

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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JNIM CONDUCTS FIRST CLAIMED ATTACK IN SIKASSO REGION

Jacob Zenn

Mali's Sikasso Region borders Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, but has been devoid of the violence that has afflicted the rest of the country. Neither Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) nor Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) had conducted any claimed attacks in Sikasso until the former's attack on April 12. The strike was subsequently featured in a video that was not released by official al-Qaeda or JNIM media outlets, but informally on the group's social media channels. It featured JNIM fighters speaking Bambara and Fulani, attacking a police station, and acquiring spoils ([Twitter.com/@Menastream](https://twitter.com/Menastream), April 16).

Prior to this attack, Sikasso had only rarely been targeted, despite being an operational area years earlier in 2015 for a separate insurgent group, Ansar al-Din's Khalid ibn Walid Brigade (al-Akhbar, July 5, 2015). In one instance, in February 2017, Colombian missionary, Sister Gloria Cecilia Narváez, was kidnapped by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Sikasso (fides.org,

October 15, 2020). JNIM, for its part, was not formed until March 2017 to serve as al-Qaeda Sahel-based entity. AQIM is primarily responsible for Algeria and North Africa operationally. AQIM oversees the Sahel-based organization's operations through meetings between AQIM's leader Abdelmalek Droukdel's and JNIM's leader, Iyad ag Ghaly, and the latter's deputies ([Twitter.com/@Eldruso](https://twitter.com/Eldruso), February 4). It is, therefore, probable that Narváez is now in JNIM's hands, but considering JNIM's weaker presence in Sikasso compared to other parts of Mali, she might have been relocated out of the region.

Sikasso is bound to be important for JNIM's expansion from Mali into Burkina Faso and especially Côte d'Ivoire. The group has already attacked the latter country, including in June 2020, but it is yet to feature as prominently in JNIM, or ISGS, operations as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (France24, June 11, 2020). Nevertheless, another JNIM attack in Côte d'Ivoire more recently in March, which killed two soldiers, suggests that the group maintains cells in the country's border region with Mali (France24, March 29). Given the geographic and temporal proximity of the April 12 Sikasso attack and

the March Côte d'Ivoire attack, it is probable that the same JNIM brigade is operating across the two countries' borders.

The JNIM attack in Sikasso, therefore, indicates the opening of not only a new front in Sikasso itself, but also an increasing threat to Côte d'Ivoire. It should also be recalled that in 2016, AQIM struck a Côte d'Ivoire beachside resort in Grand Bassam that killed 16 people and specifically targeted foreign guests (lemonde.fr, January 12, 2017). This new JNIM push into the country, however, is different because it appears less directed toward attacking foreigners or foreign interests or the country's economy as a whole. Rather, it reflects a more indigenous expansion from Sikasso, Mali into Côte d'Ivoire to establish a new jihadist front in the country's majority Muslim border region.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

CHADIAN TURMOIL AFFECTS COUNTER-TERRORISM AGAINST BOKO HARAM

Jacob Zenn

On April 19, Chadian president Idriss Deby was killed in a shocking attack by Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT) rebels, who were traveling southward in convoys from the Chadian-Libyan border area in an attempt to overthrow Deby. Since Deby's death, Chad has been ruled by a Transitional Military Council (alwihda.com, April 21). Deby's son, Mahamat Idriss Deby, is leading the Council and has promised a return to civilian rule after an 18-month period (Tchadinfos.com, April 21). However, suspicions loom large that Mahamat, like his father, who ruled Chad for more than 30 years, will seek to remain in power just as long as his father.

The FACT rebels launched their incursion from Libya into northern Chad on April 11, to take advantage of the election being held that day, wherein Deby was seeking a sixth presidential term (aljazeera.com, April 21). France has been a supporter the Transitional Military Council and has attacked FACT when they entered Chad. The Chadian military has also succeeded in thwarting FACT in several battles already (tchadinfos.com, April 19). Therefore, FACT is unlikely to succeed in entering the capital N'djamena and overthrowing Mahamat Idriss Deby's government. Mahamat's rhetoric about restoring democracy, whether genuine or not, is also likely intended to undermine FACT's claims that it desires to end authoritarian rule in Chad.

Whatever happens in Chadian politics in the longer term will not salvage the country's efforts to combat Boko Haram's factions in the Lake Chad region in the short term. Mahamat Idriss Deby has experience combating Boko Haram, including on the frontlines with his father during the April 2020 offensive that sought to 'punish' Boko Haram after a faction of the group killed 92 Chadian soldiers (alwihda.com, April 4, 2020). However, now that Chad's primary security threat is coming from the north and Mahamat's attention is turned toward securing his own rule, continuing the fight against Boko Haram will not be a top priority, as it was in 2020. Although Boko Haram's Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) faction has become increasingly active around Lake Chad in recent months, it might behoove ISWAP to

not attack Chad. This would allow Mahamat to become distracted on other matters, while ISWAP reestablishes bases around the lake for targeting Niger, Cameroon, and its primary nemesis, Nigeria ([Terrorism Monitor](#), April 9).

The possibility of FACT fighters having any ties to Boko Haram is also unlikely. Although some Boko Haram commanders, such as Moustapha Chad, who led the group's 2014 raid on the Giwa Barracks in the Nigerian city of Maiduguri, have been Chadian, FACT's networks are along the Libyan border, not near Lake Chad ([Hum-Angle](#), March 14). What FACT and Boko Haram do have in common, however, is that they would benefit from instability in Chad. This would provide FACT a better chance at achieving its goal of seizing N'djamena and would lighten the pressure on Boko Haram from what has thus far been a competent Chadian military when it comes to counter-insurgency operations across its borders in Nigeria and Mali.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

Will the South African Military Intervene in Mozambique? Assessing Domestic Backlash and Islamic State Retaliation

Brenda Githing'u

Ansar al-Sunnah wa-Jamma (ASwJ) is the latest Islamist insurgency to emerge in southern Africa with links to Islamic State (IS), which has named the group Islamic State in Central African Province (ISCAP). ASwJ's emergence in October 2017 with the two-day occupation of Mocimboa da Praia (MdP), in hindsight, foreshadowed what was to come only three years later with the seizure of the city again in August 2020. The second MdP incursion was a highly coordinated, large-scale attack that outmaneuvered government security forces and allowed the militants to regain control of the town.

Since August 2020, ASwJ has used MdP as its main operational base for militants to gather to prepare for large-scale attacks, facilitate indoctrination of youths at camps, and hoard loot from attacks on nearby villages. The group has managed to sustain a coordinated insurgency and is comprised of a network of cells throughout Cabo Delgado Province that have led to the displacement of nearly 670,000 people ([Médecins sans Frontières](#), March 4). This culminated in the major March 2021 attack on Palma, which is a town formerly believed to be a relatively safe home to thousands of displaced people from elsewhere in the province, as well as expatriates, foreign contractors, and tourists ([SABC News](#), March 24).

Considering the proximity of Palma to liquefied natural gas (LNG) sites of multinational companies like Total, the attack marked a major shift in the development of the insurgency and its capacity to pose a threat to foreign investments and nationals from across the southern African region and the West, while further displacing thousands of locals.

Calls for Regional Intervention

As the state of insecurity worsens in Cabo Delgado, calls for regional intervention have mounted. Chief among such calls is for the South African government to deploy its military to Cabo Delgado. Taking note of this, IS made the case in an editorial in its al-Naba newsletter in July 2020 that South Africa has “enough internal problems [that] getting involved in this war that would place it in a great financial, security and military predicament and may result in prompting the soldiers of the Islamic State to open a fighting front inside its borders” (aymennjawad.org, July 3, 2020). These potential consequences continue to frame questions among security analysts and policymakers as to whether South Africa is sufficiently prepared to intervene against the insurgents in Mozambique and mitigate the threat of IS.

South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, recently extended Operation Cooper, a bilateral agreement with Mozambique to combat piracy and enhance maritime security along their coastal areas ([South African Government](#), June 1; [News 24](#), March 19). The mission has been proposed as a cost effective, operationally low-risk option to gradually escalate South Africa’s involvement in Mozambique by enhancing its naval warfare capabilities through a combination of maritime and aviation operations to combat insurgents ([Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa](#), 2020). Nonetheless, this option remains unlikely due to severe financial constraints, as the estimated costs required for simply fully utilizing the South African Navy Forces would require a doubling of its existing budget to between \$564-\$635 million ([Twitter.com/DarrenOlivier](https://twitter.com/DarrenOlivier), April 7). Furthermore, intervention on a limited budget would also lead to operational gaps and pressure on troops to deliver tangible results, which may not be possible under the challenging circumstances in Mozambique. Therefore, at present, the South African government has neither the funds to support a maritime operation beyond its existing mission or a large-scale deployment for a sustained presence in Mozambique in the medium to long term.

Risks to South Africa

By intervening in the war against ASwJ in Cabo Delgado, the South African government risks losing popular support from the general public. Following the U.S. State Department designation of ASwJ as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and IS affiliate, some influential members of the South African Muslim community were reluctant to define the insurgent group in the same way ([U.S. Department of State](#), March 10). Dr. Faisal Suliman, Chairperson of the South African Muslim Network (SAMNET), argued that the conflict is “more about resources and a disgruntled local population than it is about some establishment of any Islamic state or caliphate in Southern Africa” ([Independent Online](#), April 9).

Perceptions around the nature of the insurgency and atrocities committed by armed forces are likely to shape public opinion on the morality of South Africa’s involvement. This comes nearly 20 years after the U.S. began the War on Terror (WoT) in Afghanistan and Iraq, which former President Nelson Mandela strongly condemned (polity.org.za, June 28, 2003). The South African public has widely celebrated a foreign policy based on principles of human rights and the promotion of peace and security. Therefore, a War on Terror-styled military intervention in Mozambique would break a long-established non-interventionist approach that would prompt criticism, especially from faith-based communities and human rights organizations in South Africa.

South Africa also faces the risk of retaliatory attacks by a lone wolf or cell inspired by IS. The country currently has two major ongoing cases related to suspects allegedly linked to IS. These cases include those involving Brandon-Lee and Tony-Lee Thulsie as well as Fatima Patel, her husband Sayfydeen Aslam Del Vecchio, and Malawian national, Ahmad ‘Bazooka’ Mussa ([Terrorism Monitor](#), November 5, 2020). While the latter trio have remained behind bars without trial, an accomplice of the Thulsie twins, Ronaldo Smith (and another South African, Mohammed Suliman), were alleged to have fled to Mozambique to join the insurgency. This has impeded efforts by the Thulsie twins to obtain bail ([Club of Mozambique](#), September 3). Furthermore, a case of twelve suspects accused of the attack on the Shia Imam Hussein mosque in Verulam, Durban, was dismissed last year due to a

lack of evidence ([News 24](#), July 14, 2020). The Imman Hussain mosque is attended by the minority Shia community, which drew speculation of whether the attack was sectarian. Azad Seedat, chairperson of the Shia community and founder of the mosque, was among those who expressed disappointment at the court rulings ([Daily Maverick](#), July 14)

Shortly after that dismissal, Fatima Patel and her two co-accused abandoned legal aid to be represented by advocate Jimmy Howse, who represented one of the twelve accused in the Shia mosque attack, Farhad Hooper ([Times Live](#), March 8). Additionally, another one of the twelve suspects from the Verulam, Durban case was arrested in a house in Kliprivier, south of Johannesburg, in an incident involving the kidnapping and extortion of a businessman. Police recovered an IS flag, explosives, and firearms from the house ([Defence Web](#), August 14). These developments typify the nature of the threat of IS in South Africa, where state prosecutors, police, and analysts are able to identify incidents, connections, and patterns in the absence of definitive evidence to deny or confirm the potential impact of an IS-linked insurgency in Mozambique on South Africa.

Conclusion

Considering the increasingly sophisticated nature of the insurgency in Mozambique, South Africa will likely be drawn into the ongoing conflict as the South African Development Community (SADC) prepares a more substantial response to the insurgency ([SADC](#), April 8). Due to the inevitable risk of retaliatory attacks on South African soil and likely criticism from faith-based communities and human rights organizations, the South African government will have to ensure it is able to achieve and maintain substantial gains against ASwJ if it is to intervene militarily. In the meantime, considerable measures to enhance the capabilities and cooperation between the state security and the special investigative unit, known as "the Hawks," will remain paramount to mitigating the threat of IS attacks in South Africa.

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The Pulwama Suicide Bombing and Youth Radicalization in India-Administered Kashmir

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

Introduction

On April 2, Indian forces launched a counter-terrorism operation in a village in the Pulwama district of India-administered Kashmir, killing three people. They were allegedly involved in the murder of a policeman guarding the home of a local politician from India's ruling party in the region. The house of the slain locals was also destroyed with explosives by the Indian troops ([Dawn](#), April 2). Amid a large-scale crackdown in Kashmir, youths are increasingly responding and begetting new forms of terrorism.

What's Radicalizing Kashmiris?

In 2016, the 17-year-old Adil Ahmad Dar was returning home from school when he was stopped, beaten up, and harassed by Indian troops in Kashmir. Three years later, in February 2019, Dar, who by then joined the suicide bombing squad of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), killed 40 Indian paramilitary troops in Pulwama, Kashmir in February 2019 ([indiatoday.in](#), February 15, 2019). Dar had not come from across the border, but was a local Kashmiri who apparently had developed grievances against India's counter-terrorism tactics. Dar was representative of a generation of Kashmiri youth, who are ready to engage in 'martyrdom operations' to seek Kashmiri separation from India ([southasianvoices.org](#), March 28, 2019).

India, however, justifies its counter-terrorism tactics by placing blame on Pakistani-based groups, particularly JeM, for terrorist attacks in Kashmir. For example, Indian authorities filed a charge sheet against JeM leader, Maulana Masood Azhar, for planning Dar's Pulwama suicide attack, while accusing the Pakistani security establishment of supporting the terrorist group ([The Hin-](#)

[du](#), August 28, 2020). At the same time, Pakistan has itself been fighting a complex war against separate terrorist groups since 2014 ([Pakistan Today](#), June 17, 2020). Furthermore, last year, Pakistan announced the seizure of all movable and immovable properties of terrorist groups, including Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) and JeM and their leaders, Hafiz Saeed Ahmad and Maulana Masood Azhar, respectively ([The News](#), August 22, 2020).

Abolition of Kashmir Autonomy

In August 2019, India's Hindu nationalist government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, abolished the autonomous status of Kashmir by scrapping Article 370 of the Indian Constitution ([Dawn](#), August 5, 2019). Under Article 370, no non-Kashmiri citizen could permanently settle, buy land, hold local government jobs, and secure education scholarships in Kashmir. Indian authorities have abolished these special residence rules dating back to 1927 and, under new rules, people from across India can now apply for domicile certificates ([The News](#), August 30, 2020).

In anticipation of a backlash against the removal of autonomy, Indian authorities deployed extra troops into the highly militarized region and launched a security clampdown that cut off phone and internet access, shuttered schools, and left hundreds of thousands without jobs. Many of the restrictions have since been eased. However, India's security presence in the region remains high ([Dawn](#), August 13, 2020). India potentially plans to resettle Kashmiri Hindus or Pandits in India-administered Kashmir. Tens of thousands of Kashmiri Hindus left Kashmir in 1989 when an armed rebellion against Indian rule started in the Himalayan region.

Kashmir's Attraction for Militancy

Immediately after revoking the special constitutional status of Kashmir in 2019, New Delhi put Kashmiri leaders under house arrest and deployed thousands of more troops in the area that already had a heavy military presence ([India Today](#), August 5, 2019). Former chief minister of India-administered Jammu and Kashmir, Mehbooba Mufti, who was placed under house

arrest, declared that by scrapping Article 370, Indian forces would be considered occupational forces. The unilateral change of Kashmir's constitutional status likely resulted in the radicalization of a large number of young Kashmiris ([The News](#), August 5, 2019).

The insurgency in Kashmir is likely to escalate as India's move has united the Kashmiri political leadership on one point: to end Indian rule in Kashmir. With scrapping of Article 370, the Modi government has possibly increased the likelihood for jihadists to establish new cells in Kashmir. This could convert the region into a conflict zone that also attracts Islamic militants from throughout the region, including from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China's Xinjiang province.

Conclusion

The abolition of special autonomy in Kashmir has escalated tensions between India and Pakistan. Internally, the move has also fueled unrest in the insurgency-hit Kashmir, which has a Muslim majority. The disputed territory is poised to witness more radicalization of Kashmiri youths like Adil Ahmad Dar. India has thus far been blaming militancy on JeM group and its leader, Masood Azhar, and the Pakistani government for cross-border terrorism. However, its treatment of the Kashmiri population could also lead to the creation of new militant groups. This could result in more Pulwama-like attacks.

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The Ninja Missile: A Breakthrough in U.S. Counter-Terrorism Weaponry?

Jacob Ware

A February 2017 airstrike in Idlib, Syria targeted and killed Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, a deputy to al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Masri was one of the first foreign terrorists to have been killed using the U.S. military's newest counter-terrorism weapon: the AGM-114R9X (R9X) Hellfire missile, often called the "ninja missile" or "the flying Ginsu" ([Jerusalem Post](#), June 15, 2020). The missile is a new variant on the Hellfire. However, instead of delivering an explosive payload, the R9X missile releases six blades shortly before impact, crushing and cutting its target.

At first glance, the R9X missile, described as "a weapon that combines medieval brutality with advanced technology," appears to be an important breakthrough in the U.S. counter-terrorism arsenal ([Wall Street Journal](#), May 9, 2019). Despite its Hellfire connotation, the R9X missile is more like a long-range sniper round than its explosive cousins. The payload allows a drone operator based in the United States to target terrorist leaders anywhere in the world to an accuracy of only a few feet, and potentially without any collateral damage. But there are downsides, including a failure to adequately address ethical and human rights questions and a lack of clarity about if it can be deployed effectively in future battles.

Background and Early Use of the R9X

Although the R9X missile has been employed in both Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Pentagon strikes, it has been used sparingly ([Asia Times](#), December 9, 2019). Officials suggest there have been half-a-dozen deployments, although research by this author points to at least nine strikes. The weapon was developed under the Obama administration to reduce civilian casualties from U.S. counter-terrorism strikes abroad, and a similar missile was considered for the successful mission in 2011 that killed then al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden ([Jerusalem Post](#), May 15, 2019). A former U.S. official expressed hopes the weapon could even solve a "right seat, left seat" problem, with the missile, in fact, being

capable of discriminately targeting passengers in a moving vehicle ([Asia Times](#), December 9, 2019).

Unsurprisingly, details surrounding specific R9X missile strikes remain murky, but journalists have uncovered a pattern of attacks conducted throughout the Trump administration.

- The first documented use of the R9X missile targeted al-Masri in al-Mastouma, Idlib province, Syria, in a CIA strike in early 2017 ([Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#), March 1, 2017)

- Strikes in 2019 likely targeted leaders of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria, as well as Jamal Ahmed Badawi, an al-Qaeda mastermind behind the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole, in Yemen ([Task & Purpose](#), June 16, 2020; [Gulf News](#), January 3, 2020)

- In June 2020, two senior leaders of al-Qaeda-affiliated Hurras al-Din were killed in a ninja missile strike in northwestern Syria ([Jerusalem Post](#), June 15, 2020)

- The latter half of 2020 also saw the U.S. deploy the R9X missile in Idlib to kill Khaled al-Aruri, described as ‘the de facto leader of the Qaeda branch’ in Syria; Sayyaf al-Tunisi, a Tunisian involved in the group’s external operations in Syria; Safina al-Tunisi, who was a former Jabhat al-Nusra commander (killed in the same strike as Sayyaf al-Tunisi); and Abu Yahya al-Uzbeki, a Hurras al-Din trainer ([Twitter.com/kyle-worton](#), June 17, 2020; [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#), September 15, 2020; [Twitter](#), September 15, 2020; [Twitter](#), August 13, 2020).

- An additional strike in December 2020 in Idlib was unsuccessful, although it was unclear who was targeted ([Jerusalem Post](#), December 31, 2020).

Positives: Cutting Collateral Damage from Counterterrorism Operations

The R9X missile is a remarkable show of military force. However, has it actually been that useful in helping win the War on Terror?

First, and critically, the R9X missile complements other Hellfire variants that are maintaining pressure on terrorist organizations abroad. Coordinating large-scale, international terrorist attacks requires months of detailed

planning, organizing, and training. Drone strikes decimate such organizational capacity, and the drone’s constant presence over some of the most rugged and inaccessible terrain on the planet has thus made the coordination of spectacular terrorist attacks, such as 9/11, much more difficult. Drone strikes are, in fact, directly linked to diminishing the rate and lethality of terrorist attacks orchestrated by targeted groups ([International Studies Quarterly](#), June 2016).

Despite criticisms, drone strikes have also actually proven effective at limiting civilian casualties ([New America](#), 2018). In contrast, during President Trump’s first month in office, a failed ground mission in Yemen killed up to 25 civilians, as well as Navy SEAL William Owens, while failing to locate the intended target, AQAP leader Qasim al-Raymi ([Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#), February 9, 2017). Al-Raymi would be killed three years later—in a drone strike ([Al Thawra](#), February 26, 2020). Without drone technology, the United States would still pursue targeted killing as part of its counterterrorism campaigns, but it would be far more dangerous to American servicemen and civilians on the ground. A more precise missile serves to lower civilian casualties.

Nevertheless, one cannot question the negative “hearts and minds” impact wrought by U.S. drones, which have damaged the country’s reputation in targeted regions. Over the course of the War on Terror, however, the United States has learned from mistakes in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the war against Islamic State (IS), for instance, the U.S. limited its footprint, taking a “train, advise, assist, and equip” approach, and attempted to allow great power rivals—notably Russia—to gather poor press ([Department of Defense](#), September 13, 2018). Obama’s 2011 directive to develop a missile that could more precisely target militant leaders—in Idlib, for example—with little-to-no collateral damage was intended to stand in stark contrast to instances like Russia’s bombing of Syria’s hospitals ([New York Times](#), October 13, 2019). Accordingly, precise drone strikes may strengthen the U.S. hand in the growing reorientation toward great power competition.

Finally, terrorists adapt, and as with any counterterrorism measure, they have learned to avoid drone strikes, largely by hiding among women and children. With improved precision, the R9X missile may challenge the “human shield” approach used by militants. That would break down one of the only defenses terrorist leaders had against U.S. airstrikes ([Wall Street Journal](#), May 9, 2019).

Negatives: Still No Long-Term Strategy?

The downsides that the R9X missile presents deal less with any unique consequences it triggers, and more with issues it fails to solve. Most notably, the development of the R9X missile will likely coincide with the U.S. military and government's struggles to implement a broader and bolder strategy to defeat jihadism through the dismantling of its ideological allure. As almost twenty years of the War on Terror have demonstrated, playing whack-a-mole is only effective in *managing* the threat posed by international terrorist groups—not *defeating* them ([CTC Sentinel](#), January 14). Until the U.S. undertakes a longer-term effort, in collaboration with reliable local partners, to challenge the ideological attractions provided by Salafist-jihadism, the War on Terror will be indefinite—and the R9X missile will just be the latest bullet in America's chamber.

The fact that drone strikes have led to new recruitment for terrorist groups is also clear ([International Affairs](#), January 2013). The issue has been compounded by al-Qaeda's adoption of its own "hearts and minds" approach to insurgency, with the group having successfully "ingrained itself in local communities and conflicts," according to the United Nations ([United Nations](#), July 23, 2020). Accordingly, the R9X missile may still not solve the "accidental guerrilla" dilemma: the U.S. ends up in wars against "the local fighter [...] fighting us because we are in his space, not because *he* wishes to invade ours." [1]

It is also unclear whether the R9X missile will alleviate the ethical and human rights concerns that have plagued the use of the drones since its inception. A lengthy Amnesty International report argued, for instance, the "ultimate tragedy" of the U.S. drone policy was that drone strikes "now instill the same kind of fear [...] that was once associated only with al Qai'da and the Taliban" ([Amnesty International](#), October 21, 2013). Importantly, distrust of the United States and its military operations does not necessarily come from its missiles, but from the drones themselves. Some residents of Pakistan's border region, for example, have admitted to seeing drones as "a constant, enduring reminder that they are being watched, and may be killed, by a foreign government" ([The International Journal of Human Rights](#), 2015). Such concerns are not eased by the R9X missile, at least in the short term.

A "safer" missile like R9X also risks encouraging the United States to continue to expand its drone war out-

side current areas of engagement. To date, drone strikes have typically been avoided in more crowded locations, such as city squares, transport terminals, and places of worship. Accordingly, it has been used in more rural landscapes—Pakistan's Waziristan, for instance, or the hinterlands of Somalia and Yemen. With a more precise missile, that might change ([Defense One](#), May 10, 2019).

Finally, the R9X missile does not relieve the need for flawless intelligence—if anything, it actually increases the need for good intelligence, ideally provided in real time by human sources on the ground ([Wall Street Journal](#), May 9, 2019). This may prove increasingly true if the U.S. does hope to pursue discriminate targeting in close quarters—a moving car, for instance. And this may become even more difficult as the U.S. increasingly pulls out of the Middle East and South Asia to refocus on great power competition.

Conclusion

It is unlikely, for now, that the R9X missile will be used outside current theaters, but if counter-terrorism concerns continue to grow in the Sahel and Mozambique, this precise missile will offer an attractive alternative to a more visible footprint. The Somalia model—surgical strikes that are targeted narrowly at high-value targets posing an international threat—will be more attractive than the boots-on-ground Afghanistan and Iraq models. The broader question of whether to intensify counter-terrorism operations beyond current areas of engagement is ultimately a political question and will be a question for the Biden administration to answer. For now, the Biden administration's review of existing policies seems to indicate that drone warfare will not be unnecessarily expanded ([New York Times](#), March 3). But, whether the government's latest weapon, the R9X missile, eventually encourages wider engagement remains to be seen.

In 2013, scholars Daniel Byman and Audrey Kurth Cronin debated the effectiveness of drone strikes in counter-terrorism operations in *Foreign Affairs*. "The United States simply cannot tolerate terrorist safe havens in remote parts of Pakistan and elsewhere, and drones offer a comparatively low-risk way of targeting these areas while minimizing collateral damage," Byman argued ([Foreign Affairs](#), July/August 2013). Cronin countered that the "drone program has taken on a life of its own, to the point where tactics are driving strategy

rather than the other way around" ([Foreign Affairs](#), July/August 2013).

Both, to an extent, are right. Drone strikes have been tremendously effective at limiting international terrorism, and in fact, forced an operational rethink for jihadist organizations, away from sending operatives overseas to commit attacks, and towards inspiring "homegrown" extremists within the target country itself. And yet, the war goes on. The R9X missile appears poised to gradually degrade international terrorist organizations, while limiting both civilian and military casualties, but without adequately addressing the concern that Washington lacks "a long-term political strategy that undermines the enemies of the United States" ([Foreign Affairs](#), July/August 2013). As former Marine Corps General James Cartwright declared, "If you're trying to kill your way to a solution, no matter how precise you are, you're going to upset people even if they're not targeted" ([New York Times](#), March 21, 2013).

At the height of the war in Afghanistan, retired General Stanley McChrystal said, "Air power contains the seeds of our own destruction if we do not use it responsibly. We can lose this fight" ([Hindustan Times](#), June 22, 2009). The AGM-114R9X Hellfire missile marks a powerful step forward for the U.S. counter-terrorism arsenal, breaching a new frontier in targeting and precision. But until a bolder, braver, more transformative strategic shift is pursued, victory in the so-called War on Terror will remain elusive.

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Notes

[1] Kilcullen, D. (2009). *The accidental guerrilla: Fighting small wars in the midst of a big one*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.