**Research Article**

# Incubating Terror: The Implications of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine for Global Terrorism

## Peter Kent Forster

*College of Information Sciences and Technology, Penn State, https://ist.psu.edu/*

**Abstract**: The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 accelerated the geopolitical shift towards Great Power competition while further contributing to the waning attention given to transnational terrorism. This study posits that the risks of transnational, regional, and local terrorism, both directly and indirectly stemming from the war in Ukraine, are increasing. To support this assertion, it analyzes recent events and commentary to establish a framework for examining the war's impact on the trajectories of transnational terrorism. Furthermore, it provides evidence of newly emerging terrorist threat vectors that challenge conventional counterterrorism strategies.

**Keywords**: Russo-Ukraine war, radicalization, terrorism, threat vector, private military companies, weapons trafficking, counterterrorism strategy

## Introduction

In December 2022, similar letter bombs were sent to the Ukrainian and US embassies, the Spanish Prime Minister's office, the Torrejón de Ardoz military base, the Spanish Ministry of Defense in Madrid, and Instalzaz, an arms manufacturer in Zaragoza rumored to be making grenade launchers for Ukraine.[1] Although initial indicators pointed to pro-Russian criminal gangs, the bombs' sophistication

---

[1]   "Multiple Letter Bombs Defused in Spain, Prime Minister and Arms Firm among Targets," *France 24*, December 1, 2022, https://www.france24.com/en/europe/202212 01-fifth-letter-bomb-defused-in-spain-prime-minister-and-arms-firm-among-targets; Itxu Díaz, "Who Is Sending Letter Bombs, Blood, and Animal Eyes to Embassies?" *National Review*, December 10, 2022, https://www.nationalreview.com/2022/12/ who-is-sending-letter-bombs-blood-and-animal-eyes-to-embassies.

belied this hypothesis. Despite Russian denunciations of the incidents, U.S. intelligence officials believed that Russian military intelligence, the GRU, directed the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), a U.S. Department of State-designated terrorist group, to carry out the attacks.[2] The targets appear to be connected to the war, but more importantly, the operation reflects a new terrorist threat vector emerging from the war.

The February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine accelerated the ongoing geopolitical shift toward Great Power competition, further diminishing the focus on transnational terrorism. The "Conflicts to Watch in 2023" did not even consider a mass casualty terror attack on the United States or its allies as a "plausible contingency."[3] While this survey has merit, the war in Ukraine diverts attention and resources from broader counterterrorism operations, providing terrorist organizations with opportunities to recruit, grow financial reserves, and enhance operational capabilities. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has created three conditions contributing to the growth of both existing and emerging terrorist threats:

- changing geopolitical postures that intensify radicalization push and pull factors
- allowing foreign fighters, state-tolerated terrorist groups, and quasi-state-controlled politicized private military companies (PMCs) to act as incubators for new terrorists
- facilitating the diversion of weapons and the dissemination of operational and tactical knowledge, which risks improving terrorists' capabilities.

This article examines these conditions and assesses mitigation strategies for these threat vectors. It does not claim to be a comprehensive study of each variable. Instead, it provides evidence for establishing a new framework to further analyze terrorism in the context of hybrid warfare.

## Geopolitical Impact on Radicalization Push-Pull Factors

The war's geopolitical implications highlight the push-pull factors that attract new terrorists and mobilize those already committed to violence. These factors are influenced in three ways:

- weaponization of food and energy
- the emergence of new security vacuums in Syria and elsewhere

---

2   Katie Bo Lillis, Kylie Atwood, and Alex Marquardt, "Russian Intelligence Agents Believed to Have Directed White Supremacists to Carry out Bombing Campaign in Spain, US Officials Say," CNN, January 23, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/23/politics/russia-intelligence-spain-bombing-ukraine/index.html.

3   Paul B. Stares, "Preventive Priorities Survey 2023" (New York: Center for Preventive Action, Council on Foreign Relations, 2023), 4, https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/CFR_CPA_PPS23.pdf.

- deflection of counterterrorism resources and potential threats to the West.

Weaponizing food and energy contributes to short-term and cascading instability beyond Ukraine. In Europe, support for Ukraine and the imposition of sanctions have increased social polarization. In September and October 2022, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala and Bavaria's State Premier Markus Söder commented that the energy crisis spawned by the war was contributing to "fear and insecurity" and rising extremism.[4,5] Pro-Russian media outlets such as *RT*, *Iranian News*, and *Sputniknews*, as well as right-wing social media, quickly curated and amplified these comments, exploiting societal cleavages. In December 2022, Germany arrested 25 anti-government violent extremists for plotting to overthrow the government. Although the plot's genesis pre-dated the war, the conflict and related Russian manipulation of the information space acted as catalysts for mobilization.[6] In early 2023, pro-Putin German activists with ties to the Union of Cossack Warriors of Russia and Abroad, a group fighting alongside the Russians in Ukraine, were identified as attempting to undermine Berlin's support for Ukraine.[7]

In the Sahel, food insecurity caused by scarcity and rising prices, along with reduced energy supplies resulting from the Russian blockade of Ukrainian ports and sanctions on Russian energy, have increased poverty and population displacement. This has contributed to growing political instability and general insecurity. According to the UN's World Food Programme, 345 million people were already facing food insecurity before the war, and up to 50 million were on the "edge of famine."[8] Verisk Maplecroft maintains that food price inflation particularly contributes to social unrest,[9] which in turn feeds extremism. Forced emigration offers cover for terrorists to move freely and presents opportunities for recruitment. In July 2023, German authorities arrested seven Central Asians on

---

4   Robert Tait, "Thousandc Gather at 'Czech Republic First' Rally over Energy Crisis," *The Guardian*, September 4, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/04/czech-republic-prague-protest-sanctions-energy-crisis-gas-russia.

5   Roman Eichinger, Burkhard Uhlenbroich, and Niels Starnick, "Söder fordert Anti-Putin-Schutzschirm für Deutschland," *Das Bild*, October 16, 2022, https://www.bild.de/politik/inland/politik-inland/markus-soeder-im-interview-der-staat-verdient-an-dieser-krise-81631162.bild.html.

6   James Jackson, "The War in Ukraine Is Emboldening Germany's Far Right," *Time*, December 9, 2022, https://time.com/6240005/germany-far-right-ukraine-war/.

7   Polina Nikolskaya et al., "Pro-Putin Operatives in Germany Work to Turn Berlin against Ukraine," *Reuters*, January 3, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-germany-influencers/.

8   Peyvand Khorsandi, "'This War Must End': The Ukraine Crisis Seven Months on," *World Food Programme*, September 15, 2022, http://wfp.org/stories/war-must-end-ukraine-crisis-seven-months.

9   "Turning up the Heat," *The Economist*, July 29, 2023, 53.

various terrorist charges who had come to Germany from Ukraine shortly after the Russian invasion.[10]

Energy and food shortages have converged with military redeployments and the diversion of financial resources to Ukraine, thereby exacerbating instability. French forces were asked to leave Mali and were replaced by the Wagner Group. With the end of *Operation Barkhane* in November 2022, more than half of the French forces withdrew from the Sahel, and other forces continued to leave, depleting France's counterterrorism capabilities in the region.[11]

Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria marked a turning point in Assad's battle against the Islamic State (ISIS) and bolstered the regime. However, increased commitments on the Ukrainian front have reduced the Russian military footprint and financial assistance. In May 2022, Russia began drawing down troops to support military operations in Ukraine and virtually stopped financial assistance to Syria.[12] More decisively, the remaining Russian forces were redeployed, allowing the Islamic Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) and Lebanese-Hezbollah (LH) to assume control of former Russian-held bases.[13,14] These strategic shifts have altered the regional terrorist dynamic. The IRGC and LH legitimize the presence of terrorist organizations in Syria while pushing threatened Sunnis into the arms of ISIS and al-Qaeda (AQ) affiliates. Furthermore, LH is gaining military experience and acquiring resources in Syria, promising to enhance its and others' capabilities to carry out terrorist campaigns in the region and beyond. Iran is also facilitating the flow of additional Shi'a fighters into Syria,[15] creating a trained proxy force capable of terrorism. Azerbaijan's State Security Service reported "neutralizing" an armed group trained and funded in Syria by Iranian intelligence.[16] Anonymous Azeri sources confirmed that several individuals allegedly affiliated with

---

[10]  Geir Moulson, "Germany, Netherlands Arrest 9 over an Alleged Plan for Attacks in Line with Islamic State Group," *The Associated Press*, July 6, 2023, https://apnews.com/article/germany-netherlands-terror-group-arrests-20856495d2f7530df8cf4635b26d3fb6.

[11]  Isabelle King, "How France Failed Mali: The End of Operation Barkhane," *Harvard International Review*, January 30, 2023, https://hir.harvard.edu/how-france-failed-mali-the-end-of-operation-barkhane/.

[12]  Nikita Smagin, "Moscow's Original 'Special Operation': Why Russia Is Staying in Syria," *Carnegie Politika*, February 7, 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88958.

[13]  Times of Israel Staff, "Russia Said to Pull Troops from Syria to Bolster Forces in Ukraine," *The Times of Israel*, May 8, 2022, https://www.timesofisrael.com/russia-said-to-pull-troops-from-syria-to-bolster-forces-in-ukraine/.

[14]  Smagin, "Moscow's Original 'Special Operation'."

[15]  U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2020* (U.S. Department of State, December 2021), https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/.

[16]  Ismi Aghayev, "Azerbaijan Arrests 'Iran-backed Militants'," *OC Media*, November 3, 2022, https://oc-media.org/azerbaijan-arrests-iran-backed-militants/; "Azerbaijan Arrests Group 'Set Up By Islamic Republic's Intelligence," *Iran International*, November 2, 2022, https://www.iranintl.com/en/202211028462.

the Followers of Hussain, based in Qum, remain under investigation. Finally, both IRGC and LH support Iraqi Shi'a militias,[17] which are perpetrating violence in Iraq.

Russian redeployment also impacts Syria's counterterrorism landscape. The Russians have withdrawn a SU-25 fighter squadron and elements of a parachute regiment that were intrinsic to counterterrorism operations.[18] Since 2019, ISIS resurgence in Syria has ebbed and flowed. Although sporadic, ISIS attacks are increasing in central Syria, where it confronts the regime.[19] Its efforts include blocking regime forces from entering ISIS zones on the Syrian-Iraqi border and targeting urban areas such as Deir ez-Zor, Homs, and Damascus.[20] Attacks in June and July 2023 have also demonstrated new capabilities.[21]

The growing number of attacks suggests an increase in the number of fighters, potentially augmented by freed incarcerated fighters. In January 2022, ISIS cells launched a well-planned and organized attack on the Ghweiran Prison in northeastern Syria, resulting in the release of 800 inmates.[22] Detention facilities administered by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in US and SDF areas of operation hold 10,000 ISIS fighters, the largest concentration of terrorists in the world.[23] Second, the increase in "high quality" attacks, coordinated attacks targeting urban areas with sophisticated weapons,[24] indicates improving capabilities and more sophisticated planning and training. Third, ISIS's ability to control certain border areas and conduct urban strikes implies that the Russian withdrawal has weakened the regime's counterterrorism capabilities.

With renewed emphasis on great power competition and military redeployments from terrorist-rich areas, it is inevitable that important counterterrorism tasks—such as intelligence collection, border security, information sharing, counter-finance operations, and the use of force—become less effective. Reduced counterterrorism capabilities raise concerns about new operations originating from Afghanistan, Syria, and the Sahel, increased terrorist funding, and

---

17  Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks" (Washington D.C.: The Middle East Institute, July 26, 2021), https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks.

18  Smagin, "Moscow's Original 'Special Operation'."

19  Brian Carter et al., "Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, August 9, 2023," *American Enterprise Institute*, August 10, 2023, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-august-9-2023.

20  Carter et al., "Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, August 9, 2023."

21  Carter et al., "Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, August 9, 2023."

22  Ksenia Svetlova, "ISIS Cells Are Reappearing in Syria and Iraq," *The Jerusalem Post*, January 25, 2022, https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/isis-threat/article-694461.

23  "Repatriating FTF and Displaced Persons from Northeast Syria," Remarks by Ian Moss, International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law, Valletta, Malta, *US Department of State*, September 29, 2022, https://www.state.gov/repatriating-ftf-and-displaced-persons-from-northeast-syria/.

24  Gregory Waters, "Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign," *New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy*, August 19, 2020, https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/strengthening-and-expanding-isis-central-syria-campaign.

new or sleeper cells threatening Europe. In addition to ISIS activity in Syria and the Sahel, Iran is directing criminal plots globally, and even AQ is considering more external operations. In 2019, the Dutch National Coordinator for Counter-terrorism and Security noted that Salafism was rising in Europe and that both ISIS and AQ were prepared to carry out attacks in Europe.[25] In 2020, a disrupted plot against the US and NATO military bases revealed the presence of a transnational network of sleeper cells in Europe, facilitated by ISIS recruitment among Central Asian and Russian migrant communities both inside and outside their home countries.[26] Ramming attacks in Stockholm in 2017, directed from Syria, and in Essen in 2019, were perpetrated by self-radicalized Tajik or Russian nationals in the target countries.[27] Additionally, a 2020 UN report linked Central Asians and Chechens with "criminal elements" trafficking weapons to terrorists in Europe.[28] Various US officials have assessed that the Islamic State – Khorasan (IS-K) will be capable of external operations targeting the West by late 2023 or early 2024.[29] And, in its recent "Assessment of the Terror Threat against Denmark," the Police Intelligence Service cited Islamic terrorism, fueled by ideological "hybridization" and ease of travel, as a significant threat.[30] Finally, jihadi fundraising has increased. In November 2022, MEMRI reported that jihadis were actively soliciting online donations under the pretext of humanitarian assistance to refugee camps.[31] The funds, transferred via the hawala system to the camps, are being used for recruitment, bribery to help ISIS fighters escape, and to equip fighters.[32] Iranian-backed Iraqi militias are soliciting funds to purchase drones

---

[25] Abigail R. Esman, "The Lull in Terrorism Masks a Deepening Jihad Threat," *The Algemeiner*, March 4, 2019, https://www.algemeiner.com/2019/03/04/the-lull-in-terrorism-masks-a-deepening-jihadist-threat/.

[26] Nodirbek Soliev, "The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany: The Tajik Connection," *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 1 (January 2021): 30-38, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-april-2020-islamic-state-terror-plot-against-u-s-and-nato-military-bases-in-germany-the-tajik-connection/.

[27] Soliev, "The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany."

[28] Soliev, "The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany."

[29] "IntelBrief: Islamic State Khorasan Remains a Stubborn Threat in Afghanistan," The Soufan Center, March 29, 2023, https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2023-march-29/; "IntelBrief: The Threat Posed by Transnational Jihadist Groups Continues to Evolve," *The Soufan Center*, May 23, 2022, https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2022-may-23/.

[30] Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury, "Radical Islam Poses Greatest Threat to Denmark," *Blitz*, April 6, 2023, https://www.weeklyblitz.net/counterterrorism/radical-islam-poses-greatest-threat-to-denmark/.

[31] K. Choukry, "Overview of Jihadi Fundraising Campaigns," *MEMRI*, November 1, 2022, https://www.memri.org/jttm/overview-jihadi-fundraising-campaigns-2022.

[32] J.J. Green, "The Hunt: ISIS Fighters Bribe Their Way out of Prison," *WTOP News*, March 29, 2023, https://wtop.com/j-j-green-national/2023/03/the-hunt-isis-fighters-bribe-their-way-out-of-prison.

and missiles for the Houthis, increasing their capacity, as evident in their Red Sea attacks.[33] It can also be assumed that the war in Gaza has accelerated illicit solicitations. While it is impossible to say with certainty that a lack of resources is responsible for this surge in activity, the salient point remains: terrorist groups are emboldened.

## Foreign Fighters and Quasi-state-controlled Private Military Companies (PMC)

In April 2023, French authorities reportedly arrested two neo-Nazis, one a dishonorably discharged veteran, upon their return from Ukraine for possessing assault rifle ammunition.[34] Foreign fighters, quasi-controlled paramilitaries, and Private Military Companies (PMCs) are emerging threat vectors from the Ukrainian war. Currently, there is no indication of a significant Islamic State or al-Qaeda presence in Ukraine.[35] However, there are jihadis from the Caucasus and Russia's predominantly Muslim regions fighting on both sides.[36] While there are no reports of large numbers of right-wing violent extremists (RVE) training in Ukraine, units on both sides willingly accept foreign extremists.[37] Although ideology has not been identified as the chief motivator for participation among a majority of foreign fighters, some harboring extremist beliefs have undoubtedly arrived in the conflict zone, and others may be radicalized through contact. The French DGSI estimates that at least 30 of the hundred-plus French fighters in Ukraine have known fascist sympathies.[38]

While significantly smaller than the numbers who joined the ISIS caliphate, the foreign fighter phenomenon in Ukraine is complex and presents counterterrorism challenges. Conflicts that attract foreign fighters have unintended consequences, including incubating extremism both in-country and beyond the original conflict. Ukraine has a sordid history with foreign fighters. In 2014, the Azov Battalion openly displayed far-right sympathies,[39] forming the basis for Putin's

---

[33]  Choukry, "Overview of Jihadi Fundraising Campaigns."

[34]  Kit Klarenberg, "Neo-Nazi Terror Threat Grows as Ukraine Fighters Jailed in France," *The Grayzone*, May 9, 2023, https://thegrayzone.com/2023/05/09/neo-nazi-terror-threat-grows-as-ukraine-fighters-jailed-in-france/.

[35]  Mina al-Lami, "Terrorism, Violent Extremism, and the War in Ukraine," Program on Extremism, George Washington University online seminar, April 28, 2022, https://extremism.gwu.edu/terrorism-violent-extremism-and-the-war-in-ukraine.

[36]  Steven Stalinsky, "The Jihadi Conflict inside the Russia-Ukraine War," *MEMRI*, May 22, 2023, https://www.memri.org/reports/jihadi-conflict-inside-russia-ukraine-war.

[37]  Kacper Rekawek, "Terrorism, Violent Extremism, and the War in Ukraine," Program on Extremism, George Washington University online seminar, April 28, 2022, https://extremism.gwu.edu/terrorism-violent-extremism-and-the-war-in-ukraine.

[38]  Klarenberg, "Neo-Nazi Terror Threat Grows as Ukraine Fighters Jailed in France."

[39]  Simon Shuster and Billy Perrigo, "Like, Share, Recruit: How a White-Supremacist Militia Uses Facebook to Radicalize and Train," *Time*, January 7, 2021, https://time.com/5926750/azov-far-right-movement-facebook/.

"denazification" claim. It is this attraction that undoubtedly led *Vice.com* to brand Ukraine as a training ground for neo-Nazis and to insist that returnees will be as dangerous as ISIS fighters.[40] Similarly, The Soufan Group characterized Ukrainian militia recruitment as analogous to the Taliban filling the post-Soviet space in the 1990s.[41] These comments, along with the ability of extremist forces to mobilize beyond the conflict zone, should not be dismissed out of hand.

Ukraine's International Legion, organized in February 2022 to international-ize the conflict, claims to have more than 20,000 foreign fighters from 52 to 60 countries, many with combat experience.[42] Significant energy has been ex-pended in regulating and monitoring who joins the Legion. Recruits follow a for-mal registration process, which, despite some vetting irregularities, offers im-proved accountability [43] and mitigates some concerns about attracting a large number of extremists. Still, varying levels of training and insufficient numbers of officers raise concerns about discipline and continued vetting.[44] A breakdown in either can lead to the re-emergence of extremist sympathies among the remain-ing traces of neo-Nazism.[45]

Foreign fighters supporting Russia are more difficult to estimate and verify. However, evidence exists that an extremist threat is incubating. The Kremlin re-ported receiving as many as 16,000 applications from the Middle East to join Russian forces. Yet, reports indicate that perhaps only 300-700 pro-Assad Syrians are training in Russia or fighting with the Wagner Group in Ukraine.[46] There is no corroborating evidence for rumors that other groups, such as Hezbollah, have sent troops. The Russians have also offered a pathway to citizenship to entice Central Asian immigrants to fight, and the presence of Chechen forces sent by

---

[40] Ben Makuch, Mack Lamoureux, and Zachary Kamel, "Neo-Nazi Terror Group The Base Linked to the War in Ukraine," *Vice*, February 6, 2020, https://www.vice.com/en/article/y3m3eg/neo-nazi-terror-group-the-base-linked-to-the-war-in-ukraine.

[41] Shuster and Billy Perrigo, "Like, Share, Recruit: How a White-Supremacist Militia Uses Facebook to Radicalize and Train."

[42] Isaac Chakyan Tang, "The Latest in a Long Line: Ukraine's International Legion and a History of Foreign Fighters," *Harvard International Review*, September 2, 2022, https://hir.harvard.edu/the-latest-in-a-long-line-ukraines-international-legion-and-a-history-of-foreign-fighters/9/2/22.

[43] Robert Klemko, "Foreigners Ready to Join Ukraine's Fight Must Pass Tougher Muster," *The Washington Post*, April 8, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/08/ukraine-foreign-legion-vetting/.

[44] "The Foreign Fighters Who've Gone to Ukraine," NPR, June 22, 2022, www.npr.org/2022/06/20/1106211841/the-foreign-fighters-whove-gone-to-ukraine.

[45] "The Foreign Fighters Who've Gone to Ukraine."

[46] Bassem Mroue, "Battle-hardened Syrian Fighters to Join Russian Side in Ukraine War, Say Observers," *PBS News*, April 18, 2022, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/battle-hardened-syrian-fighters-to-join-russian-side-in-ukraine-war-say-observers; Raphael Parens, "Wagner Group Redefined: Threats and Responses," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, January 30, 2023, https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/01/wagner-group-redefined-threats-and-responses/.

President Ramzan Kadyrov is well documented.[47] Some of these fighters are or were on Russia's terrorist list.[48] Technically, neither of these groups meets the definition of foreign fighters. However, they are considered here because they may act as incubators for extremist violence upon their return home.

The North Caucasus is characterized as an area of "simmering radicalization," [49] with Chechnya particularly ripe for violence. The risk of regional violence is intensified by Chechens fighting on both sides in the war. Kadyrov's pro-Russian authoritarian rule has exacerbated social cleavages, worsened by economic deprivation caused by the war.[50] Security forces have also been cannibalized to provide troops to the front lines, weakening Russia's ability to maintain regional stability.[51] When the Ukraine conflict freezes or winds down, Chechen nationalist units such as the Anti-Kadyrov Battalion have already pledged to "liberate" Chechnya upon their return.[52] The targeted recruitment of Central Asians and Chechens by ISIS further increases the risk of multiple factions propagating violence and insurgency. How these various factions—jihadis, nationalists, and pro-Kadyrov forces—will converge remains to be seen, but in a depleted security environment, a wave of violence seems inevitable.

Discounting the latent extremist threat emerging from foreign fighters is unwise. The conflict's potential for motivating extremism warrants a more operational-tactical assessment of the foreign fighters' landscape. Understanding how many foreign fighters there are, who they are connected with, and what is known about their location and activities in the conflict zone is essential for identifying at-risk individuals.

Beyond the foreign fighter phenomenon, extremism is rooted in quasi-state-controlled paramilitary organizations and Private Military Companies (PMCs) in the conflict zone. Operating on the fringes of state control and with limited internal structural oversight, PMCs and quasi-controlled paramilitary forces pose an extremist threat. Although diminished, the neo-Nazi influence among pro-

---

[47] Molly Olmstead, "Who Are the Americans Who Went to Fight in Ukraine?" *Slate*, March 10, 2022, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/03/americans-fighting-ukraine-russia.html.

[48] "From Budyonnovsk to Bakhmut: More Than a Dozen of Kadyrov's Fighters in Ukraine Were – or Still Are – on Russia's Federal Terrorist List," *Meduza*, December 8, 2022, https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/12/08/from-budyonnovsk-to-bakhmut.

[49] William B. Farrell, "Central Asia's New Foreign Fighters Problem: The Russia-Ukraine War," *United States Institute of Peace*, September 8, 2022, https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/central-asias-new-foreign-fighters-problem-russia-ukraine-war.

[50] Farrell, "Central Asia's New Foreign Fighters Problem."

[51] Carol Saivetz, "Russia in the Caucasus and Central Asia after the Invasion of Ukraine," *MIT Center for International Studies*, January 29, 2023, http://cis.mit.edu/publications/analysis-opinion/2023/russia-caucasus-and-central-asia-after-invasion-ukraine.

[52] Farrell, "Central Asia's New Foreign Fighters Problem."

Ukrainian paramilitary forces has not been completely removed. Formed in August 2022, the pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps includes members of the extreme right-wing faction of the former Azov Battalion. It targets "right-wing" migrants living in Ukraine for recruitment, and has given a leadership role to Denis Kapustin (aka Denis "WhiteRex" Nikitin).[53] Denis Kapustin, an avowed neo-Nazi, has organized a neo-Nazi mixed martial arts "empire" across Europe and trained members of Germany's neo-Nazi National Democratic Party. He played a significant role in persuading Robert Rundo, leader of the US-based white supremacist Rise Above Movement (RAM) and self-appointed adviser to Active Clubs, to abandon the group's "skinhead" image in favor of a white "warrior spirit" disseminated through the ubiquity of martial arts.[54]

Founded in 2002 by Stanislav Anatolyevich Vorobyev with quasi-Kremlin acceptance, the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) openly advocates terrorism. It operates two military training and indoctrination facilities near St. Petersburg, preparing individuals for terrorist attacks in Europe and fighting alongside Russian forces in Ukraine.[55,56] Additionally, it maintains ties with US-centered accelerationist groups such as the Base and the *Atomwaffen Division.*[57] RIM is a quintessential state-tolerated extremist organization [58] that uses fear and violence against civilians in support of Russia's hybrid operations. It has been listed as a Specially Designated Terrorist Group by the U.S. Department of State.[59] RIM's

[53] "Russian Volunteer Corps: Denis 'WhiteRex' Kapustin Is Back in Business," *Antifascist Europe*, September 30, 2022, accessed January 7, 2023, https://antifascist-eu rope.org/russia/russian-volunteer-corps-denis-whiterex-is-back-in-business.

[54] "Active Club Network," *ADL*, January 10, 2023, https://www.adl.org/resources/back grounder/active-club-network; "Rise Above Movement," *The Counter Extremism Project*, https://www.counterextremism.com/supremacy/rise-above-movement.

[55] Jon Lewis and Mary B. McCord, "The State Department Should Designate the Russian Imperial Movement as a Foreign Terrorist Organization," *Lawfare*, April 14, 2020, https://www.lawfareblog.com/state-department-should-designate-russian-imperial-movement-foreign-terrorist-organization.

[56] "Members of Russian Christian Orthodox Designated Terror Group Conduct Target Practice, Tactical Combat Drills at Center Providing Training for Civilians to Fight Alongside Russian Forces in Ukraine," *MEMRI TV*, February 22, 2023, www.memri.org/tv/russian-far-right-christian-orthodox-group-rim-practices-shooting-tactics-ukraine.

[57] "IntelBrief: Examining Atomwaffen Division's Transnational Linkages," *The Soufan Center*, May 20, 2020, https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-examining-atomwaffen-divisions-transnational-linkages/.

[58] The Soufan Center, *Foreign Fighters, Volunteers, and Mercenaries: Non-State Actors and Narratives in Ukraine*, Special Report (New York, NY: The Soufan Center, April 2022), https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/TSC-Special-Re port_Ukraine_April-2022.pdf.

[59] Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State, "United States Designates Russian Imperial Movement and Leaders as Global Terrorists," Press Statement, *U.S. Department of State*, April 7, 2020, https://2017-2021.state.gov/united-states-designates-russian-imperial-movement-and-leaders-as-global-terrorists/index.html.

interactions provide opportunities to inspire, recruit, and indoctrinate individuals with violently radical inclinations. Its presumed connection to the terrorist bombings in Spain in December 2022 [60] represents the use of terrorist tactics to erode support for Ukraine. While contained to Spain, RIM's intent to use terrorism is significant and marks a notable escalation in the European theater.

The Wagner Group and its affiliates also incubate extremism and terror through the indoctrination of recruits, expanding areas of operation, and radical networks. Wagner has been involved in military operations in Syria, Libya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Mozambique, operating either as mercenaries (as in Mozambique) or as an extension of the Kremlin. Before the June 2023 "coup," Wagner was estimated to have 50,000 troops in Ukraine and had recruited as many as 1000 Syrian fighters and US-trained former Afghan Special Forces.[61] In Ukraine, nearly 80 % of Wagner's forces were reportedly recruited from Russian prisons, reflecting a disregard for accepted norms of recruitment and military operations.[62] Wagner's activities in Ukraine followed a similar pattern of indoctrinating members into corruption and the extreme use of violence, which alienated populations in Africa.[63] Although no longer active in Ukraine, its role as Russian shock troops elsewhere continues.

Wagner's *modus operandi* serves as a push factor that benefits terrorist recruitment. Its growing engagement in the Sahel represents a shift away from Western influence in favor of Russia,[64] ultimately undermining counterterrorism strategies. According to US and French officials, Wagner is "increasing the likelihood that violent extremism will grow" in the Sahel, which is facing deteriorating security.[65] Wagner's ongoing activities in Africa and Syria, informed by its experiences in Ukraine, as well as a small number of indoctrinated Syrian volunteers returning to Assad's forces, will drive its targeted enemies to ISIS or al-Qaeda. With choices limited to continuing as mercenaries, joining criminal gangs, or perhaps aligning with anti-Taliban groups in Afghanistan, even a few re-focused Afghan Special Forces pose a significant threat. The impact of a small but well-trained cadre of extremists should not be underestimated. Viewed through the

---

[60] Lillis, Atwood, and Marquardt, "Russian Intelligence Agents Believed to Have Directed White Supremacists to Carry out Bombing Campaign in Spain."

[61] "Mercenaries Pulled from Libya as Ukraine Invasion Strains Russia's Military – FT," *The Moscow Times*, April 28, 2022, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/04/28/mercenaries-pulled-from-libya-as-ukraine-invasion-strains-russian-resources-ft-a77520.

[62] Parens, "Wagner Group Redefined: Threats and Responses."

[63] Joseph Sany, "In Africa, Here's How to Respond to Russia's Brutal Wagner Group," *United States Institute of Peace*, April 6, 2023, https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/africa-heres-how-respond-russias-brutal-wagner-group.

[64] "IntelBrief: The Current State of Islamic State," *The Soufan Center*, February 14, 2023, https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2023-february-14/.

[65] Edith M. Lederer, "US and Russia Clash over Violent Extremism in Africa," *AP*, January 11, 2023, https://apnews.com/article/politics-drug-crimes-russia-government-soviet-union-united-nations-9244e5372dcbc55f73b77f624b808377.

lens of out-of-area deployments, Wagner is, in essence, an incubator and exporter of terrorism.

Wagner's role in incubating violent extremism is evident in its leadership and its network of franchised paramilitary units. Some argue that its pattern of violence, coercion, and intimidation meets the US Government's definition of a terrorist organization.[66] Wagner's former operational commander, Dmitry Utkin (killed in the August 23, 2023 plane crash), personified the organization's extremist tendencies.[67] Utkin's neo-Nazi beliefs are mirrored in Taskforce Rusich, one of Wagner's franchised units. Led by Alexey Milchakov, a self-proclaimed neo-Nazi, Rusich recruits members harboring extremist beliefs. Furthermore, its indiscriminate violence, including its brutality in Donbas in 2014, torture in Syria, and sowing black flag operations in Ukraine as a pretense for ruthless Russian retaliation,[68] may be considered terrorism. In January 2023, the US Treasury labeled Wagner a Transnational Criminal Organization. In April 2023, the EU sanctioned it and its leader's media outlet. At the time, concerns over maintaining relations with governments working with Wagner, particularly in Africa, prevented Wagner from being designated as a terrorist organization.

Wagner's personnel, which include former prisoners, foreign fighters, and paramilitary units with terroristic tendencies, exemplify its penchant for extreme coercive violence, both in Ukraine and elsewhere. Those indoctrinated by Wagner are likely to create a pipeline of criminals and terrorists who may settle in surrounding regions, move to the next area of Russian intervention, or return to their home countries. This situation fosters criminal and terrorist recruitment, creating an environment conducive to violence.

## Weapons Diversion and Tactical Adaptation

The Ukrainian war is transforming the nature of warfare, impacting targeting, methods of attack, and retaliation. This has resulted in a dynamic operational learning environment. As a gray area conflict, the Ukrainian theater serves as a nexus for interactions among independent non-state actors, state-tolerated, state-enabled, and state-directed entities. Their activities influence weapon diversion, the tactical adaptation of disruptive technologies, and the evolution of cyber threats.

---

[66] Madison Urban and CPT Sara Downing, "The Wagner Group: Paramilitary Terrorism," *Foundation for the Defense of Democracies*, September 29, 2022, www.fdd.org/analysis/2022/09/29/wagner-group-paramilitary-terrorism/.

[67] Jason Blazakis, Colin P. Clarke, Naureen Chowdhury Fink, and Sean Steinberg, *Wagner Group: The Evolution of a Private Army*, The Soufan Center Special Report (New York, NY: The Soufan Center, June 2023), 11, https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/TSC-Special-Report-The-Wagner-Group-The-Evolution-Of-Putins-Private-Army.pdf.

[68] Miroslav Mareš, Martin Laryš, and Jan Holzer, *Militant Right-Wing Extremism in Putin's Russia: Legacies, Forms and Threats* (Routledge, October 25, 2018).

Despite safeguarding and accounting efforts, weapon diversion from Ukraine remains a significant concern. By February 2023, Western military assistance to Ukraine amounted to approximately $ 50.7 billion,[69] not including Russian military transfers to pro-Russian forces. The concern over diversion rests on four premises. First, there is a historical precedent for weapons diversion and lack of oversight in past conflicts. Second, the sheer quantity of weapons presents a tracking issue. Third, Ukraine's endemic corruption raises questions about its ability to effectively crack down on weapon diversions. Finally, Russia's disregard for who acquires weapons undermines many safeguards. The Balkan wars demonstrated that post-conflict regions can become arms bazaars for terrorists, criminals, and arms traffickers. In 1995, Serbia was estimated to have 900,000 small arms, Bosnia around 750,000, and Kosovo, with a population of 2 million, 450,000.[70] The threat of weapon diversion was manifested in the Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan attacks in Paris in 2015, where Zastava M70ARs originating in the Balkans were used.[71] In February 2023, this concern gained further traction when a GAO report cited poor accountability of weapons and equipment provided to the Afghan government as a contributing factor to governmental collapse and subsequent weapon proliferation in that region.[72] The quality and quantity of weapons in Ukraine far surpass those in either the Balkans or Afghanistan.

In October 2022, the Biden Administration released the *U.S. Plan to Counter Illicit Diversion of Certain Advanced Conventional Weapons in Eastern Europe*. Aimed at safeguarding and accounting for U.S. transfers, the plan admits that the possibility of diversion exists by recognizing the limits of control, particularly in the case of small arms. While encompassing all arms, the plan focuses heavily on "sensitive and advanced conventional weapons" such as Man-Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS), anti-tank weapons, and grenade launchers.[73] Weapon procurement is a critical endeavor for terrorists, and these weapons would significantly increase a group's capabilities. To date, U.S. DoD officials

---

[69] "Full Committee Hearing: Oversight of U.S. Military Support to Ukraine," Hearing before the US House Armed Services Committee, February 28, 2023, https://armed services.house.gov/committee-activity/hearings/full-committee-hearing-oversight-us-military-support-ukraine.

[70] Joel Fraser, "How Yugoslavia's Military-Grade Weapons Haunt Western Europe," *The Defense Post*, July 30, 2020, www.thedefensepost.com/2020/07/30/weapons-yugoslavia-europe/.

[71] Fraser, "How Yugoslavia's Military-Grade Weapons Haunt Western Europe."

[72] Ben Kesling, "Watchdog Report on Afghan Collapse Points to Abrupt Withdrawal, Lack of Planning," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 27, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/articles/watchdog-report-on-afghan-collapse-points-to-lack-of-oversight-97ee9fde.

[73] Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, "U.S. Plan to Counter Illicit Diversion of Certain Advanced Conventional Weapons in Eastern Europe," *U.S. Department of State*, October 27, 2022, https://www.state.gov/u-s-plan-to-counter-illicit-diversion-of-certain-advanced-conventional-weapons-in-eastern-europe/.

have testified that no incidents of sensitive weapons diversion have been validated.[74] However, an unnamed official noted in previous testimony that no one seemed to know who had or where 100 Kamikaze Switchblade Drones were.[75]

Notwithstanding these concerns, there are mitigating factors. Transparency International's ranking shows that the Ukrainian government's corruption status has improved during the war.[76] Additionally, Ukraine is fully integrated into President Biden's oversight plan, which includes scanners and inventory software for tracking purposes.[77] NATO and the US are maximizing technology and personnel to enhance situational awareness of weapons storage and use.[78] Ukraine has also established its own monitoring commission. Finally, extensive battlefield demands help minimize the supply of weapons to the black market, at least from the Ukrainian side.

Still, avenues for weapon diversion are almost limitless. Arms supplied by the Russians to local proxies, those abandoned on the battlefield, and those acquired by non-state or state-tolerated actors through various means are untraceable. After the Paris attacks in 2015, Interpol made efforts to cut down on arms trafficking. Mobilizing 5,000 police officers for two days across the former Yugoslavia, the task force only made 22 arrests and confiscated 40 firearms.[79] This marginal operational success is due to the arms trafficking system's complexity, the difficulty in identifying and interdicting routes, and the sheer number of available weapons. Once in circulation, the overall supply and demand of small arms is challenging to assess and track because, unlike demand-driven drug trafficking, small arms, generally, and advanced systems, specifically, are supply-driven.

The war also serves as an innovative environment for improving drones' technical and operational sophistication. With their low entry threshold in terms of cost, availability, and product type, relaxed export restrictions, new producers, a largely unregulated global network, and a sizable supply, drones are more accessible. Ongoing court cases against individuals in the West attempting to ship drones to terrorist groups reflect the demand and proliferation tendencies. One year into the war, the types of drones being produced increased from ten to 68, production in some companies soared from a dozen per month to hundreds, and innovations such as remotely operated gun turrets were anticipated.[80] Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's "swarming" attacks in 2018 on two Russian bases in Syria [81] illustrate a global distribution network and the transfer of operational knowledge. Their adaptability to terrorist operational environments is evident in the non-

---

[74] "Full Committee Hearing: Oversight of U.S. Military Support to Ukraine."

[75] "Full Committee Hearing: Oversight of U.S. Military Support to Ukraine."

[76] "Full Committee Hearing: Oversight of U.S. Military Support to Ukraine."

[77] "Full Committee Hearing: Oversight of U.S. Military Support to Ukraine."

[78] "Full Committee Hearing: Oversight of U.S. Military Support to Ukraine."

[79] Fraser, "How Yugoslavia's Military-Grade Weapons Haunt Western Europe."

[80] "The Might of Miltech," *The Economist*, February 25, 2023, 53-54.

[81] "The Might of Miltech."

state actors such as the Houthis, Hamas, Hezbollah, Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS, and the PKK, who have used similar tactics. Today, operational knowledge, such as attaching and delivering grenades, is a Google search away. Operational modifications like the Ukrainians' use of 3D-printed fins to improve anti-tank bombs' guidance are also publicly available.[82] In 1995, after determining that drone delivery was beyond its capabilities, Aum Shinrikyo resorted to human distribution of sarin gas in the Tokyo subway.[83] Today, the technical barriers to such delivery are significantly lower while the intent remains high.

Knowledge transfer resulting from training and operational experience is indeed a significant concern. The IRGC's *al-Quds* Force is reportedly training Russians in Kherson, Crimea, and Belarus on the use of drones.[84] The specifics of this training, including whether it is exclusively for Russian military forces and the eventual deployment of those trained individuals after the war's conclusion, remain unclear. Moreover, *al-Quds* is enhancing its capabilities, with its members involved in directing operational missions.[85] In April 2023, the IRGC released images of its new vehicle-launched Meraj-532 kamikaze drone,[86] suggesting that battlefield knowledge acquired in Ukraine may have been utilized in its development. Additionally, *al-Quds* is known to train for asymmetric conflict and shares knowledge and technology with terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and the Houthis. The IRGC is establishing "mobile training teams" that have gained technical and operational experience in the field and will now share their knowledge more broadly. The Ukrainian conflict has demonstrated significant advancements in drone technology, including reusability, integrated operations, enhanced intelligence gathering, miniaturization, extended loitering time, new munitions, and kamikaze attacks. All these advancements can be adapted for terrorist operations, improving their exploitation, planning, and strike capabilities.

Tactical adaptation extends beyond military hardware into the ambiguity of cyberspace. Since 2014, Russia's hybrid war strategy in Ukraine has heavily relied on cyber operations. Disinformation, fake news, false flag operations, and

---

82  RFE/RL, "How Ukraine Uses Obsolete Soviet Grenades to Destroy Russian Tanks from Above," *Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty*, May 5, 2022, https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-cheap-grenades-expensive-tanks/31835434.html.

83  "IntelBrief: Terrorists' Use of Drones and Other Emerging Technologies," *The Soufan Center*, October 3, 2018, https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-terrorists-use-of-drones-and-other-emerging-technologies/.

84  Seth J. Frantzman, "The IRGC in Crimea? The Russia-Iran Model for Syria Moves to Ukraine – Analysis," *The Jerusalem Post*, October 19, 2022, https://www.jpost.com/international/article-720051.

85  Frantzman, "The IRGC in Crimea? The Russia-Iran Model for Syria Moves to Ukraine."

86  Sakshi Tiwari, " Iran Unveils Car-Launched Suicide Drone, Meraj-532, That Has One-Way Range of 450 Km & Strikes with Deadly Accuracy," *The Eurasian Times*, April 10, 2023, https://eurasiantimes.com/meraj-532-iran-unveils-car-launched-suicide-drone-that.

cyberattacks have intensified during the war.[87] Cyberspace blurs the lines between non-state and state actors, making attribution and deterrence problematic. However, knowledge transfer is prolific. Russia's recruitment of Russian-based cybercriminals to conduct cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, troll extremists to stoke chaos, and weapons transactions on the black market enhance criminals' and terrorists' capacity to exploit cyberspace. The specialized GRU units' attacks on the Ukrainian power grid in 2015 and 2016 are well documented. What is unclear and thus concerning is the extent to which the expertise needed to launch such attacks has migrated to criminal or terrorist groups. Another example of ambiguity about cyber expertise is whether government or non-government "Russian hackers" adapted and distributed the "Industroyer" malware.[88]

Cyberspace also offers a funding avenue. Although minimal in terms of amount, in April 2022, a Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) supporter used cryptocurrency to circumvent sanctions and buy weapons and military kits for Russian soldiers.[89] In October 2022, a Chechen group fighting with the Ukrainians sought to raise funds to purchase a drone on a Russian-language jihadi Telegram channel.[90] While nascent criminal or terrorist capabilities are unpredictable, it is evident that non-state actors, with varying levels of state acquiescence, are examining the lessons learned from the cyber side of the Ukrainian conflict. In the "fog of war," acquiring and adapting cyber tools and avoiding prosecution is easier.[91]

## Summary and Recommendations

The Ukrainian war has accelerated the already growing re-emergence of great power competition as the predominant risk factor in the international environment. Ironically, the conflict hastening the return to nation-state dominance also contributes to new transnational terrorist threats and growing counterterrorism challenges. It establishes a new framework for defining and understanding ter-

---

[87] Jenna McLaughlin, "Russia Bombards Ukraine with Cyberattacks, but the Impact Appears Limited," *NPR*, March 3, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/02/23/11590390 51/russia-bombards-ukraine-with-cyberattacks-but-the-impact-appears-limited.

[88] McLaughlin, "Russia Bombards Ukraine with Cyberattacks, but the Impact Appears Limited."

[89] Nick Grothaus, Robert Kim, and Kharon Staff, "NFT Sale Linked to Sanctioned Russian Terrorist Group Attempts to Support War in Ukraine," *Kharon*, July 14, 2022, https://www.kharon.com/updates/nft-sale-linked-to-sanctioned-russian-terrorist-group-attempts-to-support-war-in-ukraine.

[90] "Jihadi Telegram Channel Raises Funds to Buy Drone for Chechen Battalion Fighting Alongside Ukraine," *MEMRI*, November 1, 2022, https://www.memri.org/cjlab/jihadi-telegram-channel-raises-funds-buy-drone-chechen-battalion-fighting-alongside-ukraine.

[91] McLaughlin, "Russia Bombards Ukraine with Cyberattacks, but the Impact Appears Limited."

rorism and identifying terrorists. This article summarizes tangible nascent terrorism threats within a framework of the war's geopolitical implications, latent and overt extremist tendencies among foreign fighters, the latitude extended to private military companies, and the diversion of weapons and tactical adaptation to improve terrorists' capabilities.

The weaponization of food and energy contributes to cascading instability and political polarization beyond Ukraine. Intensified social friction in Europe, amplified by Russian disinformation, and chaos in the Sahel breed environments conducive to violent radicalization. Geopolitical realignments from Afghanistan to the Sahel are acting as push-pull factors for extremism. Through Hezbollah and the *al-Quds* force, Iran is filling a power vacuum in Syria while challenging the definition of state-sponsored terrorism. Although confronting leadership decapitation, ISIS is exploiting deflected attention to franchise and metastasize in Africa while improving operational capacity in Syria and Iraq.

From a policy perspective, it is crucial to allocate resources to analyze the evolving nature of the threat, including the second and third-order effects emerging from an emboldened violent far-right, an active Iran, and re-grouping jihadi movements. While existing extremist push-pull frameworks may offer a rough model for predicting potential growth in extremism across various regions, new trajectories or trends involving states and state-related entities must also be considered. These include direct engagement in conflicts, increased efforts to build capacity, amplifying social cleavages, or even launching attacks outside the conflict zones.

The foreign fighter phenomenon in Ukraine is unique. Right-wing extremism, prevalent during the 2014 conflict, persists today. Both jihadis and right-wing violent extremists are ambivalent about participating in the Ukrainian war. However, they recognize that the instability, deflected attention, and broader geopolitical implications present opportunities. For instance, Rinaldo Nazzaro, the former leader of the Base who trained in Ukraine in 2014, advised his Telegram followers that white supremacists have no role in the conflict.[92] Despite this, reports indicate that fighters from the Base are still gaining combat experience in Ukraine.[93] However, unlike Syria in 2014, most foreign fighters traveling to the conflict zone are not motivated primarily by ideology. The smaller numbers of fighters and ongoing monitoring processes also help mitigate the risk of foreign fighter-related violence. Still, networking opportunities for those harboring ex-

---

[92] "Extremist Content Online: Former Leader of Neo-Nazi Group The Base Discourages Followers from Fighting IN Ukraine," *Counter Extremism Project*, March 21, 2022, https://www.counterextremism.com/press/extremist-content-online-former-leader-neo-nazi-group-base-discourages-followers-fighting; Makuch, Lamoureux, and Kamel, "Neo-Nazi Terror Group The Base Linked to the War in Ukraine."

[93] Makuch, Lamoureux, and Kamel, "Neo-Nazi Terror Group The Base Linked to the War in Ukraine."

tremist beliefs still exist. Furthermore, the conflict involves groups such as Chechens, who do not fit the traditional foreign fighter definition but nonetheless represent a potential source of instability upon their return home.

The presence of extremist elements, combined with potentially volatile social tensions in the fighters' home countries and the combat experience acquired in the conflict zone, creates a lethal mix. The activities of PMCs further fuel this potential for conflict. Whether through Wagner's recruitment of prisoners, the violence perpetrated by its right-wing franchises, or its prominent role as Russia's military arm in Africa, PMCs serve as incubators for extremism.

Addressing the foreign fighter threat requires expanding its definition to properly identify individuals who have traveled to conflict zones and pose various risks. Despite the challenges posed by individualized travel, it is crucial to identify the pathways and facilitators of return travel and map out these routes comprehensively. Secondly, establishing a database of known foreign fighters and implementing a process for accessing and sharing this data is essential. This requires strong partnerships among governments, non-governmental organizations, and communities. Proactive monitoring and risk assessment of those who have traveled should be prioritized, incorporating the recognition of indicators such as predisposition towards extremism prior to departure and networking opportunities within conflict zones. These data may be used to determine the risk posed by returnees, whether as disengaged veterans, ideologues, recruiters, or terrorists. Thirdly, establishing a legal framework to prosecute individuals who have committed offenses and to monitor those deemed high-risk is crucial. Finally, addressing the PMC challenge is best approached by designating groups as terrorist organizations, enabling additional actions such as seizing resources. Ultimately, the effectiveness in this area depends on the relationship between PMCs and the state.

Third, weapons diversion and tactical adaptation through knowledge sharing contribute significantly to terrorism. Whether through the procurement of weapons or the acquisition of technological and operational knowledge by non-state actors directly involved in the conflict—shared via benefactors such as *al-Quds* or through analysis of the vast amount of data coming from the warzone—opportunities exist for extremists to enhance their capabilities and replenish arsenals. While tracking arms can help mitigate the diversion of more sophisticated weapons, these efforts must be complemented by improved intelligence gathering and sharing across national borders and among national, regional, and local organizations (up and down and across national, regional, and local organizations). Security services, particularly local law enforcement, must be at the forefront in combating ongoing weapon diversion and detecting tactical adaptations fueled by knowledge transfer.

## Conclusion

The risks identified here necessitate ongoing commitments of resources, even years after the conflict in Ukraine concludes. Conventions for tracking and ac-

counting for weapons, identifying foreign fighters, and addressing the inspiration stemming from independent and quasi-independent organizations need to be operationalized with adequate staffing, interdiction capabilities, information-sharing protocols, and legal frameworks. Established counterterrorism groups such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum should monitor the situation and serve as a platform for advancing research, discussing trends, and providing advice, especially to more vulnerable countries.

The terrorist attacks in Spain in December 2022 and subsequent incidents involving parcels sent to Ukrainian missions across Europe underscore how the Ukrainian war is mobilizing individuals and groups towards violence, whether with or without state support. Regrettably, examining a broad swath of actual incidents reveals how the conflict is inspiring violent extremism that may persist and potentially escalate in the post-conflict phase. The duration of the conflict will significantly influence the extent of radicalization. The longer the conflict persists, the greater the likelihood of increased radicalization and intensified violent extremism in the aftermath.

## Disclaimer

## Acknowledgment

## About the Author

Dr. **Peter Kent Forster** is a professor emeritus of Security & Risk Analysis and former associate dean in Penn State's College of Information Sciences and Technology. He has been involved with the Partnership for Peace Consortium since 2001, where he has served as co-chair of both the Combating Terrorism and Irregular Warfare & Resilience Working Groups.

As an emeritus, Forster continues his work on national security policies, counterterrorism, and risk and crisis management. He has served as the Principal Investigator (PI) or co-PI on research projects sponsored by NSF, ODNI, NIJ, and the NSA. He was the first academic liaison to the Pennsylvania Criminal Intelligence Center. Forster also develops and facilitates tabletop exercises aimed at enhancing command and control, risk identification, and counterterrorism capabilities. He is co-author of *Multinational Military Intervention* (2008) and *Cognitive Systems Engineering: An Integrative Living Laboratory Framework* (2017). Additionally, he has written numerous articles on topics such as counterterrorism, understanding team cognition in crises, and American national security policy.