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FEATURE ARTICLE

Wassim Nasr on his meetings with Ahmed al-Sharaa

FEATURE ANALYSIS

The August 2024 Taylor Swift Vienna Concert Plot

NICOLAS STOCKHAMMER AND COLIN P. CLARKE

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FROM THE EDITOR

France24's Wassim Nasr is the only international journalist to spend time with Syria's de facto leader Ahmed al-Sharaa both before and after the fall of Assad. In the spring of 2023, Nasr traveled to Idlib where he met with al-Sharaa (who at the time was widely known by his jihadi *kunya* Abu Muhammad al-Julani). Nasr's insights detailed in "Journey to Idlib" in the May 2023 issue of *CTC Sentinel* on al-Sharaa's ideological journey away from the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida toward what might be termed pragmatic Islamism were invaluable to international security analysts. Late last year, shortly after the fall of the Assad regime, Nasr traveled back to Syria where he met with al-Sharaa for a second time and interviewed him.

Speaking to *CTC Sentinel* about the trip in his follow-up feature interview "Journey to Damascus," Nasr says: "Comparing the man I saw in 2023 with the man I saw in late 2024, he was the same. He spoke very slowly, very quietly. It was the same impression I had a year and a half ago, which was very surprising to many people. I was very cautious a year and a half ago, asking myself, 'Okay, should I take what he is saying for granted?' But I was reassured. Because I saw that when they took Aleppo, [when] they took Damascus, actually he applied what he said to me a year and a half ago. It can't be dismissed as just talk."

In the feature article, Nicolas Stockhammer and Colin Clarke examine the Islamic State-inspired plot to attack a Taylor Swift concert in Vienna that was thwarted in August 2024. They write that the plot "underlined that Islamic State Khorasan (ISK), which appears to have inspired the lead plotter, remains an enduring threat, evolving its tactics and strategy while focusing on radicalizing followers and supporters through relentless online propaganda. The suspects in the Vienna plot epitomized the interplay of online and offline radicalization, with extremist content on social media platforms like TikTok playing a pivotal role."

In the second interview, Wassim Nasr provides insights from his interview last fall with Mohamed (Amadou) Koufa, the number two in JNIM, al-Qa`ida's affiliate in the Sahel. For Nasr, the questions Koufa chose not to answer were even more significant than his answers. "In my assessment, Koufa's refusal to speak about al-Qa`ida was significant. I think it's very possible that JNIM is at least seriously discussing and maybe preparing to break from al-Qa`ida. Since the last third of December, JNIM has stopped referring to AQIM and stopped directing followers to the AQIM media outlet Al-Izza. ... It looks like they might be preparing the landscape for a split with al-Qa`ida in the same way that Jabhat al-Nusra—the predecessor group of Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), the group now in power in Syria—split with al-Qa`ida."

Nasr says that it is possible that having seen HTS come to power in Syria after it split with al-Qa`ida and having seen al-Sharaa in recent weeks win broad international acceptance, JNIM may be preparing to start on a similar path away from the global jihadi group.

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

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Cover: The leader of the new Syrian administration, Ahmed al-Sharaa, is pictured on December 30, 2024, in Damascus, Syria. (Ali Haj Suleiman/Getty Images)

Journey to Damascus: An Interview with Wassim Nasr, Journalist, France24

By Paul Cruickshank and Julika Enslin

Wassim Nasr is a French journalist who has been monitoring jihadi groups for more than a decade for the French news outlet France24 in French, English, and Arabic. He has conducted multiple investigations and interviews in this regard. Nasr is a senior research fellow at the Soufan Center and the author of État islamique, le fait accompli (2016). He has also been a contributor to CTC Sentinel. X: @SimNasr

Editor's Note: In mid-December 2024, Wassim Nasr traveled to Syria where he interviewed Syria's new de facto leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, in Damascus for France24. He described his previous meeting in the spring of 2023 with the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) leader al-Sharaa (formerly known as Abu Muhammad al-Julani) in "Journey to Idlib," which was published in the May 2023 issue of CTC Sentinel.

CTC: Last month, you interviewed Syria's de facto new leader Ahmed al-Sharaa in Damascus. This was your second meeting with him. You were one of the first Western journalists to meet with him back in the spring of 2023 when the world knew him as Abu Muhammad al-Julani. Your insights in our publication¹ back then on his ideological journey away from the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida to what might be termed pragmatic Islamism were invaluable to international security analysts. You said at the time: "What I saw is the beginning or the premises of a third path, another path that could be useful for the international community to try to implement or to build upon in other places. These days, HTS is less radical than the Taliban."² Fast forward to the present day and al-Sharaa is now in power in Damascus after his forces overthrew the Assad regime in a lightning advance across Syria and seems, at least for the time being, to be exhibiting the kind of pragmatism you described in 2023. It would be great if you could walk us through your trip to Syria, your most recent sit-down with al-Sharaa, and your impressions of the new Syria that is taking shape.

Nasr: I entered Syria on December 15, 2024, a Sunday, from Turkey through the Bab al-Salama border crossing into an area that at that point in late December was controlled by the pro-Turkish Syrian National Army (SNA) group. I preferred not to tell them that I had come to Syria to interview al-Sharaa because of what were then tense relations between the SNA and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). I mention this because it's very significant that this border crossing is now under the control of the HTS-led transitional government, which tells you a lot about who is now in control in Syria and who now has the upper hand in the HTS-SNA relationship.

CTC: Talk to us about meeting al-Sharaa on your most recent trip.

Nasr: I arrived in Syria on the Sunday and got the meeting with him on the Monday (December 16), which was really quick. There was a waiting moment in the Ministry of Media in Damascus, where actually HTS took over everything inside. And the funny thing about it was that you could still see Ba'ath books and VHS tapes of all the Assad speeches on the shelves. They were pretty organized, meaning that on the inside you could still see employees of the Ministry of Media, but on the outside, you still had to go through HTS bearded guys with the Kalashnikovs. I think it's different now. There was a small waiting moment there and then they took us to the government building, which I took a picture of. It was at night—I don't remember exactly what time—and actually we waited there maybe half an hour while we talked with one of his aides, a very sharp guy who has been with him for 12 years. There were other Western journalists with me, too. At one point, I had to go to the bathroom, and I saw various offices turned upside down, with shoes on the floor as if they'd just been abandoned five minutes previously. There were still Syrian regime flags with the eagle of the Ba'ath.

Eventually, our group of foreign journalists was ushered in to see al-Sharaa in the big reception room. Conditions had been placed on us, including that nothing could be filmed or recorded. But we could ask him questions and report his answers.

The interview lasted a little bit longer than an hour.³ Al-Sharaa said that his top priority was rebuilding Syria, and it was key for sanctions to be lifted. He stressed the importance of national unity and emphasized that HTS was in dialogue with Syria's various sects. He stated, "In Syria, we spoke with all the communities, the Druze, who fought alongside us, the Christians, the Alawites, and the Kurds." Zeroing in on the Kurds, al-Sharaa stated, "We have absolutely nothing against the Kurds as long as they don't advocate separatism and division."

Al-Sharaa stated: "We ask for the international community's help in prosecuting the Assad regime's criminals and recovering the money stolen from Syrians. We also call for pressure on Israel to put an end to its operations in Syria." He added: "We don't want conflict either with Israel or with other countries. Syria won't be used to target other countries. Syrians are tired and just need to live in peace."

Addressing the future direction of Syria, al-Sharaa stated, "The institutions we've set up in Idlib have helped us, but it's premature to define the exact form of the new regime we're putting in place." He added that "writing a new constitution will take time, and elections could be held. But as things stand, we don't even know how many voters there are in Syria. A huge census has to be taken to recreate a register." In an interview in late December with the Saudi media outlet Al Arabiya, al-Sharaa provided a possible timeline of three years to draft a constitution and up to four years to hold elections.⁴

He stated that "our first concern is to get people to return home, whether from abroad or displaced people in Syria. We need to secure



Wassim Nasr

this transitional period, while providing the necessary assistance for the return of displaced persons, refugees, and Syrians in general.” When he was asked about what kind of Syria he wanted to build, al-Sharaa stated, “it will be a reflection of real Syria, in its customs and habits.” He stressed: “Our mission is to build Syria.”

Comparing the man I saw in 2023 with the man I saw in late 2024, he was the same. He spoke very slowly, very quietly. It was the same impression I had a year and a half ago, which was very surprising to many people. I was very cautious a year and a half ago, asking myself, ‘Okay, should I take what he is saying for granted?’ But I was reassured. Because I saw that when they took Aleppo, [when] they took Damascus, actually he applied what he said to me a year and a half ago. It can’t be dismissed as just talk. He’s actually really applying what he said a year and a half ago to me, and it was quite reassuring to me because I took a risk in 2023 by reporting on his transformation. I’m the only foreign reporter that saw him both in 2023 and after the fall of Assad.

CTC: Let’s go back to your meeting with al-Sharaa in the spring of 2023. What did he tell you about his journey away from Islamic State and al-Qa`ida jihadism?

Nasr: In 2023, he said to me: ‘I was young, I made this choice, but when I went into Syria, mandated by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, at a certain point, I began refusing his orders, meaning I did not want to target a number of Syrian rebel commanders [the Free Syrian Army, etc].’ I should point out here that the reality is more complex because under the leadership of al-Sharaa, Jabhat al-Nusra also targeted the Free Syrian Army and other factions at numerous occasions.

When he left ISIS for al-Qa`ida, many foreign fighters went with ISIS, so he had to keep his jihadi credentials to keep some of the fighters with him. And I guess this is, in part, why he joined

al-Qa`ida. Additionally, it prevented him from being overrun by other rival Islamist rebel factions. And he became actually the most successful branch of al-Qa`ida at the time in the world. Eventually, he left al-Qa`ida and put huge pressure on the remaining al-Qa`ida loyalists that became known as Hurras al-Din. He fought them and even maybe facilitated or at least turned a blind eye [to] some of the targeting of them by the Americans. And this is why, it’s not a secret, he’s not been targeted himself since 2017. So, I guess he made these moves out of conviction but also self-interest for his own survival and broadly for the survival of the Syrian revolution. He made clear that global jihad was a mistake. This was not a guy who had just been arrested saying this. It was a guy in power telling me: ‘It was a mistake. We have another path, and let’s create another path for the people of this region.’

It is certainly not liberal or democratic. It is certainly Islamist, but it is indeed, as I like to call it, a third path away from ISIS and al-Qa`ida.

In 2023, al-Sharaa told me, ‘My focus is on toppling Assad, that’s objective #1. Objective #2 is pushing the Iranians out and fighting the Russians.’ He said: ‘We are keeping ISIS and al-Qa`ida under control. We are fighting them, and like the Ukrainians, we are fighting your enemies meaning Russia. So, why are we still sanctioned?’

CTC: Coming back to the present day, al-Sharaa has been pragmatic so far. But what happens if something happens to him? You’ve met others in the group. When it comes to the direction of travel toward pragmatism, how much does this depend on him? Does this come off the rails if something happens to him? Or is this more solidly grounded than just him?

Nasr: Listen, that’s what they tried to do in Idlib—to create a system of governance via the Salvation Government that goes beyond him, but as you know, in this part of the world, it’s always about the leader, regardless of the country. His track record and credibility within jihadi and Islamist circles as someone who has ‘fought the fight’ is what allowed him to move the group in a more pragmatic direction and keep hold of power, despite these moves being very dangerous for him. Each move he made away in the past from jihadi activity and away from hardcore implementation of the *sharia* was very costly for him. He’s going to have to be *more* moderate each day that passes. For example, the warm words he expressed about Saudi Arabia in his Al Arabiya interview would have been unimaginable just a few months back.^a Also he has been pragmatic so far with Russia, despite the enmity caused by Russia’s past actions in Syria, because he does not want to alienate a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council given he wants sanctions removed. So, he has to tackle all this—neighboring countries, international powers, and the hardliners in his ranks.

The new Syria is going to have to be different to how HTS ran things in Idlib. It is important to recognize that Idlib is a mostly homogeneous society, conservative Sunni society. So, I don’t know

^a Editor’s Note: Al-Sharaa told Al Arabiya, “Saudi Arabia has a major role in Syria’s future, and I take pride in everything it has done for us.” “Exclusive - Syria’s new elections and draft constitution: Al-Sharaa outlines timeline,” Al Arabiya, December 29, 2024.

if they're going to be able to apply that same model all over Syria. I guess that if they want to rule, they have to get even more moderate.

A key figure in the new government is Syria's new foreign minister, Asaad Hassan al-Shaibani. He is a very smart man. He was previously heading the political bureau of HTS. I spent more than an hour with him in Idlib in the spring 2023 just before I met al-Sharaa.

CTC: Does al-Shaibani share al-Sharaa's worldview?

Nasr: Yes. He's the man behind most of this outreach to the world.

CTC: Because people are saying, 'Who is advising al-Sharaa? He must be very well advised right now.' And so, al-Shaibani is one of those people.

Nasr: Al-Shaibani is a key advisor, with access that goes way beyond the Syrian landscape, which explains his appointment as minister of foreign affairs.

CTC: So, he's the one advising him. It's not like he's just got Turks whispering in his ear. He's got al-Shaibani behind him.

Nasr: Yes, but al-Shaibani has good relations with the Turks. And al-Shaibani was the one who opened the door with the West. Al-Shaibani knows his stuff, and on the political level, what the political bureau did is the work of Shaibani. He's the man behind the outreach to the world.

CTC: During your trip to Idlib in the spring of 2023, you met with Mohammed al-Bashir who was then a leading figure in the HTS-led Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) in Idlib and is now the prime minister in Syria's transitional government. What were your impressions of him?

Nasr: When I met him, he was the minister of Development and Human Relief in the HTS Salvation Government in Idlib. He would later become the prime minister of the SSG and is now Syria's prime minister. He gave me the impression of being a technocrat. He was very precise and technical in everything we addressed. He's an Islamist, 100 percent. He's not a jihadi. He's not a fighter. He's a technocrat. He's a politician. And in this regard, he represents the will of al-Sharaa to remove the military from political affairs and direct governance. I think he is trusted by al-Sharaa. It was because of this and his technical abilities and being a known counterpart of U.N. envoys and aid agencies, that al-Sharaa appointed him.

CTC: You also traveled to other parts of Syria during your recent trip. What were your impressions?

Nasr: I also spent time in Aleppo, on my way in and out of Syria. I was immediately struck by how huge parts of the city were still in ruins after the fighting in 2016. I was also struck by the scenes of everyday life, including people playing music and smoking *shisha*, with none of this activity restricted by HTS. The flags of the revolution were everywhere, no doubt sold by some of the same hawkers who had sold Syrian regime flags. This was also at the time when people were still putting the portrait of al-Sharaa on their cars, before he forbade that from happening. When I met



Wassim Nasr (at right, in top image) and other foreign journalists interview Ahmed al-Sharaa in Damascus on December 16, 2024.

him in Idlib in 2023, al-Sharaa had talked to me about how he had terminated the operations of the Hisbah—the religious police. The police forces that deployed in Idlib were the same that HTS deployed in Aleppo, to do regular police work.

In Aleppo, I met a prominent Sunni tribal leader with ties to the HTS leadership in his apartment. He and his men had just accompanied the HTS fighters in their advance from Idlib into Aleppo. During this meeting and in messages he exchanged with me afterwards, he told me that the military buildup for the operation by HTS started four years ago. He played a key role in getting his clan to switch from backing Assad to tacitly supporting the HTS rebellion. He explained that part of his tribe had thrown their lot in with the regime because of blood feuds in years gone by with rebel forces, but the corruption of the regime and the 4th Army Division within Aleppo had eroded this support for Assad.

It was these kind of shifts in allegiances that paved the way for the HTS takeover. He told me he had started working on getting his tribe to switch allegiance two-and-a-half years ago and that he had arranged for the head of the tribal militia to be brought into Turkey,



The renovated church in the Idlib village of Yaqoubia (Nasr)

where he and another likeminded figure in his tribe talked to the head of the tribal militia and convinced him. Then they brought him into Idlib to show him how Idlib was faring under HTS control, and at the end of the day, after two and a half years of efforts, they convinced him that once the battle for Aleppo started, he should stay out of it. Six months ago, they talked about what would be the on-the-ground measures when HTS launched its offensive. This explains so much about how HTS took the city so easily because the regime was relying on these militias to defend the city. The tribal leader told me that when he and the HTS fighters advanced on Aleppo, “we agreed to notify the pro-regime tribal fighters in front of us while we were advancing, and they retreated accordingly.” He added that “the political factor” was key to the “swift and mostly clean liberation of Aleppo.” He emphasized that “the decision of Ahmed al-Sharaa and the HTS leadership to use political as well as military means—and to provide guarantees to those who dropped their weapons—avoided bloodshed and was key to the liberation of Hama, Homs, and Damascus after the fall of regime defenses in Aleppo.”

While I was in the apartment, there were lots of fighters going in and out, including two Hezbollah members from the nearby towns of Nubl and al-Zahraa who were seeking an accommodation with Aleppo’s new rulers to avoid bloodshed.

The Aleppo Sunni tribal leader with ties to HTS messaged me on January 7 to say that “one of the biggest issues now is upholding the agreements cut between HTS and the Sunnis previously aligned with the regime and getting the services to work in a proper way.”

While I was in the city, I also went to see the bishop of Aleppo Hanna Jallouf. In my 2023 interview with you, I described meeting

members of the Christian community in HTS-controlled areas of Idlib. I saw firsthand how HTS were allowing Christians to rebuild churches and monasteries.⁵ Jallouf was one of the Christians that I met in Idlib, and he was subsequently appointed by Pope Francis as bishop of Aleppo. When I caught up with him in the city, the first thing I noticed was that he was wearing his priest clothes with the cross, which wasn’t at all the case in Idlib a year and a half ago. Back then, he had been wearing civilian clothes and was forbidden from wearing his clerical clothes. When I met him after the fall of the regime, he was very hopeful that the takeover of Damascus would have good repercussions, including for the Christians in Idlib, meaning they will have more space and more liberty. He was very confident about the future, but he still had some worries for the Christian minorities in Syria. He said that talks were going well and that HTS should be applauded for preventing the most radical elements within Islamist rebel ranks from doing things that could create turmoil. He said there was a long road ahead and his concern was not just over radical HTS elements but also “other elements” who do not want things to go well. He didn’t name anyone, but my guess is that he was referring to the Iranians and the remnants of the former regime. Very soon after we spoke, Bishop Jallouf met with Ahmed al-Sharaa in Damascus.⁶

During my recent trip to Syria, I went back to the villages in Idlib that I had visited in 2023. This time I met up with the priest who replaced Jallouf and another priest. They were now openly wearing the robes of the Franciscans. The priest who replaced Jallouf told me: “We rang the bells on the 8th of December because we were happy that Assad fell.” He said: “40 Christian families have returned to the villages” over the last year and that “the restitution of property

and land is underway, more than 140 plots have been returned.⁷⁷ In my 2023 interview, I spoke about how the church in one of the villages was being renovated. When I returned, the church in the village of Yaqoubia had been fully restored. The picture I took tells its own story. There is a lot of uncertainty ahead because figuring out how to deal with minorities are difficult subjects for HTS internally. But now that they have taken power, they have to confront these issues. HTS opened up a line of communication with the Druze community in Suwayda in southern Syria when they started demonstrating in 2024. Fast forward to late 2024 and among the first people who pulled the Assad statues down in Damascus were Druze people in Jaramana. Al-Sharaa told me: “They fought with us” when I interviewed him in Damascus. So, an opening of a dialogue with minorities is not just about optics. It pays. It is in their interest.

In reflecting on the rebel takeover of Aleppo, there’s a key thing to stress. The SNA only opened up a front north of Aleppo three days after the beginning of the battle for the city. The primary objective was to cut off retreating YPG forces from reaching Kurdish-controlled areas, but also to maintain a balance with HTS who had already liberated most of the town.

This is important to grasp because it reveals the nature of the relations between Turkey and HTS, which is not a relation of a proxy; it is a relation really of a *relation de force*, as we say in French. So, the person who turned the table is al-Sharaa and everybody was forced to follow, including the Turks. Now, after the takeover of Damascus, of course, the balance has changed, and of course the Turks made their choices, as I said in the beginning of our discussion, by giving the border crossings to the new government. Because when they handed over the border crossings, they deprived the Syrian National Army from revenue. It’s a huge deal, even though the SNA is not dissolved yet.

One has to recall that Turkey would have preferred not to have al-Sharaa in Idlib. They would have preferred to have someone similar to the Syrian National Army, which they actually fund and train and have the upper hand on [regarding] their political decision-making. And you have to remember, for example, that just a few months before this battle, Turkey was forced to send its tanks to stop HTS from going further into Turkish administrated areas and from cannibalizing the Syrian National Army.⁸ So, it’s a relation of tension. We have to remember that HTS is still labeled as a terrorist organization in Turkey.

CTC: So, for you, this was an HTS-initiated campaign rather than something that was orchestrated by Ankara or Doha, and everyone was playing catch up and adjusting to al-Sharaa’s plans and HTS’ plans?

Nasr: One hundred percent. He grabbed his moment. The week before, Erdogan was still trying to have good relations with Assad. When I talked to al-Sharaa in 2023, I asked him about rumors of a deal being cut between Russia and Turkey for HTS to retreat behind the M4 highway. He replied: ‘It’s not true. We’re not going to lose territory. We’re going to take territory because we have a lot of displaced people and we need to put them back in their homes. We need to enlarge our territory, and the military option is the only viable option.’ At the time, I thought to myself, *Okay, this is just political talk*. But at the end of the day, the military option worked for him.

CTC: Did the HTS folks you met in Syria speak about worries that Iran and Hezbollah may try to play a spoiler role within Syria?

Nasr: Yes. They are worried about that, but they think they can handle it. The biggest issue for them now—for all the people I saw because I saw people also from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—the main issue for them now is how to put the country on track, like lifting the sanctions that were put on Assad. In my interview with al-Sharaa, he complained that ‘we are living the sanctions that were imposed on our dictator as we are victims.’ That’s on one hand, and when you see what I saw—I drove from Damascus to Aleppo and from Aleppo, I went all over the place in Syria—you cannot imagine the destruction. It’s not just destroyed cities. As you head into Damascus from the north, there’s nothing apart from piles of rubble. There’s really nothing.

If you want people not to be attracted by Iran for financial reasons or others, you have to put the country on track. And the clock is ticking. If people still don’t have anything and the situation is still as it is, of course Iran will have more cards in its hands. What’s reassuring regarding this—and this is why I’m telling you that rebuilding is important—is that the operations that HTS has been conducting in the areas that are loyalist to the regime to catch regime loyalists are more like police operations. You don’t see urban fighting. You don’t see a resistance from the communities, Christians, or Alawite even, and you see them going in and picking up people from their homes. Sometimes they are fighting; sometimes they are not fighting. I’m not seeing parts of the country defending themselves from HTS and the new government, including the Alawite territory.

I went through the Alawite territory from Jisr ash-Shughur. And we went through the old frontline and went down to all the way to Latakia, the town. You cannot imagine the poorness of the villagers. I had the impression I was in 19th century villages, the Alawite villages. So, you see the Alawite community did not profit as a community from the rule of Assad. And this may explain why the Alawites are not actually putting up a fight against the HTS in a massive way. Those who are putting up a fight are regime people who were not able to flee when Assad fled and who have blood on their hands and who know that if they get caught, either they are going to get killed on the spot—because killings on the spot have happened—or they’re going to get judged and jailed for a long time and maybe executed later.

This is important: If you put reconstruction and rebuilding of the country with recognition from the neighboring countries, with the displaced people going back to their homes, and you give them the means to reconstruct their homes, Iran will have fewer cards in its hands. But if you leave it as it is under sanctions, no rebuilding and something like 90 percent of people living under the poverty line, of course Iran and other players, including Hezbollah, will have more cards in their hands. With a small investment, they can create a turmoil.

CTC: Did anybody talk to you about ISIS and concerns that they could exploit the situation?

Nasr: I spoke to the Sunni tribal leader in Aleppo about ISIS. He told me that some ISIS elements from the *badiyah* desert are trying to reach out to demobilize. I don’t know if it’s 100 percent true.



The Al-Hamidiyeh Souk in Damascus in mid-December 2024, after the fall of Assad. The banner refers to “terrorist Iran” and accuses it of having used the Palestinian cause as a pretext for occupying Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq. It also accuses Iran of having planted the seeds of turmoil between religious communities in the Muslim world. (Photo credit and translation: Nasr)

This is only him saying it. It could be that now you have a winner in Syria’s civil war, ISIS will be less ‘attractive’ at least for Syrian youngsters. Al-Sharaa showed that his path was the winning path—the third path, as I put it in my 2023 interview with you. So maybe it will get some Syrian ISIS members to demobilize, but ISIS, as an organization, which still has a presence in Syria, is strongly ideologically opposed to the new HTS-led government and will try to create problems for the new Syrian government just to prove that they cannot secure their new rule. On December 7, the Aleppo Sunni tribal leader messaged me to say, “We are concerned about the latest liberations of ISIS fighters by the Kurds,⁹ and of potential Iranian involvement to aid ISIS cells in the *badiya*.”

CTC: Your reporting creates considerable hope that things will go right but also concern that things could go wrong. In late December the Israeli foreign minister depicted the new HTS-led government as Islamist extremists who are wolves in sheep’s clothing and expressed the view that it is problematic

for Israel that they now control Syria.^b Based on the time you spent there, what are your key takeaways about the direction this is all heading?

Nasr: They are reaching out to the world. Look how HTS handled the issue of Travis Timmerman, the U.S. citizen who was found in the outskirts of Damascus.^c They handed him straight away to the head of the American forces in Syria. That’s one thing. On the other hand, Israeli concerns are understandable because what concerns Israel is its own security, and this is why they have been destroying what is left of the armaments of the Syrian army, even though it puts HTS and the new Syrian government in a bad position, because

b In an interview with *The Jerusalem Post* in late December 2024, Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa’ar described the new rulers of Damascus as “Islamists with a highly extreme worldview.” He added “these players are deceiving the West, yet the world rushes to Damascus” and stated, “this an Islamist regime, not a moderate one.” Amichai Stein and Zvika Klein, “FM Gideon Sa’ar: The regime in Damascus is ‘a gang – not a legitimate gov’t,” *Jerusalem Post*, December 28, 2024.

c Editor’s Note: Timmerman “was found by local residents near Damascus ... after he was freed by hammer-wielding armed men.” A U.S. military helicopter took Timmerman out of Syria “after Syrian rebels from the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group brought him to US forces in the town of Tanf.” Bernd Debusmann Jr., “US military flies freed captive Travis Timmerman out of Syria,” BBC, December 13, 2024.

people in the region sympathetic to Iran are asking HTS, ‘How can you permit this? How can you let Israel do what it wants?’ especially when, as you know, they accuse HTS of being an “Israeli puppet.”

So, HTS are between two fires, but al-Sharaa said himself when I saw him a year and a half ago and now publicly again when I interviewed him, ‘I’m not seeking any war with anyone. The Syrians are tired. We just want to live in peace,’ and he mentioned Israel by name the last time I interviewed him.

Israel is right to be concerned because its national security is at stake. But was it better to have Shi`a militias stretching from Iran

to Lebanon, on the security level?

The ‘War on Terror’ was strategically blinding, meaning that it permitted Iran to stretch its power all over the region because the West was only fighting against jihadis including the Islamic State. Since the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, the era of letting Iran get away with such activity is over. We saw the choices made by a former U.S. administration 10 years ago work to Iran’s advantage, but after October 7, Iran got burned by its own overreach. I don’t think that the Americans and their allies will make the same mistake twice. **CTC**

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The August 2024 Taylor Swift Vienna Concert Plot

By Nicolas Stockhammer and Colin P. Clarke

The Vienna Taylor Swift concert plot highlights an alarming trend of Islamic State-inspired teenage jihadis targeting events to inflict maximum casualties and attract widespread media attention. The plot also underlined that Islamic State Khorasan (ISK), which appears to have inspired the lead plotter, remains an enduring threat, evolving its tactics and strategy while focusing on radicalizing followers and supporters through relentless online propaganda. The suspects in the Vienna plot epitomized the interplay of online and offline radicalization, with extremist content on social media platforms like TikTok playing a pivotal role. Influential salafi preachers use pop culture references as an on-ramp for more radical content, specifically targeting youth. Austrian authorities, supported by international intelligence agencies, disrupted the plot, which aimed to use vehicle ramming, knives, and explosives. The arrests underscore the importance of transnational intelligence cooperation and advanced surveillance techniques in counterterrorism efforts. The global terrorist threat landscape indicates that increasingly shifting resources away from counterterrorism to strategic competition will come at a cost.

Concerts and large public gatherings have, over the course of the past decade, become increasingly vulnerable targets for terrorist attacks and mass shootings. On November 13, 2015, Islamic State terrorists attacked multiple locations across Paris, including the Bataclan Theater, resulting in approximately 130 fatalities.¹ Similarly, in May 2017, an Islamic State-inspired suicide bombing at an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester² claimed the lives of 22 people. Just four months later, a lone gunman killed 60 attendees when he opened fire at a Las Vegas music festival, and although the Islamic State made a rare false claim of responsibility,

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no links were ever established, and the incident was not deemed an act of terrorism.³

On March 27, 2024, Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) carried out a terrorist attack on a sold-out concert at Crocus City Hall on the outskirts of Moscow, the deadliest incident in Russia in nearly two decades, with at least 143 casualties.⁴ Throughout the spring and summer of 2024, ISK encouraged its followers in online posts to target large gatherings at stadiums in London, Madrid, and Paris, including events such as the 2024 Paris Olympic Games,⁵ high-profile soccer matches during the UEFA European Championship in Germany,⁶ UEFA Champions League games,⁷ and other gatherings including crowded concerts.

This article begins by examining the particular dynamics of the plot in Vienna targeting the Taylor Swift concert. The alleged perpetrators were seeking to conduct a mass casualty attack at the concert venue, eerily reminiscent of the Islamic State-inspired Manchester Arena attack. After laying out the specific details of the plot, the article focuses on the importance of information sharing and intelligence cooperation between allies, which was essential to preventing the attack. It then analyzes the attack tactics of the plot, looking at some tactical similarities with previous European plots and attacks. Next, the article provides an overview of how the Islamic State is successfully engaging with youth on platforms such as TikTok, where its propagandists use pop culture references as an onramp for more radical content. In the section that follows, the article identifies other issue areas relevant to the plot, such as the pairing of online and offline radicalization, especially in the Balkan jihadi nexus, and the role of mental health. It concludes by placing the Taylor Swift plot in context alongside other ISK-driven European plots as well as the broader transatlantic threat posed by the group. The article draws upon a range of sources, including secondary source reporting, open-source intelligence, and sources from the Austrian government, since legal proceedings are still underway at the time of publication of this article.

The Plot Against the Taylor Swift Concert

Ternitz is a small town of approximately 15,000 inhabitants located about 60 kilometers south of the Austrian capital, Vienna. In the early morning hours of August 7, 2024, the Austrian law enforcement special forces unit COBRA conducted a raid on an unassuming residence after electricians had cut the power supply. The primary target of this operation was a 19-year-old man with Macedonian (ethnic Albanian) roots, Beran A., who was arrested on suspicion of planning a terrorist attack at a mass event. During the course of the house search, the police found € 21,000 in counterfeit currency, which was possibly intended for escape purposes. As well as an extensive trove of Islamic State propaganda material, an array of other items was seized: electronic ignition devices, a 12-channel transmitter, a detonator, a 60-centimeter-long metal pipe, a 30-centimeter-long combat knife, a 46-centimeter-long

machete, a butterfly knife, and blank ammunition in addition to chemicals available at any hardware store. Moreover, the police operation yielded components for manufacturing the highly explosive *triacetone triperoxide* (TATP) and sulfuric acid, which he allegedly stored in the refrigerator.⁸

Franz Ruf, director general for public security at the Austrian Ministry of the Interior, stated that the investigations pointed to “concrete preparatory actions.”⁹ Until shortly before his arrest, Beran A. was employed at a local steelworks factory nearby, where he had allegedly stolen some of the substances found in his possession. The young man was completing a retail sales apprenticeship there, which granted him access to the plant’s laboratory and various chemicals. He allegedly managed to produce TATP from “everyday” substances—sulfuric acid, an acetone-based nail polish remover, and hydrogen peroxide, similar to the concoction used in an al-Qa`ida plot to bomb the New York City subway by Najibullah Zazi in 2009.¹⁰ Some of the bomb-making materials discovered are believed to have been acquired via the Darknet.¹¹ Reportedly, Beran A. tried to order a hand grenade, a Zastava M70 assault rifle, a Kalashnikov AK-47 “clone” (the same type Kujtim Fejzulai, the perpetrator of the Vienna November 2, 2020, attack used), and a handgun from the United States via the messaging service Telegram but he completely failed in his endeavor to obtain weapons from his “list.”¹² The suspect had already submitted his resignation to the factory on July 18, 2024, mentioning to his work colleagues at the factory that “big plans” were underway.¹³

Prior to the police raid, Austrian authorities had kept Beran A. under close surveillance for several days (since August 2, 2024). During this time, according to prosecutors, he was observed handling what appeared to be the highly volatile TATP while wearing protective gear, including gloves and a face mask. “The amounts (of TATP) were small, but appear sufficient to produce a detonator,” the official report of the Austrian Federal Office of Criminal Investigation (*Bundeskriminalamt*) stated.¹⁴

A few days before the planned attack, Beran A. allegedly asked a friend where he could acquire a fuse. When asked why he needed it, Beran A. allegedly responded: “You’ll hear about it!”¹⁵ In a Telegram Chat, the 19-year-old allegedly posted: “Fight for Allah. Go out and terrorize the *kuffar* (unbelievers). If you don’t have weapons, go out with knives. If you don’t even have knives, run them over. And if you can’t even run them over, then spit in their faces.” A fellow Islamist from Germany allegedly encouraged the young man in his intentions there. “Do you want to do a simultaneous attack? You at your place, me here,” Beran A. allegedly replied.¹⁶ There were numerous ideas exchanged in the chats: Beran A. was advised to acquire drones to drop bombs from the sky or to obtain sarin gas and release it at the concert venue.¹⁷ These exchanges with likeminded extremists on the platform Telegram suggest Beran A.’s advanced interest in plotting. To prepare himself, he watched videos of the Charlie Hebdo attack, went to the fitness center, and practiced shooting in a field at night.¹⁸

The suspected plot was a large-scale terrorist attack targeting a mass event in Vienna, specifically the second of three upcoming Taylor Swift concerts due to be held in early August 2024. Swift is currently considered the world’s most successful pop star with a global fanbase. Approximately 200,000 tickets were sold for the three concerts, originally scheduled for August 8, 9, and 10, 2024. According to findings by the Austrian Directorate for State Security and Intelligence (DSN), Beran A. pledged allegiance to the Islamic

State’s leader on July 7 and uploaded his loyalty oath via Telegram.¹⁹ Although Beran A. had reportedly sympathized with al-Qa`ida, he seemed particularly fascinated and captivated by ISK.²⁰

Beran A. can be categorized as an Islamic State-inspired lone perpetrator drawing on a supportive micro network. Albeit there is currently no conclusive evidence indicating direct contact with Islamic State operatives, his intense networking activities on messenger chats suggest contact with Islamic State affiliates. Moreover, at an earlier stage of plotting, he reportedly was in contact with a person believed to be a member of the Islamic State: “I will try to get a gun and bombs. If that doesn’t work, I will use big knives. Or I will kill a police officer and take his rifle.”²¹ There is no evidence that has publicly come to light that Beran A. sought or obtained “permission” from the Islamic State for the potential attack.²²

Beran A. had planned to drive as close as possible to the Ernst-Happel Stadium, likely on August 9, in his parents’ VW Beetle equipped with emergency lights to deceive the security personnel.²³ According to the case filed against him, to gain unfettered access to the stadium grounds, he was perhaps planning to disguise himself as a police officer, which would also make his possible escape more seamless after the attack to continue his deadly rampage.²⁴

Beran A. purportedly planned a vehicle ramming attack aimed at causing maximum fatalities by targeting up to 30,000 Taylor Swift fans gathered outside the stadium. He allegedly was planning to use machetes and knives for further assault following the car attack and then to blow himself and others up using a homemade improvised explosive device (IED).²⁵ According to official sources, he had downloaded operating instructions on the handling of the IED from an Islamic State propaganda website and had “considered both options,” a vehicle ramming followed by stabbing or using an IED concerning the *modus operandi*.²⁶

In addition to the main suspect, Austrian police also arrested a 17-year-old Austrian with Turkish-Croatian roots, Luca K. The teenager had just been employed by a facility management company that was providing services of an unspecified nature at the venue of the Taylor Swift concerts, meaning that he likely had unrestricted access to critical areas.²⁷ Luca K. was detected in front of the stadium and allegedly had “extensive IS materials with him.” Stickers glorifying jihadism were found in his wallet, displaying an Islamic State flag and al-Qa`ida lettering imitating an Adidas logo.²⁸ Moreover, investigations have reportedly revealed that Luca K., who had just broken up with his girlfriend, had intensive contact with Beran A. before the attack.²⁹ Telecommunications data shows that Luca K. had intensive contact with Beran A., for example, shortly after Beran A. swore allegiance to the Islamic State and also during the weekend prior to the Taylor Swift concerts.³⁰

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Luca K. was already known to state police in the context of a previous criminal case, a gang war in Vienna.³¹ In March 2024, Luca K. stood trial in Vienna for physically assaulting a young Muslim in the Upper-Austrian town of Pasching in an attempt to convert him to the “right” Islam. “If your mother and sister were not present, we would kill you,” one of his accomplices allegedly threatened the victim.³² The 17-year-old received a four-month suspended prison sentence.

Following the interrogation of a teenager (15) with Turkish roots as a witness, Austrian authorities investigating the Taylor Swift plot also arrested an 18-year-old Iraqi citizen as a third suspect on August 8, 2024.³³ The Vienna Public Prosecutor’s



Police cars are parked outside of Ernst-Happel-Stadion in Vienna, Austria, on August 8, 2024, after three Taylor Swift concerts were canceled after Austrian law enforcement announced it had foiled an attack on the venue. (Thomas Kronsteiner/Getty Images)

Office is investigating Beran A. and Luca K. on charges of terrorist association, criminal organization, and violations of the Weapons Act. At the time of publication, both suspects remain in pre-trial detention, which was extended in November 2024. As a result of the arrests of the two suspects (Beran A. and Luca K.) accused in the terrorist plot, all three Taylor Swift concerts in Vienna were canceled on August 7, 2024. The fact that at least one of the plotters had infiltrated the workforce for the concerts was a critical factor in this decision. Event organizer Barracuda Music, in consultation with law enforcement officials and Swift's management, chose to cancel the music events due to the confirmed terrorist threat.³⁴ The cancellation upset many fans who had traveled from various countries and invested heavily in travel and accommodations to attend the event in Vienna. In response to the threat, and before the concerts were canceled, Austrian authorities had initially heightened security protocols for the concerts.³⁵ Reinforced ("robust") measures included increased security checks at the venue entrances and the deployment of special forces.³⁶ Given Swift's immense global popularity, the foiled plot served as fodder for ISK propaganda and brought an immense amount of attention to the group, which had already grown in notoriety as a result of the Moscow attack just several months earlier.

Virtual Planning Hub or Micro Network?

According to the most recent investigative findings, Beran A. had also planned an attack in front of a mosque in Dubai in the United

Arab Emirates on March 11, 2024.³⁷ This is what restored chats on his mobile phone, uncovered through forensic data analysis, now reveal. Beran A. flew to Dubai in March 2024 and purportedly had the firm intention of stabbing a soldier in front of a mosque and then "shooting at people in the vicinity" with the guard's revolver at the beginning of Ramadan. But he decided against an attack "at the last moment" because he feared "dying in a hail of police bullets and having to suffer from it."³⁸ Following extensive communication on encrypted messenger applications (alternatively on Telegram, Signal, and Snapchat) with Beran A., two suspected accomplices of his from Lower Austria had planned to simultaneously execute attacks on sacred sites in Mecca and Istanbul, believing that they are visited by "infidels."³⁹ One of them, 20-year-old Hasan E., stabbed a security officer in front of the Great Mosque in Mecca on that very day (March 11), injuring four more persons severely. He is currently imprisoned in Saudi Arabia.⁴⁰ Whether the other suspected accomplice, who is still unknown, succeeded with his plot in Istanbul is yet unknown and subject to investigation.⁴¹ Given this relevant context, it appears plausible that Beran A. may have functioned as either a member of a jihadi micro-network or as the organizer of a virtual plotting hub, facilitating the coordination of attacks on behalf of or in collaboration with the group. Referring to his various chats within different chat groups, his role might not be confined to this limited framework, as there is considerable potential for his activities to extend beyond the immediate network.

Transatlantic Intelligence Cooperation

Austrian intelligence services were able to thwart the plot with assistance provided by the CIA and other U.S. intelligence services.⁴² Considering the thwarted ISK Pride Parade plot of June 2023 and the foiled 2023 New Year's Eve European cathedrals attack plan (both analyzed below), this was not the first instance of the United States aiding the Austrians with critical intelligence to prevent an attack. The CIA's deputy director, David Cohen, said that the plot was "quite advanced" and was intended to kill "tens of thousands of people," including "many Americans."⁴³ If successful, the attack would have been reminiscent of the Islamic State-inspired attack in Manchester, England, in 2017 at an Ariana Grande concert, which killed nearly two dozen concertgoers.⁴⁴

The head of Austria's domestic intelligence service, Omar Hajjawi-Pirchner, confirmed that the intelligence tip had emanated from abroad without directly identifying the United States.⁴⁵ Such warnings are common practice for the U.S. intelligence community, which also shared warnings about other imminent plots with Iran and Russia earlier in 2024.⁴⁶ In those cases, even with Tehran and Moscow avowed U.S. adversaries, the intelligence community reached out under its "duty to warn" policy, put in place back in 2015 to establish "a consistent, coordinated approach for how the Intelligence Community (IC) will provide warning regarding threats to specific individuals or groups of intentional killing, serious bodily injury, and kidnapping."⁴⁷ The Americans reportedly first provided Austrian military intelligence authority "Heeres-Nachrichtendienst" (HNA) with Beran A.'s telephone number, his Telegram profile ("Abu Dujana"), and the name of the suspect in a relevant channel, along with forwarded photographs.⁴⁸ Under Austrian law, the security services and law enforcement authorities are prevented from legally monitoring the text messages of its citizens.⁴⁹ Although sources and methods were never revealed, it is likely that signals intelligence, or SIGINT, enabled U.S. intelligence agencies to glean the information necessary to prevent the attack. Then Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer, speaking after the plot was disrupted, said, "It's vital that messenger services like WhatsApp, Signal, Telegram can be decrypted for security authorities, under judicial oversight, while upholding the rule of law."⁵⁰

Attack Tactics

The Taylor Swift plot adhered closely to the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) seen in other jihadi attacks in the West, and in Europe in particular, over the past decade. To begin with, TATP, also known as "the mother of Satan," has become the go-to choice for jihadi terrorists planning attacks in Europe. TATP was used or discovered in the Bataclan attack (November 2015); Brussels Airport attack (March 2016); Manchester Arena attack (May 2017); Brussels Central Station attack (June 2017); Barcelona car-ramming attack and Cambrils stabbing (August 2017); and the Parsons Green, London Underground attempted bombing (September 2017).⁵¹ There was also a vehicle ramming component to the plot, and vehicle ramming attacks became somewhat of a hallmark for the Islamic State during its apex, with deadly attacks at a Bastille Day parade in Nice, France (July 2016, 86 killed); a Berlin Christmas market (December 2016, 12 killed); a busy shopping area in central Stockholm, Sweden (April 2017, four killed); Las Ramblas in Barcelona, Spain (August 2017, 14 killed) and bicycle path in New York City (October 2017, 8 killed), to name just a few.⁵²

Another horrific Islamic State-inspired terrorist attack occurred

on New Year's Day in New Orleans, Louisiana, when a 42-year-old former U.S. Army soldier named Shamsud-din Jabbar rammed a truck into a crowd of revelers on Bourbon Street, killing 14 and injuring many more.⁵³ The attacker pledged his loyalty to the Islamic State in one of several videos posted online, referencing "a war between the believers and disbelievers."⁵⁴ He also hung an Islamic State flag from the vehicle used in the attack. Similar to the Taylor Swift plot, there were multiple attack tactics built into the New Orleans attack, which in addition to the vehicle ramming aspect, included a rifle and improvised explosive devices (though these failed to detonate).

The Taylor Swift concert plot was intended to cause maximum casualties. Given the very high public profile of Taylor Swift, had the attack been successful, it likely would have resulted in weeks of global media coverage and a major boost to Islamic State propaganda, aiding the group in the recruitment of new supporters and followers. Other aspects of the plot—the use of knives, the interplay, as detailed below, of online/offline radicalization, and the use of fake police uniforms—were far from unique but still noteworthy, especially as terrorists often seek to emulate prior attacks and to learn from each other.⁵⁵

TikTok Radicalization

Beran A. radicalized after regularly consuming video material of German salafi influencer preachers such as Abul Baraa and Marcel Krass.⁵⁶ During initial interrogations, the teenager admitted that his radicalization was heavily influenced by consuming TikTok videos, particularly those created by Baraa.⁵⁷ The salafi "hipster"-preacher's relatable style on his TikTok channel has attracted 82,000 followers, with tens of thousands more across other social media platforms where he has shared more than 2,000 videos.⁵⁸

Moreover, Beran A. stated that he had spent the past few weeks playing first-person shooter games on his PlayStation, going to the gym, and reading the Qur'an. According to his avowal, he felt rejected by friends and acquaintances because of their "sins," dedicated his life to Allah, and was a strong advocate of sharia law.⁵⁹

Analysts emphasize TikTok's growing role as a key recruitment platform⁶⁰ for young lone attackers and virtual terror cells, leveraging its vast reach and algorithmic influence.⁶¹ Meanwhile, Telegram is frequently utilized to plan and coordinate attacks. Encrypted platforms such as Telegram allow for secure group communications, enabling extremists to coordinate within cells or networks without fear of their conversations being monitored.⁶² According to recent research by Reuben Dass, "in at least 44 percent of the 57 virtually directed Islamic State plots between 2014 and 2020, Telegram was used as a method of communication."⁶³ This evolution in perpetrator's communicative preferences presents significant challenges for law enforcement.

The recently appointed EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator (EU-CTC), Bartjan Wegter, has identified a more diffuse jihadi threat, emanating from myriad directions and spreading online—something akin to "mutant jihadism."⁶⁴ Salafi jihadis, both organizations as well as micro-structures, are seeking to capitalize upon this dynamic. What might appear as harmless Islamist online content is ubiquitous on different platforms, including TikTok, YouTube, 4Chan, Reddit, Instagram, and others,⁶⁵ while there is also extremely violent jihadi propaganda material shared on Telegram channels.⁶⁶ The initial access point to salafi propaganda is online "borderline content"⁶⁷ (low-threshold formats) that

might be inciting hatred and fueling individuals' radicalization.⁶⁸ The phenomenon of "influencer preachers," who are becoming popular and gaining larger and more diverse followings, should be considered as a driving force of "TikTok-radicalization."⁶⁹ One particularly concerning example of "borderline content" is the new generation of "hipster Salafists,"⁷⁰ preachers who present themselves as pop culture influencers, using slang, memes, and various facets of online culture to present themselves on the internet in ways that resonate with younger generations. In some ways, their growing resonance with younger generations of Muslims is reminiscent of Anwar al-Awlaki, the al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) propagandist who had considerable influence radicalizing a generation of religious extremists.

Everyday problems are framed and interpreted or infused with Islamist ideas. The preacher's casual and relatable appearance providing Q&A-style content in the language of the followers is a savvy tactic of subtle Islamist propaganda. Their goal is to create a gateway to more radical jihadi ideas.⁷¹ Extremists are succeeding in delivering partially radical messages to their target audience or in trivializing, distorting, or deliberately falsifying messages.⁷² TikTok regularly removes videos and accounts containing Islamist and Islamic State-related content, but propagandists appear to operate following a 'flood the zone' principle. Countless profiles openly glorify former Islamic State leaders, often accompanied by captions such as "Look how the kafir dies and burns."⁷³

The Balkan Jihadi Nexus: A Motor for Offline Radicalization

Both alleged plotters had links to the Balkans, with Beran A. having Macedonian (ethnic Albanian) roots and his alleged accomplice having Turkish-Croatian roots. An unmistakable characteristic of the Austrian jihadi scene is its distinctive transnational (Southeast European) network, particularly in, toward, and from the Balkans—especially in Bosnia, the Sandžak area,⁷⁴ Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia.⁷⁵ Strong ties also exist to neighboring Germany and Switzerland, and Turkey. The Balkan region is often described as a "Salafist bridgehead."⁷⁶ Even though Islam in the Balkans has historically been characterized by a tolerant form of Sunnism, the area has had significant issues with radical Islamism.⁷⁷ The Balkan wars of the 1990s introduced numerous radicalized fighters from regions such as Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and North Africa, particularly to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH). According to some estimates, there are still approximately 65 salafi communities in BIH and there were three rural enclaves that were considered sources or refuges for supporters for the Islamic State during the heights of its 'caliphate.'⁷⁸ The radical ideology in these areas was further entrenched by conflicts such as the unfolding Syrian war. In towns like Gornja Maoca, Osve, and Dubica, the Islamic State flag was prominently displayed, and sharia law was enforced until the mid-2010s.⁷⁹ These locations became recruitment hubs, with youth repeatedly drawn from there to fight as militants.⁸⁰ Islamism remains a persistent challenge in North Macedonia. Increasingly, the concern is over online radicalization. This digital presence transcends borders, targeting young, radicalized members of the diaspora in Central and Western Europe.⁸¹

Notorious salafi hate preachers in Austria with a Balkan background, such as Mirsad O. (alias "Ebu Tejma"), Nedžad B. (alias "Ebu Muhammed"), and Hamza Hodja, as well as other charismatic figures in the scene with roots in the former Yugoslavia, have made a significant contribution to the development of overarching salafi

structures and cooperation beyond Austria's borders toward the Balkans. As a Central European hub, especially to the Balkan region, the Danube metropolis of Vienna, in particular, has in the past decade had a pronounced jihadi scene with "great ideological appeal" and far-reaching international connections for several years.⁸² Consequently, the jihadi scene in Austria is estimated to consist of between 120 and 150 particularly dangerous individuals. The director of the DSN recently spoke of a "very low three-digit number" of "endangerers."⁸³ Among them are second or third-generation Austrian citizens, returned foreign terrorist fighters, and immigrants/asylum seekers. As part of an increasingly concerning trend, some of the domestic potential attackers belong to the emerging category of "teenage terrorists"⁸⁴—rapidly radicalized adolescents from Gen Z or even Gen Alpha.⁸⁵ One analysis of recent jihadi propaganda suggests that some recruiters explicitly target youngsters from Balkan diaspora.⁸⁶ Beran A. reportedly was a regular attendee at the local Albanian mosque, visiting every Friday.⁸⁷ However, there is no indication that radical Salafi preachers were active there.

Contrastingly, Luca K. is said to have attended the radical Islamist Tawhid-Mosque in Vienna-Meidling, which is known for being popular among young Islamic State sympathizers.⁸⁸ The notorious mosque had been repeatedly linked to Salafi preachers such as former Imam Muhammed P. (who is alleged to have connections with radical Islamists in Bosnia and a Bosnian mujahideen training camp).⁸⁹ It is also known as the preferred mosque for individuals with Balkan roots, later involved in (attempted or suspected) terrorist plots—most prominently the perpetrator of the Vienna attack of November 2, 2020, Kujtim Fejzulaj,⁹⁰ further underscoring its relevance for radicalizing adolescents in the local context.⁹¹ Consequently, the mosque was temporarily closed after the November 2 attack because Fejzulaj is said to have become radicalized there.⁹²

Luca K.'s radicalization, similar to that of Beran A., appears to have involved both online elements and offline components, such as networks and meeting points (including radical mosques). Furthermore, Luca K.'s radicalization involved interactions with a criminal youth gang with Islamist activities, a profile often seen recently among younger Islamist extremists.⁹³

A combination of societal influence and exposure to extremist content online creates a potent breeding ground for radicalization.⁹⁴ Social media algorithms, designed to engage users, amplify extremist narratives, with adolescents especially vulnerable.⁹⁵ The intersection of mental health vulnerabilities and exposure to extremist ideologies further complicates efforts to intervene effectively.

Mental Health Issues

The third generation of jihadis often manifest as loose micro-networks with a low-profile connection, sometimes a non-affiliation with a core organization such as the Islamic State. Moreover, a hybrid on- and offline radicalization, a growing exploitation of virtual technology, and a tactical low-level attack approach define this current generation of jihadi perpetrators.⁹⁶ Both suspected Taylor Swift concert plotters fit this third-generation profile in terms of age, ethnic background, and dual radicalization. They are teenagers with roots from the Balkans and radicalized online with a reinforcing real-life component.

A significant number of third-generation jihadi suspects have exhibited mental health conditions.⁹⁷ Recent studies by widely

acknowledged researchers like Paul Gill, John Horgan, and others have revealed a notable shift in our understanding of lone-actor terrorism, particularly in relation to jihadi and right-wing extremist violence.⁹⁸ In 2016, Jeanine De Roy van Zuijdewijn and Edwin Bakker found that around 35 percent of European lone-actor terrorists exhibited signs of mental disorders, compared to 27 percent in the general population.⁹⁹ According to research published in 2014 by Emily Corner and Paul Gill, lone-actor terrorists were 13 times more likely to have a mental disorder than those involved in group-based terrorism.¹⁰⁰ These findings indicate that many jihadi lone attackers suffer from some variant of psychopathological illness, often even diagnosed and under surveillance.

The main suspect in the Taylor Swift concert plot, Beran A., is reportedly mentally unstable.¹⁰¹ Since the beginning of the year, he had been abusing the drug “Lyrica”—an anti-epileptic medication also used to treat neuropathic pain and anxiety disorders—along with cannabis.¹⁰² According to his juvenile court report partially cited by Austrian media, this substance abuse led the 19-year-old to experience delusions of persecution and, at times, auditory hallucinations.¹⁰³ Seeking relief from his drug use and mental distress, he turned to an “Islamic cure” and sought a *ruqyah* (a form of exorcism) performed by an imam.¹⁰⁴ Psychopathologies frequently diagnosed among lone actors—such as personality disorders, schizophrenia, delusional disorder, and autism spectrum disorders—often involve “deluded, rigid or fixated” thinking, which can be easily influenced by ideological beliefs.¹⁰⁵

Prelude: Recent Foiled Islamic State and ISK Plots in Austria

Since mid-2023, there have been three significant foiled plots in Austria that could be regarded as indicators of the gathering threat demonstrated by the thwarted Taylor Swift plot. Similarities concern overall plotting, perpetrator typology, pathways of radicalization, *modi operandi*, networks, communication, tactics, and the strong allegiance of the plotters toward the Islamic State and specifically ISK.

The Early 2023 Vienna Pride Parade Plot

In early 2023, three Austrian teenage Islamists—comprising a 14-year-old of Chechen descent and two brothers, aged 17 and 20, of Bosnian descent—planned to use an assault rifle and a machete to attack the Vienna Pride Parade, a popular LGBTQ festival that takes place every June.¹⁰⁶ They were arrested on June 17, shortly before the event.¹⁰⁷ The three suspects were subsequently released a few days after their arrest and consequently not charged. There are indications that the suspected plotters were also planning a vehicle ramming attack.¹⁰⁸ At least two of the plotters, much like the Taylor Swift case suspect Beran A., had been radicalized by Islamist influencer preachers on TikTok, regularly sharing ISK propaganda online.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, the then 14-year-old teenage plotter with Chechen roots asked an unknown user on the messaging service Threema what components he needed to build an explosive.¹¹⁰ The accused then 14-year-old received a link with detailed instructions from this virtual comrade. On his cell phone, investigators discovered bomb-making instructions, a manual for operating an AK-47 assault rifle, a comprehensive guide on traveling to “Islamic State territory,” and a document outlining ways to support jihad.¹¹¹ Police raids conducted before the parade uncovered additional evidence, including a significant cache of blade weapons, a trove of extremist materials, and a written pledge of allegiance to Abu

Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi, the then-leader of the Islamic State. Among the seized items were an 18-page manual detailing tactics for urban combat and a homophobic pamphlet denouncing the LGBTQ community. The manual appeared to provide strategic instructions for carrying out attacks in densely populated areas, indicating a significant level of preparation and intent.¹¹²

The youngest among the group seemed to play a crucial role within the triad. He allegedly initiated a Telegram channel for fellow European-based jihadis and allegedly created and edited propaganda material promoting terrorism. According to investigations, he used a chat group to fundraise for weapons purchases for ISK and stated that he wanted to join the group in Afghanistan as soon as he reached adulthood. The Telegram group served as a hub for active communication with fellow jihadis across Europe, including individuals from Germany, Belgium, and the Balkans, potentially operating as a micro-network for virtual terror planning.¹¹³ Allegedly, the then 17-year-old plotter chatted with at least two suspected Islamic State supporters outside Austria, presumably discussing plans to attack the Vienna Pride Parade and holding out the prospect of acquiring an AK-47 and a large knife in the Czech Republic for a terrorist attack. His then 20-year-old brother is reported to have at least supported him psychologically.¹¹⁴ They are originally from St. Pölten, the state capital of Lower Austria, and the town where Kujtim Fejzulai, the 2020 Vienna attacker, had close ties to the Islamist scene.¹¹⁵ A foreign partner intelligence service is said to have provided the decisive tip-off about the suspects and their plot.¹¹⁶

The September 2023 Central Train Station Plot

On the 22nd anniversary of 9/11, September 11, 2023, 16-year-old Ali K., a teenager of Turkish descent, arrived at Vienna Central Station armed with a 17-centimeter blade combat knife and dressed in camouflage attire, probably to underscore his admiration for military combat. He lingered at the station for about 45 minutes, a location bustling with travelers and commuters, which would have maximized the impact of a knife attack.¹¹⁷ Ali K. planned to ignite a firecracker as a diversion before attacking startled passersby with a knife.¹¹⁸ This deceptive tactic has become characteristic of some recent plots by ISK supporters. For instance, the ISK Moscow Crocus City Hall perpetrators used firecrackers as a decoy, sending panicked visitors to the exits, where the gunmen shot them.¹¹⁹ As already noted, the individual behind the Taylor Swift concert plot intended to use emergency lights to heighten the impact. Apparently, Ali K. lost his nerve and ultimately decided not to follow through with his plans. Like Beran A., he idolized Kujtim Fejzulai, the perpetrator of the November 2, 2020, Vienna attack.¹²⁰ The timing of the planned attack—on the anniversary of 9/11—suggested a deliberate attempt to draw symbolic significance to his actions, aligning himself with a broader narrative of jihadi ideology.

During his planning for the attack, Ali K., allegedly a fanatic supporter of the Islamic State, had announced his planned assault in a bumpy German-English mixture on a relevant Telegram channel: “I make inshallah attacke (sic!) in Vienna.”¹²¹ When asked when he would “do it,” he later replied: “Im make today,” using the platform to declare his intentions and possibly seek validation or encouragement from like-minded individuals. He posted a photo of himself in camouflage clothing and with a combat knife.¹²² His actions are again indicative of the growing trend of publicizing and glorifying terrorism on social media.

In April 2024, Ali K. stood trial, but his aborted attack was not

addressed in court due to his withdrawal from the plan. He was sentenced to two years in prison, with eight months to be served unconditionally, for membership in a terrorist organization and a criminal network. However, due to the time he had already spent in pre-trial detention, he was released shortly after on probation and enrolled in a deradicalization program.¹²³ His probation proved unsuccessful, as he was reportedly spotted in Vienna wearing Taliban-style eyeliner. Moreover, from July 2024 onward, after Ali K. (now 18) had undergone a military medical examination but was deemed unfit for service, his radicalization intensified, and he reportedly began visiting known extremist mosques again, reading extremist literature, and reconnecting with the radical Islamist scene via Telegram.¹²⁴

Ali K.'s aborted attack at the central station was reportedly preceded by a dispute with his father, which allegedly led to another falling out between them. Ali K. has been back again in pre-trial detention since November 6, 2024.¹²⁵ The Vienna public prosecutor's office has now appointed an expert to assess his sanity and dangerousness.¹²⁶ This may suggest a mental health condition. The majority of suspects in recent Islamic State/ISK plots in Austria are male teenagers,¹²⁷ and many reportedly exhibit increased psychological abnormalities and disorders. Their radicalization is influenced by their social and family environment as well as increasingly by social media, especially given the early access children have to platforms such as TikTok and YouTube.

The 2023 New Year's Eve European Cathedrals Plot

A transnational, seven-member ISK cell, comprising six individuals of Tajik origin and one Turkish-rooted woman, orchestrated an elaborate plot targeting iconic churches in Europe, including St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna and Cologne Cathedral.¹²⁸ The group's plans extended beyond symbolic destruction, aiming to inflict mass casualties. German authorities uncovered that the cell intended to carry out a vehicle attack against the dense crowds gathered outside Cologne Cathedral, a popular New Year's Eve destination adjacent to the central train station.¹²⁹ Both timing and target selection indicated a plan to maximize the number of potential victims and media impact.

The main suspect is also alleged to have taken photos and video recordings of the Viennese amusement park "Prater," possibly another potential target of the ISK cell.¹³⁰ However, his actions may not have been solely driven by terrorist intentions. It has now been confirmed that the man made at least five phone calls to a contact in October and November 2023, during which plans for a robbery, a kidnapping for ransom, and a contract killing were allegedly discussed.¹³¹ Further investigations revealed preliminary evidence pointing to additional plans by the same transnational cell active in Austria and Germany for an attack in Madrid, indicating the ISK cell's broader European ambitions.¹³² Excavations in Lower Austria for a possible ISK weapons cache in a wooded area near Sieghartskirchen and in a ravine in Hinterbrühl were unsuccessful.¹³³ Only pieces of sheet metal and wire were found, but no evidence to support the suspicions. Given that the crucial information needed to thwart the attack scenario and identify the suspects once again came from a friendly intelligence partner, the initial suspicion could not be corroborated with additional evidence (as intelligence data cannot be used in court). As a result, all criminal proceedings were dropped in October 2024.¹³⁴

The Transnational ISK Threat

The ISK Taylor Swift plot came as little surprise to Western security services, which have been dealing with an uptick in ISK plotting.¹³⁵ The group has deliberately made it a part of its strategy to focus on external operations and, accordingly, has dedicated more resources to launching attacks outside of Afghanistan. The shift in approach was the result of a decision taken by the group's leader, Sanaullah Ghafari (also known as Shahab al-Muhajir), and began to take shape not long after the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021.¹³⁶ And though there is no evidence that the U.S. troop withdrawal precipitated Ghafari's decision, the lack of a U.S. presence certainly enabled ISK to plot transnational attacks, taking advantage of an intelligence deficit that was the outcome of the troop withdrawal.

In 2022, ISK conducted cross-border rocket attacks against two of its neighbors, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, launched assaults against the Russian and Pakistani embassies in Kabul, and attacked a hotel in Kabul frequented by Chinese businessmen.¹³⁷ These targets were far from random and were indeed part of the group's effort to globalize its agenda. ISK's propaganda is key to understanding what it has called its internationalization strategy.¹³⁸ To get a sense of the diversity of languages and the geographic scope and reach of ISK, one only needs to consider that its content is published in Arabic, Dari, English, Farsi, Hindi, Malay, Pashto, Russian, Tajik, Turkish, Urdu, Uzbek, and sometimes Uyghur. As part of the group's production efforts, it releases online print magazines in Arabic, English, Pashto, Tajik, and Turkish, in addition to multilingual videos. The goal is to cast a wide net in an effort to radicalize a broad swath of supporters and followers. Toward this end, ISK has also diversified the tech platforms where it operates, communicating, spreading, and storing its propaganda through Archive.org, Element, Facebook, Hoop, Telegram, and TikTok while continuously looking for additional ways to spread its messaging.¹³⁹

It is important to track and monitor ISK propaganda because the group is very serious about its plans and often follows through on the various threats it makes across languages and platforms. Over the summer of 2024, before the Taylor Swift plot was disrupted, it became clear that ISK was fixated on attacking Europe. Just as ISK telegraphed its intention to attack Russia through its propaganda,¹⁴⁰ in the summer of 2024, ISK threatened the Euro 2024 games in Germany, the Cricket World Cup in the United States, and the Summer Olympics in Paris.¹⁴¹ Following ISK's deadly attack in Russia in March, a website affiliated with the group published a graphic that read, "After Moscow ... Who Is the Next?" and highlighted London, Madrid, Paris, and Rome as potential targets.¹⁴² These are hardly idle threats. In the lead-up to Euro 2024 in Germany, an Islamic State supporter had applied, unsuccessfully, for a job as part of the security staff employed to protect the games. The individual, of German-Moroccan-Polish nationality, was later arrested at the Cologne/Bonn airport in Germany and charged with violating the Foreign Trade and Payments Act for transferring approximately \$1,700 USD in cryptocurrency to ISK.¹⁴³

Conclusion

What does the Taylor Swift concert attack plot and the uptick in plotting by ISK tell us about the outlook for the current terror threat landscape and where things might be going over the course of 2025? To begin with, it seems logical to suggest a continued effort by jihadi groups, including affiliates of the Islamic State, to focus

on radicalizing extremely young supporters and followers online. The demographics appear to have shifted, with children in their early teens now particularly susceptible to jihadi propaganda. Salafi 'hipster preachers' have repeatedly proven to be influential figures, effectively leveraging social media platforms like TikTok to spread their message.

The use of borderline content, wherein less threatening topics and internet meme culture are used as an on-ramp to more hardcore material, is likely to continue, if not increase altogether. ISK's push to radicalize and recruit will be abetted by its aggressive propaganda campaign, which has expanded in both scale and scope, diversifying its geographic reach and publishing in more languages than ever before.

In line with the objective to radicalize and recruit new members and to push individuals toward plotting and acts of violence, groups such as the Islamic State and their affiliates will focus on dual radicalization—that is, attempting to radicalize potential supporters *both* online and in person, viewing this as the more effective route. Accordingly, the group will end up recruiting individuals, like some of those in the Austrian plots, who exhibit clear mental health issues.

Just as ISK will continue to combine the online/offline dual approach toward radicalization, in the future, the group will also likely continue to pursue a multi-pronged approach to plotting and attacking. While concert venues and other large gatherings will remain attractive, given the opportunity to maximize casualty counts, the ISK enabled or inspired individuals will also pursue low-level attacks with knives and other weapons in an effort to

increase the operational tempo of their attacks and spread fear among civilian populations.

Each of these trends is converging around and is indeed impacted by a broader shift in the counterterrorism community, wherein resources have been diverted away from counterterrorism and toward great power competition. This includes not just funding and manpower/personnel but also a drawdown in Western military forces on the ground, which have been the tip of the spear in taking the offensive to terrorists, insurgents, and militias operating in areas where al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State, and their various franchise groups control territory and project influence.

The information sharing and intelligence cooperation that characterized the Taylor Swift plot surely relied, in great part, on the ubiquitous reach of signals intelligence. As evidenced by the strike that killed longtime al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul in late July 2022, the United States retains exquisite technological capabilities as part of its 'over-the-horizon' approach to counterterrorism. Still, as Israel learned painfully on October 7, 2023, an overreliance on technology can be deadly. The United States and its allies must not take their collective technological superiority for granted. Technology is critical to disrupting terrorist plots, but it is not a panacea. Only through a comprehensive approach to counterterrorism, including reliance on all forms of intelligence, from HUMINT to ELINT to COMINT, as well as sensitive site exploitation (SSE) and document exploitation (DOCEX), can the West remain at the forefront of protecting its citizens and institutions from the long arm of the Islamic State.

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Answers from the Sahel: Wassim Nasr, Journalist, France24, on His Interview with Deputy JNIM Leader Mohamed (Amadou) Koufa

By Paul Cruickshank

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Editor's Note: In October 2024, in a Q&A that took two years to set up, Wassim Nasr of France24 received answers from Amadou Koufa, the founder and emir of Katiba Macina, a branch of the Sahel al-Qa`ida affiliate Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM). The answers were shared via an audiotape publicly posted online by the group. It was Koufa's first-ever interview by a news outlet. He is the second-highest ranking figure in JNIM. According to his designation by the United Nations, Koufa is one of JNIM emir Iyad ag Ghali's religious advisers and his principal representative in the center of Mali. France24 aired a segment on October 22, 2024, in which Nasr discussed Koufa's answers.

CTC: How did the interview with Amadou Koufa come about?

Nasr: It took me two years of discussions in order to get him to answer because he was initially not interested in answering my questions. The answers came as an audio compilation of 26 minutes and 18 seconds that was published by al-Zallaka, the JNIM media outlet, on October 21, 2024. This was the only way to be sure that it was Koufa answering with his own voice and in the name of the group and that the group took full responsibility for the answers. The next day, October 22, 2024, France24 aired a studio analysis segment focusing on the terrorism threat in the Sahel in which I described what he told me.¹ We did not publish his answers verbatim nor air them.

CTC: What for you stood out in Koufa's answers?

Nasr: Of the 17 questions I asked, Koufa replied to 14. There were some answers which were very vague, and some that were quite interesting. I asked him, "You accuse Russia and the Malian army of committing human rights abuses, but your group burned villages in Ansongo [in eastern Mali],² accusing the villagers of being supporters of the Islamic State. So how can you justify this?"

His answer, which I am paraphrasing, was interesting. He stated that generally: "We consider that we tried everything with villagers before the use of force. We try negotiations, we try to tell them to stay away from the army and from local militias. Regarding the villages in Ansongo, we said stay away from Islamic State Sahel Province and they did not answer positively our calls. We tried everything and now we consider that there is only war between

us and them.' He considered his group to be the legitimate force handling those areas.

The most important thing he said is that human rights abuses by the Russians and the Malian military in Africa have pushed Fulanis into the hands of al-Qa`ida.³ He did not say 'it's only my force of preaching.' He stated that, 'yes, of course hideous crimes created awareness and pushed them into our hands ... the Russians surpassed by far abuses committed by the French.'

Commenting on the French departure from the Sahel region, Koufa said that France's departure was "a victory given by God for mujahideen," adding "God gave the courage to their former followers and slaves [the juntas in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso] to rebel." He said that "France should stop mocking and respect the Muslims in general and in Africa in particular, if they do, they will be treated accordingly."

He stated that JNIM were still open to negotiations with the government and what he referred to as "conflict resolution." The audio recording with his answers was recorded before the group carried out an attack on a military training school and the military airport in the Malian capital Bamako on September 17, 2024, the first attack of this kind in the capital for years.⁴ Three days after the attack, on September 20, 2024, Koufa stated the same thing, in an audio tape released by the group about the need for conflict resolution.⁵

So those are the things that were in my sense the most interesting parts of what he said.

For what it's worth, he also claimed, 'We try to avoid hitting civilian targets.' But while this is the case for JNIM in urban areas—with their last significant attacks against soft targets in an urban areas being the Radisson Blu attack in Bamako in November 2015⁶ and an attack on the Aziz Istanbul café in Ouagadougou in August 2017⁷—they don't hesitate to target civilian populations in rural areas they want to control. It's clear their focus on military and hard targets in urban areas is a political choice in order to try to win the hearts and minds of the population.

Interesting enough, answering a question in which I gave the Aziz Istanbul unclaimed attack as an example, he said "mistakes can occur sometimes and we abide to compensate those mistakes." He claimed that the use of force is a kind of last resort and that "acts of war ... can be interpreted differently according to the legitimacy or not of the perpetrators."

CTC: Human Rights Watch documented a JNIM massacre⁸ of "at least 133 people in the town of Barsalogo, Burkina Faso, on August 24, 2024, largely civilians, forced [locals] to build a trench to protect the town with a military base."⁹

Nasr: After that attack, JNIM sent a response to Human Rights Watch¹⁰ justifying the attack, saying that even if those targeted were forced to dig the trench, "this would not be an excuse to



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spare them. Anyone who ... follows this regime ... deserves to be held accountable.”¹¹ They were basically saying that it was justified to kill the villagers because they could have refused to dig the trench and because “the villagers, men and women, had a history of cooperating with army in the region.” It should be noted that according to Human Rights Watch, “witnesses said that soldiers based in Barsalogo forced male residents to dig the new trench section without providing payment.”¹² It was the first time that the Shura Council of JNIM in Burkina Faso had publicly and officially answered an NGO.

Answering one of my questions, Koufa reiterated the stance of JNIM regarding NGO activities in the areas that are under the control of the group. He said they are allowed to operate as long as it does not involve “hostile activities” to the group. Such activities have included, for example, “birth control” issues that led to the banning of some NGOs in Timbuktu in August 2024.¹³

CTC: In its July 2024 report, the United Nations team monitoring the global jihadi terror threat stated that “JNIM and ISGS [the Islamic State in the Sahel] have both expanded and consolidated their areas of operation. Complete destabilization of the countries in the region in the medium-term remains a possible risk and continues to be an objective of these groups. This is accompanied by a strategy aimed at extending their influence in the northern parts of some littoral States to enhance terrorist access to resources and logistical corridors essential for their expansion.”¹⁴ What is your assessment?

Nasr: Today, there are two issues: The first issue is that the Islamic State is a real security and military threat in West Africa. But this security military threat is being mostly contained due to attrition because of the war between the Islamic State and the al-Qa`ida affiliate JNIM. The war with JNIM is also preventing the Islamic

State from recruiting beyond the three-border area between Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Koufa, referring to the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), told me that ‘they had tried everything with these deviants and the only option now was war,’ especially because of ISSP’s “indiscriminate violence against civilians” in areas where the population is loyal to JNIM and beyond.

The second issue is that JNIM in the mid to long run is a political challenge, as well as a military and security threat.

CTC: This is the view that JNIM is a bigger long-term concern because they’re smarter in terms of how they deal with the population.

Nasr: Yes, they are more political when they address local players, communities, and power brokers, which makes them capable of compromise. They have already taken control or roam freely in large chunks of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso and are more and more active in northern Benin.

CTC: Could JNIM take over Bamako and Ouagadougou, the capitals?

Nasr: I don’t know if they have the capacity to handle capitals. While in theory they would like to take over these cities militarily, taking Bamako or Ouagadougou or Niamey would be very costly for them in terms of governance and management. With large segments of the population in these cities being hostile to them, it would not be easy for them. It would also be used by the juntas to regain unconditional international support. So, it does not make sense for them to take the cities from a rational point of view, but of course, you should keep in mind that we are not talking only about rational actors here and it is possible for irrational decisions to lead to gains on the ground for them.

CTC: When it comes to the littoral countries—Benin, Togo, Ghana, Ivory Coast—how worried do they need to be about the threats to the north of them?

Nasr: They should be worried, but they can still avoid committing the same mistakes that were made in the Sahel countries regarding human rights abuses targeting the Fulani population, for example, regarding the situation on the border, regarding the sole choice of a military solution. The governments should avoid building up and using local militias which lead to more human rights abuses and in turn more targeting of civilians by jihadi groups.

The governments of the littoral countries should look at what was done badly in the Sahel over the last 10 years and try to find something smarter, which is the path the Ivory Coast is now taking, for example. Authorities in Abidjan started by acknowledging that the situation was getting problematic on the northern border as early as 2017, so they enhanced security and military efforts but also tackled problems between herders and farmers on which Koufa himself was trying to capitalize on by sending a number of emissaries to Ivory Coast. So, for the Ivory Coast, avoiding denial [a problem existed] was a good starting point; that was followed by measures that prevented JNIM from having a foothold in the country. It does not mean that incursions into the Ivory Coast are impossible or that JNIM operatives do not cross the border to shop or see family members, but it means that JNIM was deterred or



JNIM deputy leader Mohamed (Amadou) Koufa (center) in a video released by the group in February 2023

unable to plant the seeds of an insurgency as he did in Burkina Faso out of Mali, and out of Burkina Faso in Niger and in Benin.

CTC: What questions did Koufa not answer?

Nasr: The three questions he did not answer related to Hamas and the situation in Gaza, the Taliban, and al-Qa`ida Central. He did not want to speak about al-Qa`ida at all. He did not answer any of the questions regarding al-Qa`ida. I followed up with some local sources with knowledge of the deliberations of the group on this and they conveyed to me that his silence on al-Qa`ida had a purpose. In my assessment, Koufa's refusal to speak about al-Qa`ida was significant. I think it's very possible that JNIM is at least seriously discussing and maybe preparing to break from al-Qa`ida.

Since the last third of December, JNIM has stopped referring to AQIM and stopped directing followers to the AQIM media outlet Al-Izza. Furthermore, very interestingly on January 20, 2025, AQIM issued a communiqué regarding the Gaza war, which for the first time did not come in the form of a joint communiqué with JNIM.¹⁵

And looking back at the audio answers of Koufa, I noticed that the compilation did not start as usual with a graphic of AQ media branches nor with the regular audio of OBL, but rather only with the al-Zallaqa logo. Even the *nasheed* used in the compilation was not an al-Qa`ida *nasheed*. It looks like they might be preparing the landscape for a split with al-Qa`ida in the same way that Jabhat al-Nusra—the predecessor group of Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), the group now in power in Syria—split with al-Qa`ida.

CTC: So, what we may see playing out is the events in Syria having reverberations in the Sahel because JNIM have just seen a group that split with al-Qa`ida take over the country?

Nasr: This is a very good question. In Idlib, as I observed firsthand during a visit there in 2023,¹⁶ HTS moved towards what I've called a third path—firmly away from al-Qa`ida's path, which HTS leaders such as Ahmed al Sharaa thought was leading nowhere, but



et de répondre aux questions du célèbre journaliste



Wassim Nasr

Screen captures from the audiotape released by the JNIM media outlet al-Zallaqa on October 21, 2024, containing Mohamed (Amadou) Koufa's answers to Wassim Nasr's questions. The Arabic text says, in part: "We are glad to receive the questions of the famous journalist Wassim Nasr and to answer them through al-Zallaqa media production institute, in this first interview with him."

not onto a path that can be called liberal or democratic. This was a political choice that led them all the way to power in Damascus, which would have been impossible under the banner of al-Qa`ida. We are now seeing this pragmatic Islamism play out in its rule in Syria, as I reported a week after the fall of Assad.¹⁷ This could be a blueprint for other jihadi groups, including in the Sahel. But even if AQIM and JNIM did not get involved in plotting attacks in Western countries, it should be noted that a little bit less than a decade ago, AQIM did get involved in sending relatively small amounts of money to what was then the al-Qa`ida affiliate Hurras al-Din in Syria and al-Qa`ida sympathizers in Gaza, for example. So, it's too soon to know if the internal JNIM dynamics will allow the shift away from al-Qa`ida to happen in the Sahel and if it does, would it be to the advantage of JNIM, or will it play into the hands of its deadly enemy the Islamic State? That was the gamble Ahmed al-Sharaa (then known as Abu Muhammad al-Julani) took in Syria in 2017 by forming Hayat Tahrir al Sham. The payoff took seven years to come with the group's takeover of Syria being broadly accepted by the international community. **CTC**

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