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IN THIS ISSUE:

BRIEFS.....1

CRISIS IN GREECE: ANARCHISTS IN THE BIRTHPLACE OF DEMOCRACY
By George Papadopoulos4

FROM PAKISTAN TO YEMEN: ADAPTING THE U.S. DRONE STRATEGY
By Brian Glyn Williams7

HOLIER THAN THOU: RIVAL CLERICS IN THE SYRIAN JIHAD
By Aron Lund9



Amir Mokhtar Belmokhtar

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WAS AL-QAEDA'S SAHARAN AMIR MOKHTAR BELMOKHTAR KILLED IN THE BATTLE FOR GAO?

Though al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) continues to deny the death of one of its leading amirs in the late June battle for the northern Malian city of Gao, the movement has yet to provide any evidence of the survival of Mokhtar Belmokhtar (a.k.a. Khalid Abu al-Abbas), the amir of AQIM's Sahara/Sahel-based al-Mulathammin Brigade. [1]

Belmokhtar and his AQIM fighters are reported to have played a central role in leading the takeover of Gao by the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), a sub-Saharan AQIM spin-off (*Le Républicain* [Bamako], June 28; for MUJWA, see *Terrorism Monitor*, April 6). The clashes were sparked on the night of June 25, when Idrissa Oumarou, a popular local politician and leader of a group dedicated to resisting the rebel occupation of Gao, was killed while riding his motorcycle through a checkpoint run by the largely Tuareg Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) (*L'Essor* [Bamako], June 27; *Info Matin* [Bamako], June 27; *L'Indicateur du Renouveau* [Bamako], June 27). Youth protests began the next morning with the burning of tires in the streets. As the protest turned violent, it appeared that MNLA fighters opened fire on the protesters from rooftops, wounding 12 and possibly killing one or two demonstrators (*L'Essor* [Bamako], June 30; *Le Combat* [Bamako], June 27). At this point MUJWA launched an attack on the MNLA, which succeeded in driving the movement out of the city in which it had shared administration with the Islamists.

Accounts of Belmokhtar's death during the battle vary only in the details. The AQIM leader was variously reported to have been killed on June 28 by a burst of gunfire

to his chest, by a rocket that destroyed his vehicle, or by a rocket to his chest fired by Tuareg leader Colonel Bouna ag Atayub before the latter was himself killed in the fighting. Belmokhtar's death has since been reported by the MNLA and confirmed by Algerian sources (Toumast Press, June 30; July 2; Ennahar TV [Algiers], June 28; Liberté [Algiers], June 30). An unnamed Mauritanian AQIM commander was also reported killed (Toumast Press, June 30; SIWEL – Agence Kabyle d'information, June 28). The other senior MNLA officer reported killed in the clashes was identified as Colonel Wari, possibly Wari ag Ibrahim, a former National Guard officer and a member of the Idnane Tuareg.

At least 35 people died in the fighting, including those drowned in the Niger River and those who died in hospital afterwards. The MNLA admitted to four dead and 10 wounded, but made the improbable claim of having killed “dozens” of MUJWA fighters (AFP, July 1). Most of the dead appear to have been MNLA fighters, along with a few civilians caught in the deadly crossfire (*Le Combat* [Bamako], June 29).

However, two days after Belmokhtar's supposed death, a communiqué regarding the events in Gao issued under his alternate name of Khalid Abu al-Abbas was published by a Mauritanian news agency and later carried by jihadi websites (Agence Nouakchott d'Information, June 30). In the statement, Belmokhtar describes the deadly force used against protesters by the MNLA and goes on to describe the latter's subsequent expulsion from Gao, though he is careful to note that the use of force “was limited in time and place,” was not intended as a declaration of war “on any party,” and cannot be interpreted as a conflict between Arabs and Tuareg. None of the events described in the communiqué appear to post-date June 28 and as Belmokhtar's message appeared in the form of a statement rather than an interview that would verify his continued existence, it does not establish the AQIM amir's survival past June 28.

Since expelling the MNLA, the Islamists have been conducting house-to-house searches for MNLA members or sympathizers (RFI, July 3). MUJWA has also issued warnings on local radio that they have laid anti-personnel mines in the bush areas surrounding Gao to force all traffic to use the few roads controlled by the movement and thus prevent re-infiltration of the city by MNLA forces (*Le Combat* [Bamako], July 3). MUJWA forces in Gao are under the command of the movement's leader, Hamadou Ould Khairou, a Mauritanian who left AQIM last year to form a new and largely sub-Saharan militant Islamist group. Ould Khairou has been living at the Algerian consulate since his fighters seized the building and abducted seven Algerian diplomats in April and is frequently seen driving the Algerian

Consul's four-wheel drive vehicle in the streets of Gao (*Jeune Afrique*, July 7).

Following the MUJWA takeover of Gao on June 27, Islamist reinforcements (mostly Algerian according to the MNLA) began arriving in trucks that night, joining MUJWA forces and some 100 members of Ansar al-Din already in Gao (VOA, June 28; Toumast Press, June 30). The MNLA reported the destruction on June 29 of a convoy of Islamist reinforcements in the Tarkint region of Gao by a brigade under the command of Colonel Leche ag Didi of the Idnane Tuareg (Toumast Press, June 30). Many of the MNLA's leaders belong to the Idnane tribe, which has in recent years been engaged in a growing power struggle with the aristocratic Ifogha tribe, to which Islamists like Algabass ag Intalla and Ansar al-Din leader Iyad ag Ghali belong (al-Jazeera, June 11; *Info Matin* [Bamako], July 4). In some quarters of Mali, the conflict between the rebel groups is seen as a proxy struggle between Algeria, the “secret sponsor” of the MNLA, and Qatar, the “secret sponsor” of the Islamists (*L'Aube* [Bamako], July 2).

MNLA Secretary General Bilal ag Cherif, who was wounded in the fighting (either by shrapnel or friendly fire), was airlifted to a hospital in the Burkina Faso capital of Ouagadougou by a Burkinabe helicopter, apparently under the orders of Burkinabe president Blaise Compaoré, who is hosting negotiations between the northern Mali rebel leaders and the transitional Malian government. According to some reports, Ag Cherif was accompanied by MNLA military commander Colonel Muhammad ag Najim (*Le Combat* [Bamako], June 29; AFP, June 28). The rest of the Gao-based MNLA appears to have withdrawn to the Gao Region town of Ménaka to regroup (*L'Indépendant*, June 29).

After taking Gao, the Islamists claimed to have found a “black list” of assassination targets on the computer of Muhammad Jerry Maiga, the vice-chairman of the MNLA's Azawad transition committee. Among the names allegedly found there was that of Idrissa Oumarou, the politician whose death led to the brief struggle for Gao. MUJWA has since issued a reward of FCFA 3 million and a Land Cruiser for the death or capture of Maiga (*Le Combat* [Bamako], July 2). After the MUJWA victory, Maiga told French radio that MUJWA has little real strength and would soon be driven out of Gao by the MNLA (RFI, June 28).

A MUJWA spokesman, Abu al-Walid al-Sahrawi, claimed his group had taken 40 prisoners as well as two tanks and heavy weapons such as a Grad missile launcher abandoned by the MNLA in the fighting (al-Jazeera, June 29). One Ansar al-Din commander, Umar Ould Hamama, mocked MNLA claims that they would return to Gao after a “tactical withdrawal”:

“How can they talk about a counteroffensive when they have left behind them their war arsenal and trucks full of ammunition?” (*L’Essor* [Bamako], June 29).

Aside from their victory in the spontaneous battle for Gao on June 30, MUJWA also claimed responsibility for an early morning attack the previous day on the regional headquarters of a paramilitary police force in the Algerian town of Ouargla that killed one and wounded three. MUJWA accuses Algeria of encouraging the MNLA to confront the Islamists in northern Mali (AFP, June 29).

Note

1. For a profile of BelMokhtar, see Andrew Black, “Mokhtar Belmokhtar: The Algerian Jihad’s Southern Amir,” *Terrorism Monitor* 7(12), May 8, 2009.

“CHRISTIAN BROTHERHOOD” FORMED IN EGYPT ON THE MODEL OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

As Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood attempts to consolidate its political control of Egypt’s presidency and parliament, the formation of a new “Christian Brotherhood” was announced on July 5. The new movement does not have the endorsement of the Coptic Orthodox Church and is described by its founders as either a “sectarian” or a “liberal and secular” organization that will or will not seek political power, depending on who is asked. Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, which is still officially unrecognized in Egypt, the new movement will register with the Egyptian Ministry of Social Affairs to obtain legal status. The announcement came at a time of growing sectarian tensions and protests following incidents such as an attack by bearded Islamists on a Coptic woman in the Cairo suburb of Ma’adi for not wearing a veil (*al-Masry al-Youm* [Cairo], July 7).

Though it is only being activated now, the idea for a Christian Brotherhood movement was first advanced in 2005 by Coptic lawyer and activist Mamdouh Nakhla, the director of the Kalema Center for Human Rights (Cairo) and political analyst Michel Fahmy. The two were later joined by Amir Ayyad of the Maspero Youths Union for Free Copts, who played an important role in organizing the group. According to Fahmy, the movement was activated after the election of Muslim Brotherhood member Muhammad al-Mursi as Egypt’s new president to “resist the Islamist religious tide... We created our group to create a balance in the Egyptian political scene.” (*al-Arabiya*, July 5; *Bikya Masr* [Cairo],

July 5).

Mamdouh Nakhla described some of the goals of the new movement in a recent interview with a pan-Arab daily (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 7). Noting that the political model of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has been very successful in Egypt, Nakhla insists that the Christian Brotherhood (CB) will follow this model, at times almost slavishly – for instance, the CB’s political wing will be called *Hizb al-Adala wa’l-Hurriyya* (Justice and Freedom Party) in imitation of the Muslim Brotherhood’s *izb al-urriya wa’l-Adala* (Freedom and Justice Party). The CB will also be led by a “Supreme Guide,” just as in the MB. According to Nakhla, “We have been convinced by the Muslim Brotherhood’s success in coming to power, particularly as this group is still officially illegal. This is why we intend to implement this same idea, utilizing even the same hierarchy and positions, which may even have the same names...” The Coptic activist even suggests an alliance with the MB could be possible:

We are prepared to politically ally with them and take part in elections with them on a joint list, which could be called the “Egyptian Brotherhood” list. We may support their presidential candidate in any future elections, on the condition that presidential and ministerial posts are shared between us. Therefore, if they were to win the presidency then the vice president would be a member of the Christian Brotherhood, whilst if they form a government, ministerial portfolios would be shared between us, each according to their [parliamentary] proportion.

Ahmed al-Deif, a political adviser to the new Egyptian president, said in late June that al-Mursi was considering the appointment of two vice-presidents, a Copt and a (presumably Muslim) woman (*Egypt Independent*, June 26). The idea, however, ran into opposition from Egypt’s Salafists, who oppose such appointments but would permit the appointment of a Copt as a presidential adviser (*Egypt Independent*, July 2). The main candidate for a Coptic vice-presidency is Dr. Rafiq Habib, a Coptic intellectual who is vice-president of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party, the leadership of which describes him as “a valued and very much respected member” (Ikhwan Web, August 10). Nakhla notes that Dr. Habib has joined the Muslim Brotherhood “and is promoting their views; in fact sometimes he is even more unwavering in this than the members of the Muslim Brotherhood Guidance Bureau themselves!” (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 7).

While reaction from the Muslim Brotherhood is still forthcoming, Nakhla does not expect any opposition to the

Christian Brotherhood from that quarter: “They cannot object to this idea, for if they object, then this means that they must dissolve their own organization.” Surprisingly, Egypt’s Salafists have expressed no objections to the new movement; according to Salafist Front spokesman Khalid Sa’id: “As long as they [the Christian Brotherhood] work within a legal framework, in accordance with their religion and their faith, and aiming for the country’s interests, there is nothing wrong with it” (al-Arabiya, July 5).

Egypt’s Grand Mufti Ali Guma’a has urged al-Mursi to address the fears of his Coptic “brothers” as part of an effort to form a consensus based on the “common, national, Egyptian civilization” (*Al-Masry al-Youm* [Cairo], June 27). So far, al-Mursi appears to share the Mufti’s opinion, meeting with interim Coptic pope Bishop Pachomius only two days after being declared the victor in Egypt’s presidential election.

The new president’s outreach efforts stand in contrast to the heated days of the two-stage election, when al-Mursi and other members of the Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party accused the Copts of “betraying the revolution” by voting exclusively for Air Force General and former Mubarak administration prime minister Ahmad Shafiq, despite ample evidence that the Coptic vote was split between a range of candidates (*Egypt Independent*, May 29). Like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Coptic Orthodox Church remained aloof from the momentous events of last year’s Egyptian revolution, unable or unwilling to split from its traditional cooperative approach to the Mubarak regime.

Crisis in Greece: Anarchists in the Birthplace of Democracy

George Papadopoulos

Despite having consigned most members of Greece’s most violent anarchist groups to prison since 2010, there are new concerns amongst Greek authorities that the June 27 car-bombing of the Athens headquarters of Microsoft could mark a resurgence in anarchist political violence, a resurgence fuelled by the ongoing Greek economic crisis (*Capital.gr*, June 28, 2012). In a statement carried on anarchist websites, a new group called “Deviant Behaviors for the Expansion of Revolutionary Terrorism International Revolutionary Front” claimed it had carried out the Microsoft attack in support of imprisoned anarchists in Greece (*Ekathimerini.com*, June 30). Failure to bring many of the anarchist detainees to trial within the specified 18 month pre-trial detention period means that some detainees are now emerging from prison on conditional release. The disappearance of two leading members of the anarchist Revolutionary Struggle organization earlier this month after the Justice Department failed to bring them to trial in the 18-month period was an ominous development with many other prisoners coming up for release.

Modern Greek anarchism and terrorism can be directly correlated to major political events and socio-economic conditions that have fomented extremism. Social tensions that gave rise to the anarchist ideology in the 1970’s have emerged once again. The European sovereign debt crisis has created another perceived threat for anarchist groups, the neo-liberal order.

Greek terrorist groups first appeared after the fall of the military junta dictatorship in 1974. Resentment against the junta and the United States for its perceived backing of the regime led to the emergence of the fanatically nationalistic, Marxist-Leninist, and anti-Western 17 November Revolutionary Organization (*Epanastatiki Organosi 17 Noemvri*), responsible for the assassination of CIA Chief of Station Richard Welch on December 23, 1975 as well as various foreign diplomats and Greek officials. The organization was named for the date that the junta crushed a student rebellion at the Athens Polytechnic in 1973, resulting in the death of 23 people. To this day, the event is still commemorated by an annual march on the U.S. embassy by many of Greece’s anarchist groups that claim their legitimacy from that uprising.

Since the group was dismantled by Greek security services in 2002, three prevalent anarchist terrorist groups have emerged: Revolutionary Struggle, Conspiracy of Fire Nuclei, and Sect of Revolutionaries. All three groups have been sanctioned by the U.S. State Department and seem to have utilized the European sovereign debt crisis, the dismantling of 17 November, and the death of a 16-year-old protestor to fuel their political violence.

The economic storm in Europe has resulted in Greece's GDP contracting by 15% since 2008, and a 52.8 percent unemployment rate for young adults between the ages 15-24 (Ekathimerini.com, June 7). Neo-liberal policies and corrupt domestic political parties are regarded by many within Greece as the cause of the current predicament. Anarchist groups have capitalized on the climate of social unrest to renew attacks on financial institutions, businesses, the state and foreign targets (Reuters, May 19, 2010).

It may be no surprise that Greek youths make up the majority of the anarchist terrorist groups in Greece. According to Mary Bossis, a former government advisor on counterterrorism, unpopular austerity measures have resulted in unprecedented anti-state sentiment and social unrest. "There are plenty of very young people who feel they have no prospect for the future and who see in front of them unemployment and a lot of social, political and economic problems. Recruitment over the past few years is being done within universities targeting young people." (Athens News, November 7, 2010).

Revolutionary Struggle

Revolutionary Struggle (*Epanastatikos Agonas*) is seen as a direct offshoot of 17 November. The U.S. State Department designated Revolutionary Struggle as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 2009 for various terrorist acts, including a 2007 RPG attack on the U.S. Embassy in Athens. [1] Its members, similar to 17 November, seem to come from the lower socio-economic status of Greek society; their alleged leader, Nikos Maziotis (one of the two suspects who disappeared after his 18 month pre-trial detention period expired), is an unemployed construction worker. [2] Among many other violent crimes against the state, Maziotis tried to bomb the Ministry of Industry in 1998. When caught, he said, "The only thing I regret is that there was a technical error, the bomb did not explode, they found my fingerprints, and I was arrested" (Ekathimerini.com, July 8). Revolutionary Struggle has shot and wounded a riot police officer guarding the Culture Ministry and has used bombs to target foreign companies such as Royal Dutch Shell in 2008 and Citibank

branches and the Athens Stock Exchange in 2009 (Reuters, November 3, 2010). What is of grave concern is the timing of the disappearance of Maziotis and fellow Revolutionary Struggle leader Panagiota Roupa and the fact that they likely still have an extensive and very well organized underground network of supporters. There is a real possibility that the relative calm of the organization in the last two years will cease to exist now that their leaders are again amongst them.

Conspiracy of Fire Nuclei

The Conspiracy of Fire Nuclei (CFN - *Synomosía Pyrínontis Fotiás*) transformed in 2006-2007 from *gazakides*, youth that placed gas bombs under cars, to a "new generation of terrorists" that do not care about the public's opinion of them. [3] From 2008 they became much more sophisticated, and adopted a nihilistic attitude following the shooting death of a 16-year-old boy by a Greek police officer during demonstrations. [4] The event hardened the young group's preexisting rejection of the state's authorities, institutions and symbols.

The U.S. Department of State implemented a terrorist designation and sanctions on the CFN on October 13, 2011. [5] Targets of the group have included banks, government institutions, and foreign leaders. After a 2010 attack on Athens' main prison, the group noted that the strike was meant to weaken the Greek government as it attempted to implement new austerity measures (Reuters, May 19, 2010). In 2010 two of the group's members, Alexandros Mitrousias, and Gerasimos Tsakalos, mailed a series of parcel bombs to foreign leaders and embassies within Greece. [6] After their arrest the suspects proclaimed "We are rebels with a cause, we will continue our struggle, and the abuse that the system has given us has motivated us. Do not see us as small children, but as patriotic rebels, we have a war going on, and we will make sure that we will continue to fight" [7]

In February, 2011, the group sent a letter bomb to the office of Justice Minister Haris Kastanidis to show "solidarity" with its imprisoned members (Athens News, February 3, 2011). A new group, the "Zero Tolerance Organization," emerged in December, 2011 in solidarity with the CFN by carrying out firebomb attacks on the offices of three prominent Greek politicians. The new group argued that Greeks should "do away with the system" because "the economic and political crisis and the occupation of the country by the troika – the ECB, the EU and the IMF – were proof of its failure" (Ekathimerini.com, December 22, 2011). As of late 2011, the group had conducted about 200 attacks using artisan bombs that were always accompanied by nihilistic and anarchist

proclamations. [8]

The trial of Greek anarchist Theofilos Mavropoulos and several members of the Conspiracy of Fire Nuclei on charges of “inciting criminal acts” began on June 27. The accused are charged with issuing an October, 2011 statement that included the slogan “Not 1 Millimetre Back; 9mms in Cops’ Heads.” [9] Mavropoulos is facing other charges after being wounded and arrested in a gunfight with Greek police in 2011, an incident which he clothed in revolutionary rhetoric: He and a comrade did not stop at a police control point “because we had made the conscious choice of revolutionary illegality... wanting to get us out of this situation I made the choice, the political choice of armed conflict... The condition of illegality involves a life on the edge of the razor, where the choices get tougher since the risk goes sky high.” [10]

Sect of Revolutionaries

The Sect of Revolutionaries emerged in February 2009 a few weeks after the police shooting of a 16-year-old boy. The group attacked an Athens police station with grenades. While there were no casualties in that incident, in June 2009 the group killed Nektarios Savvas, a counter-terrorism officer. [11] More recently, in July 2010, they assassinated Socrates Giolios, a prominent Greek journalist who had covered the group (Tovima.gr, July 19, 2010). In a statement claiming responsibility for the murder, the group promised to turn Greece into a “war zone,” declaring:

We in the Sect of Revolutionaries believe that only through the complete destruction of the state and the current structures will a new perspective of life be able to dawn. A life of new human relationships, without authority, without borders, without religion, without divisions. A life that money does not govern; neither will property rule. A life away from false idols, compulsions and conventions. [12]

On February 24, 2011, the U.S. Secretary of State designated the Sect of Revolutionaries as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist Organization, citing the group’s “indiscriminate terrorist activities” that “threaten the national security of the United States.” [13]

Conclusion

While these anarchist groups have little popular support, the evidence seems to suggest that there has been a gradual modification of the values of these terrorist organizations from the nationalism and anti-Americanism of 17 November to the anti-establishment and anti-capitalist ideology of Revolutionary Struggle and the Sect of Revolutionaries and the total nihilism of the Conspiracy of Fire Nuclei.

With a shrinking economy, rising unemployment and social tensions, the rise of anarchy in Greece may continue for the long-term. The key question is whether the Microsoft attack signifies the beginning of yet another spike in domestic terrorist activity in Greece. It may be no coincidence that the Microsoft attack in Athens occurred after the recent disappearance of the leaders of Revolutionary Struggle.

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Notes

1. See <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/05/123590.htm>.
2. “Terrorists, ‘Old’ and ‘New,’” Research Institute for European and American Studies, April 18, 2010, <http://www.rieas.gr/research-areas/editorial/1196-terrorists-qoldq-and-qnewq.html>.
3. See <http://folders.skai.gr/main/theme?id=123&locale=el>
4. Mary Bossis, “The Dimensions of the ‘New’ Greek Terrorism: The Spill-over Effect,” *Journal of Counter Terrorism & Homeland Security International*. 17(3), Fall 2011.
5. See <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/10/175362.htm>.
6. Tassos Symeonides, “Another Spike in Domestic Terrorism?” Research Institute for European and American Studies, July 1, 2012, <http://www.rieas.gr/research-areas/editorial/1798-another-spike-in-domestic-terrorism.html>
7. Alpha News Channel, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8iP9c5XqIQ&feature=related>.
8. Bossis, op cit.
9. “Letter from CCF and T. Mavropoulos in Solidarity to Anarchit Steki Nadir in Thessaloniki-Greece,” October 11, 2011, <http://actforfreedomnow.wordpress.com/2011/10/11/letter-from-c-c-f-and-t-mavropoulos-in-solidarity-to-anarchit-steki-nadir-in-thessaloniki-greece/>.
10. Letter of anarchist political prisoner Theofilos Mavropoulos who is imprisoned in Koridall, July 18 2011, <http://actforfreedomnow.wordpress.com/2011/07/27/letter-of-anarchist-political-prisoner-theofilos-mavropoulos-who-is-imprisoned-in-koridallos-prisons/>

11. NET News Channel, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2sMJU_iqk0.

12. Sect of Revolutionaries, Announcement no.4, July 28, 2010, <http://actforfreedomnow.blogspot.com/2010/08/sect-of-revolutionaries-claims.html>.

13. See <http://athens.usembassy.gov/pr-2011-7.html>.

From Pakistan to Yemen: Adapting the U.S. Drone Strategy

Brian Glyn Williams

Perhaps one of the most important developments in the war on al-Qaeda in the last two years has been the gradual demise of al-Qaeda Central in Pakistan as a result of the war of attrition carried out by the CIA's Predator and Reaper drones. Hundreds of al-Qaeda and supporting Taliban militants have been hunted down and killed in this vast operation in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATA). But in a perfect example of the "whack-a-mole" paradigm for waging war on a stateless terrorist group like al-Qaeda, a virulent new al-Qaeda franchise has sprung up in Yemen known as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

AQAP first made a name for itself when it dispatched a suicide bomber to kill Spanish tourists in Yemen in 2007. It was this regional franchise that also made headlines when it sent Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the so-called underwear bomber, to blow up a passenger plane flying to Detroit on December 25, 2009, tried assassinating Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, the head of Saudi counter terrorism, with a suicide bomb in 2009, and attempted to blow up UPS and FedEx planes with bombs hidden in ink cartridges in 2010. Most recently, in May 2012, Saudi intelligence foiled a plot by infamous AQAP bomb maker Ibrahim al-Asiri to create a new bomb based on PETN that could avoid detection by X-ray scanners at airports. The Yemeni military, however, failed to detect the AQAP terrorist who set off a bomb in the same month in Sana'a killing almost a hundred soldiers and bystanders (al-Jazeera, May 21). To compound matters a local pro-al-Qaeda militant group known as the Ansar al-Shari'a took advantage of the chaos surrounding the overthrow of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011 to establish an emirate based on the town of Zinjibar in the strategic coastal province of Abyan. This group's ultimate goal is to overthrow the secular government of Yemen and create a Shari'a-based caliphate modeled on the Taliban.

In response to these alarming developments, the Obama administration has tasked the CIA and the U.S. Army's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) with ramping up an assassination campaign designed to kill AQAP terrorists and weaken related Ansar al-Shari'a militants. The Pentagon and CIA decided to turn to drones when Tomahawk cruise missile strikes proved to be too clumsy, on one occasion leading to the death of dozens of Bedouin civilians at al-Ma'ajala (Abyan Governorate) in December, 2009 (al-Jazeera, May 9).

The U.S. drone attacks started off slowly in 2009 then reached a crescendo in the spring of 2012. The stepped up pace of the Yemeni drone campaign can be seen from the fact that there were 4 drone strikes in 2009, 10 in 2011 and 25 by the beginning of July 2012 (i.e. more this spring than in all the previous years combined). The drone campaign has been the subject of less controversy and opposition than the Pakistani drone operations. This is largely due to the fact that the new president of Yemen, Abd Rabu Mansur Hadi, has worked closely with the United States against the terrorist threat to his country. The Yemeni Air Force, for example, has also been involved in bombing Ansar al-Shari'a targets in Abyan Governorate in an attempt to dislodge the militants (Yemen Post, May 23). There have also been reports in the Arab media of U.S. trainers working directly with Yemeni forces to help them retake districts lost to AQAP (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 19).

The Pentagon/CIA drones appear to be flown from either Camp Lemonier, Djibouti (home to the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa – CJTF-HOA) or from an undisclosed base built somewhere in the Arabian Peninsula. The majority of the drone strikes appear to be in Shabwah Governorate, a known hideout for AQAP where they have the support of local tribes, and in Abyan Governorate, which was largely taken over by Ansar al-Shari'a. Yemeni sources report that the drones are directly assisting the Yemeni military operations in these areas (Yemen Post, June 11).

There are similarities in trends between the drone strikes in Yemen and the more widely publicized strikes in Pakistan:

- In Yemen the drones seem to be targeting easily monitored vehicles carrying terrorists, instead of houses, with the aim of avoiding civilian “collateral damage” deaths. As in Pakistan there have nonetheless been civilians killed and this has led to protests by angry tribesmen relatives of the slain civilians.
- There has been a move from more limited “personality strikes” (i.e. drone strikes on well-known terrorists whose names are on a kill list) to “signature strikes” (strikes on those whose observable “pattern of life” actions would seem to indicate they are terrorists), a broadening of target sets first discerned in Pakistan in 2008.
- The precision of the strikes indicates that the CIA has established a network of spies and informers that have been relaying the positions of the terrorists to drone operators as in Pakistan’s FATA. As in Pakistan, voices have been raised against the drone strikes in Yemen’s parliament as well as the brutal killings by militants of those who are said to be spies working to help guide the drones.
- As in the early days of the drone strikes in Pakistan, there has also been a trend whereby the Yemeni government tries to deflect domestic criticism of the CIA drone strikes on Yemeni citizens by claiming that their own air force carried out the strikes. In Yemen, however, this is improbable, in that the outdated Yemeni Air Force Mig-23s and Mig-29s are incapable of making precision strikes (especially at night) on moving vehicles.
- As in Pakistan it is difficult to discern the overall impact of the drone strikes but they have definitely forced AQAP to remain in hiding to avoid being killed by the constantly present drones. The drones may have also inadvertently led to further “accidental” recruits among the relatives of tribesmen killed in errant strikes.
- The major differences are found in the more prominent role played by JSOC in the Yemeni campaign, the more direct role President Obama has in choosing the targets and the increasing role that the drones play in supporting the Yemeni army in its ground operations against the militants in the spring of 2012. [1] The drones, for example, were used to blow up AQAP ammunition depots and to hit the militants’ defensive positions in ground operations carried out by the Yemeni army in June.

As in Pakistan, the Obama administration seems to believe that the threat from al-Qaeda operatives warrants a stepped-up policy of preemptive strikes to deter terrorists through “suppression fire” or through actual assassinations of key terrorist operators. This policy exists despite an inevitable blowback of criticism from those in Yemen, the greater Muslim world and West who are opposed to the drone strikes on humanitarian grounds or because of the oft repeated claim that “they make more terrorists than they kill.”

Unlike the drone campaign in Pakistan’s FATA region which is being waged primarily by CIA drones directed from Langley, Virginia, the majority of drone strikes in Yemen are being flown by JSOC remote pilots flying their UAVs from Creech and Nellis airbases in Nevada. The drone campaign seems to have instilled a climate of fear among AQAP terrorists who do not know when or where the ever-present Predator and Reaper drones will strike. This, combined with the killing of over a dozen high-ranked terrorists (most recently Fahd al-Quso, an al-Qaeda operative with a \$5 million bounty on his head for alleged involvement in the bombing of the USS

Cole), has disrupted further terrorist attacks on American interests. This is certainly a prime strategic objective of the Obama administration, which fears the impact that a terrorist strike from al-Qaeda's most active branch could have on the November U.S. presidential elections.

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Note

1. For the role of President Obama in choosing targets from a "kill-list," see "Secret 'Kill List' Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will," New York Times. May 29, 2012.

Holier Than Thou: Rival Clerics in the Syrian Jihad

Aron Lund

The Syrian conflict is emerging as an extremely attractive recruiting ground for jihadi groups - in February, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the emir of al-Qaida, called upon "every Muslim and every honorable and free person in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon to go to aid his brothers in Syria" (as-Sahab Media Productions via shamikh1.info, February 11). The uprising is largely Sunni Muslim in character, with the armed insurgency against Bashar al-Assad's secular Alawite-dominated regime almost exclusively focused in rural Sunni Arab regions: Deraa, Homs, Hama, Idleb, parts of the Aleppo and Damascus countryside, and Deir al-Zor, as well as some Sunni enclaves on the Mediterranean coast. [1] Most fighters are locally recruited Sunni Arab civilians and army defectors, while ideological Islamists form only a small minority of the rebel manpower, albeit of growing influence.

The Free Syrian Army and Sunni Radicalism

The most well-known Syrian rebel formation is the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a poorly defined network of largely autonomous rebel groups self-described as "brigades" regardless of their actual size. The FSA itself is almost entirely Sunni Arab, but lacks a distinct ideology. It is loosely allied to the Syrian National Council (SNC), based in Turkey and supported and funded by Western and Gulf Arab states. It includes some of the largest militia formations inside Syria, such as the Farouq Brigade of Homs, and has the nominal support of many more. [2]

The FSA's leadership, a collection of mid-ranking Sunni Arab military defectors headed by Colonel Riyad Musa al-As'ad from a base in Turkey, is actively courting Western support and has unambiguously condemned jihadi groups. This attitude is not necessarily shared by the fighters on the ground, who tend to label themselves FSA whether or not they are in actual contact with the FSA headquarters. With Sunni sectarian perspectives becoming more central to the armed uprising as time passes, most FSA factions are now steeped in religious rhetoric and there are a number of explicitly Islamist groups calling themselves part of the FSA, some of whom use radical jihadi slogans. One such group is the al-Bara bin Malek Brigade, which uses the Salafi-Jihadi flag made famous by al-Qaeda in Iraq and vows to carry out "martyrdom operations." [3]

Outside the FSA umbrella, there are other groups which are more radical and more hostile to Western influence over the uprising. These include the Ahrar al-Sham Brigades, a network of Islamist militias spread over several provinces, as well as a Salafist group in Homs called the Ansar Brigade. Others, such as Fath al-Islam, a Syrian-Lebanese-Palestinian group, predate the uprising. There is not, however, a formal al-Qaeda franchise in Syria, after the failed attempt to establish *al-Qa'ida fi Bilad al-Sham* ("al-Qaeda in the Levant") in the mid-2000s, though this situation may be about to change (*al-Hayat*, September 28, 2010).

The Rise of Jabhat al-Nusra

The most prominent Syrian jihadi group, by far, is the *Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham min Mujahedi al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad* ("The Support Front for the People of the Levant by the Levantine Mujahedin on the Battlefields of Jihad"). Jabhat al-Nusra (as it is known) emerged in early 2012 and has rapidly captured the imagination of jihadi activists and the attention of international news media through spectacular suicide bombings (*Shamikh1.info*, January 24, 2012).

While non-jihadi Syrian dissidents often accuse Jabhat al-Nusra of being a regime creation, most signs indicate that it may be a spinoff from the al-Qaeda-affiliated "Islamic State in Iraq" (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 22). U.S. government sources have repeatedly linked Jabhat al-Nusra to al-Qaeda generally and the Iraqi branch specifically, and the group has a very active branch in the Deir al-Zor region along Syria's eastern desert border, where tribal smuggling networks have remained active since the Iraq war (*McClatchy*, February 10; *Guardian*, March 22; see also *Terrorism Monitor*, June 1). Jabhat al-Nusra is now seen by the vast majority of international Salafi-Jihadis as "their" group in Syria, despite the presence of other contenders. It has been actively promoted by the major jihadi web forums, perhaps indicating that trusted sources have vouched for its credibility.

A number of prominent Salafi-Jihadi scholars have also endorsed Jabhat al-Nusra in the past months, further raising its visibility. Examples include Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi, who is based in Irbid in northern Jordan (an area tribally linked to Syria's Dera'a region), where he supports Jordanians who seek to join the jihad in Syria (*Shamikh1.info*, March 14; *al-Jazeera*, June 6). Another locally influential name is Abu al-Zahra al-Zubeidi (a.k.a. Osama al-Shihabi), a Lebanon-based preacher and activist considered a leading authority for Fath al-Islam. While some sources claim that al-Zubeidi is in fact the amir of Fath al-Islam since Lebanese intelligence killed its former leader Abd al-Rahman Oud in August

2010, al-Zubeidi emphatically denies even being a member of the group (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], January 24). In a written statement released to jihadi forums in May, al-Zubeidi called on everyone – including other jihadi organizations – to "join Jabhat al-Nusra to strengthen it and to avoid fragmenting the efforts" (*Shamikh1.info*, May 15). Abu al-Mundhir al-Shanqiti, a Mauritanian scholar who issues religious edicts for the influential *Minbar al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad* website, has also strongly backed Jabhat al-Nusra (*Minbar al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad*, June 6).

Abu al-Mundhir al-Shanqiti vs. Abu Basir al-Tartusi

However, there are dissenting voices in the jihadi community, chief among them the London-based Salafi-Jihadi theologian Abu Basir al-Tartusi (a.k.a. Abd al-Mun'im Mustafa Halima). Abu Basir, who fled his native Syria during the the 1979-1982 Islamist uprising against Hafez al-Assad, is a leading light of the contemporary jihadi movement. He has been strongly supportive of armed jihad against the Assad regime, and has established a minor group called *al-Mu'arada al-islamiya lil-nizam al-souri* (Islamic Opposition to the Regime in Syria). [4] In May 2012, a short video clip was published of Abu Basir alongside armed rebels, implying that he had now joined the fighting inside Syria, although the scene could also have been shot in the border regions of Lebanon or Turkey. [5]

Abu Basir has regarded Jabhat al-Nusra with skepticism from the very start, raising doubts about its authenticity and asking why there is no known spokesman for the group (its leader, known by the *nom-de-guerre* al-Fatih Abu Mohammed al-Joulani, appears only through distorted voice recordings). [6] Abu Basir has angrily refuted jihadi complaints about the FSA. These have tended to focus on the concept of *al-riya*, 'the banner' – i.e., the requirement that mujahideen should flock to a single legitimate leadership, fully committed to Islamic rule, for their jihad to be legitimate. According to Abu Basir, what matters at this stage is to topple the regime, not to split hairs about theological concepts such as *al-riya*. He considers the FSA to be "heroic mujahideen" and their detractors to be "present-day Kharijites." [7]

This position has led to a public clash with Abu al-Mundhir al-Shanqiti, who states that by "announcing his support for those who adopt the democratic program and at the same time attacking those who will apply Islamic Shari'a," Abu Basir displays "a great shortcoming" (*Minbar al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad*, May 21). In contrast to Abu Basir, Abu al-Mundhir has been wary of the FSA all along. He believes that jihadis need to maintain working relations with the FSA on the battlefield, but laments that the FSA "doesn't fight

under the banner of Shari'a, [but] to implement democracy and consecrate Western values" (Minbar al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad, May 21). Muslims should instead "hurry to join the mujahideen in Jabhat al-Nusra, the existence of which has eliminated the need for any other group," because unlike the FSA, Jabhat al-Nusra fulfills the demand for al-*raya*. On a more flexible note, Abu al-Mundhir supports the use of secular-sounding movement names as a tactical ruse, and says that jihadi groups can also cooperate with the FSA in order to tap into its foreign funding. (Minbar al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad, June 6).

Personal or Political, Local or Global?

Some of the differences between Abu al-Mundhir and Abu Basir could perhaps be explained by Abu Basir's special relationship to the conflict. As analyst Joas Wagemakers notes, the Tartus-born jihadi "obviously cares about Syria," and has been striking a much more nuanced tone than is usual in jihadi politics – "one of concern for his native land." [8] How deeply personal the struggle against the Assad regime is for Abu Basir was illustrated by his post to Facebook on May 31 - a wrinkled and yellowed photograph of his brother Abd al-Qadir, abducted by Syrian intelligence in 1981 and never heard from since. [9]

But the difference in perspective is not simply personal, nor is it limited to Syrian affairs. Abu Basir has always been an odd bird in the militant community due to his negative view of suicide bombings. Almost alone among the major Salafi-Jihadi scholars, he opposes this favorite jihadi tactic on theological grounds. [10] His FSA dispute with Abu al-Mundhir has also coincided with a similar public conflict about jihadis in Yemen, with Abu Basir criticizing the extremist tendencies of Ansar al-Shari'a and Abu al-Mundhir attacking Abu Basir's "disgusting deviation." [11]

As obscure as these intra-jihadi quarrels may seem, they are not unimportant. As Wagemakers points out, Abu al-Mundhir and Abu Basir "may well be the most influential and most prolific radical scholars in the world right now," if only because the other contenders are dead or in prison. [12] Their conflict is not simply one of egos, but an example of the tension between principled radicalism and business-minded pragmatism which has long dogged the jihadi movement. In a situation where the core leadership of al-Qaeda has been decimated and militant Salafism becomes ever more decentralized, the fact that two of its most senior theologians have started to appear as ideological polar opposites will further fragment the global jihadi community.

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Notes:

1. Fabrice Balanche, "Géographie de la révolte syrienne", *Outre-Terre*, no. 29, 3/2011.
2. For the FSA, see Joseph Holliday, "Syria's Armed Opposition", *Middle East Security Report* 3, Institute for the Study of War, March 2012. For the SNC, see Aron Lund, "Divided they stand: An overview of Syria's political opposition factions," Foundation for European Progressive Studies and the Olof Palme International Center, May 2012, http://www.feps-europe.eu/en/news/122_divided-they-stand-an-overview-of-syrias-political.
3. See "Ansar al-Sham, in steadfast Homs: Announcing the formation of the al-Bara bin Malek Brigade under the banner of monotheism," February 17, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFDyw1cYATg>.
4. A packet of Abu Basir's collected writings on the Syrian revolution are available for download on his website. See Abu Basir al-Tartusi, "Daftar al-thawra wa'l-thuwwar" (Notebook of the revolution and the revolutionaries), <http://abubaseer.bizland.com/books/read/b%2040.doc>.
5. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgihhPIECag (May 12, 2012).
6. Abu Basir al-Tartusi, "Al-muarada al-islamiya lil-nizam al-souri," *Facebook*, February 27, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/moaradaislamiya/posts/332542243454471>.
7. See <http://abubaseer.bizland.com>, February 15, 2012.
8. Joas Wagemakers, "Al-Qaida Advises the Arab Spring: Syria," *Jihadica*, November 19, 2011, www.jihadica.com/al-qaida-advises-the-arab-spring-syria/.
9. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=204110236297673&set=a.188139241228106.42806.187950447913652&type=1>.
10. Abu Basir al-Tartusi, "Suspicious of Sin in Martyrdom or Suicide Attacks," November 11, 2005, www.en.altartosi.com/suicide.htm.
11. Wagemakers, *op cit*.
12. *Ibid*