist groups provide governance does not necessarily mean they will become more militarily effective. Thus, claims that jihadist governance is a challenge because it makes jihadist groups stronger are not always clear-cut or supported empirically.

Beyond whether governance makes jihadist groups more militarily effective, one possible challenge posed by the governance of jihadist groups is that the justice that they deliver is more brutal relative to other groups. The Islamic State, for instance, became infamous for the punishments the group meted out.[6] Yet the Islamic State may not be a typical case for jihadist groups. For some women, al-Shabab's justice in Somalia is preferable to alternative justice mechanisms because it provides unique protections that other justice systems do not.[7] Beyond jihadist rebel groups, recent research has recounted the cruelty of both left- and right-wing groups against members of the transgender and queer communities.[8] Scholars of political violence also remind us to consider that notions of violence are culturally defined.[9]

Taken together, these anecdotes suggest that it is not especially clear that the justice of jihadist groups is uniquely brutal or violent relative to other types of groups. Rebel groups of many different ideological stripes engaged in forms of judicial punishments that are harsh and violent. Even among jihadist groups, there is variation in the extent to which certain communities prefer their justice relative to other institutions.

A third and final consideration is that one unique challenge posed by jihadist groups' governance is that certain social groups might be unable to access critical goods and services. Governance is multifaceted: not only do rebel groups vary in the types of services they provide but also in who can access these services.[10] Jihadist groups might exclude certain members of the population from accessing governance. Lack of access to governance goods and services is a choice. Alternatively, jihadist groups may be unable to provide certain services or resources to the civilians living under their control (e.g., medical care and food). In this case, a lack of access to governance services is a lack of capacity. As a result of either process (if not both), jihadist groups could systematically underserve large swaths of the population.

The challenge of civilian lack of access to goods and services is not unique to jihadist groups. Indeed, the problem of access to necessary goods and services characterizes the governance of many state and nonstate actors. For instance, in many places in the United States, women are unable to access lifesaving medical services.[11]

Yet the governance challenge of civilian lack of access to goods and services might be particularly acute under jihadist groups. Where jihadist groups may differ from other governing actors is that the particular set of social groups that are more likely to be excluded from governance could be quite broad (e.g., women or other religious groups as opposed to landlords or wealthy persons in the case of leftist rebels). At the same time, while international groups or states might be willing to provide resources and services to civilians living under the control of jihadist rebels, jihadist groups might be especially unwilling to collaborate or work with these providers. While independence-seeking rebel groups need the support of the international community, and leftist rebel groups viewed global engagement as critical to their struggle,[12] jihadist groups may be especially wary of Western institutions.

Additionally, as climate change and its effects intensify, the necessity of access to governance will be paramount. Historically, war and conflict have exacerbated famines or created profound food insecurities.[13] Freshwater scarcity may become an increasing challenge, while the demand for better or different land could create additional tensions surrounding property rights and land tenure.[14]

Finally, because climate change is also closely related to global health, climate

change could increase demands on healthcare systems and medicine to which all persons might need access.[15] In short, civilians' need to access goods and services will become even more dire.

If access to governance is a major challenge posed by jihadist and other rebel groups, the international community must grapple with how to address access restrictions. Research suggests that incentives from the international community can lead rebel groups to structure their governance in certain ways and in ways that are less exclusionary.[16] These international incentives typically take the form of resources (e.g., food, medicine) or international recognition.

However, international incentives can only be effective if the jihadist group is interested in the international community and if the international community is willing to engage with jihadist groups. Yet both sets of actors might be unwilling to engage with one another due to concerns regarding legitimization. Among jihadist groups, they may be unwilling to interact with some international actors and organizations due to demands among their leadership or other foreign backers to eschew partnering with especially Western organizations and institutions. By working with or acknowledging these Western organizations or institutions, jihadist rebel group leaders may be perceived as legitimizing Western institutions.

Among Western actors, interacting with jihadist groups might similarly be perceived as legitimizing them. To interact with jihadist groups on governance delivery means a recognition that some other state fails to control the territory in its borders and that the actor with effective control and authority within a given space is a rebel group. It could also mean providing goods (e.g., food or medicine) to an organization that has engaged in violence against allied military personnel and civilians. To both domestic and international audiences, legitimizing such groups to any degree is not acceptable.

We might consider the occasional (and sometimes justified) hesitancy of Western organizations and jihadist rebel groups to engage with one another to improve and expand governance access as a tradeoff between engaging on governance issues and legitimization. By engaging with one another on governance, both parties recognize each other's legitimacy to a degree. The question for leaders is whether the benefits of engagement are worth the possible penalties of legitimizing the other and concurrent delegitimization of self to certain invested audiences. The

Taliban is perhaps one of the clearest examples today, with Western donors considering whether and to what extent to provide resources and aid when the Taliban is systematically excluding women from educational institutions, especially if the provision of such resources is seen as legitimizing the Taliban's governance.[17]

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If the challenge of jihadist governance is especially limited civilian access to services and resources, one final question remains about how to address it. An initial first step might be to consider the conditions under which a Western actor or organization would select engagement at the price of legitimization, as opposed to no engagement and no legitimization. These decisions will likely need to be made and considered on a case-by-case basis.

If Western organizations or jihadist groups are unwilling to engage with Western institutions or groups, the tools at hand to incentivize or support increased access to goods and services by civilians are greatly reduced. Instead, it might be worthwhile to consider preventing the rise of jihadist groups. If jihadist groups' governance poses particular challenges, then preventing the emergence of these types of groups should be especially paramount.

Recent scholarly work has examined why some rebel groups during the Cold War became leftist while others did not,[18] yet few works explain why some rebel groups that could have become jihadist do not while others do. Historically, the combination of oppressive prewar governance and discrimination, an effort to eliminate existing cultural practices, and the prevalence of an ideology that countered existing dominant ideological frameworks drove some rebel groups to adopt leftist ideology relative to others. Similar factors, especially since the global war on terrorism, may facilitate the emergence of jihadist groups relative to others. If these factors do facilitate the rise of jihadist groups, this means that one clear place to begin with prevention is to reduce discriminatory and oppressive governance practices ongoing before war begins.

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To conclude, I am skeptical about whether jihadist groups' governance poses unique challenges relative to other rebel groups' governance with different ideological frameworks. Rather than presenting unique challenges, one challenge common across all governance providers that might be especially acute when contending with jihadist groups is civilian access to goods and services. Jihadist rebel groups might systematically exclude civilians from accessing certain goods and services, or they may lack the resources for the delivery of these goods and services. As climate change or geopolitical rivalries intensify, resource and service delivery may become increasingly urgent.

International actors may try to incentivize some jihadist groups to expand civilian access to goods and services or might provide some of them with the resources (e.g., food, medicine) to do so. But doing so could serve as a signal that international audiences view the jihadist rebel group as legitimate. Jihadist rebel groups might also refuse to engage with international institutions as they might lose legitimacy in the eyes of key audiences (e.g., the rebel group's leadership or other foreign backers). If the jihadist group refuses to engage, options for expanding civilian access to goods and services are limited. As a result, one promising avenue to contend with this governance challenge is through prevention and identifying the conditions under which jihadist rebel groups are more likely to arise relative to other rebel groups with a different ideology.

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