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FEATURE ARTICLE

## The Quds Force in Syria

PIERRE BOUSSEL

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## Brian Nelson

UNDER SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY  
FOR TERRORISM AND FINANCIAL  
INTELLIGENCE

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*Cover: The commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force, Esmail Qaani, speaks at an event in Tehran, Iran, on December 20, 2022. (Morteza Nikoubazi/NurPhoto via Getty Images)*

### FROM THE EDITOR

In this month's feature article, Pierre Bousset provides a deep examination of the Quds Force in Syria. He writes: "The key mission of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) is to defend the Iranian Islamic

Revolution and create armed militias in the countries of its 'Axis of Resistance.' Its organization is opaque and complex, coordinating combat operations with soft-power actions aimed at, among other initiatives, establishing a *Pax Irania* in the Middle East, a 'peace' of which it is the initiator and guarantor. Although the Quds Force's apparatus in Syria has been under pressure from Israeli airstrikes, Tehran is sticking to its mission set: infiltrating Syrian civil society and sending fighters to the north, where the civil war will one day end, and to the south, on the edge of the Golan Heights, to establish a base against Israel if necessary."

Our interview is with Brian Nelson, the Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence. He describes how his office "marshals the Department's intelligence and enforcement functions with the dual aims of safeguarding our financial system against illicit use and also combating corrupt regimes, terrorist facilitators, weapons of mass destruction proliferators, money launderers, drug kingpins, and other national security threats."

On May 6, 2023, Mauricio Garcia, a man with longstanding neo-Nazi views, murdered eight people in a mass shooting at the Allen Premium Outlets mall in Allen, Texas. Ashley Mattheis, Amarnath Amarasingam, Graham Macklin, and Marc-André Argentino look at what led to the attack. They write that the deceased perpetrator "had an ideologically fuzzy tapestry of extreme thoughts tied to rampant violence. He appeared to view neo-Nazis and other members of the extreme far-right as living the 'real' masculine ideal in its fullest form by their commitment to generating dominance through violent, radical, racial, and cultural action. This interaction between race and gender is an increasingly present aspect of far-right violence and needs to be better understood."

**Paul Cruickshank**, *Editor in Chief*

# The Quds Force in Syria: Combatants, Units, and Actions

By Pierre Boussel

**The key mission of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) is to defend the Iranian Islamic Revolution and create armed militias in the countries of its “Axis of Resistance.” Its organization is opaque and complex, coordinating combat operations with soft-power actions aimed at, among other initiatives, establishing a *Pax Irania* in the Middle East, a ‘peace’ of which it is the initiator and guarantor. Although the Quds Force’s apparatus in Syria has been under pressure from Israeli airstrikes, Tehran is sticking to its mission set: infiltrating Syrian civil society and sending fighters to the north, where the civil war will one day end, and to the south, on the edge of the Golan Heights, to establish a base against Israel if necessary.**

**I**rregular warfare—a deliberately asymmetric approach to the enemy to surprise and destabilize<sup>1</sup>—is not just a tactic in Iranian military doctrine; it is also an established operational model of the “Islamic Revolution.” The day after taking power, the regime set up a “headquarters for irregular warfare,”<sup>2</sup> which it used against its enemy then, Iraq. From the start, the aim was to have a force on the fringes of a conventional force, offering a wide range of interventions: combat, intelligence, special operations, and soft power, among others.

The IRGC<sup>3</sup> was born out of the desire to protect the gains of the Islamic Revolution<sup>4</sup> against internal and external enemies and to export the ideology of the regime, whatever the means and *modus operandi*. Mostly confined, in terms of external operations, to southern Lebanon and a few operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina<sup>5</sup> in the years following its establishment after the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah of Iran,<sup>6</sup> it became, during the Syrian civil war, a textbook case illustrating Iran’s expansionist strategy.

To understand the IRGC is to understand the deeper realities of the regime. Before being killed in a U.S. strike, the then Quds Force commander Major General Qassem Soleimani declared in 2018: “The IRGC has a structure, statutes, rules and regulations, but in reality [it is] an intellectual system”<sup>7</sup> in which every action is sacred. The aim of Soleimani was summarized as: “to create opportunities out of dark crises.”<sup>8</sup> This phrase exemplified the *modus operandi*

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of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps operating in the Syrian theater. It used the Syrian crisis to create opportunities for itself.

Tehran’s axes of intervention in Syria are: 1) To protect the Shi’a minorities in Syria; 2) to create a corridor to the shores of the Mediterranean by eliminating the American presence; and 3) to create the conditions for an encirclement maneuver of the Israeli state if necessary, pre-positioning men and military equipment on the outskirts of the Golan Heights without opening fire on Israeli positions.<sup>9</sup> There is no time limit on any of the objectives. It is not a question of conquering an area and then withdrawing as soon as peace is signed. The Quds Force wants to establish *Pax Irania* in Syria and in all the countries of the “Axis of Resistance.”<sup>a</sup> The aim is to create a transnational peace that transcends flags and borders, a space of shared theological values and strategic cohesion where Tehran, as the epicenter of the edifice, is the guarantor of everyone’s security.

After supplying law enforcement equipment to Damascus in 2011<sup>10</sup> and training officers in the management of pre-insurgency situations,<sup>11</sup> the Quds Force quickly moved on to its core business: establishing militias<sup>12</sup> tasked with spreading the message of the “Islamic Revolution” among the civilian population.<sup>13</sup> An Iranian major general close to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has estimated that the IRGC has created 82 fighting units in Syria since the beginning of its intervention, amounting to some 70,000 armed men.<sup>b</sup>

The first part of this article focuses on the human organization of the Quds Force, from the rank-and-file to the senior officers who plan the Iranian presence in Syria. It then distinguishes between the Force’s units and locally created militias. It takes a close look at recruitment operations, the nature of military confrontations, infiltration attempts, and soft-power work aimed at increasing Tehran’s influence in Syria. Before offering concluding observations, particular attention is paid to the failure of Iranian intelligence, which, by dint of proselytizing, forgets to be discreet.

This article is largely based on Iranian and Arab sources that reflect either the positions of governments or opposition movements operating in the region. The daily reading and study of sources likely to have biases and agendas is cross-referenced with factual events reported by Western sources and analyses, which, depending on the vector and country of origin, may also be biased. Cross-referencing these sources provides a mine of knowledge. The exaggerations of certain sources conceal weaknesses. Silence reveals embarrassment. Shameless lies reveal the dynamics of propaganda. The paradox is

a The countries of the “Axis of Resistance” (*mehwar-e moqawemat* in Farsi) are Israel, Iran, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestinian territory of Gaza.

b Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi is one of the head military advisors to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. “Khamenei Senior Advisor: Soleimani Established 82 Brigades in Syria, Iraq,” Asharq Al-Awsat (Ar), January 12, 2021.

that some sources are more interesting in their silence than they are in their content. This article is mainly based on open-source information. The author has been closely following the activities of the Quds Force in Syria for over 10 years. This tracking is cited when the author is not aware of relevant open-source information. The protection of human sources on this extremely sensitive issue imposes a duty of care on those who take the risk of providing foreign analysts with information about the IRGC's actions.

The staff of the Quds Force has the peculiarity of being open and official at the top and utterly secretive when it comes to the men on the ground, the real linchpins of Tehran's policy in Syria. The identification of the actors of the Iranian presence in Syria in this article is based on Iranian sources, both pro-government and political opposition.

### Leaders and Combatants

Quds is one of the four units that make up the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), along with the ground, air, and naval forces. A recruitment website in Iran explains that its mission is to “organize Islamic movements,” raise funds, and oversee external relations.<sup>14</sup> Young recruits undergo nine to 12 months of training at the Mashhad center in northeast Iran, known by the code name 4000, or at the Ben Ali barracks (code name 320).<sup>15</sup> Ideological and theological training is provided at the Imam Hossein University in Tehran (District Babaei Hwy).

At the top of the Quds organization is a coterie of staff officers. Each zone of intervention (Syria, Iraq, Lebanon) is headed by a commander. The position gives access to the Council, a forum of exchange and consultation, who reports on their specific activities in Syria to General Esmail Qaani, head of the Quds Force.<sup>16</sup>

Commander Khalil Zahedi, nicknamed Abu Mahdi al-Zahdi, is currently the linchpin of the Iranian presence in Syria. There is no photograph or official biography of him. Nor is there any evidence that the Iranians are communicating the identity of this man, who is apparently in the sights of Israeli and American special forces.<sup>17</sup>

Commander Zahedi's prerogatives are many and varied. He manages subordinates assigned to geographical areas, such as Commander Hajj Kumait, responsible for eastern Syria (Deir ez-Zor, Hasakah, Raqqa, and Badia).<sup>18</sup> He has solved logistical problems concerning ammunition stocks and fuel by receiving emissaries from Behnam Shahriyari, identified by the United States as the head of an oil smuggling network.<sup>19</sup> Lower-ranking Iranian officers deployed on the ground organize the purchase of Syrian houses, apartments, shops, and farmland, which they then provide to pro-Iranian fighters.<sup>20</sup>

Commander Zahedi has to ensure that the field visits of his superior, General Qaani, go smoothly—for example, when the latter came to oversee the distribution of humanitarian aid to the victims of the February 6, 2023, earthquake.<sup>21</sup> Zahedi is also responsible for the maintenance of Shi'a places of worship and the security of religious festivals and recreational activities. For example, he oversaw the inauguration of a school for children to learn to speak Persian<sup>22</sup> and ensured that a mosque in the al-Tamou district of al-Mayadeen, which had been converted into an IRGC command post, could be used as a hall for religious ceremonies.<sup>23</sup>

If General Qassem Soleimani, killed in early 2020, still embodies the mission of the Quds Force in Syria in the Iranian imagination, other lesser-known officers have played important roles, albeit less high-profile, but still leaving an operational footprint.<sup>24</sup> One

example is General Hossein Hamdani<sup>25</sup> who formed the first militias to support President Bashar al-Assad during the worst of the Syrian civil war, when gunfire could be heard in the corridors of the presidential palace. Inspired by the Basiji model,<sup>c</sup> Hamdani organized the embedding of fighters in civil society—by having them sleep in people's homes rather than in barracks, for example—to create a human link with the civilian population.<sup>26</sup>

Two other generals contributed greatly to the internationalization of the force: Mohammad Hijazi, who had long worked with Hezbollah and whose connections were very useful in coordinating the arrival of Lebanese fighters, and Esmail Qaani,<sup>27</sup> the current head of the Quds Force and an expert on Afghanistan and its Shi'a minorities (Hazaras), from which came the powerful Liwa Fatemiyoun group<sup>28</sup> operating in Syria.<sup>29</sup>

The article's appendix contains an organizational chart of the principal Iranian officials and officers currently involved in the Syrian file based on the author's tracking of the Iranian presence in Syria since 2011.

General Hossein Salami, commander-in-chief of the IRGC, recently gave an update on his forces' involvement in Syria. He put forward three key ideas that he said should guide Iran's strategy in Syria.<sup>30</sup>

- The fight against the West requires “one or two intermediate grounds” to fight on; by which he means Syria. The notion that Tehran's security begins in Damascus is an old one in Iran.
- The IRGC is to play “a decisive role in Iranian deterrence” in the Middle East. The Quds Force is an asymmetric force. No state or army has been able to defeat it or roll it back.
- The IRGC forces are “transformational.” They do not exist in a static reality. They are constantly evolving.

### Units and Militias

The Quds Force is made up of units operating in particular in the Syrian theater. They operate in complete secrecy and are never mentioned in official media from the authorities in Tehran.<sup>d</sup> Thanks to Syrian opposition sources, the presence of some of them on the ground in Syria has been confirmed, as have some of their activities. Local testimony from digital sources (e.g., social networks, armed factions' channels, disaffected militants' channels, and local press) allows the presence of IRGC units to be established through a long process of cross-checking, without the author claiming that the following list is complete:

- 
- c Founded by Ayatollah Khomeini after the 1979 revolution, the Niruyeh Moghavamet Basij, known as the Bassidj, is a paramilitary auxiliary force responsible for internal security and enforcing the regime's orders. The U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned the militia for “recruiting, training, and using child soldiers to fight in conflicts fuelled by the Revolutionary Guard throughout the region.” For more information, see “Treasury Sanctions Vast Financial Network Supporting Iranian Paramilitary Force That Recruits and Trains Child Soldiers,” U.S. Department of State, October 16, 2018. For more information about the Basij Militia, see Saied Golkar, “Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran,” Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Columbia University Press, 2015.
- d The IRGC is also active in other parts of the world. For more on the mapping of IRGC activities around the world since 1979, see “Making the Case for the UK to Proscribe Iran's IRGC,” Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, January 17, 2023.

**IRGC, Quds Force, Unit 400**

Identified activities: Transport and logistics

- Led by Abdollahi Hamed, the unit is mentioned in connection with arms transfers on the Iraq-Syria axis under the guise of humanitarian aid convoys.<sup>31</sup>

**IRGC, Quds Force, Unit 190**

Identified activities: Financing

- Led by Behnam Shahriyari, the unit is involved in oil smuggling<sup>32</sup> and money laundering.<sup>33</sup>

**IRGC, Unit 1500**

Known activities: Counterintelligence

- Led by Ruhollah Bazquandi, the unit is cited in cases of neutralization of Iranian opponents or Israeli interests (in Turkey).<sup>34</sup>

Non-IRGC units have also operated in Syria. From 2014 to 2016, an Iranian force known as the Green Berets from Iran's 65th Airborne Brigade was reported to be conducting advisory missions in Syria.<sup>35</sup> The "Green Berets," also known as the NOHED Brigade,<sup>e</sup> do not belong to the IRGC but to the Iranian army's special forces unit. Officers from Iran's Ranger Brigades (45th, 258th, 58th [Zulfiqar]) were present.

With the end of the Islamic State's hold on Syrian territory and the stabilization of the frontlines, the Quds Force has regained mobility for its men and logistics convoys. It manages the conflict—of medium to low intensity—through dispersed attacks and carefully planned operations. The aim is not to hold positions, to be entrenched on the frontlines, but to exert a potentially coercive influence on regional areas.<sup>36</sup>

The visible face of the Iranian edifice in Syria is made up of the large and well-documented militias: Liwa al-Quds, Lebanese Hezbollah, Fatemiyoun Brigade, Zainebiyoun Brigade, Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Liwa al-Baqir, and Kata'ib al-Imam Ali.<sup>37</sup>

And then there are the others, the unknown and the ephemeral, those who are obscure (*al-Ghaybat* in Shi'a culture).<sup>f</sup> Some have a technical vocation, such as protecting military sites. The Fajr al-Islam militia<sup>38</sup> was created to secure the former Russian military bases, which were recovered in 2022 after the "repositioning" of the Russian apparatus, according to Safinaz Mohamed Ahmed, a researcher at the Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies.<sup>39</sup>

Others are exclusively female: for example, the Field Women's Battalion,<sup>g</sup> commanded by Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas in Al-Bukamal since August 2022.<sup>40</sup> The women in the battalion carry out agricultural work for a monthly salary of around \$100.<sup>41</sup> They provide health care, run nurseries, or open kindergartens, such as the Khatwa kindergarten in the Villat al-Baladiya neighborhood of Deir ez-Zor.<sup>42</sup> The aim of this battalion is twofold: first, to have the

human skills to infiltrate Syrian civil society and second, to carry out intelligence missions.<sup>43</sup> The IRGC may consider women to be more reliable than men, perhaps as men have more of a tendency to confide in the first person they meet on social networks. Second, to develop a non-combatant force to transmit Islamic thought and promote the idea of the "holy defense" of the countries of the Axis of Resistance.<sup>44</sup>

The Quds Force also created the Imam Brigade in 2022 to adapt to the pressure of Israeli airstrikes.<sup>45</sup> The Iranian officer Suleiman al-Abbasi has been put in charge of this small unit of less than 100 men,<sup>46</sup> which aims to immerse itself in Syrian society. His two deputies belong to the Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>47</sup> After a few weeks of training in the desert (As-Suwayda), they were deployed in a large area, from As-Suwayda to the outskirts of Quneitra, in 2022.<sup>48</sup> This tactic seems to respond to the desire to discreetly pre-position forces on the outskirts of the Golan Heights.

The creation of the Imam Brigade has been accompanied by intensive work with local tribes and dignitaries. The aim is to allow pro-Iranian fighters to move freely in the region and create human synergies.<sup>49</sup> The Iranians seem to place their men among and grant material benefits to those who become their allies. One example among many: Agents of influence worked to promote a local figure, Abdul Aziz Al-Rifai, who was given the status of sheikh, a title of honor and respect in Syrian sociology. He was invited to Tehran and welcomed at the People's Assembly in 2022.<sup>50</sup> Members of his extended family were also helped in gaining privileged administrative positions.<sup>51</sup>

The Quds Force has intimate knowledge of local power relations. It knows who to appoint, who to promote, and who to sack for disobedience.<sup>52</sup> This work, which has been going on for more than a decade, is based on a chain of command that gives the field officer a level of responsibility that allows for local initiatives,<sup>53</sup> such as the temporary opening of a recruitment center in Deir ez-Zor with the support of a sheikh from the Bakara tribe, which confers honor, respect, and influence in traditional Syrian society.<sup>54</sup> The sheikh's Iranian handlers did not have to promise anything in return. They have been known in the region for a long time. Asking is enough.<sup>h</sup>

The infiltration of traditional organization of local communities is an ongoing concern. Still in the area of Deir ez-Zor, a meeting was held in March 2023 to create a new militia with tribal roots in the al-Mashada clan.<sup>55</sup> Command was given to one Akram Akram, whose identity should be treated with caution.<sup>56</sup> It may be an alias. The brigade is not yet operational—or at least it has not made itself known through military operations.

The human and material reality of the militias is sometimes haphazard. Names of groups appear and disappear at the spur of the moment. According to the Washington Institute, these are "façade groups,"<sup>57</sup> names used to cover tracks or to saturate the analysis of intelligence services trying to understand their activities. A recent example is the claim of an attack on an American garrison at the "Ru'ailan" airport signed by an almost unknown group, the Brigade Al-Ghaliboun, according to the pro-government source, Arth Press.<sup>58</sup> This is either a real group, a nascent group, or a front

e NOHED is the acronym for "Airborne Special Forces," which in Persian is called Nirūhāye Vīzheye Havābord.

f *Ghaybah* means "concealment" or "absence." On this concept in the Shi'a branch of Islam, see Naser Ghobadzadeh, "The Minor Occultation: Collaboration and Survival" in *Theocratic Secularism: Religion and Government in Shi'i Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

g On a similar model, the Houthi militia (Yemen) has created a female battalion called Zainabiyat. Its appearance is mentioned by open sources from 2018. Nabil Abdullah al-Tamimi, "The Houthis use a female battalion to oppress Yemeni women," Al-Mashareq, August 16, 2018.

h The IRGC is constantly reflecting on the relations that need to be developed between its militias and the local population, who need to be convinced of the merits of the "Islamic Revolution." "IRGC plays a role on the Syrian battlefield," Basirat (lr), June 23, 2016.

group. The Iranian tactic is to make its activities in Syria so opaque that only a handful of specialists and analysts can accurately track them.

### Recruitment, Operations, and Logistics

The creation of the militias requires an intensive recruitment policy.<sup>59</sup> Offices have been opened in Deir ez-Zor, Palmyra, Deraa, Qamishli, and the Damascus suburbs.<sup>60</sup> Each fighter receives training, a weapon, and a monthly salary of between \$60 and \$80.<sup>i</sup> Officers earn about \$100, have access to health care, and can take days off.<sup>61</sup>

Iran benefits from the influence of Shi'a communities around the world. The Afghan Liwa Fatemiyoun militia recruits through clerics, both within the Afghan Shi'a community and in refugee camps.<sup>62</sup> Salaries in U.S. dollars and charity cards (food donations) are promised to those who go to Syria. Recruitment is easier now than during the Islamic State era (2014-2019). At the height of the Syrian civil war, Fatemiyoun acknowledged significant losses: 2,000 dead and 8,000 wounded.<sup>63</sup> This estimate, which could not be independently verified, seems to indicate that the group wanted to emphasize the sacrifices made.

These recruitments serve to aggregate diverse military skills from different countries in the service of a single objective: supporting Tehran. Again, on the ground, militia formations are complex to dissect, sometimes even convoluted due to a large number of actors, but they deserve to be examined in order to understand the IRGC's *modus operandi*. Below are some concrete examples.

The Quds Force has tasked the Iraqi militia Saraya Tala'a al-Khorasani, which specializes in drone warfare in the al-Hasakah governorate, with expanding its activities into Syria in 2022.<sup>64</sup> Lebanese Hezbollah has helped to set up these activities and organize recruitment; 1,500 militiamen are expected.<sup>65</sup> It has been agreed that the troops will be spread over several towns to avoid Israeli strikes.<sup>66</sup> As for future training camps, four different sites have been identified for military training and ideological courses for the new recruits.<sup>67</sup>

Regardless of the militia and its geographical location on the Syrian-Iraqi axis, the movement of fighters to the contact zones<sup>l</sup> is discreet, sometimes hidden in pilgrims' buses or unmarked vehicles.

In the summer of 2022, Fatemiyoun fighters were sent by road in small groups to al-Sou'eida and to the south of the Jebel el-Druze, a mountainous area better protected from the threat of Israeli airstrikes.<sup>68</sup> Those coming from al-Mayadeen were fleeing Israeli airstrikes.<sup>69</sup> The crossing was set up by a branch of the Military Security (Fajr Forces), administratively linked to Branch 291 of Syrian Military Intelligence, but under Iranian influence.<sup>70</sup>

Southern Syria is strategic because it is a two-hour drive from

i Depending on the source, the average salary in Syria is between 70 and 130 dollars per month. This amount does not include the devaluation of the currency. According to "the dollar exceeded 9,200 pounds, the euro reached 10,200, and the price of a gram of 21-carat gold exceeded 540,000 Syrian pounds." Adnan Abdul Razzaq "La livre syrienne est au prix le plus bas de son histoire, et la Banque centrale tente de le réduire," *New Arab*, May 11, 2023. On the issue of salaries and payments, see Wissam Selim, "Low salaries push Iranian militiamen out of Syria," *New Arab (Ar)*, April 15, 2021.

j From the Al-Bukamal-Deir ez-Zor axis, the Iranians' first axis of advance heads southwest (Al-Suwadaya) near the Jordanian and Israeli borders. The second axis heads east, toward Aleppo and its surroundings.

the Golan Heights and close to the Jordanian border, and is very lucrative thanks to the captagon drug trade.<sup>71</sup> The other advantage is its divided political environment. At least seven armed groups are registered there: the Men of Dignity Movement, Ahrar al-Arab Gathering (opposition), and As-Suwayda Popular Resistance (pro-Damascus), among others. This is in line with the late General Soleimani's view that "dark crises"<sup>72</sup> create opportunities. In this case, the objective is infiltrating a Druze area that is demanding recognition in the future Syrian constitution.<sup>73</sup> It is likely that when the time is judged right, Iranian soft power will position itself as a mediator with Damascus aspiring to be the guardian power of the Middle East peace process. This mediating power posture was observed during the round of quadripartite meetings held in Moscow<sup>74</sup> in the presence of Turkish, Syrian, and Iranian delegations. Iran always sees itself as a "moderate"<sup>75</sup> power that "mediates peace."<sup>76</sup> Tehran believes it can compete with the great powers because its regime is structured, stable, and de facto resilient in the face of an angry population. Unlike the hyper-powers that come and go in the Middle East according to the vagaries of geopolitics, Iran relies on its operational endurance and the maintenance, come what may, of its strategy of influence.

According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), much of the equipment for the IRGC in Syria is transported by road or by airlines accustomed to working with the IRGC: Pouya Air Cargo (also known as Yas Air), Mahan Air, and its subsidiary Qeshm Fars Air. Small and medium-caliber weapons that are not purchased or stolen in the field come from Iranian companies such as the Armament Industries Group (AIG).<sup>77</sup> They are transported to the field by middlemen who specialize in illegal transport (Behineh Trading Co.).<sup>78</sup> When the IRGC wants to construct civil-military buildings in Syria requiring engineering skills, it turns to Iranian companies such as Khatam al-Anbiya (KAA), known for its involvement in the construction of the Qom/Fordow nuclear facility.<sup>79</sup>

### Soft Power

The Quds Force is also an effective instrument of Iran's soft power,<sup>80</sup> as taught in contemporary military manuals that theorize the need to win hearts and minds.<sup>k</sup> Tehran is seeking a political and theological sphere of influence<sup>81</sup> rather than territorial conquest in the strict sense.<sup>82</sup>

This soft power correlates two temporalities: the emergency and the long term, that are discussed below in turn.

Two days after the devastating February 6, 2023, earthquake in Syria and Turkey, Quds Force Commander General Qaani made a whirlwind visit to Aleppo to oversee the delivery of humanitarian aid, as confirmed by Salman Nawab Nouri, the Consul General of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Aleppo.<sup>83</sup> Excavators and heavy equipment were promised.<sup>84</sup> Local pro-Iranian militias were invited to host affected families in their compounds. The Imam al-Baqir Brigade, the Zain al-Abidin Brigade, Dushka, and the

k The strategy of winning hearts and minds dates from the post-World War II era. The French used it during the Algerian War, as did U.S. forces in Vietnam. It is usually used in the context of counterinsurgency. P. Bao U. Nguyen, "An Analytical Model for the Strategy to Win Hearts and Minds," DRDC - Centre for Operational Research and Analysis (Ca), Defence Research and Development Canada, August 2020; David Galula and David H. Petraeus (author of the preface), "Contre-insurrection - Théorie et pratique," *Economica*, 2020.

Aleppo Defenders Corps were all invited to help.<sup>85</sup> Food is still being distributed to those most in need. Discreetly, military reinforcements of Iraqi origin (from the Badr Brigade) are being brought into Syria under the guise of humanitarian aid and are settling in the cantonments of the 80th Brigade, which is based near Aleppo International Airport.<sup>86</sup>

Meanwhile, the Quds Force continues the pursuit of its long-term objectives. The education ministers of Iran and Syria have been working together since 2018.<sup>87</sup> Tehran has pledged to restore 250 Syrian schools at a cost of \$3 million.<sup>88</sup> The “Ja’fariya” Shi`a law school teaches *bara'em al-Atfal* (children buds),<sup>89</sup> who are given free access to an Islamic library network and digital training to help develop an Iranian “virtually unified nation”<sup>90</sup> from southern Lebanon through Iraq, Syria, and Gaza.

### Intelligence Failure

Iranian forces are operating in a Syria where they have many enemies, especially among Sunnis. The actions of their militias are spied on and reported.

According to the Syrian opposition online newspaper Jesr Press:

*The head of the “Dir’ al-Akidat” militia, Hashem Masoud al-Sattam, has been recruiting people for the Iranian militias in the towns of Dhiban and al-Hawajj (...) The recruits receive 300,000 Syrian pounds a month in exchange for planting bombs on roads used by US forces and providing the Iranian militias with information about the “SDF” and coalition forces.<sup>91</sup>*

According to the Syrian opposition online newspaper Deirezzor24:

*“Al-Bashir” is one of the leaders of the local Revolutionary Guard militia and heads the clan militia that moves from the T2 station, Muaizila, and Al-Salihya, in the Al-Bukamal countryside.<sup>92</sup>*

Operational intelligence, once the prerogative of intelligence services, is available to the average person. A man, a smartphone, and an internet connection are all it takes to spread information that makes Iranian movements in Syria visible. Technological advances have closed gaps in operational intelligence gathering,<sup>93</sup> making such intelligence collection much easier.

The following reports, openly published by the Syrian media opposed to Iran’s presence in Syria, the Thiqa Agency, demonstrate the accuracy of OSINT (open-source intelligence):

September 4, 2022

*A military convoy arrived at the headquarters of Abu Rama Al-Iraqi in the village of Al-Hari (Bukamal). It included 7 military vehicles belonging to the Iraqi Hezbollah militia, including the leaders Akram Abu Rama Al-Iraqi and Haj Hussein, who are the two economic heads of the militia. The convoy headed to the house of the Iranian Hajj Sajjad in the Al-Ma’ari street area in the centre of Al-Bukamal, where a security meeting was held in the presence of the Iranian Hajj Askar.<sup>94</sup>*

March 22, 2023

*The Revolutionary Guard Corps moved the checkpoint (Al-Hirasa) to another position near the new headquarters in their areas near Al-Bala’om Square at the entrance to Al-Mayadin.<sup>95</sup>*

This flow of information records from open sources the comings and goings of militias, the creation of operation rooms (alliances of armed groups), the names of militia leaders, the transport of weapons or raw materials (oil, copper), the production of logistical vehicles, and so forth. The revelation of the secret activities of the Quds Force has the potential to affect the changing balance of power on the ground. The Syrian opposition press has described the creation of a faction led by Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas (Adnan al-Bass, known as al-Zuzu) whose mission is to infiltrate the areas held by the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) in order to discreetly introduce a pro-Iranian presence.<sup>96</sup>

The Liwa Fatemiyoun militia was forced to dismiss some 20 of its fighters. They were suspected of providing information to outsiders, presumably Israel. Their weapons and cards were confiscated.<sup>97</sup> Rahim Aghdam, commander of the Quds Hazrat Zeinab Force camp in Syria, sounded the alarm in March 2023 about the “decrease in operational and intelligence capacity,”<sup>98</sup> with the risk that IRGC fighters will sell information to satisfy their personal material needs.<sup>1</sup>

Arrests are regular. Among the most significant figures taken into custody was General Ali Nasiri, a senior IRGC commander, who was arrested in June 2022 for “spying for Israel”<sup>99</sup> and Ali Esmailzadeh,<sup>100</sup> commander of the 840th Brigade, who died under suspicious circumstances in June 2022, supposedly having ‘committed suicide’<sup>101</sup> for his treason. According to the official Iranian press, “Ali Esmailzadeh died after falling from the terrace of his house, which was not adequately protected.”<sup>102</sup> The event came a few weeks after the shooting of Colonel Hassan Sayyad Khodaei by unidentified men on a motorbike outside his home in Tehran on May 22, 2022. Hussein Tayeb, who headed the IRGC’s Intelligence Organization, was dismissed in 2022 for his services’ inability to protect nuclear and military sites.<sup>103</sup>

### Concluding Observations

The Quds Force is currently making a push toward northern Syria, both to protect itself from Israeli strikes harassing its positions, but also to approach Shi`a urban areas (Al-Zahraa, Nubl)<sup>104</sup> and position itself close to the disputed areas where the fighting will take place in the coming months: Idlib, Tal Rifaat, Raqqah, Hasakah.<sup>105</sup>

The Iranians have concentrated three drone launch sites on the Nairab/Aleppo axis and at the Jirah and Kuweires airbases.<sup>106</sup> Weapons depots have been moved to Jibreen, northeast of Hama. Others are dispersed in the areas of Qalamoun, Deir Attia, Al-Qaryatayn, Al-Sukhna, Hama, and the oil-rich area of Al-Tabqa.<sup>107</sup> In addition to this movement, fighters are spread throughout the country, with infiltration points in the south toward the Jordanian border and the Golan Heights, which remains a major objective as

<sup>1</sup> According to the Azadi Time Telegram channel, a former commander who operated in Syria, Nauaei Akbar, complained in 2022 about “leaked operational plans” to the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, Ali Khamenei. “Iranian fears and warnings about ‘selling’ information to Israel,” *lebanese-forces.com* (Ar), March 23, 2023.

it offers the possibility of opening a front with Israel if necessary.<sup>108</sup> In April 2023, the pro-Iranian militia Liwa al-Quds fired several rockets south of this Israeli-held area, toward the towns of Netur and Avni Eitan.<sup>109</sup>

Apart from Israel, the favorite target of the militias is the American contingent stationed in Syria, comprised of some 900 personnel; U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin revealed on March 29, 2023, that 83 attacks had been carried out against their positions since the beginning of President Biden's term of office.<sup>110</sup> Although this suggests an increase in tension,<sup>111</sup> as illustrated by the increased U.S. naval patrols in the Strait of Hormuz<sup>112</sup> and confirmed by the February 2023 Annual Threat Assessment Report by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence that noted Iran's desire "to erode U.S. influence in the Middle East,"<sup>113</sup> it should be pointed out that Tehran does not dare to confront U.S. forces directly. Iranian diplomats are invited to Moscow to take part in quadripartite talks with officials from Syria, Turkey, and Russia, four countries<sup>114</sup> that have many differences but all agree on one objective: to reduce American influence in the Middle East. While Tehran, Damascus, and Moscow all want to expel American forces from the Middle East, Ankara appears to want a significant reduction in American influence so that it can pursue its Middle East policy without constraints.<sup>115</sup>

The unknown factor remains the autonomy of action that the IRGC will reserve for itself in the coming months in the face of

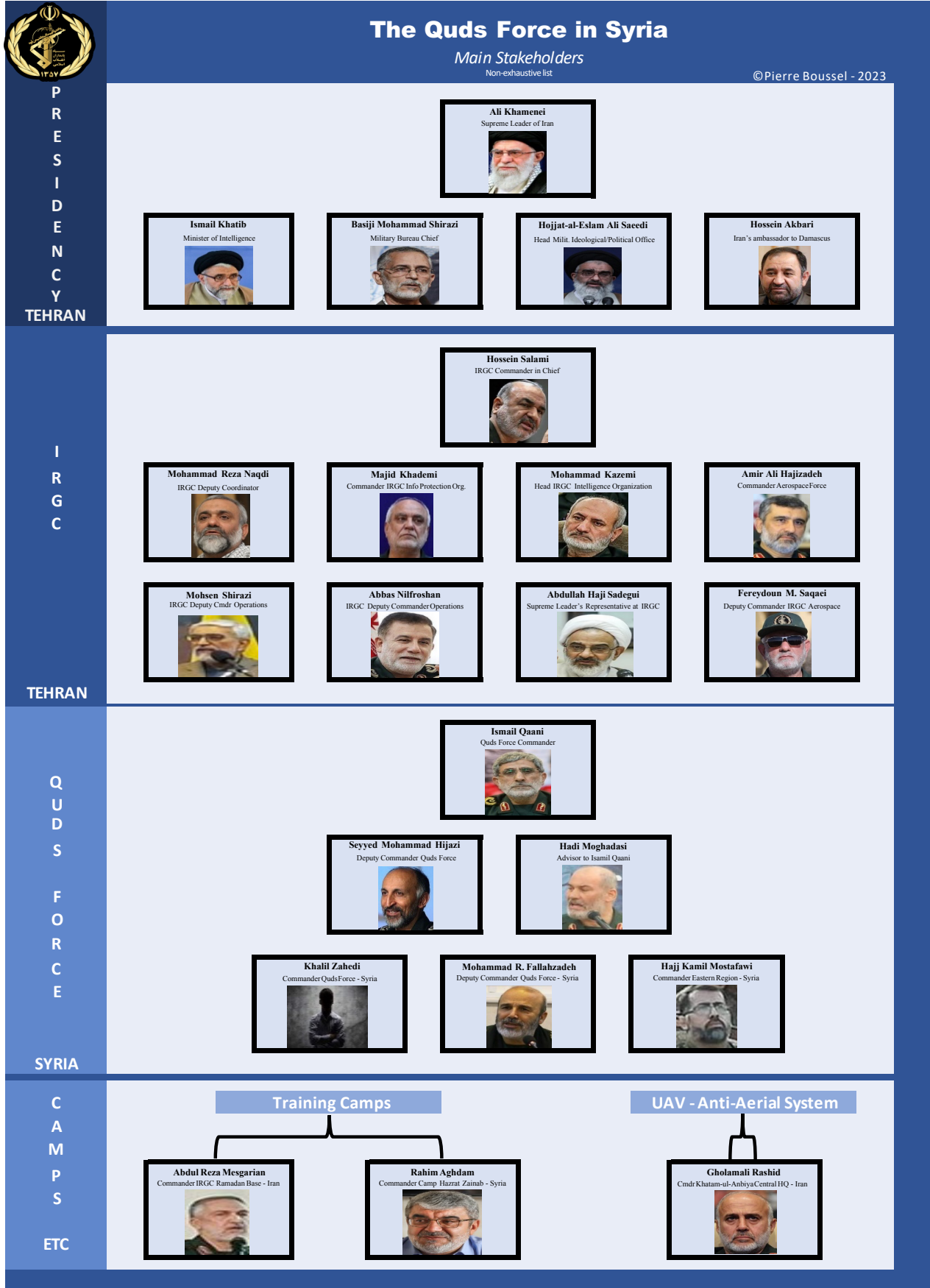
Tehran's new orientations. The IRGC's media silence following the signing of the Iran-Saudi Arabia agreement on March 10, 2023, has been interpreted in various ways, with some suggesting that the Pasdaran<sup>m</sup> fears that this new diplomatic axis will limit Iran's operational freedom in Syria.<sup>116</sup> How will it deal with Syria's return to the Arab League and the restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran? Nothing suggests that Damascus wants to commit itself permanently to Iran as an ally. Relations between Damascus and the IRGC are in flux. Javad Ghaffari, the commander-in-chief of IRGC forces in Syria, was dismissed by order of Bashar al-Assad in 2021. He was suspected of corruption and human trafficking.<sup>117</sup> According to Iranian sources quoted by the Tasnim news agency, which is close to the IRGC, this departure was normal and was not the result of any disagreement between Damascus and Tehran.<sup>118</sup> The monitoring of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards suggests that its objective is less to keep the Assad clan in Damascus in power than to spread the 'Islamic revolutionary' spirit in the sub-region. For Tehran, Damascus is a transactional ally, a step toward establishing *Pax Irania* in the Middle East. **CTC**

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m Pasdaran is the abbreviation for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Anthony Cordesman, "Iran's Military Forces: 1988-1993," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 1994; Kenneth Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam, Iran's Revolutionary Guard* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).



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# A View from the CT Foxhole: Brian Nelson, Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence

By Kristina Hummel and Teddy MacDonald

*Brian Nelson is the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence. Prior to joining Treasury, he was the Chief Legal Officer at LA28, the organizing committee for the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Los Angeles. His previous government service includes roles as a senior policy advisor, policy chief, and general counsel in the California Department of Justice. There, he oversaw key national security initiatives, including efforts to combat transnational criminal organizations, dismantle human trafficking networks, and build state and international partnerships to stop money laundering and high-tech crimes. Under Secretary Nelson also led a number of efforts to enforce and then reform financial regulations in the aftermath of the national foreclosure crisis in the late 2000s.*

*Earlier in Under Secretary Nelson's career, he was a special counsel and then deputy chief of staff of the National Security Division of the U.S. Department of Justice. Following clerkships at the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit and the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, Brian began his career at Sidley Austin's D.C. office as an attorney in information privacy, national security, and appellate practices. He received his bachelor's degrees from UCLA and his J.D. from Yale Law School.*

**CTC:** You assumed the role of Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence at the end of 2021. What have been TFI's priorities over the first year and a half of your tenure as pertains to the CT realm? How is Treasury responding to the shifting CT landscape?

**Nelson:** The Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence's (TFI) mission is to enhance national security by applying Treasury's unique policy enforcement, intelligence, and regulatory tools to identify, disrupt, and disable terrorists, criminals, and other national security threats to the United States and to protect the U.S. and international financial systems from abuse by bad actors. TFI marshals the Department's intelligence and enforcement functions with the dual aims of safeguarding our financial system against illicit use and also combating corrupt regimes, terrorist facilitators, weapons of mass destruction proliferators, money launderers, drug kingpins, and other national security threats.

So while TFI was formed with a specific terrorist financing focus after the 9/11 attacks, the scope of our work has really evolved over time. One of TFI's core missions is to safeguard the domestic and international financial systems from abuse and we do this by identifying and closing vulnerabilities that illicit actors use to support their networks. As such, while today's conversation, of course, is focused on CT and TF [terrorist financing], I just want to emphasize that it's hard to discuss that topic without looking at the entire anti-money laundering/countering the financing of terrorism

(AML/CFT) picture. Criminals and illicit actors are using all means to raise funds, which impacts money laundering and other illicit financial activities as well.

The demands for my office's expertise have really grown quite exponentially in the last several years. CFT remains an important part of our work here, but more than ever, it's one aspect of a broad set of priorities. And it is difficult to completely separate it as other priority adversaries and criminals use similar techniques to exploit AML/CFT vulnerabilities similarly as terrorist financiers. So while some things have changed in the CT landscape, some things have stayed constant: Terrorist groups continue to try to exploit vulnerabilities in the international financial system as well as jurisdictions with weak governance to raise, move, and use those funds. Likewise, TFI continues to use our tools strategically both to disrupt the financial operations of specific networks and on a more systemic level to close the regulatory loopholes and vulnerabilities which allow these groups to use the formal financial system in the first place.

To maximize our resources and effectiveness, we have really focused our efforts on key facilitators, regional financial hubs, and building partnerships and capacity with priority jurisdictions. This has required a coordinated effort here across all components of Treasury, including our policy, intelligence, sanctions, and enforcement offices. It has also required working closely with other U.S. government agencies to develop a shared understanding of terrorist financing risks and threats, pursue opportunities to disrupt TF, and support interagency CT efforts.

Internationally, Treasury—in coordination with the departments of State as well as Justice and other interagency partners—works bilaterally as well as multilaterally to share typology and transactional information and to engage and build capacity so our foreign partners can take their own actions to dismantle TF networks and prevent terrorist access to the international financial system. Engaging our foreign partners—again, bilaterally and multilaterally—is key to increasing our collective TF risk understanding, maximizing the impact of our actions, and enabling our partners to take their own actions. Just as an example, we have prioritized building up partner capacity to identify and disrupt TF threats through our Terrorist Financing Targeting Center, the TFTC, which is a multilateral forum among the United States and the Gulf countries.

Our multilateral engagement through a variety of international fora as well as these bilateral conversations with our key partners allows us to share lead information and investigative best practices that are designed to build partner capacity. This range of engagements has resulted in better coordination and more effective sanctions and other disruptive outcomes. This is something that we looked at closely through a review of our sanctions' authorities in particular, and it has also created avenues to engage countries on other priority illicit finance issues.



*Brian Nelson*

**CTC:** Can you describe your career trajectory and how that prepared you for the role you're now in? What lessons have you learned along the way and what advice would you offer to professionals in this field, specifically the CFT field?

**Nelson:** Thank you for that question. The first week I started law school was the week of 9/11, so it really shaped my desire to serve our country. Once I got out of law school, I spent a brief moment in private practice before having the opportunity to serve in the Department of Justice, working in the national security division. This was 2009, 2010, 2011 and one of my reflections was that we were seeing terrorist groups that were still plotting threats directly to the U.S. homeland. We were nine, 10 years out from 2001, but we were still seeing that they had the resources and the ability to attempt to strike us here at home. Over my time, in just three years, the capacity of those groups to do that diminished significantly. The thing I took away from that experience was, while the Department of Justice was doing incredible work with partners and colleagues, it was the Treasury Department that had cut off the money, and that really starved a lot of these terrorist groups from frankly having the capacity to attempt to strike the homeland.

I left federal service for the State of California and there worked on transnational criminal organizations. From that perspective, I moved from seeing how sanctions were effective against international terrorist groups to how important our AML/CFT tools are to go after the drug trafficking organizations and human smuggling operations and the like. I also got to work with federal partners from the state level.

Collectively, those two experiences were the things that really drove home for me that these tools that Treasury employs are incredibly effective in supporting and preserving our national

security and that it would be an honor to be able to lift up the work and to continue to try to effectively hone the use of those tools. In California, I was working for then Attorney General Kamala Harris, and so when I was invited back to Washington, D.C., to continue to support this work, I was profoundly honored to be nominated by the president to lead TFI.

Regarding lessons learned, I think the thing that I carry with me is that the more we can uplift the work of colleagues across the national security apparatus of our government the more effective our fight will be. For me more personally, the lessons learned are to focus on the work, focus on doing that work in a spirit of collegiality and respect, and just go where the opportunities present themselves. You never know: When I moved to California, I wasn't planning on coming back to D.C. necessarily, but I wanted to continue to be able to serve our country in a new capacity. So I think just focusing on that, focusing on the mission, and trying to execute against it as effectively as you can is really, truly the real advice.

The other thing is just to have a suite of experiences. You don't have to do one thing for your entire career, and there are so many ways to get after and really support our national security mission. Seeing it from a number of different perspectives I think provides useful insights into how we can more effectively work here in our own government and with our international partners to execute this mission with the tools that we have.

**CTC:** How does Treasury prioritize resources to combat the various terrorist organizations active across the globe? Are some groups more susceptible than others to disruption through traditional Treasury tools?

**Nelson:** It's a great question, and as I noted earlier, there are a variety of threats we continue to monitor and, frankly, they all have different points of pressure. But their tactics, their techniques, their procedures for financing their illicit activities still overlap. Financial disruption is more effective against more centralized terrorist organizations, as you can imagine: those that rely on the international banking system. This allows us to leverage the central role that U.S. banks play in cross-border financial activity.

Just as an example, Hezbollah's leader made an unprecedented call to his supporters pleading for fundraising efforts to be stepped up after highlighting the financial pressure that's been imposed by our own sanctions.<sup>1</sup> And we're aware that Hezbollah media and military officials are complaining of the pay cuts, so we know it's working.

We've also used direct engagement to complement our own actions and maximize impact. Working with partners has enabled arrests, freezing of assets, prosecutions, and domestic designations of terrorists and terrorist financiers operating in their own jurisdictions. For example, in January and then again in May of this year, Treasury worked with Turkish authorities to take joint action to disrupt financial activities of ISIS and other terrorist groups operating in that region.<sup>2</sup>

But financial sanctions have been less effective against terrorist groups that rarely use or do not require use of the regulated financial system for the reasons I've noted. Some groups raise revenue locally and do not engage in cross-border financial activity or travel internationally, and that is necessarily going to limit the practical impact of our tools.

**CTC: How does Treasury approach combating terrorist financing in regions where tools like sanctions may have limited disruptive impact? In addition to sanctions, what other tools does Treasury employ to combat terrorist financing?**

**Nelson:** Going back to the attacks of September 11th and the focus on executing a whole-of-government effort to counter terrorism, which was strengthened by the USA Patriot Act in 2004, TFI has a broad range of powerful economic tools—obviously through economic sanctions, but also inclusive of anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism measures, enforcement, foreign engagement, policy coordination, asset forfeiture, and intelligence and analysis, among others. We remain still the only country that combines all of these economic authorities, including an intelligence department, within our own Department, which helps the United States respond effectively and nimbly to the greatest illicit finance and national security threats that our country faces.

While sanctions are an effective tool and truly a critical part of our work in this space, we have many different tools that we can leverage to protect the U.S. financial system from illicit financial activity such as terrorist financing. We work very closely with our U.S. law enforcement counterparts and engage with financial institutions to help them better protect and report suspicious financial activity. We can, and often do, utilize tools such as advisories and information-sharing mechanisms through Treasury’s Financial Intelligence Unit, the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network—otherwise known as FinCEN. FinCEN works to promote national security through the strategic use of financial authorities to collect, analyze, and disseminate financial lead information. These information exchanges—both with private sector and federal law enforcement—really offer the opportunity to share red flags and typologies, which in turn can enable their own work to identify suspicious activity by the financial institutions themselves. And most importantly, this information is invaluable to promoting national security by aiding law enforcement agencies in their efforts to investigate and prosecute terrorist financiers and other criminals that are abusing the U.S. and international financial system.

Given the gravity and time-sensitive nature of terrorist financing offenses, financial institutions are required to immediately notify law enforcement in addition to filing a suspicious activity report with FinCEN. This demonstrates the strong public-private partnership between FinCEN, law enforcement, and financial institutions on such an incredibly serious issue. And then similarly, information from Treasury’s Terrorist Financing Targeting Program, the TFTP, has been and continues to be instrumental in supporting specific investigations of terrorist financing networks, enabling us to better understand the movement of funds that facilitate more effective disruption.

We also leverage our participation in multilateral bodies, such as the Financial Action Task Force, the FATF, which is the international standard-setting body for AML/CFT, to strengthen international cooperation and promote effective legal and regulatory regimes. This type of multilateral cooperation is incredibly important to tackling systemic issues that make jurisdictions susceptible, frankly, to abuse for TF purposes. Given the international financial system’s interconnectedness, deficiencies in one jurisdiction, unfortunately, can be exploited to gain entry and abuse the broader international financial system for terrorist financing and other illicit purposes.

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**CTC: How is Treasury responding to the growing threat of domestic violent extremism?**

**Nelson:** Combating domestic terrorism is a priority for the Biden-Harris administration, and we here at TFI have been applying lessons learned from our experience with international terrorism and combating other criminal actors in this involving challenge, while respecting the vital constitutional protections for all Americans. We very recently hosted a roundtable with public and private sector partners, where discussions focused on how domestic violent extremists (DVEs) and racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs) have raised, moved, or used funds. That roundtable included focusing on the use of virtual assets in particular and some of the challenges in identifying and reporting the misuse of virtual assets by these groups, along with potential opportunities for collaboration.

Developing a shared understanding of money laundering and terrorist financing risks among relevant public and private stakeholders is, in our view, the foundation of an effective AML/CFT regime to protect the financial system from abuse by illicit actors including DVEs and RMVEs. This is not unlike the public-private partnership that establishes and is the framework for all of our AML/CFT work.

To further promote this risk understanding, we also launched a public landing page<sup>3</sup> on Treasury’s website of select reports and assessments for private and public sector entities seeking to develop a better understanding of DVEs, their foreign analogs, and associated financial activity.

Lastly, we also collaborate with our State Department colleagues to assess whether foreign organizations and individuals linked to domestic terrorist activities can be designated. This includes the recent June 2022 designations of two supporters that were linked

to the Russian Imperial Movement.<sup>4</sup> And then we also regularly engage with foreign governments to identify and disrupt foreign individuals or entities sending money to support the training or recruiting of U.S. persons, which again is work that we've done in other contexts as well.

**CTC: How does Treasury assess the threat of digital assets being abused by terrorist organizations to raise and move funds?**

**Nelson:** Digital assets create a complicated environment, to be sure, as we recognize both the potential benefits and challenges brought on by this new and emerging technology. Treasury is focused on encouraging responsible innovation in the digital asset space, while also identifying and assessing potential illicit finance risk and, where appropriate, applying necessary mitigation measures. As virtual assets continue to become more accessible and barriers to entering the crypto market continue to decrease, we need to be mindful of the potential for illicit financial activity. We do have particular concerns about certain underregulated sectors of the market and encrypted person-to-person transfers that don't require a traditional financial institution intermediary.

To your question, we know that terrorist groups try to exploit emerging technologies for their organizations; this has been true for a long time. And we have seen both domestic and foreign terrorist actors utilize virtual assets to fund their operations. Similarly, U.S. law enforcement agencies have detected an increase in the use of virtual assets to launder the proceeds of drug trafficking, fraud, and cyber-crime, including ransomware attacks as well as other illicit activity, which also includes sanctions evasion.

However, it's important to contextualize the scale of the problem. We assess that terrorist groups still overwhelmingly tend to use more traditional 'tried and true,' if you will, methods of moving funds such as cash and formal and informal banking mechanisms. And then likewise, use of virtual assets for money laundering remains far below that of fiat currency and more traditional methods. But this is an area that we're watching very closely and we'll continue to monitor for the foreseeable future.

**CTC: How does Treasury mitigate the potential for indiscriminate "de-risking"<sup>a</sup> by financial institutions from jurisdictions or transactions that may be perceived as a high risk for terrorist financing and other illicit finance?**

**Nelson:** Yes, this is a high priority for the Treasury Department, and it is one that we've been working on over the past few years. We are committed to shaping a safer, more transparent and accessible financial system, while at the same time, maintaining and preserving a robust framework to protect the U.S. financial system from illicit actors and bolstering national security. So striking this balance between these two objectives is really a critical piece of making the U.S. AML/CFT framework effective.

This de-risking, as you described it, is also inconsistent with

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global anti-money laundering and countering terrorism financing standards just generally. From our perspective, widespread access to well-regulated financial services facilitates financial inclusion and reduces the incentive to use unregistered financial services. Financial access also ensures that well-regulated financial systems remain central to international finance, and these, as I've described, are really all U.S. public policy goals and support the use of our tools to go after illicit actors. We also just earlier this year released the 2023 De-Risking Strategy, which I am proud to say is the first of its kind, and it examines this phenomenon and offers policy options to address it. The things that we want to do is make sure that banks take a risk-based approach when it comes to AML/CFT policies in high-risk jurisdictions. They can do that by analyzing and managing the risk of clients in a targeted manner. This will only enhance our ability to detect and combat TF while ensuring financial services are available and accessible to those who need them.

We've also taken significant steps in the past several months to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations. One example of our commitment on this issue led to the adoption of broad humanitarian authorizations within our U.S. sanctions programs and the adoption and implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2664 to approve humanitarian exemptions imposed by the United Nations sanctions regimes.

**CTC: We've spoken a lot about how Treasury combats non-state terrorist actors. How does Treasury's approach differ when combating the funding of state actors, and their proxies, such as Iran and DPRK? What challenges have you faced? What progress has been made?**

**Nelson:** For better or for worse, criminal actors, regardless of state or non-state association, are exploiting the same vulnerabilities and

a De-risking is “the practice of financial institutions terminating or restricting business relationships indiscriminately with broad categories of clients rather than analyzing and managing the risk of clients in a targeted manner.” See “The Department of the Treasury's De-risking Strategy,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, April 2023.

relying on similar typologies to raise, move, and use funds while facilitating their illicit purpose. Therefore, a strategy to counter state actors and their proxies involves a similar coordinated effort within Treasury and with partners.

Specifically on the DPRK, we are focused on using our tools and authorities to root out Pyongyang's WMD procurement networks, revenue generation schemes, malicious cyber activity, sanctions evaders, and human rights abuses, and probably a whole list of malign activity that they're engaged in. And this year, we've designated more than a dozen individuals and entities involved in obfuscating DPRK's revenue generation, its weapons facilitation, and its malicious cyber activities. We coordinated these efforts with our close partners and allies, and several of these destinations were jointly rolled out with the Republic of Korea. Treasury has also taken other actions to inform the public and private sector of the DPRK's illicit financing through our Decentralized Illicit Finance Risk Assessment, our National Proliferation Financing Risk Assessment, and the DPRK IT Workers Advisory. Almost all of our risk assessments have a DPRK angle of one flavor or another.

On Iran, Treasury has taken a robust and comprehensive approach to combating the regime's state sponsoring of terrorist and illicit activity. Over the past several years, we've disrupted several IRGC-QF financing schemes with wide-ranging networks. Our actions have sought to restrict the channels by which our adversaries can access the international financial system and have primed the private sector to be aware of the sanctions-evasion typologies employed by Iran and other adversaries.

We continue to regularly engage frontline industry, foreign governments, and international organizations on Iran and DPRK sanctions-related issues.

**CTC: In January 2023, the Wagner Group was designated a transnational criminal organization by Treasury.<sup>5</sup> Some have asked whether it should be further designated as a foreign terrorist organization,<sup>6</sup> which would expand Treasury's sanctioning powers against it. And there has been some discussion here and abroad of it being designated a terrorist group.<sup>7</sup> How do you view this question of an FTO designation? Is the current transnational criminal organization designation sufficient for your office to constrain the Wagner Group's activities?**

**Nelson:** It's a great question, and I'll have to defer to my State Department colleagues on this question as they're the lead agency for designating entities as FTOs. But as you mentioned, OFAC [Office of Foreign Assets Control] designated the Wagner Group as a Significant Transnational Criminal Organization in January, further reinforcing sanctions imposed on the group including by G7 partners and allies. Our sanctions continue to help expose the Wagner Group's abuses, and by aggressively targeting the group's support networks, we are doing our part to disrupt its operations. But clearly, this—as you noted—is an ongoing priority area for the

administration.

**CTC: What financial threat do you wish was better understood by or received more attention from policymakers, practitioners, and the public?**

**Nelson:** There are a number of threats that I would say should receive more attention from larger swaths of people, but one area that is particularly important is that deficiencies in AML/CFT regimes globally create widespread opportunities for regulatory arbitrage, which allow our adversaries and other illicit actors to abuse the international financial system and threaten our national security. It really is that principle of the weakest link. However, as the largest economy in the international financial system, we, the United States, bear a responsibility to close deficiencies in our own domestic AML/CFT regime while also increasing transparency and accountability in the U.S. and international financial systems.

So at the end of the day, a strong AML/CFT framework makes it harder for illicit actors to abuse the U.S. and international financial systems while also allowing us to target more effectively those who have nevertheless slipped through. To that end, Treasury has taken a number of steps to assess our domestic AML/CFT regime and identify potential deficiencies, then taking steps to address any of the deficiencies that we have identified.

For example, there is a problem of so-called gatekeepers. These are the professional service providers that facilitate financial activities. These types of individuals and entities are not covered by comprehensive and uniform AML/CFT obligations and are routinely involved in company formation and complex financial transactions and corporate activities that can be used to facilitate money laundering.<sup>8</sup> Treasury is also working to implement the Beneficial Ownership Information Reporting regime, mandated by the Corporate Transparency Act of 2020, and we are also working towards bringing just greater transparency to the residential and real estate market and evaluating whether and how we should impose AML-CFT obligations on certain investment advisors. So while addressing our own domestic regulatory deficiencies, we also continue to engage multilaterally through participation in the Financial Action Task Force and bilaterally with our partners on the importance of really advancing these AML/CFT reforms to better protect the entire international financial system from abuse.

And as you can probably sense, TFI's founding mission absolutely does persist. It just happens to be nested in this broad swath of priorities against which the United States is using Treasury TFI tools. As with any organization, we have to continue to evolve to meet the growing demand for the use of these tools and continue to meet the demand for the use of these tools in the context of national security challenges. In this, I must acknowledge our incredibly strong staff and colleagues who are dedicated to this mission and are strategically applying this expertise, our tools, our authorities to advance our national security and foreign policy objectives. **CTC**



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## Citations

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- 1 Editor's Note: See "Hezbollah calls on supporters to donate as sanctions pressure bites," Reuters, March 8, 2019.
- 2 Editor's Note: For more, see "The United States and Türkiye Take Joint Action to Disrupt ISIS Financing," U.S. Department of the Treasury, January 5, 2023, and "Treasury Designates Terrorist Financing Facilitators Jointly With Türkiye," U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 2, 2023.
- 3 Editor's Note: For more, see "Domestic Violent Extremism," U.S. Department of the Treasury, n.d.
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# The Allen, Texas, Attack: Ideological Fuzziness and the Contemporary Nature of Far-Right Violence

By Ashley A. Mattheis, Amarnath Amarasingam, Graham Macklin, and Marc-André Argentino

**On May 6, 2023, Mauricio Garcia, a man with longstanding neo-Nazi views, murdered eight people in a mass shooting at the Allen Premium Outlets mall in Allen, Texas. He was shot dead by police. Though investigators are still probing the deceased gunman's motivations, this article examines all the available information regarding Garcia's *modus operandi*, the nexus between extreme far-right ideas and misogyny prevalent in Garcia's writings, and the complex roles of race and mental health in the attack. Garcia had an ideologically fuzzy tapestry of extreme thoughts tied to rampant violence. He appeared to view neo-Nazis and other members of the extreme far-right as living the "real" masculine ideal in its fullest form by their commitment to generating dominance through violent, radical, racial, and cultural action. This interaction between race and gender is an increasingly present aspect of far-right violence and needs to be better understood.**

**O**n May 6, 2023, 33-year-old Mauricio Garcia, a man with longstanding neo-Nazi views, murdered eight people and injured seven more in a mass shooting at the Allen Premium Outlets mall in Allen, Texas, a suburb approximately 20 miles north of Dallas. A policeman shot him dead at the scene before he could cause further bloodshed. It was the second mass shooting in Texas in little over a week<sup>1</sup> and the sixth in the state this year.<sup>2</sup> It is, at the time of publication, the second deadliest mass shooting in the United States in 2023.<sup>3</sup>

Mauricio Garcia dressed in black for the attack and wore body armor with numerous magazines attached to its chest rig. He had affixed a patch that read "RWDS"—an acronym for "Right Wing Death Squad"<sup>a</sup>—to his body armor alongside two "Punisher" motifs.<sup>4</sup> Although he was dressed in quasi-paramilitary garb, Garcia had little military experience. Aged 18 in June 2008, Garcia had entered basic training as an infantryman at Fort Benning but was expelled after three months due to concerns about his mental health. The

a The "RWDS" patch on Garcia's body armor derived from a slogan popular within the alt-right milieu from around 2017 onward. Groups like the Proud Boys whose members have been photographed wearing such patches helped to popularize it. See Darragh Roche, "Ex-Proud Boy Regrets Wearing 'RWD' Patch After Texas Shooting: 'Horrified,'" *Newsweek*, May 9, 2023. The phrase, which appeared on shields at the violent Charlottesville protest in 2017, has its origin in the glorification of South American right-wing death squads that operated during the 1970s and 1980s. Chile's General Pinochet was a figure singled out for veneration as reflected in the visual aesthetic of the milieu, which produced T-shirts proclaiming, "Pinochet Did Nothing Wrong." See "RWDS/Right Wing Death Squad," ADL, n.d.

Army discharged Garcia before he could receive rifle training, and so it is unclear whether prior military experience was a factor in the lethality of his attack.<sup>5</sup> Although Garcia had little military experience, his social media posts and diary entries indicate that he regularly visited firing ranges to practice discharging his weapon.

Garcia planned his killings for some time. He extensively researched his target, Allen Premium Outlets, and posted numerous photographs of the building and its parking lot on his Odnoklassniki (OK) (a Russian social media site that translates to "classmates") profile on April 16, 2023. These posts included screenshots of Google geo-location information—indicating he had previously

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*The Allen Premium Outlets mall in Allen, Texas, is seen on May 8, 2023, two days after a mass shooting occurred there. (Joe Raedle/Getty Images)*

visited the mall on May 14, 2022, January 7, 2023, and April 15, 2023—and another screenshot showing the mall’s busiest times and an indoor map of the facility.<sup>6</sup> This approach was similar to that of the Buffalo, New York, shooter, who also conducted extensive research on his target (a supermarket frequented by Black patrons) prior to his attack and utilized Google’s “popular time” feature to select the best time to carry out his attack.<sup>7</sup> The Allen, Texas, shooting is another example of a racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism incident taking place at a retail location, as opposed to a place of worship, for example. Large retail locations are becoming one of the preferred soft targets for those seeking to carry out a mass casualty attack.<sup>b</sup>

On the day of the attack, Garcia posted a short video of himself on YouTube wearing a “Scream” mask, which he then removed. “Not quite what you were expecting, huh?” he said on the video.<sup>8</sup> An ardent white supremacist, Garcia was also of Hispanic heritage. Twenty-four minutes before the shooting, Garcia reportedly emailed a rock singer links to his YouTube and OK profiles.<sup>9</sup> This deviates from other extreme right-wing mass shooters, who tend to post their propaganda content and manifestos on image boards<sup>c</sup>

and mainstream social media sites.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike several recent right-wing violent extremists, Garcia did not livestream<sup>d</sup> his rampage. Dashcam footage from a bystander’s vehicle that circulated online in the aftermath of the massacre showed Garcia exiting a vehicle in the parking lot of Allen Premium Outlets and immediately beginning to shoot at people on the sidewalk.<sup>11</sup> Garcia murdered eight people and injured seven more. At 3:36pm local time, an Allen police officer, who was at the mall on an unrelated call, “heard gunshots, went to the gunshots, engaged the suspect, and neutralized the suspect,” according to the Allen Police Department.<sup>12</sup> After Garcia’s death, police recovered “multiple weapons” at the scene, “including an AR-15-style rifle and a handgun.”<sup>13</sup> One report recorded police recovering four firearms.<sup>14</sup>

Prior to the attack, the gunman had posted pictures to his OK profile of at least four different pistols, two assault rifles, and a pump-action shotgun with photographs of large amounts of ammunition and his chest rig (which, in one photo, contained 16 ammunition clips—indicative of a capacity for carnage he was ultimately unable to achieve). Garcia also posted online the electronic receipts for two 9mm pistols (a Beretta and a Sig Sauer) and a Kalashnikov USA

<sup>b</sup> Recent examples include the Cascade mall shooting in Washington in September 2016, the July 2022 shopping mall shooting in Copenhagen, Denmark, and the July 2022 mass shooting in Greenwood, Indiana. See “Active Shooter Incidents in the United States in 2021,” FBI, May 2022.

<sup>c</sup> An image board is an online forum where users often post images along with text and engage in longer discussion. They started in Japan, but are now prevalent elsewhere. The most famous of these image boards are 4Chan and 8Chan (now known as 8kun).

<sup>d</sup> Several recent mass casualty shootings have been livestreamed by the attackers themselves. These include the Christchurch attack, the Halle Germany shooting, and the Buffalo shooting. See Graham Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age,” *CTC Sentinel* 12:6 (2019); Daniel Koehler, “The Halle, Germany, Synagogue Attack and the Evolution of the Far-Right Terror Threat,” *CTC Sentinel* 12:11 (2019); and Amarnath Amarasingam, Marc-Andre Argentino, and Graham Macklin, “The Buffalo Attack: The Cumulative Momentum of Far-Right Terror,” *CTC Sentinel* 15:7 (2022).

KR-103, totaling \$3,217.29. Garcia bought the firearms online in three separate transactions in June 2022.<sup>15</sup>

In the aftermath of the attack, eyewitnesses recalled truly horrifying scenes.<sup>16</sup> Garcia's victims included three children aged 11, eight, and three.<sup>17</sup> These numbers fail to convey the scale of multiple personal tragedies. Ilda Mendoza, who was critically injured during the shooting, lost her two daughters: Daniela, aged 11, and Sofia, aged eight. A six-year-old boy wounded in the massacre was orphaned. The gunman killed both the boy's parents, Cho Kyu Song and Kang Shin Young, and his three-year-old brother, James. The dead included Aishwarya Thatikonda, a 26-year-old Indian engineer who was visiting the mall with a friend; Elio Cumana-Rivas, a 32-year-old Venezuelan immigrant who had arrived in Dallas less than a year ago seeking to escape violence in his own country; and Christian LaCour, a mall security guard, aged 20.<sup>18</sup>

Garcia's own death leaves many questions unanswered. Did he select his victims on ideological or racial grounds, or target them indiscriminately? Did he choose Allen as the site for the killings because of its racial diversity? With a population of about 105,000 residents, Allen is among Dallas-Fort Worth's most diverse areas. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Allen's population as of July 2022 was about 19.2% Asian, 9.6% Black and 11.2% Hispanic/Latino.<sup>19</sup>

This is not the first time that the city of Allen has featured in an extreme right-wing terrorist attack. In August 2019, Patrick Crusius, who lived in Allen, drove 650 miles from his home to El Paso, Texas, where he murdered 23 people at a shopping mall.<sup>20</sup> Crusius pled guilty to 90 federal charges earlier this year; a judge will sentence him at the end of June.<sup>21</sup> This latest attack is part of a broader trend that is contributing to a "heightened threat environment" nationally and internationally, notes a recent DHS National Terrorism Advisory System (NTAS) bulletin.<sup>22</sup>

This article examines the radicalization of Mauricio Garcia, making use of hundreds of pages of his handwritten diary, as well as his posts on the social media platform Odnoklassniki (often abbreviated as OK or OK.ru). These posts were manually collected by the authors from Garcia's OK profile. OK was founded in 2006 by Albert Popkov and has become one of the most popular platforms in Russia and the former Soviet Republics, after Vkontakte and Facebook.<sup>23</sup> The authors also take a close look at the roles of race, gender, and misogyny, which are interwoven into the shooter's discussion of grievance and foundational to his ideological identifications.

### The Radicalization of Mauricio Garcia

Garcia left a sizable online footprint, though it appears to be a socially isolated one. A preliminary review by officials "found that the gunman's social media posts were not liked or shared by other users."<sup>24</sup> Though Garcia did not leave a manifesto—manifestos have become hallmarks of many violent right-wing extremist attacks—he did keep a diary. This handwritten document dates from approximately 2013 onward, and Garcia appears to have individually scanned over 300 pages and uploaded them to his

**“It is notoriously difficult to trace an individual’s radicalization trajectory by reading only their social media posts, but Garcia’s case has proven especially complex.”**

OK profile. His first post on OK is dated April 2, 2020. From this first post to the date of the attack, he presumably refrained from adding to his handwritten diary and only posted material to his online profile.

It is notoriously difficult to trace an individual's radicalization trajectory by reading only their social media posts, but Garcia's case has proven especially complex. His diary is, to put it mildly, all over the place. Garcia's diary contains over 300 pages and a mix of stories about arguments with his former bosses and co-workers, almost getting into fistfights of his own imagining with people walking past him, dozens of pop culture references, concert experiences, experiences with women, musings about the sexual prowess of different racial groups, notes on how sexually aroused he is by nurses at the hospital who "wait on me hand and foot," stories about masturbating to different women he had met, as well as a critique of his own Hispanic community's politics around privilege, socio-economic status, and relationship to the white majority. Anyone who tries to pinpoint a single ideological driver will not find it. There is no clear audience for his diary entries; like any "dear diary" entry, the audience is the writer himself. Unlike other extreme far-right attackers, Garcia's diary makes clear that he is not isolated; there are endless stories about his place of employment, going to social gatherings and parties, attending concerts, and even meeting people he enjoys being around.

In one undated diary entry, he recalls feeling shunned by the Hispanic community growing up, which caused him to "lean far-right." Reflecting on this later, Garcia writes that "there was a time when I wished I was white, it was because my own race was treating me like shit." In the late 2000s, Garcia watched the film *American History X* (1998)—a film about a violent Nazi who, after being imprisoned for murdering two men, tries to prevent his brother, who hero-worships him, from following in his footsteps<sup>25</sup>—and began to identify with some of the lines and characters in the movie. "I used to think no one thought like me," he writes, "but after watching the movie, I knew I wasn't alone." From here, Garcia seems to have gone down an online rabbit hole; he described visiting white supremacist and fascist websites like *American Renaissance*, *Vdare*, and the *Daily Stormer*. After joining the Army, he wrote, he had discovered that white people in the military "weren't the racist [sic] the media made them out to be."

While his narrations of personal interactions with people of color are often littered with derogatory and racist labels, it seems evident that much of this is driven by a personal animosity toward the individual he is talking about as opposed to the group as a whole. This is evidenced by other people of color he wrote about glowingly in the diary who happened to be nice to him and "gave him a chance."

In addition to nearly 10 years of written diary pages, Garcia's online footprint consists of approximately three years of posts on

e Such as the El Paso shooting, the Halle Germany shooting, the Christchurch attack, as well as the Buffalo shooting. See Jacob Ware, "Testament to Murder: The Violent Far-Right's Increasing Use of Terrorist Manifestos," ICCT Policy Brief, March 2020.

OK. The content on this social media page is less erratic than his diary pages, but still lacks a coherent theme. There are photos of parking lots, shooting ranges, his meals, favorite movies, and boxes of ammunition he had purchased. In January 2022, Garcia posted a series of photos of Nazi flags, Punisher imagery,<sup>f</sup> images from a 2010 protest in Mexico City organized by the Nationalist Front of Mexico, and images from a 2018 protest against Honduran immigration to Mexico organized by Mexican far-right nationalist groups. On June 6, 2022, Garcia posted a screenshot from Dropbox about how he had downloaded the Buffalo shooter's livestreamed attack video.

Just as easily as he posted decontextualized photos of far-right protests in Mexico, Garcia posted discussions of his masculinity, specifically his "confidence score" obtained from a kind of New Age human potential website tinged with male victimhood and manosphere<sup>g</sup> talking points. On September 1, 2022, for example, Garcia posted that "My mother, sister, AND FATHER, mocked any attempt I made to be masculine throughout my childhood and teenage years and they continue to do so today. You wanna lift weights? 'Muscles are weird and gross.' I've never, and mean literally never, been in the same room with my mom, dad and sister without my mom and sister talking down to my father."

Garcia used his OK social media page in a similar manner to how he used his handwritten diary—not as a social networking tool.<sup>h</sup> This is similar to how the Buffalo shooter used Discord as a diary.<sup>26</sup> At times, Garcia's posts are lists of article titles that have no apparent relationship. For example, a post from early September 2022 contains an article about Nikolas Cruz, the Parkland high school shooter, receiving love letters in prison; an article about how much money truck drivers make; and several derogatory statements about Jews and African Americans. As such, Garcia makes it easy for analysts to pick and choose posts from nearly a decade of content to attach him to a series of individual ideologies. The authors argue, however, that this misses the point. The point is that Garcia was immersed in an entire ecosystem, with one viewpoint feeding into and reifying the next. His attachment to any one ideology is less important—and fuzzier—than how each feeds into his broader tapestry of belief. It is a tapestry that must be viewed from a distance to understand the coherence of the image created by its various threads.

After reading through nearly a decade of diary entries and online posts, if the authors were to try to pinpoint two main ideological drivers, they would likely be the manosphere and the extreme far-right, more specifically the interplay between the two online. While there is much scholarship noting the intimate relationship

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between misogyny and the extreme far-right,<sup>27</sup> it seems likely that, for Garcia, members of the extreme far-right symbolize the ultimate "confident" men. According to him, they not only stand up for men, but also their culture, and are not afraid to fight for it. For Garcia, these ultra-confident men are what women find attractive. While the masculinity of the extreme far-right is positioned as the hierarchical apex, the notions of prioritizing the relationship between men and women as markers of male status through sexual conquest clearly come from manosphere narratives, particularly the framing of Pick-Up Artists (PUAs) and misogynist involuntary celibates (incels).

In a bizarre reversal of incel ideology, which is heavily focused on genetic determinism, Garcia claims in a post on OK that good-looking and muscular men are not actually the bearers of "real" manhood. Rather, because such men are so biologically privileged, they have a difficult time navigating hardship and are thus incapable of engaging in the "real fight." Garcia wrote in the same post on OK: "This is one of the disadvantages chads [biologically privileged men] have. When you are genetically blessed, you are totally spoiled, and your psyche is essentially as weak as a woman's. Even the slightest pitfalls are enough to send them into endless suicidal depression." For Garcia, it seems, neo-Nazis and other members of the extreme far-right live the "real" masculine ideal in its fullest form by their commitment to generating dominance through violent, radical, racial, and cultural action. This interaction between race and gender is worth unpacking more, as it is an increasingly present aspect of far-right violence.

### Gender and the Construction of Ideology

Much has been made of Garcia's use of misogyny in his online postings and diary writings, and it is indeed startling. His statements are both casually cruel and intensely violent. In one post, he said the rejection he has experienced has enraged him to the point that even if he got a perfect "high value" woman, he "would just not have the capacity to love her. Even if she loved me, I would want to inflict as much pain as I could on her, I would want to rape her as a final act of revenge on behalf of all whores." While this is shocking, it is all too common in the digital fora of so-called "red pill" cultures (the manosphere and far-right extremists among

f The Punisher skull image was originally developed by Marvel Comics as a kind of anti-hero to Spider-Man. This image was later adopted by certain members of the American military. In recent years, the symbol has been used by local law enforcement as well as members of the Proud Boys and other far-right movements. See Rebecca Collard, "How a Marvel Comic Hero Became the Icon of the Fight Against ISIS," *Time*, April 13, 2015. See also Sean Thielman, "How do you stop the far-right using the Punisher skull? Make it a Black Lives Matter symbol," *Guardian*, June 11, 2020.

g The 'manosphere' is an umbrella term that refers to a number of interconnected misogynistic communities. It encompasses multiple types and severities of misogyny—from broader male supremacist discourse to men's rights activism (MRA) and "involuntary celibates" (incels). "The 'Manosphere,'" Institute for Strategic Dialogue, n.d.

h Garcia also had a personal Facebook account and YouTube profile; however, these were taken down before the authors could analyze them.

them) online.<sup>i</sup> Crucially, though, little attention has been paid to how Garcia's understanding of gender is the root of his misogynist expressions. Stepping back from Garcia's salacious misogyny to explore his wider, gendered worldview reveals a use of racialized misogyny to construct an idealized vision of masculinity through his linkage of gendered and racialized supremacist ideology.

Research has shown that propaganda and radicalization to extremist views are often driven by or deeply intertwined with gender-based grievances, though narrative constructions of those grievances can differ between white and male supremacist cultures.<sup>28</sup> In the digital context, gendered discourses, specifically notions of (white) male precarity, anti-feminism, transmisogyny, and homophobia, are used by manosphere and extreme far-right influencers and propagandists to present whites, men, and traditional women as under threat in the contemporary world. Here, red pill narratives and propaganda help to circulate gender-based grievances between a variety of extremist and extreme-adjacent digital spaces.

This digital engagement creates interaction between white supremacist, fascist, and male supremacist cultures as they consume the same media (i.e., propaganda and content), and debate each other, primarily through their shared focus on gender, misogyny, and anti-feminism. Garcia's content, specifically his writings and posts, highlights this cross-pollination between digital hate cultures and how it constructs a particularly violent and dominant masculinity. One of his posts discussed the March 2023 Nashville school shooter (grammar and spelling from original post):

*So the Nashville shooting was particularly interesting because a bitch broke the ER barrier (with a decent kill score) for the first time. This is like the greatest accomplishment of feminism ever, for a foid, even though a tranny, but still a vagina haver, to feel so empowered that they could take it upon themselves to pick themselves up by the bootstraps, get their gear in order, and successfully go ER is a moment Valerie Solanas would be proud of. Only feminism could have taken biological women to the logical extreme of embodying the highest pinnacles of toxic masculinity.*

Blending the deep transmisogyny of extreme far-right ideology with the violent and misogynist language of the incelosphere, in the above quoted post Garcia glorified the violence of the Nashville attack in which the assailant, a transgender man, murdered three nine-year-old children and three adults on March 27, 2023, at a Christian elementary school where he had been a former pupil.<sup>29</sup> Garcia reclaimed this violence as a province of masculinity by positioning the act as the result of feminism run amok to the point that it actually crosses sides in the battle between left and right positions in the culture wars online. His reference to bootstraps is an interesting nod to ideals of meritocracy, typically reserved for racial discourse in the United States. Here, however, he applied it to overcoming gender-based marginalization. Finally, he hit on a very "manosphere" reference to Valerie Solanas, the author of the *SCUM Manifesto*—a violent, radical feminist tract from the late

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1960s—most famous for her attempt to murder Andy Warhol in 1968.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the most telling line is the last line, where mass murder (violence) is characterized as a logical extreme and the pinnacle of toxic masculinity (a positive thing in Garcia's usage). Implicitly, then, Garcia was arguing that violent action is a mode of overcoming marginality and achieving masculinity.

Examining Garcia's construction of ideal masculinity and proper manhood is critical to understanding his use of violence in language and in action. He repeatedly constructed "ideal" masculinity as highly dominant, using violence as a corrective against women and other "lesser" peoples, with Aryan (e.g., white fascist) men portrayed as the apotheosis of "proper" manhood. Because gender is constructed as a binary system in both extreme far-right and manosphere cultures, Garcia had to also narratively construct masculinity by saying what it is not, and that is feminine. So, he did this by also repeatedly narrating femininity as "evil" via slurs and assertions that all women are users and destroyers of men. He blended this with the regular use of the incel-specific derogatory term "foid," a shorthand for "femoid," indicating that women are soulless, and not, in fact, human beings.<sup>31</sup> Finally, in his writings Garcia depicted women as sexualized objects, articulating at great length his fixation with sex, pornography, and punishing women by violently raping them. These constructions position violence as the path to manhood and women as acceptable objects of violence enacted by "real" men.

Ultimately, Garcia in his writings presented women as markers of male status, whether as sexual objects or as lesser beings to be dominated and controlled through violence—a common notion within the manosphere. This narration provided a lens through which Garcia could construct his preference for and discussions in his diary about feminine submissive behavior as sexually appealing, including his posts about nurses who "waited on him hand and foot" (mentioned above) and about Asian women specifically. Linking this gendered worldview with his racial worldview (where Aryan masculinity is the peak of manhood) also provides a lens to understand his focus on Asian women, who are stereotyped as more submissive, and his obsessive hatred of Asian men.<sup>32</sup> With women as markers of male status and Aryanism as the apogee of manhood, race itself becomes a hierarchical currency accrued in sexually violent terms. Here, dominating women confers masculine status. This is particularly true if a man can dominate high-status women. In these particular extremist ideologies, whiteness and high-status femininity are often linked such that Asian women are often portrayed as of higher status than other women of color.<sup>33</sup> Garcia could leverage this economy through his portrayal of desire to dominate high-status women in an effort to offset a perceived

i In this context, "red pill" is a pop cultural reference to the film *The Matrix*, where the main character is offered the choice of taking a red pill to remain aware of reality, or a blue pill to go back to a simulated world. The idea is that by taking the red pill, one can break free of false consciousness. In the case of the "red pill" cultures online (including the manosphere and the extreme far-right), this predominantly refers to a belief that society is structured to hurt men and white people.

loss of masculine status from his own racial and ethnic identity.

In the end, an ideologically fuzzy tapestry of extreme thoughts tied to rampant violence does not fit neatly into traditional (racial) or newer (misogynist) categories of extremism. However, it is essential to widen beyond misogyny to view how gender, as a more complex category, shapes relationships with race, violence, and action. With respect to the Allen, Texas, attack case, the uncharacteristic usage of ideological frames and terminologies highlights how useful an intersectional analysis is for studying identity-based supremacy and extremism. In this case, an intersectional analysis shows how gender and race mutually constitute and reinforce each other in ways that can produce violence.

## Conclusion

Two aspects of the Allen, Texas, attack and the radicalization of Garcia, the assailant, are worth highlighting, as they may represent future trends within the extreme far-right.

The first noteworthy aspect of the attack is the difficulty of linking it to a particular ideology given the mixture of references, languages, and symbols the attacker writes about. However, in this case, the ideological mixture can be analyzed through Garcia's cross-linking grievances around gender. As such, this case highlights the need to develop new methods of assessment and exploration (such as intersectional analysis) to better understand ideological drivers and violence. As noted above, Garcia appears to have been deeply immersed in the manosphere and a variety of extreme far-right narratives, but seemingly was not committed to anything in particular. Ideologically specific terminology was used, but these ideas were rarely developed or articulated at length. Researchers have previously sought to explain this broad and increasingly common phenomenon with terminology like "ideological convergence,"<sup>34</sup> "fringe fluidity,"<sup>35</sup> or "salad bar" extremism.<sup>36</sup> The challenge the authors found with all of these conceptual frameworks, especially with respect to Garcia's online material, is that, even while acknowledging that radicalized individuals may hold multiple ideologies, these frameworks still assume that an individual's commitment to particular ideologies is strong. In Garcia's case, his commitment seems to be stronger toward violence and casual in relationship to ideologies.

The second noteworthy aspect of the Allen, Texas, attack case is the issue of race. Judging by social media conversations following the attack, the fact that Garcia was not white but had Nazi tattoos caused a fracturing in the discourse. For some, it was clear evidence that analysts and journalists on the "left" were too quick to label the incident a far-right attack. For others, it was evidence of a false flag. While these ideologies claiming white racial superiority have been historically associated with white supremacist movements, it is crucial to recognize that they are not exclusive to any particular racial or ethnic group. There are complex intersections between racial or ethnic identity, nationalism, and socio-political factors that contribute to the adoption of such ideologies. In reality, the phenomenon of people of color joining extreme far-right movements is not new at all.

Scholars such as Cecilia Marquez have traced Latino involvement in white supremacist movements back to the 1980s.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, as Hannah Allam and Razzan Nakhlawi have reported, many right-wing activists argue that the real racism is "denying them the agency to follow whatever ideology they choose – no matter how repugnant it is to liberals."<sup>38</sup> People of color in extreme far-right circles include former Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrío, who in May 2023 was found guilty of seditious conspiracy in relation to the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.<sup>39</sup> It also follows that lone actors from among these circles will also periodically engage in violent action. These instances serve as reminders that racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism can transcend what the general public perceives as normative racial boundaries, requiring comprehensive efforts to address the underlying social, economic, and political factors that contribute to radicalization and mobilization to violence.

Extreme far-right movements that are not explicitly white supremacist attract people of color. Relatedly, as noted above, notions about gender and sexuality, including misogynist attitudes, often transcend racial boundaries. As Daniel Hosang and Joseph Lowndes have written, "Performed as patriarchal traditionalism, online ultra-misogyny, or street-brawling bravado, masculinity bridges racial differences for populist, fascist, and even white-nationalist politics."<sup>40</sup> Grasping this dynamic in all its complexity is crucial for understanding future attacks in this space. **CTC**

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