



# Terrorism Monitor

In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror

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General Julius Karangi

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## ARAB-TUBU CLASHES IN SOUTHERN LIBYA'S SABHA OASIS

Following deadly clashes between Tubu and Arab tribesmen in the Libyan oasis of Kufra in February, another round of fighting between the Tubu and Arabs using automatic weapons, rockets and mortars erupted in late March in Libya's strategic Sabha oasis. Tubu residents in Sabha reported Arab tribesmen torching the homes of Tubu residents or expelling them at gunpoint while Arabs warned of Tubu snipers (*Libya Herald*, March 28; AFP, March 29). Three hundred Transitional National Council (TNC) soldiers arrived in Sabha on March 26, with more arriving in the following days. Without a national army that can be called upon to restore order, the TNC instead called on Arab militias from northern Libya to deploy in Sabha, including militias from Misrata, Ajdabiya, Zintan and Benghazi (*Libya Herald*, March 28; Tripoli Post, March 29). Though a dispute over a stolen car was said to have ignited the fighting, others have cited rising tensions over the distribution of \$4 million earmarked by the TNC for use in Sabha (*Financial Times*, March 29).

Sabha, a city of 210,000 people about 400 miles south of Tripoli, is the site of an important military base and airfield as well as being a commercial and transportation hub for the Fezzan, the southernmost of Libya's three traditional provinces. Many of the residents are economic migrants from Niger, Chad and the Sudan, while the Qaddadfa (the tribe of Mu'ammarr Qaddafi) and the Awlad Sulayman are among the more prominent Arab tribes found in Sabha. One of the last strongholds of the Qaddafi loyalists, Sabha was taken by TNC militias in light fighting over September 19-22, 2011.

By March 29, the fighting had begun to ebb as tribal elders met to negotiate a ceasefire and the oasis town began to fill with some 3,000 TNC-backed militia fighters from northern Libya (*Jordan Times*, March 30). The clashes are believed to have left 50 dead and 167 wounded while revealing the continuing fragility of the post-Qaddafi Libyan state (*Tripoli Post*, March 30). Though active fighting between the Tubu and Zuwaya Arabs in Kufra eased in March, tensions remain high as the Zuwaya claim Tubu from Chad have infiltrated the oasis and supplied weapons to the Libyan Tubu in an effort to take control of the borders and smuggling. Local security officials have warned it would take “only one shot for things to degenerate.” (Now Lebanon, March 22; for Kufra see Terrorism Monitor Brief, February 23). Bashir al-Kabit, the head of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, said the fighting in Kufra was only an isolated incident, blown out of proportion by the media, while suggesting the Tubu were still in the pro-Qaddafi camp: “There are some tribal problems. Some tribes were in favor of the [Qaddafi] regime, and some others were against it. Some skirmishes are taking place. There is also a fifth column that is still active in the country; they belong to the al-Qaddafi group. They are trying to carry out some operations to prove to the world that Libya is not stable” (*al-Sharq al-Awsat* [Cairo], March 9).

The Tubu are an indigenous Black African tribe following a semi-nomadic lifestyle in what is now southern Libya, northern Chad and northeastern Niger. The fiercely independent Tubu were renowned for their stiff resistance to the encroachments of the French Colonial Army in the late 19th/early 20th centuries, often conducted in cooperation with Libya’s Sanusi Sufi order, which had established an anti-colonial Islamic confederation in the Sahara. The Tubu are divided into two groups speaking different dialects of a common Tubu language, the Teda group of southern Libya and the larger Daza group now found in Chad and Niger. Tubu politician and guerrilla leader Goukouni Oueddei (president of Chad, 1979-1982 and son of the *derde* [chief] of the Teda), was backed by Libyan forces in his struggle for control of Chad in the 1980s against the French-backed Hissène Habré, a member of the Anakaza branch of the Tubu and a former defense minister in Goukouni Oueddei’s government. Qaddafi’s price for this support was control of the uranium-rich Aouzou Strip in northern Chad, which was eventually returned to Chad by a decision of the International Court of Justice in 1994. Many Daza Tubu migrated north into Libya to work in the oil industry with the encouragement of Qaddafi. Arab Libyans continue to identify these migrants as pro-

Qaddafi foreigners even though the local Teda Tubu were subject to repressive measures from the Libyan leader, who liked to suggest that the indigenous Tubu had only arrived in Libya during the Italian occupation or later.

During the anti-Qaddafi rebellion, some Tubu formed the rebel-allied “Desert Shield Brigade,” which conducted long-range raids (a Tubu specialty) on Murzuk and al-Qatrun (*Ennahar* [Algiers], August 20, 2011; AFP, July 23, 2011). The Brigade was led by veteran Tubu militant Barka Wardagou, the former leader of the Niger-based Tubu movement Front armé révolutionnaire du Sahara (FARS), which has worked in cooperation with Tuareg militant groups in the past.

The Libyan Tubu claim that, rather than facilitating the entry of foreign militants, the local Tubu have formed their own border patrols to ensure Libya’s sovereignty in the absence of an effective central authority. According to Tubu representative Muhammad al-Sanusi, “Libya’s borders are a red line” (Now Lebanon, March 1).

Led by Isa Abd al-Majid, some Libyan Tubu organized resistance to the Qaddafi regime in 2007 by organizing the Tubu Front for the Salvation of Libya (TFSL), though al-Majid emphasized at the time that the movement was not seeking separation, only “the restitution of our rights” (al-Alam TV [Tehran], August 15, 2007). In light of the fighting in Sabha and the clashes between the Tubu and the Zuwaya Arabs of Kufra Oasis in February, al-Majid expressed the exasperation of the Libyan Tubu by announcing “the reactivation of the Tubu Front for the Salvation of Libya [TFSL] to protect the Tubu people from ethnic cleansing... If necessary, we will demand international intervention and work towards the creation of a state, as in South Sudan” (*Libya Herald*; March 28). With the TNC struggling to establish national institutions, separatist threats have even spread to the TNC’s powerbase in Cyrenaica. In mid-March, 3,000 representatives gathered in Benghazi to form an autonomous region in eastern Libya under the “Congress of the People of Barqa [the Arabic name for Cyrenaica]” led by Ahmad al-Zubay al-Sanusi, the grandson of King Idris al-Sanusi (1951-1969) (*Jomhuriye Eslami* [Tehran], March 22). The new autonomous region would hold about three-quarters of Libya’s known oil reserves.

According to Ahmat Saleh Boudoumi, a Tibesti Tubu and author of *Voyages et conversation en pays toubou*, “Relations between the Arabs and Tubu have always been bad. To be integrated with the Arabs... he must

renounce his identity, [something] that the Tubus have always refused. Hence their marginalization in Libya” (*Tahalil* [Nouackchott], March 31).

## IS A MILITARY INTERVENTION POSSIBLE IN MALI?

As the political and military situation deteriorates in Mali following a poorly-planned coup by junior officers and the subsequent occupation of nearly all northern Mali by Tuareg rebels and various tribal allies there is increasing discussion of the possibility of a military intervention to restore order and prevent Mali’s unrest from spilling over its borders.

The most likely source of a military intervention would be the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its military arm, the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG).

ECOWAS has put 2,000 troops on standby (*Le Proces Verbal* [Bamako], April 2). The military chiefs-of-staff of the ECOWAS states are meeting in the Ivoirian capital of Abidjan on April 5 to discuss the creation of an intervention force (AFP, April 3).

The African Union has endorsed the ECOWAS decision to activate the planning process for a possible deployment of a brigade of troops to “protect the unity and territorial integrity of Mali” (PANA Online [Dakar], April 4). In the meantime ECOWAS has instituted a comprehensive embargo on the Malian regime. According to the ECOWAS chairman, Côte d’Ivoire president Alassane Dramane Ouattara: “All the diplomatic, economic, and financial measures are applicable as of today and will be lifted only when the constitutional order is actually restored” (*L’Essor* [Bamako], April 4).

The ECOWAS chairman has stated that several West African states have already pledged troops for an intervention force, adding that: “We would like to ensure the integrity of Malian territory. We shall use all means at our disposal to stop this rebellion, and to restore Mali’s territorial integrity. It is the sub-region’s duty” (*Le Patriote* [Abidjan], April 2).

Junta leader Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo announced the restoration of the 1992 Constitution on April 2, but so far this appears to be an attempt to mollify international opposition rather than return Mali to its democratic course (*L’Indicateur du Renouveau* [Bamako], April 2;

*L’Essor* [Bamako], April 2). In an especially troubling development for the coup leaders, Colonel al-Hajj ag Gamou, the military chief-of-staff in Kidal region and a highly capable leader of a pro-government Tuareg militia, has declared his allegiance to the MNLA rebels (*L’Indicateur du Renouveau* [Bamako], April 2). The rebels appear to have already seized large stockpiles of arms from captured garrisons in the north.

ECOWAS is demanding a return to constitutional order and a transfer of power to the Speaker of Parliament, Professor Dioncounda Traore, in accordance with article 36 of the Malian constitution. For now, however, there is every sign that the junta plans to remain in power. Despite the crisis in the north, the military junta in Bamako is insisting on going ahead with prosecutions of President Amadou Toumani Touré and other leading political figures on charges of treason and corruption.

ECOMOG has been involved in three previous military interventions with varying degrees of success – Liberia in 1990, Sierra Leone in 1997 and Guinea-Bissau in 1999. [1] There was also a brief ECOWAS deployment in Liberia in 2003. In the past, ECOMOG has been dominated by Nigeria’s military, the largest and most powerful in the region, usually in partnership with the militaries of other Anglophone West African nations. An intervention in Mali, a Francophone state and former French colony, would require larger participation from West African Francophone states, probably with Senegal in the lead.

With Mali increasingly isolated financially and diplomatically and a growing rift between Tuareg rebels of the Mouvement National de Libération de l’Azawad (MNLA) and the Islamist rebels of Iyad ag Ghali’s Ansar al-Din movement, there seems little possibility of an internal solution being found for Mali’s difficulties in the near future.

Despite pursuing an alarmist interpretation of the Malian crisis in which al-Qaeda controls the rebels and is planning an invasion of southern Mali to implement a Shari’a state, French foreign minister Alain Juppe has said there is no possibility that France would intervene directly in Mali, though it could provide logistical support to an ECOWAS force. Juppe has also urged a greater role for Algeria, which is constitutionally prohibited from participating in military interventions outside its borders (AFP, April 3). France maintains garrisons in Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire, but according to Juppe, “We can help with logistics or training but there

is no question of putting French soldiers on Malian soil” (AFP, April 2). Washington has supported ECOWAS interventions in the past and may also provide logistical support in the event of a military intervention in Mali.

Note:

1. See Andrew McGregor, “Quagmire in West Africa: Nigerian Peacekeeping in Sierra Leone (1997-1998),” *International Journal* 54(3), Summer 1999, pp. 482-501.

## Somalia’s Neighbors Making Progress against al-Shabaab Despite Threats of Retaliation

*Abdullahi Ahmed Mohamed*

Under military pressure from its neighbors on several fronts, Somalia’s al-Shabaab/al-Qaeda Islamist militants are beginning to show fractures in the solidarity of their leadership after losing several key towns and regions. As the movement faces the worst situation it has experienced in several years, it has resorted to threats against civilians in Kenya, whose forces are fighting al-Shabaab in southern Somalia: “The Kenyan public must be aware that the more Kenyan troops continue to persecute innocent Muslims of Somalia, the less secure Kenyan cities will be; and the more oppression the Muslims of Somalia feel, the more constricted Kenyan life will be. Such is the law of retribution. Your security depends on our security. It is a long, protracted war and Kenyans must neither harbor a reason for optimism nor hope for triumph.” [1]

In the latest developments, Ethiopian forces supporting the pro-government militia Ahlu Sunna wa’l-Jama’a (ASWJ) captured Elbur, a strategic stronghold of al-Shabaab in Galgudud Province, about 225 miles north of Mogadishu (Shabelle Media Network, March 26; Raxanreeb.com March 26). Only days earlier, the movement had also lost Hudur Town in Bakool region to Ethiopian forces (Jowhar.com, March 22). In response, al-Shabaab spokesman Shaykh Ali Mahmud Raage (a.k.a. Ali Dheere) held a press conference via telephone and read a statement by the top leadership of al-Shabaab that accused the United States, Israel and NATO of pushing Somalia’s neighbors to occupy the country. The statement also appealed to the mujahideen to unite against the foreign troops (Shabelle Media Network, March 26; Somalimemo.net, March 26). The appeal did little to stem the tide, however, and by March 30 AMISOM was reporting that Ugandan and Burundian forces working with Somali troops had retaken the important Dayniile District northwest of Mogadishu, thus relieving al-Shabaab of one of their most important strongholds (AFP, March 30). The Islamists had earlier lost their military base at Maslah, their last base in Mogadishu. Al-Shabaab used this base to carry out executions and other punishments of persons they identified as infidels or spies. It was also a base for al-Shabaab leaders to hold public rallies to

promote their ideology and for the public viewing of jihadist tapes and videos (Radio Muqdisho.net, March 2; Kismaayonews.com, March 2).

These latest military pressures have forced al-Shabaab to change its methods and revert to hit-and-run tactics. The group attacked an Ethiopian base at Yurkud in the southwestern Gedo region in mid-March, claiming to have killed 74 Ethiopian soldiers and injured more than 100 (HSMPress [al-Shabaab's official Twitter account], March 13, al-Kataib Media, March 11). However, Somali authorities claimed to have killed 130 of the attackers in the same battle with minimal loss to Ethiopian or Somali government forces (al-Jazeera, March 10). In another incident the radical Islamists attacked a military post near Baidoa in Bay region (al-Kataib Media, March 24).

The commander of the Kenyan Defense Forces (KDF), General Julius Karangi, has declared that Kenyan troops will join forces from Uganda, Burundi and Djibouti in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) (Hiiraan Online, March 13). Possibly in reaction to al-Shabaab's deteriorating situation in the south, the movement has replaced its local administrator in the Jubaland district, Shaykh Abubakr Ali of central Somalia's Hiiraan region, with Abdurahman Hudeyfi, who is from Afmadow in Lower Juba Province (Hiiraan Online, March 13).

Kenya's government has accused al-Shabaab of being behind a grenade attack at a bus station in Nairobi that left six Kenyans dead and 63 others injured (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], March 10; March 11). While al-Shabaab has several times warned the Kenyan government of the consequences if it refused to withdraw its troops from Somalia it has denied any involvement in that incident (Bar Kulan Radio, October 19, 2011; Halgan.net, March 12; HSMPress, March 12).

Al-Shabaab leaders insist that they will fight until the death of the last member of the group or the establishment of the Islamic state. They have described their retreat as a "military tactic" rather than a defeat, claiming that they have already carried out many attacks on the enemy since falling back (Jowhar.com, March 2; March 6). Abu Abdirahman, al-Shabaab's regional leader in Banaadir, claimed victory against Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and AMISOM forces, saying that their militants prevented these forces from advancing towards the outskirts of Mogadishu. [2]

Al-Shabaab has started to force elders from Bay region to take part in the war against Ethiopian armies and TFG forces in Baidoa. The group also wants the elders to bring young men of their clans to participate in the war and has begun arming students for the same purpose (Shabelle Media Network, February 7; Mareeg.com, March 7).

The major challenge for Kenyan and Ethiopian forces in the liberated areas remains to ensure the stabilization of these areas and to secure them from al-Shabaab sleeper cells and hit-and-run attacks. Kenyan military spokesman Major Emmanuel Chirchir says that the strategy remains to reduce al-Shabaab's effectiveness and restore TFG authority. [3] The movement continues to target Ethiopian forces with land mines and car bombs in the two key cities held by Ethiopian forces, Baidoa and Beledweyn (Hiiraan Online, January 24; February 23; Bar Kulan Radio, March 2; Raxanreeb Online, March 2).

The military forces of Somalia's neighbors still have a long way to go to accomplish their objectives of defeating and eliminating al-Shabaab as a regional threat. Large parts of southern and central Somalia remain in the hands of al-Shabaab, including the key port city of Kismayo, the financial cornerstone of the movement. The veteran militants of the movement, newly united with al-Qaeda, continue to enjoy the support of some clan groups who see the foreign forces as favoring particular clans and political movements that want to increase their influence in the regions held by al-Shabaab.

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Notes:

1. Press Office, Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, April 1, 2012.
2. Press conference held by al-Shabaab's Bandir region administrator, Abu Abdirahman, in the Dayniile District, March 6, 2012.
4. Kenya's Military spokesman Facebook status update, October 31, 2011.

## West Africa's MOJWA Militants – Competition for al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb?

Dario Cristiani

With a deadly suicide attack on a security facility in southern Algeria, a newly formed group of West African militants has demonstrated it is a serious security threat and a potential competitor to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

As the gates opened for the daily food delivery to the headquarters of Algeria's gendarmerie in the southern city of Tamanrasset, a second vehicle loaded with explosives rushed in behind. Seconds later a series of blasts collapsed the building's external wall, injuring 23 (*La Tribune* [Algiers] March 3). After a second pre-planted bomb was defused near the headquarters, Algerian police apprehended a Malian and an Algerian who were trying to flee Tamanrasset with weapons, explosives and €7,000 (*El Khabar* [Algiers], March 4).

Responsibility for the attack was claimed by the Jamaat Tawhid wa'l-Jihad fi Garbi Afriqiya (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa - MOJWA), a new group supposedly created after a split within AQIM (*Jeune Afrique*, March 3). The attack was carried out by two allegedly Malian suicide bombers, using a Toyota with 200kg of TNT (*Le Temps D'Algérie*, March 6). MOJWA emerged for the first time in December 2011, when it claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of three European aid workers from a Saharawi refugee camp in Algeria in October 2011 (*La Repubblica* [Rome], March 3; *La Tribune* [Algiers], March 5). The group is demanding a ransom of about €30 million for their liberation (*L'Expression* [Algiers], March 3).

In a December 2011 video, six members of the group claimed that their references are Osama Bin Laden, Mullah Omar and several local Islamist historical figures, such as al-Hajj 'Umar ibn Sa'id Tall, 'Uthman Dan Fodio and Amadou Cheikhou, three key figures in the history of West African Islam and the regional anti-colonial struggle (*Tahalil* [Nouakchott], December 18, 2011). The group also threatened France, given its past as a colonizer in the region and its present role in the local security configuration (*Le Figaro* [Paris], January 3). MOJWA is allegedly guided by a Mauritanian, Hamada Ould Muhammad Kheirou (a.k.a. Abu Qumqum) (*Le*

*Temps D'Algérie*, March 4). Mauritanian authorities have issued an international arrest warrant for the MOJWA leader (Carrefour de la République Islamique de Mauritanie., March 4). A possible explanation for this split is to be found in AQIM's resistance to expanding its leadership to fighters coming from countries other than Algeria.

The "Sahelization" of AQIM is the result of a decade-long process that started with the weakening of the now defunct Groupe Islamique Armée (GIA) in the late 1990s and the retreat of its successor, the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC), to two strongholds - the Berber-inhabited Kabylia in the east and the Sahara/Sahel region in the south. However, the shift in geographical focus had more to do with AQIM's financial needs and economic activities than with jihad. The largely ineffective control of the Sahel states offered AQIM a number of illicit business opportunities, the most remunerative being the kidnapping of Westerners and smuggling. The changing geography of AQIM, however, did not result in the ethnic pluralization of its leadership. It remained substantially an Algerian group in its command and, although much more "internationalized" in terms of rhetoric and strategic aims following the merger with al-Qaeda, its strategic priority and main target has firmly remained Algeria.

Tamanrasset is somehow different from other Algerian cities, as its historical, cultural, social and political features are much more rooted in Saharan than Mediterranean dynamics. [1] Given its cultural diversity and its strategic importance in controlling this area, Algerian authorities have always tried to boost control over Tamanrasset through a massive security presence, although this control vanishes in the enormous desert region outside the city.

The attack on Tamanrasset is consistent with the self-claimed aim of MOJWA to pursue jihad in West Africa as the city is home to the Comité d'état-major opérationnel conjoint (Committee of Joint Chiefs - CEMOC), the structure for regional counterterrorism cooperation between Algeria, Mali, Niger and Mauritania. Hitting Tamanrasset is a symbolic warning that cooperative regional efforts to face the terrorist threat will be unsuccessful. The attack also demonstrates a strong operational capability - Tamanrasset is a highly militarized city, being the home of the Algerian Army's 6th division. The attack then implies that MOJWA can count on a wide range of connivances and collusions, including the support of loyal tribesmen, an ability to

smuggle weapons and explosives into the city and the availability of volunteers from the surrounding areas for suicide missions.

The resurgence in terrorist attacks and clashes between security forces and jihadist militants indicates the greater availability of explosive devices and weapons following the collapse of Qaddafi's Libya. With the largely Tuareg Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) seizing the major cities of northern Mali, the security situation in Western Africa is likely to continue to deteriorate in the coming months; Boko Haram has increased its operational profile in northern Nigeria, Senegal had some problems during the electoral process, Niger is facing a serious food crisis and, along with Algeria, is facing new flows of refugees from northern Mali. Given the structural weakness of states in the region and the permanent instability characterizing these territories, it is possible that one of the ambitions of this new group might be to exploit this situation in order to enhance its operational profile.

Marking a clear dividing line between conjecture and factual evidence is always particularly troublesome when dealing with the jihadist phenomenon in this region. According to the claim made by MOJWA, it differs from AQIM in strategic priorities, internal organization and ideological foundations. The attack in Tamanrasset and the non-Algerian leadership are consistent with this claim. The real question is whether this group has truly severed itself from AQIM, representing a potential regional competitor in both in the jihadist domain and more mundane smuggling activities, or is it simply another sub-group of the already internally fragmented AQIM, working more specifically in the territories of western Africa?

If MOJWA is truly independent of AQIM, it may be competing with AQIM for scarce resources in the region by increasing its jihadist profile through operations like the attack in Tamanrasset. It could also prove to be a competitor in terms of recruitment, as it would be much more attractive to those West African fighters who want to fight their own governments rather than focus specifically on Algeria. Fragmented groups could, in some ways, be a more difficult threat to handle in the short term, as the possible competition among them could trigger a race to enhance their respective operational profiles by carrying out attacks to show their strength. In the long term, however, this fragmentation could represent a smaller strategic threat, since a larger and more geographically widespread group can represent a

more serious strategic threat.

If, however, MOJWA is merely an arm of AQIM, that would mean the end of the simple "economic functionality" of the Sahelian space, so far fundamental as an area of wealth production and training, but whose importance was neglected operationally. In this case, this group will enhance the operational profile of AQIM in the region. Given the developments in northern Mali and northern Nigeria, as well as the wider regional increase in instability since the deterioration of security conditions in several countries of the area, then an enhanced operational jihadist profile in Western Africa will bind together these several scenarios of crisis into a greater arc, stretching from Nigeria to the Mediterranean coast of Algeria.

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Note:

1. See Geoff D. Porter, "Curtailing Illicit and Terrorist Activity in Algeria's Tamanrasset," CTC Sentinel, August 15, 2008, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/curtailing-illicit-and-terrorist-activity-in-algeria%E2%80%99s-tamanrasset>.

## How Kurdish PKK Militants Are Exploiting the Crisis in Syria to Achieve Regional Autonomy

*Emrullah Uslu*

Turkish-Syrian relations have been always problematic. Dating back to the Cold War, Syria's support for the Kurdish militants of the Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK) was a major obstacle to efforts to normalize relations between the two countries until the 1998 Adana Accord allowed Syria and Turkey to put the past behind them and become major economic and strategic partners. The Adana agreement established joint cooperation against the PKK and relations subsequently flourished in all aspects. In 2009, the two countries signed a joint political declaration establishing a High Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC), intended to elevate relations to an even higher level ([mfa.gov.tr](http://mfa.gov.tr), accessed on March 16, 2012).

With the arrival of the Arab Spring, these relations began a downward slide as the Assad regime initiated an intensive crackdown on Syrian opposition groups. In response Turkey sent its special envoy, Ahmet Davitoglu, to Damascus to help speed up the reform process. Instead of hastening this process and maintaining good relations with Turkey, Assad developed even closer ties to Iran and launched a heavy-handed assault on the Syrian opposition. Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan became the first prime minister to call for Assad to step down, which completely soured Turkish-Syrian relations for the first time in 12 years (*Hurriyet*, November 22, 2011),

### The PKK's Policies towards Syria

Instability in Syria has rapidly altered the regional geopolitics of the PKK. Syria's Alawite regime initially hoped that the PKK would keep the Kurdish region calm, enabling the regime to turn its attention exclusively to the Sunni Arab opposition without a repeat of the Kurdish unrest of 2004 and 2005 in the Syrian district of al-Qamishli. Talks between the regime and the opposition failed and President Assad began seeking an authority to keep the Kurds under control. [1] Under these circumstances the PKK emerged as a viable option.

The movement was well known to the Syrian regime, which provided a home to the PKK from 1980 to 1998.

The founder of the organization, Abdullah Ocalan, lived in Damascus for 18 years. The PKK thus considered Syria a friendly country even while ignoring the heavy pressure being applied to Syria's Kurds by the Assad regime. However, the PKK changed its Syrian policy after Abdullah Ocalan was expelled from Syria in 1998. By 2003, the PKK had founded a Syrian sub-group known as the Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party - PYD), which became one of the most vocal critics of the Assad regime.

After the PKK and the Syrian regime brokered a deal in 2011, Assad allowed PYD leader Muhammad Salih Muslim to return to Syria from exile. Assad also allowed the establishment of six Kurdish schools funded by a PKK affiliate where the Kurdish language is taught and the Kurdish flag flown (CNNTurk, November 9, 2011; *Sabah*, November 29, 2011).

While Assad plans to use the PYD to temper the Kurdish opposition and provide opposition to Turkey, the PKK hopes that Syria will provide new opportunities for the movement, hopes that are apparently being fulfilled as the PYD runs the Kurdish region of Syria and PKK militants provide security.

### Assassins at Work

After strengthening its presence in Syria the PKK began to eliminate Kurdish leaders who might pose a threat to the Assad regime or competition to the PKK. Local Kurdish leader Mashaal Tammo, assassinated by unknown gunmen in 2011, may have been a victim of this campaign, though PKK officials have suggested Turkey is responsible (*Kurdish Globe* [Erbil], October 26).

Tammo was one of the founders of the Kurdish Future Movement after the 2004 Qamishli riot. Soon after its foundation, Tammo's movement faced political competition from the PYD, which has its own take on Tammo's murder. The PYD claim that Turkey is behind the assassination of the Kurdish leader and refers to the murder as a message from Ankara to Damascus that Turkey is more than capable of spreading chaos in Syria. This allegation presumes that Turkey calculated the Kurdish outcry against the Syrian regime. Arab members of the Syrian opposition suggested that the PKK may have killed Tammo, perhaps on behalf of the regime. This claim is fuelled by rumors that the PKK is under the direction of the Syrian military intelligence



and is able to play the “Kurdish card” in its “cold war” with Ankara.

Abdullah Bedro, the strongest tribal leader in the Kurdish region of Syria, was another victim of assassination. The PKK denied its involvement in the crime, but when a PKK leader’s body was discovered at the scene of the clash in which Bedro was killed, the PKK had to admit its involvement in the assassination (*Zaman*, February 15). The PKK was further accused in the killing of Dr. Serzad Hac Resid, another anti-Assad politician and an Aleppo-based representative of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYDKS). Dr. Resid was involved in distributing video footage concerning the brutality of the Assad regime (*Zaman*, February 17).

Reports in the Turkish press claim the PKK has opened a new training camp in the Syrian town of Resulyan across the border from Turkey’s Urfa Province and deployed 150 PKK militants there in November (*Milliyet*, November 24, 2011). Kurdish politician Kemal Burkay claimed that 2000 PKK militants were deployed in Syria to help the Assad regime, while Turkish TV stations broadcast video footage of PKK checkpoints in the Afrin District of Syria (*Radikal*, January 18; Beyaz TV, February 17).

### Iran’s Realignment with the PKK

On August 13 last year a Turkish state owned TV station claimed that the head of the PKK, Murat Karayilan, had been arrested in Iran (trt.net.tr, August 13, 2011). According to news reports, Turkish intelligence shared Karayilan’s location with Iranian authorities and Iran then arrested Karayilan. However, there was a conflicting response from the Turkish and Iranian authorities - some authenticated the news while others denied it, creating an air of uncertainty over his whereabouts (trt.net.tr, August 13, 2011; see *Terrorism Monitor* Briefs, October 21, 2011). Following this flurry of reports, officials from both sides publicly denied the news seemingly in an effort to let the news die down.

In October, 2011 a headline story at the Turkish pro-government newspaper *Yeni Safak* provided new details of the case. Journalist Abdulkadir Selvi, who is believed to be a semi-official voice of the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) government and maintains close relations with Turkish intelligence, shared specific details about how Karayilan was arrested. According to Selvi, in the summer of 2011, Iran launched a series of counterterrorism operations against the Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistane (PJAK - Party of Free Life

of Iranian Kurdistan), an offshoot of the PKK. During those operations Iran offered to conduct joint military operations with Turkey against the PKK and PJAK while Turkey agreed to share intelligence with Iran in its fight against PJAK. Selvi claims that Deputy Prime Minister Besir Atalay, the coordinator minister for counterterrorism operations, confirmed this (*Yeni Safak*, October 11, 2011).

Based on an intelligence sharing agreement between Turkey and Iran, the Milli Stihbarat Teskilatı (MIT – Turkish intelligence) shared Karayilan’s location with Iran and they arrested Karayilan and a few other PKK leaders and took them to Iran. While Turkey was expecting Iran to hand Karayilan and other PKK leaders over to Turkey, Iran offered to free them in exchange for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of PJAK units from Iran. In addition, Selvi claims “Iran asked Karayilan to provide opportunities for the Syrian factions within the PKK and maintain the PKK’s support in Syria to balance the Kurdish opposition groups against the Assad regime during the political turmoil in Syria” (*Yeni Safak*, October 11, 2011).

According to an Iranian professor of international relations who requested anonymity:

The Iranian press gave extensive coverage to the arrest of Murat Karyilan. However, the coverage of this news disappeared after two days from its initial coverage. I inquired about the veracity of Karayilan’s arrest, and I was told by highly reliable and connected Iranian sources that Karayilan was indeed arrested, but he was released as a quid-pro-quo for the PKK pressuring PJAK and controlling the latter’s terrorist operations against Iran. When the Turks found out about Karayilan’s release, they expressed their utter dismay at the Iranian move. It should also be noted that some elements (especially the Foreign Ministry) of the Iranian government objected to the release of Karayilan, but they ultimately lost the battle. [2]

On September 4, Murat Karayilan sent a pre-recorded videotape to the pro-PKK Roj TV showing that he was not arrested and was still a commander in the PKK (Aktifhaber.com, September 4, 2011). At the same time Karayilan appeared on TV, PJAK declared a unilateral

ceasefire. Iran asked the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of northern Iraq for further details about PJAK's ceasefire and in a short period of time a joint ceasefire agreement was brokered by former KRG prime minister Nechirvan Barzani (ekurd.net, September 7, 2011; rudaw.net, September 28, 2011). PJAK withdrew its militants from Iran and linked up with the PKK to fight against Turkey.

Shortly after PJAK's ceasefire with Iran, Turkish counterterrorism operations reported many citizen of Iranian origin among those PKK militants who were killed in October and November 2011. In one such operation in the town of Cukurca in Hakkari Province six Iranian PKK militants were killed on October 28 (aktifhaber.com, December 18, 2011). There also were reports of an increase in militants of Iranian origin fighting in PKK units operating inside Turkey, an important sign that PJAK militants may have transferred to the PKK (*Bugun*, October 4, 2011).

Another critical development that occurred after PJAK's withdrawal from Iran was the increased role of Bahoz Erdal in organizing PKK attacks. Erdal, who is of Syrian origin, was the top commander of the PKK until July 2009, when Murat Karayilan removed him from his post and appointed another Syrian PKK militant, Sofi Nurettin, in his place (*Hurriyet*, July 8, 2009). It was quite unusual for Bahoz Erdal to stage a comeback in 2011 after having been dismissed from his post. Indeed, the Turkish press suggested that Bahoz Erdal's order to create chaos in Turkey did not fit with the general strategy of the PKK. It was believed that his unexpected comeback as a commander might be tied to his relations with outside forces such as Iran and Syria (Aksiyon, October 25, 2011).

Right after Murat Karayilan's bizarre disappearance, or one might say his arrest and release by the Iranians, an interesting analysis of the situation appeared by Yusuf Ziyad, a PKK media official. It sparked rumors of a possible Kurd-Shiite axis, arguing that the changing geopolitical situation in the region had opened a vast area of operations for the PKK:

As Turkey reached an agreement with the U.S. to install NATO's radar units in Turkey, Iran failed to drag Turkey out of the West. It further isolated Iran in the region. Turkey's decision to support American plans in the Middle East have

deeply disturbed Iran. Because there is no neighboring state for Iran to build an alliance with, Iran will build alliances with non-state actors. It is a well-known fact that Iran has had alliances with Hezbollah, Ansar al-Sunnah, Hamas, etc. The AKP government has pulled Hamas away from Iran's influence. As an outcome of an arrangement between Turkey and Hamas, the organization shut down its offices in Damascus. At this stage, the best option for Iran is to build a Shiite and Kurdish alliance. As we look at the interests of both the Kurds and the Shiites there is ground to build such an alliance. Turkey's moderate Islamic model is a direct challenge to the Iranian model of Islam. Promoting the Turkish model of Islam across the Arab world is an American project (Firatnews.com, September 19, 2011, likolin.ogr, September 19, *Today's Zaman*, October 5, 2011).

#### Turkey's Response

As the PKK appears to deepen its roots in Syria, Turkish authorities have given conflicting signals about the role of the Syrian government in supporting the PKK. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu stated: "It is beyond Syria's power to use the PKK card. Syria is a country that cannot even control the Zabadani region [in the Rif Dimashq Governorate, close to the Lebanon border], but considers using a terror organization as a political card. We don't allow Syria to consider using terror as political card" (NTV, February 8). Recently Davutoglu added that "Assad denies the PKK network is in Syria, and of course he would say this, but we have information that the PKK network exists in Syria..." (Stargazete.com, March 2).

#### Conclusion

It appears that the PKK's strategy toward Syria does not call for fighting beside the Assad regime until the very end. Rather, it has used the situation to its own advantage to open new avenues for itself and strengthen its position within Syria in order to be ready for further confrontations if the Assad regime falls. In recent weeks it seems that the PKK could be deserting Assad and trying to impose its own policies in Syria. For this

purpose the PYD prepared a few weeks ago to declare “democratic autonomy” within Syria (yuksekovahaber.com, March 4).

PKK deputy chairman Mustafa Karasu and Amed Dicle, the head of the pro-PKK Roj TV, have written several pieces on Syria, claiming that the policy of Turkey’s AKP government towards Damascus had collapsed because the Kurds had declared “democratic autonomy” and that the Kurds would defend their right to this status (yeniozgurpolitika.org, February 28; Firat News, March 4). Both authors indicated that the PKK would likely concentrate more on Syria than Turkey in the future because the PKK considers it to be more strategically important at this time to take control of Syria’s Kurdish region to further its goal of one day forcing Turkey to accept “democratic autonomy” for Turkey’s Kurds as well.

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Notes:

1. “The Al-Qamishli Uprising: The beginning of a ‘new era’ for Syrian Kurds?” KurdWatch Report no: 4, December 2009.
2. Email exchange with an Iranian scholar who prefers to remain anonymous, October 2011.