

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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EMBATTLED FRANCE REBUFFS NEGOTIATIONS AFTER AL-QAEDA HOSTAGE EXCHANGE IN MALI

Jacob Zenn

On October 11, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)'s sub-affiliate in Mali, Group for Supporters of Muslims and Islam (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin—JNIM), released photos featuring elder Malian Tuareg JNIM leader Iyad ag Ghaly. He was hosting a celebration for some 200 freed prisoners, including significant numbers of jihadists, in a certain northern Malian village ([Al-Khaleej Today](#), October 13). Two weeks later, on October 23, JNIM released video clips of Iyad ag Ghali delivering a speech to those freed prisoners in Arabic, which was translated into a local language by a fighter standing beside him ([Twitter/SimNasr](#), October 23).

Earlier that month, on October 8, the informal head of Mali's opposition party, Soumaila Cissé, and three other foreign hostages, including French aid worker Sophie Pétronin, Italian priest Pierluigi Maccali, and Italian tourist Nicola Ciacco, were exchanged by JNIM for those prisoners and, according to Algeria's Defense Ministry, an unspecified sum of money ([France24.com](#),

October 8; [Ashaq al-Awsat](#), October 29). Algeria itself was understandably concerned about the hostage exchange because Algerians were among the jihadists released from prison. One Algerian prisoner who was released, for example, was immediately arrested attempting to cross into Algeria ([malijet.com](#), October 30).

Cissé was abducted in March while campaigning in Timbuktu, and the 75-year old Pétronin was abducted in Gao in 2016. Maccali, meanwhile, was abducted in Niger near the Burkina Faso border in 2018, and Ciacco was a tourist abducted near Timbuktu in 2019. Pétronin, notably, converted to Islam and changed her name to Mariam while in custody ([lemonde.fr](#), October 9). This resembled Italian Silvia Romano, who was kidnapped by al-Shabaab in Kenya in 2019 and released in June, but not before she also converted to Islam and changed her name to Aisha ([menafn.com](#), July 11). Her conversion was not well-received in Italy ([milanorepubblica.it](#), July 6). Although Pétronin was the last remaining French hostage released from al-Qaeda worldwide, fanfare seems to have subsided more quickly than usual, perhaps because of her conversion.

Cissé's and the three hostages' release demonstrates that negotiated deals can be reached with JNIM. How-

ever, France's foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, ruled out further dialogue with JNIM on his first visit to Mali since the hostage exchange and the previous August military coup that ousted Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta from the Malian presidency ([Agence France-Presse](#), October 26). JNIM, which is loyal to the Afghan Taliban, for its part, demands French military withdrawal from the Sahel before it is willing to negotiate peace with Mali's government ([Radio France Internationale](#), March 12). The mutually contradictory positions of France and JNIM largely explain Paris' disinterest in any further negotiations, while the August coup may have somehow facilitated the behind-the-scenes negotiations for the hostage deal with JNIM.

With no end in sight to French involvement in combating JNIM in Mali and neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso, France's battles with jihadism are set to continue both at home and abroad in overlapping ways. One of Sahelian jihadist mastermind Mokhtar Belmokhtar's former deputies, the Mauritanian Fawaz Ould Ahmed, for example, is standing trial in Mali for orchestrating the 2015 attack on a Bamako nightclub and 2016 attack on Bamako's Radisson Blu hotel, which killed more than 25 people combined, including mostly foreigners. Ould Ahmed states that the jihadists' motivation for those attacks was revenge for the French Charlie Hebdo cartoons that mocked the Prophet Mohammed ([information.tv5monde.com](#), October 28).

Meanwhile, French President Emmanuel Macron is facing an international backlash, especially from Turkey, for his standing firm in support of the right to blaspheme Prophet Mohammed after a Chechen refugee beheaded a schoolteacher in suburban Paris who showed one of the Charlie Hebdo cartoons to his students ([francetvinfo.fr](#), October 27). Further, on October 29, a woman was beheaded and two others were killed in Nice, France in revenge for this blasphemy ([liberation.fr](#), October 29). Combating jihadism and addressing Islamism's challenge to French *laïcité* (secularism), therefore, cannot be considered either a domestic or foreign policy matter for France. Rather, they are intertwined. Moreover, with French presidential elections scheduled for April 2022, Macron may be drawn to the right. Macron's longtime right-wing challenger, Marine Le Pen, called for a "comprehensive response aimed at eradicating Islamism from [French] soil" after the recent Nice attack ([Twitter/MLP_officiel](#), October 29).

Jacob Zenn is the editor of Terrorism Monitor.

ISLAMIC STATE'S GREAT ESCAPE JAILBREAK IN THE CONGO

Jacob Zenn

On October 18, Islamic State's *Nashir News* media agency released an audio from Islamic state's al-Furqan Media Foundation of spokesman, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, called "Tell the Stories so They can Reflect." The audio was promoted by Islamic State supporters on social media, but its content was fairly unoriginal. Al-Muhajir, for example, predictably lambasted Gulf countries' normalizing diplomatic relations with "the Jews" and spreading lies about Islamic State (IS) ([The Times of Israel](#), October 17).

Also notable was the audio's release nearly one year after IS' first 'caliph' Abubakar al-Baghdadi's death at the hands of U.S. special forces in Idlib, Syria on October 26, 2019. Al-Baghdadi's own spokesman and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir's predecessor, Abu Hassan al-Muhajir, was killed shortly after al-Baghdadi's death. However, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir's audio did not mention al-Baghdadi or Abu Hassan al-Muhajir.

Although there are signs of an uptick in IS attacks in Syria and Iraq, the group is far from restoring its 'caliphate' in its heartland. Thus, it appears that al-Baghdadi's successor as caliph, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, has little incentive to release any videos or audios at this time. It was, for example, only after IS captured Mosul, Iraq in 2014 that al-Baghdadi appeared prominently for the first time and delivered a sermon from a historic Mosul mosque and declared the reestablishment of the "caliphate" ([Al Arabiya News](#), June 29, 2014).

In his recent audio message, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir praised IS fighters in sub-Saharan Africa, where Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) in Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Niger and Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP) in Mozambique and Congo remain strong. They have remained loyal to IS, despite al-Baghdadi's death ([ISWAP](#), February 14). In addition, in his audio message al-Muhajir called for "demolishing the fences of prisons and freeing the Muslim prisoners," which has historically been one of IS' main ways of replenishing its ranks and retaining the loyalty of its fighters. Two days after al-Muhajir's audio, on October 20, ISCAP conducted a jailbreak in Beni, Congo, which was claimed hours later by IS as part of its "Answer the Call [of al-Muhajir]" campaign ([Al-Khaleej Today](#), October

20). The claim noted seven Congolese soldiers were also killed.

In total, according to Congolese authorities, 1,455 prisoners escaped, 122 remained in prison, 14 were caught by the police, and two were killed while escaping ([actu-alite.cd](#), October 20). With this dramatic prison break, ISCAP has, like Islamic State itself in Syria and Iraq in previous years, now replenished its ranks, demoralized the Congolese army, and seemingly tied its prison break to al-Muhajir's audio to buttress the IS spokesman's credibility. ISCAP will likely escalate attacks in coming months not only in Congo, but also in Mozambique and even in Tanzania, where, since October, the group has begun formally claiming lethal attacks against Tanzanian soldiers in that country's territory ([Agence France-Presse](#), October 23).

Jacob Zenn is the editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Yemen's War Tests Oman's Neutrality: Focusing on the Saudi Footprint in al-Mahra

Michael Horton

Neutrality is one of Oman's greatest assets. Under the leadership of the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said, Oman successfully navigated the fall of the Shah in Iran, the Cold War and its end, the U.S.-led War on Terror, and the Arab Spring. Through all these global and regional shape-shifting events, Oman has maintained its neutrality and independence. Oman, for example, maintains longstanding relationships with the United States and Great Britain while, at the same time, it enjoys constructive relations with Iran. Moreover, although Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are aligned against Iran, Qatar, and Turkey, Oman has managed to work with all of these countries to address regional issues.

The foreign policy charted by the late Sultan Qaboos resulted in Oman's becoming a valuable intermediary between rival countries in the Gulf and world powers with interests in the Gulf. In its role as an intermediary, Oman has facilitated negotiations between warring parties, and has secured the release of prisoners held in Iran, including three American hikers in 2010 and 2011 ([Times of Israel](#), November 29, 2013). Numerous countries, including the United States, have availed themselves of Oman's trusted position as an interlocutor for conducting backchannel negotiations with Iran as well as with political and military factions like the Taliban and Yemen's Houthis ([The National](#), October 16, 2017; [Inside Arabia](#), October 12, 2018).

However, the ongoing war in Yemen poses a growing challenge to Oman's neutral foreign policy. This is due to Saudi Arabia's ambitions in the Yemeni governorate of al-Mahra, which borders Oman. Yet, Oman's role as a mediator is critical to ending the war in Yemen. The involvement of multiple powers, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran, has made the war in Yemen a stage on which regional tensions are being violently acted out. All sides in the war are emboldened, funded, and armed by outside powers, and it may be increasingly difficult for Oman to remain neutral.

Saudi Moves and Omani Counter-Moves

Before Saudi Arabia launched its March 2015 military intervention in Yemen, Sultan Qaboos and his senior advisers repeatedly warned the most senior members of the House of Saud about the dangers involved in such an intervention. [1] Neither the Saudis nor the allied Emiratis heeded these warnings. Both countries asserted that their military intervention would rapidly defeat the Houthis and restore Yemen's internationally recognized government headed by President Abd Raboo Mansur Hadi. Now, nearly six years into their war, the UAE and Saudi Arabia seek a face-saving end to the conflict.

Ending the war—or rather overlapping wars—in Yemen in a way that achieves at least some of Saudi Arabia's security goals is no easy task. Ironically, the Saudi-led intervention that sought to defeat the Houthis and eliminate Iranian involvement in Yemen has instead strengthened the Houthis and allowed Iran to deepen their relationship with them (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), November 11, 2016).

Oman comes into play because it facilitates backchannel negotiations between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia. The Omani government, under the leadership of Sultan Haitham bin Tariq al-Said, the late sultan's cousin, recently played a pivotal role in negotiating a prisoner exchange between the Houthis and Yemen's internationally recognized government ([al-Jazeera](#), October 17). [2] Sultan Qaboos and his senior advisers also previously warned Saudi Arabia and the UAE that there is no military solution to the war in Yemen because no party, including the Houthis, has the capability to fully defeat the other parties. Without de-escalation and a workable and realistic framework for peace, the war in Yemen risks becoming a medium to low intensity conflict that persists for years or even decades.

The Importance of Al-Mahra Governorate

Oman, which shares a rugged 183-mile border with Yemen, is keenly aware that the war in Yemen will not stay in Yemen if it continues. Oman has already dealt with thousands of displaced Yemenis moving across Oman's borders, increased smuggling, and the expense of providing vast amounts of critical humanitarian aid. This all comes at a time when Oman faces a financial crisis induced by low oil prices, debt payments, and the global economic fallout from the responses to COVID-19.

Al-Mahra, the Yemeni governorate that shares Oman's border, had been a bastion of stability throughout much of the war. This stability was largely due to the cohesiveness and traditions of the tribes in al-Mahra, whose territory encompasses most of the governorate. [3] The Omani authorities are well-placed to mitigate conflict in al-Mahra because they have long enjoyed good relations with tribal elites, whose territory extends into the neighboring Omani governorate of Dhofar. [4]

Control of the border with Yemen is critical to Omani security. However, controlling the long border, which traverses mountains and deserts, is challenging even with Oman's well-trained and equipped Border Force, which is a mechanized infantry brigade. Smuggling along the border, which has been long a mainstay of the al-Mahri economy, is still rife. [5] To help control smuggling and maintain stability and security, Oman has relied on its longstanding relationships with al-Mahra's tribal elders, many of whom are dual Yemeni-Omani citizens. Oman views al-Mahra as an important buffer between it and the chaos that has engulfed most of Yemen.

Saudi ambitions in al-Mahra now threaten the stability the governorate once enjoyed. Over the last two years, Saudi Arabia has become involved in the governorate's tribal politics and has also established a military presence in the capital of the governorate, al-Ghaida, and allegedly in the district of Hawf ([Middle East Monitor](#), October 1, 2018; [Middle East Monitor](#), October 6). In addition to hard power, the Saudis have tried to exert soft power by establishing Salafist-inspired madrassas in al-Mahra. Through protests and some armed confrontations, people in al-Mahra are fighting back against what many view as a Saudi takeover of the governorate ([al-Jazeera](#), February 18).

Saudi Arabia views al-Mahra as valuable real estate. Control of or influence in al-Mahra would allow the Saudis access to the Gulf of Aden. Saudi Arabia has long wanted to construct a pipeline through Yemen that would allow it to decrease its dependence on the Strait of Hormuz. [6] The Saudis also view their military and influence operations in al-Mahra as a way of exerting pressure on Oman at a time when Oman is perceived as vulnerable due to its weak economy and the recent death of Sultan Qaboos in January. Saudi Arabia and the UAE want to force Oman out of what they view as the Iranian and Qatari orbit.

Prospects for Saudi Arabia and Oman

Saudi Arabia's plans for al-Mahra are unlikely to succeed. Al-Mahra's tribal society militates against sustained foreign influence. At the same time, it is imperative that Oman continue to do what it can to manage the situation in al-Mahra via its well-established ties with tribal elders and other elites in the governorate. At some point Oman may be compelled to take sides in the war in Yemen at least as far as it concerns Saudi Arabia's moves in al-Mahra. If it does take sides, Oman risks compromising its role as a neutral and trusted intermediary. Such a move would not only harm Oman, but also the prospects for stability in the broader region.

Notes

[1] Author's interview with Yemen analyst and former member of the Yemeni government, conducted remotely, October 19, 2020.

[2] Author's interview with a former member of the Yemeni government, conducted remotely, October 27, 2020.

[3] See Ahmed Nagi, "[Eastern Yemen's Tribal Model for Containing Conflict](#)," (Carnegie Middle East Center: March 2020)

[4] It was in Dhofar that Oman fought a thirteen year (1963-76) long insurgency against Communist-inspired rebels, who were aided by what was then the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). The rebels moved between Dhofar and bases in al-Mahra, then a part of the PDRY. With assistance from Great Britain and Iran, which was then ruled by the Shah, Oman defeated the rebels and asserted control of its border with Yemen. See J.E. Peterson, *Oman's Insurgencies: The Sultanate's Struggle for Supremacy* (Saqi: 2007)

[5] There have been numerous claims made about arms and materiel being smuggled across the Oman-Yemen border for the use by the Houthis. Oman has denied these claims, and little or no evidence has been provided to substantiate the charges ([Gulf News](#), October 15, 2016). It should be noted that almost all the territory between the Oman-Yemen border and Houthi-controlled northwest Yemen is controlled by forces nominally allied with Yemen's internationally recognized government. These areas include the northern half of the governorate of Hadramawt and much of the governorate of Marib. If weapons are being smuggled via the Oman-Yemen border, they must transit nearly 300 miles

of territory that is not under the control of the Houthis. Far easier routes exist for weapons smugglers. Yemen's lengthy coast along the Gulf of Aden is unpatrolled, and there are well-established smuggling routes that connect the coast with north Yemen.

[6] See Yahya al-Sewari, "Yemen's al-Mahra: From Isolation to the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm," (Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies: July 5, 2019)

Michael Horton is a Fellow for Arabian affairs at the Jamestown Foundation.

Islamic State's South African Fighters in Mozambique: The Thulsie Twins Case

Christian Jokinen

On October 2, South Africa's state prosecutor successfully opposed bail for the "Thulsie twins" in their prolonged trial on terrorism offenses ([Daily Maverick](#), October 2). The alleged offenses and corresponding court case highlight South Africa's growing concern about South African-origin foreign fighters and the deteriorating security situation in northern Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province.

Motivations of the Thulsie Twins and Renaldo Smith

Tony-Lee and Brandon-Lee Thulsie and their friend Renaldo Smith converted to Islam in 2013. The trio became radicalized, and in April 2015 the Thulsie twins and Smith attempted to fly out of Johannesburg's O.R. Tambo International Airport on Qatar Airways to Turkey. According to South African security authorities, the intended destination for the trio was Syria, and the motive for their travel was the desire to join Islamic State (IS).

Their travel, however, was disrupted when the airline declined to allow them on the flight after receiving a tip of their true intentions from an unknown source that was most likely South African intelligence services. Despite this, several months later, the trio attempted a different route. This time they drove to Maputo, Mozambique's capital, to board a Kenya Airways flight, but again they were declined.

Frustrated by their failure to join IS abroad, the trio apparently decided to plan attacks in South Africa. However, security authorities arrested the twins after Tony-Lee allegedly discussed their terrorist plans with IS operatives, including on how to build and obtain explosive devices for carrying out attacks. Unbeknownst to Tony-Lee, he had come in contact with an undercover U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agent, who was posing as an IS operative, and unwittingly shared his attack plans with the FBI. Following a 10-month investigation, the Thulsie twins were arrested, and their homes were searched on July 9, 2016. Handwritten notes containing information on how to join IS and bombmaking instructions were found ([News24.com](#), August 1, 2016).

New Counter-Terrorism Precedents in South Africa

Tony-Lee and Brandon-Lee became the first South Africans to be arrested and charged for having Islamic State links. According to South African security authorities, the twins were plotting to attack the U.S. embassy, the UK High Commission, the South Africa Zionist Federation, King David High School in Johannesburg, and the South African military technology conglomerate, Denel. In addition, the Thulsie twins contemplated targeting Jewish South African cartoonist Jonathan "Zapiro" Shapiro, Jews who fought in Israel with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and returned to South Africa, a Jewish South African investment banker, and an unidentified gay imam ([The Star](#), June 11, 2019).

Meanwhile, the Thulsie twins' friend, Renaldo Smith, was only questioned by security authorities and became a witness. However, Smith later disappeared until resurfacing in May 2018 in northern Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province, where he joined the jihadist group that locally calls itself 'al-Shabaab,' but that one year later became Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP). A photograph circulating among IS supporters on Telegram showed Smith and other jihadists in Mozambique posing in a field with weapons and the black-and-white Islamic State flag ([2OceansVibe](#), August 26).

The U.S. government designated the Thulsie twins as terrorists in September 2017 ([U.S. State Department](#), September 19, 2017). Their court process, which was seen as a test of South Africa's counter-terrorism legislation, has, however, been postponed and delayed since 2017. The Thulsie twins launched their latest bail bid in January 2020, but this was successfully opposed by the South African government, which argued that the twins could abscond and join their friend, Renaldo Smith, in Mozambique. The state stressed that the twins had "already used this route before," referring to their July 2015 travel attempt to Syria from Maputo ([The Citizen](#), October 2).

South African Concerns About Jihadism in Mozambique

The escalating jihadist insurgency in Mozambique has moved the threat of international terrorism right to South Africa's doorstep. In July 2020, State Security Minister Ayanda Dlodlo admitted that South Africa's intelligence services were having "sleepless nights" because of the threat posed by IS in neighboring Mozambique ([2OceansVibe](#), August 26). Echoing Dlodlo's words, the country's Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation

(DPCI) stated one month later that South Africans were aiding and abetting IS in Mozambique with “financial and material support.” According to DPCI spokesperson, Lloyd Ramovha, “the investigation into South Africans’ involvement in the insurgency [in Cabo Delgado province] involves Interpol and Mozambican authorities. The investigation has multiple legs, with detectives looking at cross-border financial flows, the origins of these funds and the involvement of organized crime in raising finances” ([DispatchLive](#), August 27).

The South African government has not provided public estimates of the numbers of South African nationals who have traveled to or returned from IS territories in Syria and Iraq. As seen in the Thulsie twins’ and Renaldo Smith’s frustrated travel attempts, South African authorities have tried to handle cases quietly that involve South Africans who tried to travel to Syria, or even some who have traveled and returned. Iraq’s Ambassador to South Africa, Hashim al-Alawi, caused some debate in 2015 when he claimed to *Fox News* that “certainly” some 50 to 60 South Africans had joined IS in Syria and Iraq, but that the number could be as high as 300 ([Fox News](#), October 3, 2015).

Prominent think tanks and analysts in South Africa, however, estimate that around 100 individuals migrated to IS territories in Syria or Iraq between early 2014 and late 2016, with the majority having subsequently returned to South Africa or been slain on the battlefield ([U.S. State Department](#), 2018). They included:

- Fayyaz Valli of Vereeniging, who was the first South African to have died while fighting in Syria in October 2013 ([Sunday Times](#), May 31, 2015);
- Bilal and Ahmed Cajeel, who were brothers who traveled to Syria and Iraq to join IS, with the former dying during Syrian forces’ recapture of Palmyra in March 2016 and the latter dying earlier in 2014 ([TimesLive](#), March 3, 2016);
- Musa Abu Mujahid Oscar, who is from Mabopane township in Pretoria and was reported to have died while fighting for IS in Raqqa, Syria in 2016 ([TimesLive](#), December 23, 2016); and
- Firoze Ganchi of Upington, Northern Cape, who worked prior to his departure to Syria as a surgeon and with his wife, Safiya, a psychiatrist from Durban, and their two children traveled to IS territory in 2016, but in February 2019 Ganchi was killed near Baghouz, Syria, in an airstrike targeting Islamic State fighters ([Mail & Guardian](#), March 3, 2019).

Future Threats to South Africa

While South African authorities continue to keep a tight lid on information concerning jihadist travelers to Cabo Delgado province, a growing number of credible threats are emerging from that region. One example is the case of another identified South African foreign fighter, Mohammed Suliman. He was seen in the photograph with Renaldo Smith in Cabo Delgado province. According to Suliman’s father, he left South Africa in 2018 and traveled to Mozambique with a group of 15 other young South Africans, who intended to fight for IS. Mohammed Suliman, however, is now believed to have died in Cabo Delgado province. According to a recent report, 100 South Africans have already travelled to Mozambique to join the jihadists ([2OceansVibe](#), August 26). If correct, this would indicate that with the demise of IS in the Middle East, Cabo Delgado province has become the destination of choice for South African foreign fighters since 2018.

Moreover, in June 2020, the official newsletter of the IS’ central media office, *al-Naba*, published an editorial addressing Mozambique. It warned that should South Africa become involved in Mozambique militarily, it could result in the opening of a “fighting front” within South Africa itself ([Memri](#), July 2). With the presence of South African foreign fighters in IS ranks in Mozambique and with other supporters in South Africa itself, the group is in a position to back up its threats.

South Africa’s quiet efforts to prevent its nationals from joining IS in the Middle East have previously been aided by the sheer distance between South Africa and the group’s strongholds. The emergence of a jihadist arena in Cabo Delgado province, however, complicates South Africa’s counter-terrorism efforts. South Africa’s border with Mozambique is known to be porous. To prevent jihadist travelers from reaching Cabo Delgado province, South Africa and Mozambique, as well as the wider Southern African Development Community (SADC), will need to strengthen border control and surveillance and boost regional information and intelligence sharing.

Dr. Christian Jokinen received his doctorate from the Department for Contemporary History at the University of Turku in Finland. He specializes in political violence and terrorism.

Antifa's Denver Shooting: New Trends in Left-Wing Political Violence, Syrian Connections, and Sub-cultures

Jacob Zenn

Prosecutors have charged Matthew Dolloff with second-degree murder for killing navy veteran and cowboy-style hat-maker, Lee "Tex" Keltner, in Denver's Civic Center Park on October 10 ([CBS \[Denver\]](#), October 29; [AngusTV](#), 2011). Before his death, Keltner joined a 'patriot rally' organized by former CIA security contractor, John "Tig" Tiegen, to "take OUR country back" from "communist socialists" ([Twitter.com/MarcSallinger](#), October 10). Tiegen defended the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi when al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)'s Libyan sub-affiliate, Ansar al-Sharia, killed ambassador Christopher Stevens, another diplomat, and two former Navy Seal CIA agents on the 11th anniversary of 9/11. Now, Tiegen leads Patriot Muster in whose name the rally was held ([The Gazette \[Colorado Springs\]](#), October 11).

The rally was livestreamed by independent reporter Brian Loma and featured interviews of Tiegen and Gulf War Air Force veteran Casper Stockham, who unsuccessfully ran on the Republican ticket in 2016 to become Colorado's then first Black congressperson, and lost again in 2020 ([YouTube](#), October 11). Denver Antifa activists and allies, including the socialist-feminist Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (W.I.T.C.H), however, consider Stockham a "fascist" for his closeness to Patriot Muster, Colorado Proud Boys, and Donald Trump supporters ([Twitter.com/cosantifascists](#), February 21; [Facebook/WITCHDenver](#), September 4, 2019). Denver Communists (a.k.a. Party for Socialism and Liberation), which is supported by Denver's Black Lives Matters movement, W.I.T.C.H, and Colorado Socialist Revolution, therefore, organized an "Antifa-Black Lives Matter soup drive" to counter the "fash [fascist] scum" Patriot Muster, whose rally-goers held pro-Trump and 'Socialism Sucks' signs, wore tactical vests and caps emblazoned with '1776,' and listened to Lee Greenwood's country song, 'God Bless The U.S.A.' ([thenomanzone.com](#), October 17; [westword.com \[Denver\]](#), October 13; [Facebook.com/BlackLivesMatter5280](#), September 18).

This article details the cocktail of left-wing groups and individuals that comprise Antifa in Denver, including their tactics, targets, personnel, and historical evolution, and shows how an intense ideological ecosystem under the stresses of a presidential election and pandemic resulted in the fatal shooting of Lee Keltner.

Inside Denver Antifa Activism

After Patriot Muster's rally, which was partitioned to separate rally-goers from Antifa activists carrying an 'America Was Never Great' banner and umbrellas for use as 'tear gas shields,' police facilitated rally-goers' egress. However, Brian Loma's livestream captured Jeremiah Elliott, who was with Antifa, accosting and taunting rally-goers just before Dolloff shot Keltner ([YouTube](#), October 11; [Twitter.com/newgoo4you](#), October 19). Elliott's confrontations allowed reporters to record rally-goers' verbally sparring with Elliott, who wore a 'Black Guns Matter' shirt and wanted "to make white supremacists feel uncomfortable" ([Facebook.com/jeff.fard](#), October 23; [Facebook.com/jeff.fard](#), October 13). These images without context could have made Patriot Muster, including Keltner, who wore a 'Bikers Lives Matter' shirt, appear as aggressors in the media.

Elliott also wore his 'Black Guns Matter' shirt at a Denver Bernie Sanders rally in February, where Elliott brawled with a white Sanders supporter, who disliked Elliott's shirt and called Elliott, who is Black, a racist. Elliott, however, countered that "Black people have historically been restricted from firearm ownership" and that he received the shirt at a conceal-carry class. He also expressed disappointment that the Sanders rally did not have "inclusivity and safe spaces," the lack of which Elliott said he would expect "at a Trump rally" ([CBS \[Denver\]](#), February 17).

Colorado-based independent investigative reporter Angela Ramirez, who tracks "Marxist influence in American politics," including Antifa and the anti-government, anti-police, and sometimes Antifa- and Black Lives Matter-aligned Boogaloo Bois, also tweeted videos of Elliott at a July 25 Antifa black-bloc night 'action' ([Twitter.com/selfdeclaredref](#), October 30; [Star Tribune \[Minnesota\]](#), October 24; [Oakland County Times \[Michigan\]](#), October 9). Elliott wore a 'Fuc* The Police' shirt and commanded Black Lives Matter chants, including "Say His [Elijah McClain's] Name" and "No Justice, No Peace," alongside Denver Antifa 'comrade,' Michael Windecker ([thenomanzone.com](#), October 15). Antifa then started fires at a Denver suburb's courthouse, broke courthouse

windows, and pointed lasers and threw fireworks at police officers ([CBS \[Denver\]](#), July 25).

Michael Windecker calls himself a Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) "soldier" and "proud Fuc*ing Communist." He fought with Syrian-based Kurdish-led People's Protection Units (YPG), whom he refers to as "Antifa freedom fighters," and Iraqi-based Peshmerga against Islamic State. *Daily Beast* profiled Windecker, whose alias was "Necromancer," on Kirkuk's frontlines in 2015 ([Daily Beast](#), April 20, 2015). However, it published a follow-up article after learning Windecker's multiple arrests included third-degree sexual assault of a 14-year old boy ([Daily Beast](#), April 27, 2015).

Marxism, Rojava, and Rap

Michael Windecker and Jeremiah Elliott embrace revolutionary socialism, which is an influential intellectual undercurrent of Antifa and Black Lives Matters movement leaders, including the latter's co-founder, Patrisse Cullors, and former fiscal sponsor's board member, former Weather Underground and Black Liberation Army member, Susan Rosenberg ([thousandcurrents.org](#), 2020; [Time.com](#), February 26, 2018; [Facebook.com/thousandcurrents](#), May 24, 2017; [New York Times](#), December 1, 1984). At a July 12 Denver Communists event, Windecker, for example, wore Antifa black-bloc and distributed makeshift 'riot shields' by his car, which was spray-painted to commemorate Black massage therapist, Elijah McClain, who died from a chokehold during an altercation with police near Denver in 2019 ([Twitter.com/JoeyCamp2020](#), October 21). Elliott also chanted with a loudspeaker at Denver Communists' September 12 procession where white activists held "N.W.A Was Right" signs, referring to the Compton, California-based and Dr. Dre-led hip hop group's 1998 gangsta rap hit, "Fuc* tha Police" ([Facebook/denvercommunists](#), September 12).

Other videos show Elliott participating in Denver Antifa black-bloc 'actions' to break police fencing, calling Casper Stockham a "house [n-word]," and denying "membership" in any group or knowing Windecker, even though Antifa's anarchist-inspired decentralized organizational model precludes formal membership and Elliott conducted 'actions' with Windecker ([Twitter.com/newgoo4you](#), October 19; [Facebook.com/jeff.fard](#), October 23). A *New York Times* photographer also tweeted a picture of Elliott wearing his 'Fuc* The Police' shirt at a 2014 rally in New York led by Al Sharpton's National Action Network ([Twitter.com/Azi](#), August 24, 2014). It took

place following the death of Black horticulturalist Eric Garner in a police chokehold while resisting arrest for selling unlicensed cigarettes near Elliott's hometown in Brooklyn. Then 20-year-old Elliott told *New York Post* "the majority of police officers are bad" ([NY Post](#), August 23, 2014). Sometime afterward, Elliott gained employment at a marijuana dispensary in Denver, which legalized the drug in 2014. He relocated there and continued his activism, including in the months before and on the day of Lee Keltner's death ([NBC \[New York\]](#), February 18, 2019).

Before Elliott's July 25 Antifa night 'action' at the courthouse, he also joined a daytime Denver Communists highway protest sporting his 'Fuc* The Police' shirt ([Twitter.com/JoeyCamp2020](#), October 21). Also joining the highway protest was Colorado Afro Liberation Front co-director, Gabriel "Echo" Lavine, who one month earlier joined with Antifa black-bloc activists to tear down Denver Civic Center Park's Christopher Columbus monument ([thedenverchannel.com](#), June 27). They were also at the October 10 Patriot Muster counter-rally (Lavine identifies as a non-binary queer Black person and uses they/their pronouns) ([Twitter.com/JoeyCamp2020](#), October 29; [denvernorthstar.com](#), September 14). However, University of Colorado residence hall employee, Samuel Young, became the highway protest's most noteworthy activist by shooting at a jeep that drove past the human barricade, but in addition to the jeep, he also hit two fellow protesters ([YouTube](#), July 25). Young was later identified by colleagues, who recognized his 'Justice for Elijah McClain' shirt ([CBS \[Denver\]](#), July 28).

Young's blog post before the highway protest indicated his inspiration from YPG women's units and their northern Syria-based semi-autonomous state, Rojava, and his concern about a "police state that disproportionately targets black people" and Donald Trump's "threatening to designate Antifa" as a terrorist organization ([medium.com](#), July 25). His previous post explained his support for the Black Lives Matter movement and "admonishment of the system which led to these conditions" ([blog.usejournal.com](#), July 16). Gabriel "Echo" Lavine, whose mission includes "changing the nature of policing in America" that is "rooted in the oppression of Black bodies," stated the district attorney's charging of only the Black Lives Matter supporter, Young, and not the jeep driver, who like Young is white, was a "miscarriage of justice" ([Fox31 \[Denver\]](#), September 31).

The Denver Shooter's Profile

Although Denver media and police initially claimed Matthew Dolloff was a "private security guard" for news reporters and had "no affiliation with Antifa" after he shot Keltner, Pinkerton, the security company allegedly employing Dolloff, denied knowing him ([9news](#), October 11). It turned out Pinkerton's sub-contractor hired Dolloff, despite not observing certain protocols ([securitytoday.com](#), October 19). Moreover, Dolloff's crab-shaped wrist tattoo, which was originally designed by renowned Japanese video game developer Tomohiro Nishikado, also has been the logo for Pink Antifa Vienna for Free Love and Anarchy's 'Space Invaders Against Racism' sticker campaign and Denver dubstep-style music company 'Sub[dot]mission' ([raw.at](#), 2020). The company, whose concerts Dolloff attended, promoted Denver's 'Die-in' protest after George Floyd's death and Black Lives Matter movement-endorsed bail funds, including Colorado Freedom Fund, which, according to Gabriel "Echo" Lavine, posted Samuel Young's \$75,000 bail ([Denver Post](#), June 4; [Twitter.com/subdotmission](#), June 4; [Twitter.com/subdotmission](#), June 5; [Twitter.com/AfroFrontCo](#), July 29).

Dolloff's ex-girlfriend confirmed he once had "alot of the same views [as Antifa]" ([Daily Mail](#), October 13). He also married shortly before the shooting, according to a self-video filmed at his rural Colorado farm ([YouTube](#), April 29). His social media accounts further indicated affinity for left-wing politics, activists, causes, and movements. These included socialism and Bernie Sanders, but not Joe Biden, who Dolloff described as an "establishment prick"; *The Minority Report with Sam Seder's* late Michael Brooks, *The Young Turks'* Cenk Uygur and Ana Kasparian, and Women's March co-organizer Linda Sarsour, who all supported Bernie Sanders; the 2014 Ferguson, Missouri protests after Michael Brown's death, climate justice in the Philippines and 'kayaktivism' in Portland against Royal Dutch Shell, and Catalanian 'freedom' from Spain; and, lastly, Black Lives Matter, Occupy, and Antifa ([Twitter.com/matt29680](#), September 3, 2019). Dolloff, for example, called Donald Trump supporters racists, the Confederate flag equivalent to the swastika, and the U.S. executive branch a "fascist dictatorship" ([ibtimes.com](#), October 12).

Dolloff was formerly an Occupy Denver protester in 2011 and believed "corporations kill America" and sprayed graffiti stating "[We are the] 99%" in Denver public places ([Getty Images](#), November 12, 2011). However, he shifted from an economic to Antifa-aligned

"anti-fascist" orientation ([YouTube](#), 2011). This became a common trajectory for left-wing activists over the past decade, resulting in a growing, but counter-intuitive, synthesis between global corporations and left-wing activism ([Other Life](#), July 2, 2019; [cnet.com](#), June 16). The former has financially supported and the latter has embraced socio-racial, policing, and Trump presidency-related, but not necessarily economic, activism since Trayvon Martin's 2012 death; the 2013 formation of the Black Lives Matter movement through Patrisse Cullors' posting a #BlackLivesMatter hashtag on the Facebook page of co-founder Alicia Garza, who identifies as a queer social justice activist and Marxist and was a prominent San Francisco community organizer (she was then called Alicia Schwartz, but changed her surname after marrying transgender male juvenile justice activist, Malachi Garza); and the Black Lives Matter movement's mass mobilizations after Michael Brown's 2014 death. Dolloff, for instance, posted on Facebook "No Justice! No Peace! Fuc* the Police!" for his first time after Martin was shot and killed in an altercation with an Orlando, Florida neighborhood watch volunteer ([Facebook/matt29680](#), July 29, 2012; [buchmesse.de](#), October 17).

Likewise, Occupy Denver's mission is currently "to get every killer cop off the streets" and oppose "racist militants," including Patriot Muster rally-goers and "fascist white supremacists" who promote them on Twitter ([westword.com \[Denver\]](#), September 19, 2019). Such Twitter users mentioned by Occupy Denver included Indian-American Dinesh D'Souza, Vietnamese-American Andy Ngo, Malaysian-American Ian Miles Cheong, Filipino-American Michelle Malkin, and white Turning Point USA founder, Charlie Kirk, who have more than seven million combined followers ([Facebook/occupydenver](#), October 11). In contrast, Occupy Denver's main focus is no longer on "police being part of the 99%" for protecting economic elites like it was in 2011 ([Denverpost.com](#), October 13, 2011).

Antifa and the Media

Matthew Dolloff's shooting occurred immediately after Jeremiah Elliott dared Lee Keltner to "mace me [n-word]." After moving away from Elliott, Keltner slapped Dolloff when Dolloff tried grabbing his mace. Dolloff and Keltner then stepped back and Dolloff shot Keltner in the head while Keltner sprayed mace. *Denver Post* reporter Helen Richardson, who was following Elliott, snapped photographs of Dolloff's shooting ([Denver Post](#), October 12). Additionally, Brian Loma's livestream captured scenes surrounding the shooting. 'America

First' commentator Michelle Malkin further tweeted Joseph Camp's video of Elliott screaming, "one less white supremacist...fuc* yeah...right in the fuc*ing dome [head]!" after the shooting ([Twitter.com/michellemalkin](https://twitter.com/michellemalkin), October 14). Camp's media team, which operates undercover to avoid Antifa activists' noticing their recordings and assaulting them, shares videos of Antifa 'actions' with "right-leaning influencers" like Malkin ([Denverite.com](https://denverite.com), September 25). His media team also recorded Antifa's burning an American flag in front of police officers and throwing soup cans at them during the October 10 Patriot Muster counter-rally ([YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...), October 14).

It remains unclear whether Elliott knew reporters like Helen Richardson were following him to record his confrontations with Patriot Muster rally-goers and why Dolloff provided unlicensed security for NBC-affiliated 9news reporter, Zack Newman. Keltner was close enough to Newman that Keltner demanded he stop recording him just before his entanglement with Dolloff. Newman, however, covers bias-motivated crimes for 9news, including when Patriot Front (no relation to Patriot Muster) member Samuel Cordova spray-painted 'No More Commies' on a Denver bookshop that hosted third-grade schoolteacher Stuart Sanks' (a.k.a Miss Shirley Delta Blow) 'drag queen storytime for kids' in November 2019, which Cordova alleged was "associated with Antifa" ([9news](https://www.9news.com), November 25, 2019). Since Newman walked with Dolloff and was nearby Elliott and Dolloff when Dolloff shot Keltner, Newman may, therefore, have sought to report on any Patriot Muster rally-goers' bias-motivated incidents against Elliott, such as if they called him a racial slur or assaulted him, just as he had previously reported on Patriot Front's Cordova ([9news](https://www.9news.com), October 13).

Patriot Front, for its part, specializes in vandalism campaigns and promotes 'pan-European' American identity and aligns with Colorado's Proud Boys chapter and Boogaloo Bois, respectively, to oppose 'pedophilia' and gun rights restrictions. However, Patriot Front rejects Proud Boys' racial inclusiveness and Boogaloo Bois' obsession with online memes and sympathy towards Antifa and Black Lives Matter (Proud Boys chairman Enrique Tarrio is a Black Cuban-American and its Colorado chapter head Louie Huey claims to be Latino) ([Patriotfront.us](https://patriotfront.us), 2020; buzzfeednews.com, October 27; [9news](https://www.9news.com), November 25, 2019; itsgoingdown.org, October 4, 2019). On the other end, Antifa aligns with Denver Communists, Denver's Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)

chapter—whose New York and Detroit chapters' members include U.S. House Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib—and even Patriot Front, in opposing U.S. sanctions on Iran. However, Antifa condemns Denver Communists' policy of "self-defense" by simply "outnumbering fascists" like Patriot Front at rallies as well as DSA's "avoiding physical confrontations with fascists" by relying on de-escalation and 'marshals' to "maintain order and safety" (incendarynews.com, January 20; [Twitter/DenverCommies](https://twitter.com/DenverCommies), October 5).

Newman has also covered Antifa black-bloc 'actions' alongside Antifa activists and fellow 9news reporter, Jordan Chavez, who has worn black-bloc ([Twitter.com/newgoo4you](https://twitter.com/newgoo4you), October 29). A Colorado Black Lives Matter Twitter account, which supports Antifa "comrades who dress in [black]-bloc," further promised to keep "100% safe...one of [our]" 9news newscasters, Kyle Clark, three days before Dolloff's shooting ([Twitter.com/saytheirnames6](https://twitter.com/saytheirnames6), October 7; [Twitter.com/saytheirnames6](https://twitter.com/saytheirnames6), October 24). Therefore, mutual relationships appear to have existed between Dolloff and Denver reporters near the shooting, who recorded the photogenic Elliott's confrontations with Patriot Muster rally-goers. Further, Dolloff's lawyer noted during his first court appearance that Elliott now considers Dolloff "a hero" ([Twitter.com/newgoo4you](https://twitter.com/newgoo4you), October 23). Elliott also studied broadcasting at Brooklyn's Kingsborough Community College and referred to "our news company" in interviews after the shooting ([9news](https://www.9news.com), October 15; [CBS \[Denver\]](https://www.cbsdenver.com), October 20).

Moreover, Brian Loma, who is a left-wing nemesis of Joseph Camp, is not only an independent reporter, but also Occupy Denver's leader. He should have crossed paths with Dolloff through their local activism and Elliott though his reporting on Antifa, including at the July 25 highway protest. Loma, like 9news reporters, was also allowed by Antifa to record its July 2 clashes with police officers, who used pepper balls to counter Antifa's spraying irritants and throwing items at them ([CBS \[Denver\]](https://www.cbsdenver.com), July 2). Antifa sought to establish a Denver Civic Center Park 'autonomous zone' modeled on the rapper Solomon "Raz" Simone-led Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ) in Seattle, which was disbanded in June after two shootings occurred there, and anarchist-Marxist semi-autonomous states like Rojava and aspiring separatist regions like Catalonia, which 'international socialists' believe has countered Spain's "nationalist turn" ([Seattle Times](https://www.seattletimes.com), June 21; isreview.org, May 2,

2019). Given Elliott's hostility to reporters who negatively portray Antifa's 'actions' by documenting its destruction of property and sub-lethal violence against 'fascists,' instead of showing police aggression against Antifa and Blacks Lives Matter supporters, any reporter consistently close to Elliott before Dolloff's shooting presumably had his approval ([Twitter.com/KittyLists](https://twitter.com/KittyLists), October 17). Either way, the intended media spectacle involving Elliott to make "white supremacists feel uncomfortable" resulted in Dolloff's lethal political violence against Keltner.

Jacob Zenn is Terrorism Monitor's editor and The Jamestown Foundation's senior fellow for African affairs. This analysis is the author's own and represents no other organization or institutional entity. Follow @BokoWatch.