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ALGERIA WORKING TO SPLIT TUAREG ISLAMISTS FROM AL-QAEDA IN NORTHERN MALI

Algeria has modified its stance on the conflict in northern Mali by dropping its insistence on a mediated settlement based on dialogue in favor of a growing willingness to consider the military option to bring an end to Islamist rule in the region. Part of this shift may be attributed to Algeria’s desire to keep French military forces far from Algeria’s 870-mile border with Mali by providing military and logistical assistance to an African intervention force that would otherwise be provided by France. Algeria’s approach now appears to be based on efforts to separate the largely Tuareg Islamist Ansar al-Din movement from the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) Islamists who have occupied northern Mali.

Referring to the possibility of an African Union/ECOWAS military intervention in Mali, a recent statement issued by Ansar al-Din warns of the efforts of the “temporary authorities in Mali” to “ignite a ferocious war in the region, and its involving of other parties in it, which doesn’t serve the interest of Mali itself or the neighboring countries and threatens regional stability.” The statement further discounted possible French involvement as being motivated by “greed in exploiting the underground resources and riches of the region.” The movement is, however, prepared to negotiate “through the mediation of Algeria and Burkina Faso” (Agence Nouakchott d’Information, October 19).

Ansar al-Din spokesman Sanda Ould Bouamama has also expressed the movement’s confidence in Algerian mediation:

Contacts with the Algerian authorities have not been interrupted, not even for 24 hours. Our delegations are often sent to Algiers. Algeria has repeatedly stated that a political solution exists. She has overcome difficulties and solved problems more difficult and complicated than ours. She has always found a solution. Some

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would not let [Algeria] play its role in the region (*Tout sur l'Algérie*, October 30).

When asked if Ansar al-Din would join an anti-terrorist coalition to expel AQIM from northern Mali, the spokesman initially expressed disinterest but was ultimately non-committal, an attitude that suggests the movement is at least considering its options:

We are going to fight al-Qaeda in whose interest? For the interests of Obama? The problem of the Muslim world cannot be solved through war but rather with a realistic vision of the situation and with a return to religion. Those who would fight al-Qaeda must turn to religion and then ask themselves if they must fight al-Qaeda... I told you that we are an Islamist movement. We will fight those who our religion orders us to fight and we stop fighting when our religion requires us to do so (*Tout sur l'Algérie*, October 30).

Referring to Algeria's colonial past, Bouamama appeared to regard Algeria as a potential guardian against foreign military intervention rather than a participant: "We will resist and defend ourselves; that is our right. I think that Algerians are best placed to know. Algeria has paid [in the fight against colonialism] with the blood of a million and a half martyrs. We will not be the first to suffer a military intervention" (*Tout sur l'Algérie*, October 30). The Ansar al-Din spokesman's remarks were made the same day the Algerian minister of veterans' affairs demanded a "frank acknowledgement" of French war crimes committed during the colonization of Algeria (Algérie Presse Service, October 30).

An Algerian daily said that official sources from Ansar al-Din had held a secret meeting with Algerian military commanders in Kidal in the fourth week of October to discuss the issue of foreign military intervention in northern Mali. According to the sources, the leader of the Algerian military delegation warned that Algeria was under pressure to take part in the intervention and had concluded such action was inevitable if terrorism was to be defeated in the region (*El-Fadjr* [Algiers], October 24).

Burkina Faso President Blaise Compaoré has been acting as a mediator for the crisis in northern Mali for several months and has met with both the largely sidelined Tuareg separatists of the Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) and the Tuareg Islamists of Ansar al-Din. While it has been suggested that Compaoré is working to split Ansar al-Din from their AQIM and MUJWA allies, the Burkinabé president is adamant that he is "not seeking to divide anybody." He does, however, follow the emerging

line that the military option would target "only terrorists and traffickers," i.e. the militants of al-Qaeda and MUJWA (*Jeune Afrique*, October 13).

ECOWAS spokesman Abdou Cheick Touré appeared to echo this approach when he noted a negotiated approach had not been abandoned and that it was "normal" to talk to the Tuareg of the MNLA and Ansar al-Din while emphasizing that the latter must drop their alliance with AQIM and MUJWA: "[The Tuareg] are Malians. We must see if they agree to come back into the republic, to abandon their secessionist ideas, to make peace and abandon other criminal groups" (AFP, October 30).

Algerian Foreign Ministry spokesman Amar Belani has claimed there is a trend in the press to characterize Algeria's position on the military intervention as being at odds with its neighbors. Noting that the use of force was "legitimate" to eliminate terrorism and organized crime in the Sahel, Belani also drew a distinction between the Tuareg insurgents and the outside Islamist groups who were now based in northern Mali: "The use of force must be carefully done to avoid any ambiguity or confusion between northern Mali's populations who have legitimate demands and the terrorist groups and drug dealers who must be the primary target..." (Algérie Presse Service, October 11).

There are reports that the MNLA has made important changes in its military leadership in anticipation of an offensive against AQIM. For the moment, they are still waiting to hear whether Ansar al-Din leader Iyad ag Ghali will be friend or foe in the looming struggle. Ag Ghali is said to be under strong pressure from his Ifoghas tribe to abandon his AQIM allies, with traditional Ifoghas chief Intalla ag Attaher telling ag Ghali: "It is now that you have to decide or in the future we will consider you as an enemy" (*Jeune Afrique*, October 29).

In a recent interview, Abdelkader Messahel, Algeria's minister for Maghrebi and African Affairs, appeared to offer the Tuareg rebels a review of their grievances if they dissociated themselves with terrorism or separatism. According to Messahel, AQIM and MUJWA are "terrorists and drug traffickers" with whom there can be no negotiation: "I think that the time has come for these [Tuareg] groups in northern Mali to distance themselves from terrorism and organized crime. And at the same time for them to engage in a national process that will preserve Mali's national unity and dissociate these groups from any quest for independence or any kind of collusion with these terrorist groups." On Ansar al-Din's alliance with AQIM and MUJWA, Messahel said: "We want this group to dissociate itself once and for all from any ties or collusion with all forms of terrorism. This is what we

think, and this is what we want.” At the same time, Messahel emphasized the importance of strengthening the Malian army, “which must also be at the center of the Malian State’s redeployment throughout its territory” (RFI, October 16).

An AU delegation will meet with the defense ministers of Algeria, Mauritania and the ECOWAS nations and their military chiefs-of-staff on November 5 to discuss planning for a military intervention in Mali (*Jeune Afrique*, October 27).

BAHRAIN PUTS SHI’A VILLAGE UNDER SIEGE

Twenty months into a simmering Shiite “Arab Spring” style revolt in the Sunni-ruled Kingdom of Bahrain, the Gulf state’s Interior Ministry has issued orders banning all anti-government protests and demonstrations, claiming that Bahraini society was “fed up” with the regular demonstrations that call for the Khalifa royal family to step down (Mehr News Agency, October 30). The protests, often organized through social-networking sites, have continued despite violent crackdowns by Bahraini security forces that have killed at least 60 people. Bahrain’s role as host of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, at the same time the kingdom’s monarchy represses calls for democracy by the Shi’a majority, has given Iran a unique propaganda opportunity to attack their antagonists in America and the Sunni-ruled Gulf states.

Recently, Iranian press agencies seized on the alleged “siege” by Bahraini security forces of the village of al-Akr, 20 miles south of the Bahraini capital of Manama. Problems began in al-Akr on October 18, when police in the village were attacked with a homemade bomb that killed one officer and left a second in critical condition. Prior to the blast, residents of al-Akr were in the streets waving Bahrain’s flag and chanting slogans calling for the fall of the regime and the deposition of Bahrain’s ruler, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa (BBC, October 19). The demonstration was one of several called for by the February 14 Youth Coalition, an opposition group that organizes through social networking sites (AFP, October 19). Shiite activists claimed that the policeman killed in the attack was a “foreign national” (al-Alam [Tehran], October 21).

Security forces detained seven men in the incident and placed a cordon around the village that police said was intended to help capture other suspects in the bombing (NOW Lebanon, October 23). Opposition reports claimed that government reports that life in the village was continuing normally were

false, suggesting that “mercenary forces” were preventing food and medical aid from reaching the village, had attacked a Shiite mosque and were punishing the village for its “past defiant stances” (Bahrain Online, October 23; Fars News Agency, October 23). In the Bahraini context, “mercenary” is a euphemism for troops and policemen from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE who entered Bahrain in March 2011 as part of the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), a multi-national armed force under the command of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (see Terrorism Monitor Brief, March 24, 2011).

Despite its small size, the village of al-Akr has been a hotbed of anti-regime activity that has turned violent before. On April 9, seven policemen were injured (three critically) by what police described as a pipe bomb attached to a container full of gasoline detonated near a police checkpoint. Police entered the village and arrested four suspects the following day, reportedly beating the relatives of those suspects who had evaded arrest. The village was surrounded by police forces who opposition elements claimed were imposing “collective punishment” (al-Arabiya, April 10; UPI, April 11).

In the latest incident, Iranian reports claimed security forces surrounding al-Akr had used “bombs and poisonous gas against citizens passing along the streets” (Fars News Agency, October 28). While tear gas and “sound bombs” were reported to have been used in confrontations with demonstrators in al-Akr, there is no evidence the town has otherwise been bombed or shelled.

Hoseyn Sobhaninia, a senior member of the Majlis (Iranian parliament) roundly condemned the “siege”: “The deadly silence of the international community has given the al-Khalifa regime freedom to continue suppressing and killing people and they keep [creating] human rights catastrophes by attacking defenseless people” (Press TV [Tehran], October 26). Ten Bahraini opposition groups and NGOs went so far as to send an urgent appeal to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to intervene in lifting “the siege on al-Akr” and to take a firm stand against Bahrain’s “collective punishment policy” (al-Wifaq.net, October 21). Human rights activists in Bahrain called for the trial of Interior Minister Shaykh Rashid bin Abdullah al-Khalifa for crimes against humanity (Fars News Agency, October 24). Other reports insisted that Shiite opposition groups were inflating the seriousness of the situation in al-Akr in order to deflect public attention from the death of the policeman and prevent the apprehension of his killers (al-Watan [Manama], October 22; October 23). Four suspects detained in relation to the bombing later told an activist who met them in custody that they had been

beaten and tortured into signing confessions (Fars News Agency, October 23).

Clashes following protests against the police activity in al-Akr spread to the predominantly Shiite village of Bani Jamra where police used tear gas and shotguns firing birdshot to battle demonstrators armed with Molotov cocktails and iron rods on October 23 (BBC, October 26). There were also reports of clashes with police outside al-Akr as activists tried to enter the village (al-Awwamiyah, October 23). On October 25, security patrols were attacked in the streets of Manama with firebombs and iron rods (*al-Wasat* [Manama], October 26). The continuing protests and street violence demonstrate that the Bahraini regime is still far from quelling anti-regime activity, as well as proving that some activists are ready to raise the stakes with fatal attacks on local security forces. With Iran ready to fan the flames created by opposition activity, it is clear that even a relatively minor incident could be used to precipitate a broader Shi'a uprising against the rule of the Sunni royal family.

Boko Haram's Growing Presence in Niger

Jacob Zenn

The recent arrests of Boko Haram members in the Niger town of Zinder come at a time when the Islamist movement's fighters are taking advantage of the porosity of the Nigeria-Niger border region to avoid security crackdowns in Yobe, Borno and other states of northeastern Nigeria. On September 27, a Nigerien security official reported that five Boko Haram members were arrested in Zinder, one of the rare times that Boko Haram members have been arrested outside of Nigeria since Boko Haram launched an insurgency in September, 2010 to dismantle Nigeria's secular regime and "entrench a just Islamic government" (*Vanguard* [Lagos], September 27; AFP, May 29, 2010). The only similar case in Niger occurred last February, when 15 suspected Boko Haram members were arrested in Diffa, Niger's easternmost city, allegedly planning to plant bombs in several of the city's public places (IRIN, February 20). Diffa and Zinder (the largest city in southern Niger) both border Nigeria's Yobe State, where Boko Haram—then popularly known as "the Nigerian Taliban"—established a base nicknamed "Afghanistan" in a village three miles south of the border with Niger in 2003. Diffa is believed to be a principal refuge

for Nigerian Boko Haram fighters.

On both sides of the Nigerian-Nigerien border, as well as in northern Cameroon and western Chad, Sunni Islam and the Hausa language are predominant. However, there are sizable minorities of Shuwa Arabic and Kanuri speakers in Diffa, western Chad and Nigeria's far northeastern Borno State, which has been Boko Haram's main area of operations since the start of the insurgency. These cross-border ties help unite the peoples of the border region.

The movement of Boko Haram members into Niger follows a series of blows inflicted on the movement by Nigerian security services in recent weeks:

- On September 24, Nigeria's Joint Task Force (JTF) killed 35 Boko Haram members and seized ammunition and weapons in house-to-house searches in Yobe;
- Also on September 24, the Special Security Squad launched "Operation Restore Sanity" in Mubi, Adamawa State, which borders Borno to the south. 156 Boko Haram suspects were arrested, four of whom were believed to be unit commanders. A top commander, Abubakr Yola (a.k.a Abu Jihad) was killed in the operation (*This Day* [Lagos], September 25);
- On October 15 the Joint Task Force in Borno State killed 24 Boko Haram members during a series of night raids in Maiduguri (*This Day*, October 17); and
- On October 20, security forces arrested a wanted Boko Haram leader, Shuaibu Muhammad Bama, in Maiduguri at a house owned by his uncle, Senator Ahmad Zanna, who represents Borno Central (*Vanguard* [Lagos], October 21).

Nigeria shares approximately 2,000 miles of border with Niger, Cameroon and Chad, but, according to the Nigerian Immigration Service, only 84 border points are staffed by immigration officials (Reporters 365.com [Lagos], August 9). Nigeria has previously closed the border after major Boko Haram attacks, such as the Christmas Day 2011 church bombings in Madalla, a city outside of Abuja. The Borno State National Service Immigration Comptroller said at the time that such measures were the only way to "prevent the entry and exit of suspected Boko Haram sect members and illegal aliens that have no travel or residence permit documents to remain in the country" (*Guardian* [Lagos], January 7).

Due to the linguistic and cultural ties along the 950-mile Nigerian-Nigerien border, Nigerien Muslims can easily cross the border and assimilate into Boko Haram's ranks. According to local reports in Niger, many Nigeriens have

joined Boko Haram because of economic rather than religious or ideological motives (*Africa Review* [Nairobi], February 24). Unlike northern Nigeria, Niger does not have a legacy of religious extremism, but it is one of the world's least developed and most impoverished nations.

With an estimated 200,000 herdsmen and farmers in Niger subsisting on Red Cross food rations due to severe drought, the \$30 that Boko Haram offers its members for killing Nigerian security officers—or the \$60 it offers for also stealing the officer's weapon—can be an effective recruiting tool (*Vanguard* [Lagos], October 26). The hundreds of thousands of dollars that Boko Haram has acquired in several dozen bank robberies in the past two years, can provide additional economic motivation for the poor to join the insurgency, whether or not they share the same motivations as Boko Haram leader Abu Shekau. If such reports are true, the poor Nigeriens who are taking up arms for Boko Haram may join other illicit economic activities such as selling black market gasoline and cigarettes. In February, captured Boko Haram spokesman Abu Qaqa told interrogators that Nigeriens were among the groups commonly chosen by Boko Haram to carry out suicide bombings (*The Nation* [Abuja], February 9; for Abu Qaqa's interrogation, see Terrorism Monitor Brief, February 10).

Boko Haram's infiltration of the immigration service also facilitates its operations in the border region. Two days after the arrests of the five Boko Haram members in Zinder, the Nigerian Army announced it had arrested a Nigerian immigration official posing as an army officer. Under interrogation, the official confessed to having been trained along with 15 other Boko Haram members in weapons handling, assassinations and special operations in Niger, and named other officials who were conspiring with Boko Haram (*This Day*, September 29). The October 19 killing of a customs official and his son in Potiskum, Yobe State, by Boko Haram members was likely intended to coerce other officials to comply with – or at least not obstruct – Boko Haram's efforts to infiltrate the immigration service (*Daily Trust* [Ikeja, Lagos State], October 21). Boko Haram has similarly assassinated dozens of Islamic clerics, politicians and journalists who disagreed with Boko Haram's ideology and militant activities in order to deter other influential figures from speaking out.

Since April, there have been reports of several hundred Nigerian and Nigerien Boko Haram members helping al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al-Din and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) consolidate control of northern Mali after the three militias

expelled the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), the ethno-national secular Tuareg militia (*Vanguard* [Lagos] April 9). As a result, the territory of Niger separating northern Nigeria from northern Mali—only 300 miles across at its shortest point, Sokoto to Gao—is becoming an important area of transit for the insurgents. Niger is the one country of these three that has thus far avoided an Islamist insurgency on its territory, but Niger has a restive Tuareg population in the northern Agadez region bordering northern Mali and an increasing Boko Haram presence in its southern border cities—both representing potential sources of instability. Given this pressure, Niger and Nigeria agreed on October 18th—after four years of discussionth—to deploy joint patrols along their border in order to prevent the Boko Haram presence in southern Niger from growing into a cross-border insurgency (*This Day*, October 18).

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What is Hezbollah's Role in the Syrian Crisis?

Nicholas A. Heras

Recent reports of an increase in Hezbollah's involvement in Syria's civil war as combatants alongside the Syrian military represent a potentially sharp escalation in the regional impact of the ongoing conflict. Accusations concerning Hezbollah's military support for the Assad government leveled by the party's Lebanese political opponents, the Syrian opposition and pro-opposition states have been persistent since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011. Hezbollah's leadership has replied that it is protecting Lebanese Shi'a villagers living along the Lebanese-Syrian border from attacks by Syrian rebels and that the Syrian opposition is actively being funded and armed by anti-Assad international actors, including Hezbollah's Lebanese opponents in the March 14 political bloc (*Daily Star* [Beirut], October 15).

On October 3, Free Syrian Army (FSA) chief Colonel Riyad Musa al-As'ad stated that the FSA had killed a senior Hezbollah military commander named Ali Hussein Nassif (a.k.a. "Abu Abbas") and two of his bodyguards near the restive city of Qusayr on the Lebanese-Syrian border. Colonel al-As'ad further asserted that Nassif's activities in the area had been monitored for two weeks, and that his

death was the result of a carefully planned FSA targeted assassination intended as part of a larger FSA offensive against Hezbollah in and around Qusayr (*The Daily Star*, October 3). Hezbollah officials simply stated that Nassif had died “performing his jihadi duties” (AP, October 2). Several weeks after Nassif’s death, the FSA claimed it had killed an additional 60 Hezbollah fighters and captured 13 in the vicinity of Qusayr (*al-Mustaqbal* [Beirut], October 12).

Lebanese newspapers (some of them antagonistic to Hezbollah) have recently begun publishing stories describing a deeper military commitment by Hezbollah to the Syrian regime. According to one such report, an agreement between the Syrian Defense Ministry and Hezbollah calls for the latter to provide over 2,000 “elite” fighters to Syria in the event of a foreign invasion. The report also claimed that Hassan Nasrallah offered the Assad government the full use of Hezbollah’s military capabilities in the event that “urgent assistance” was needed (*al-Jamhouria* [Beirut], July 26).

Another Lebanese publication claimed that Unit 901, an alleged elite Hezbollah military unit, had crossed into Syria to fight in the cities of Qusayr, al-Rastan, Talbiseh, and Homs, all near the Lebanese-Syrian border (*An-Nahar* [Beirut], July 27). This movement of Hezbollah troops into Syria was reported to be the result of the Syrian military’s need for assistance in the campaign to defeat rebels in Aleppo (*Majalla*, August 23). Hezbollah, along with the Iranian Quds Force, was also alleged to be training a 60,000-person Syrian military division modeled after the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to protect the Alawite-majority Latakia Governorate of Syria (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, September 30).

Hezbollah’s soldiers were recently reported to have been participating as shock troops in several of the most intense battles of the conflict, including in and around Homs, Hama, suburbs of Damascus such as Zabadani and in the vital northern city of Aleppo (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, October 20). FSA units operating in Qusayr claim they have killed over 300 Hezbollah and Iranian fighters (AFP, October 7). A defected member of the powerful Syrian Air Force Intelligence Branch has asserted that Hezbollah has 1,500 fighters supporting the Syrian military inside the country (*Times UK*, October 6).

Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s Secretary General, has refuted these allegations, stating that his party only supports the al-Assad government politically and that it was assisting 30,000 Lebanese Shi’a villagers living in 20 villages in Syria near the Lebanese border. [1] The villagers, in close vicinity to Qusayr and the city of Hermel in Lebanon, had, according to Nasrallah, been the victims of targeted assaults by the FSA and deserved the right to self-defense and support from the party (*Abul Bayt News Agency*, October 12).

Shi’a refugees from the embattled villages claimed that over 5,000 armed men, the majority with ties to Hezbollah, were protecting the villages from attack (AFP, October 17).

Hezbollah is alleged to have used Katyusha rockets against Sunni villages on the Syrian side of the border (*Independent*, October 26).

In spite of Hezbollah’s strong support for the al-Assad government, the presence of thousands of Hezbollah fighters actively participating in Syrian battlefields would be a significant departure from the established understanding of the party’s force capabilities. At present, the most consistent reports of direct Hezbollah military involvement in Syria occur in regions of the country that border Lebanon and have a significant Shi’a population, or in areas that are of strategic interest to Hezbollah because of their use as routes for moving weapons from Iran through Syria, such as the route through the Zabadan District of the Rif Dimashq Governorate.

Hezbollah’s active-duty military force is widely estimated to stand at between 2,000 and 4,000 fighters. These fighters are thought to be deployed mainly in southern Lebanon as a deterrent to Israeli invasion and throughout Hezbollah-controlled or monitored areas of Lebanon to guard the party’s exclusive “security zones” and weapons caches. Predominately Shi’a regions of Lebanon, such as in the southern suburbs of Beirut, southern Lebanon, and the Bekaa Valley, are secured by a mix of Hezbollah full-time fighters, auxiliary village-level militias and armed members of the Lebanese Shi’a AMAL movement [2]

A Lebanese Army source with extensive knowledge of Hezbollah’s war-fighting abilities states that any large-scale deployment of Hezbollah forces in Syria would most likely be the result of a severe strain being placed upon the Syrian military’s ability to overcome rebel activity in the larger cities of Syria, such as Aleppo and Homs. [3] Hezbollah’s specialization in reconnaissance and intelligence operations and doctrinal emphasis on the use of guerilla warfare would be of limited use in the current context of the Syrian theater of operations and its demand for mechanized capabilities that Hezbollah does not possess. Hezbollah Special Forces, such as the “Scorpions,” could be used in limited engagements to disrupt the Syrian rebels’ lines of support near the Turkish border or to perform rural ambush operations.

As a result of Hezbollah’s limited resources and specialized doctrine of warfare, deploying a large force in active combat alongside the Syrian military would present an enormous strain on the party’s ability to combat Israel and overcome its internal enemies inside of Lebanon. The presence of thousands of Hezbollah fighters in Syria would indicate either that the party has far more active-duty fighters than was previously believed, or that in order to execute a strategy of supplementing the Syrian military, Hezbollah is drawing significantly from its village-level reserves.

Potentially, Hezbollah could also convince its March 8-bloc allies in Lebanon, particularly AMAL, but also the Free

Patriotic Movement, the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party and the Marada Movement, amongst others, to provide armed support for the Syrian military to supplement its efforts. Although this is a possibility, there is no convincing evidence at this time that Hezbollah's Lebanese allies are mobilizing for combat duties in support of the Syrian military. This type of broad, March 8-bloc deployment would indicate that the parties in the bloc are confident in their ability to resist Israel in the event of another invasion of Lebanon and to overcome internal Lebanese rivals such as the Future Movement and Salafist militant groups in the event that an internal conflict were to erupt.

Further, the Syrian civil war presents anti-Hezbollah factions in Lebanon with a convenient opportunity to strike at the party and potentially minimize the risk of Hezbollah's retribution against them. Reports indicate that more than 300 Lebanese fighters, mainly Sunnis, have been actively supporting the Syrian rebels in Homs Governorate, including an all-Lebanese military unit (Daily Star, May 31). Some of these Lebanese fighters state that they have fought with veteran rebel units such as the "Standard of the Free Orontes," which claims to have faced Hezbollah soldiers in action in and around Homs (*NO W Lebanon*, October 19).

Areas of the Syrian governorates of Homs and Rif Dimashq that border Lebanon are now a battlefield where the Syrian military and Hezbollah are arrayed against fighters from the FSA and Lebanese anti-Hezbollah factions. The March 14 Bloc, frustrated in its ongoing efforts to reduce the political power of Hezbollah inside of Lebanon and to force the party to relinquish its heavy weapons, would benefit if the defeat of the Assad government forced Hezbollah to renegotiate its armed presence in Lebanon.

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Notes:

1. The United States Department of Treasury designated Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah as a sponsor of terrorism for "providing training, advice, and extensive logistical support to the government of Syria; directly trained Syrian military personnel and facilitated training efforts by the Iranian Quds Force; coordinating efforts with the Syrian military and the Quds Force to expel Syrian rebels" (U.S. Department of the Treasury, September 13, 2012, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1709.aspx>).
2. The author would like to thank Dr. Carl Anthony Wege, professor at the Coastal College of Georgia, for his insight into the structure of Hezbollah's military forces.
3. Interview conducted by the author with a Lebanese Army source with extensive operational experience throughout Lebanon who requested anonymity due to being on active

duty. Interview conducted on October 24, 2012.

Kenya's Coast Province and the Mombasa Republican Council: Islamists, Separatists or Political Pawns?

Andrew McGregor

Kenya's decision to launch a military intervention in Somalia to eliminate the threat posed by the Islamist al-Shabaab movement has resulted in battlefield successes but has also led to terrorist attacks and riots in the cities of Nairobi and Mombasa and even the formation of a Kenyan chapter of al-Shabaab. Simultaneous with these events are a growing number of incidents of political violence in Kenya's largely Islamic Coast Province, a region with an active secessionist movement that operates under the name of the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC). Formed in 1999, the MRC has until recently focused on legal means of attaining independence for the Coast region, which has significant cultural, linguistic, ethnic, historical and religious differences from the inland regions of Kenya where national power is held. In the Coast Province, the dominant culture and language is Swahili, which reflects a Bantu core and strong influences from Arab, Asian and European sources. Most indigenous residents refer to themselves as "Coasterians" rather than "Kenyans" and have numerous grievances with the Nairobi government over issues such as underdevelopment, poverty, land ownership, unemployment and government projects that bring few benefits to Coast residents.

Background: A Question of Sovereignty

The Coast Province consists of the coastal strip of Kenya on the Indian Ocean and is inhabited by Mijikenda, Swahili and Arab peoples, representing a population of roughly 22.5 million. The coastal region came under the rule of Omani Arabs based in Zanzibar after they expelled Portuguese colonists in the late 18th century following 200 years of rule. The Sultan of Zanzibar agreed to lease the coastal region of modern Kenya (then known as "al-Zanj") to the Imperial British East Africa Company in 1888. An 1895 treaty between Britain and the Sultan brought the region under formal British protection, with the residents remaining subjects of the Sultan rather than subjects of the British crown, as in the Kenya colony. It is this point that is the principal basis

for the MRC's legal challenges to its incorporation into post-independence Kenya. [1]

Some MRC members also claim that Jomo Kenyatta, the first prime minister of Kenya, had signed a separate 50-year lease agreement for the Coast strip with Zanzibar that will expire next year, when the Coast region will become independent. However, the movement cannot produce documentation of this claim and there is no reference to it in the existing agreements on which the Kenyan state was founded (Institute for Security Studies [Nairobi], June 27).

A 1908 British ordinance usurped most of the traditional claims to land-ownership on the Coast by declaring all land not under cultivation to be "crown land," thus transferring title to most of the Coast to the state, a system inherited by modern Kenya, which has used the distribution of such lands to up-country Kenyans as a means of patronage or as the basis of resettlement schemes and industrial projects that do little for Coast residents. Little of the wealth created in the region by its busy ports and flourishing tourist industry makes its way into the hands of locals, who face wide-scale unemployment and land loss through various land reforms favoring landholders from the interior. In this economically depressed environment many young men are turning to heroin use while impoverished young women are often absorbed into Mombasa's sex trade.

In the lead-up to Kenya's independence in 1963, Coast residents tended to join either the *mwambao* (Swahili, lit. "coastline"; in this context meaning "self-governing") or *majimbo* (Swahili, lit. "regions," i.e. federalist) camps. The *mwambao* movement began in the years prior to independence as Coastal Arabs and Swahili feared being taken over by local Africans and migrants from the "upcountry" regions of Kenya. Unfortunately, many Coast residents believed Kenyan independence would mean the restoration of their lands, not their transfer to a new authority. [2] The *majimbo* current ultimately prevailed, but many of its proponents on the Coast later changed their mind when various protections and guarantees granted to the Coast were pushed aside by the post-independence government. The new nation of Kenya was, in part, an assembly of unwilling elements under the dominance of the tribes of the highland region, with many in the coastal region and the north-eastern ethnic Somali region having serious reservations about union with Kenya.

The Kaya Bomba Raiders

Prior to Kenya's 1997 general elections, shadowy figures thought to be agents of the governing Kenya African National

Union (KANU) began organizing Coast youth and veterans bitter over alleged discrimination in the Kenyan military and government land distribution policies at a base at Kaya Bombo in Kwale District. Most of the recruits hailed from the Digo, one of the nine tribes composing the Mijikenda group (a largely colonial construct). Dressed in black robes bearing a star and crescent moon and armed with firearms and machetes, the Raiders slaughtered up-country people as well as many non-Digo coastal residents who could not respond to Digo greetings, this being the main method of determining who was native to the region and who came from up-country.

The performance of the General Service Unit (GSU) paramilitary and other Kenyan police units in combatting the Kaya Bomba Raiders was so inept that even some of the militants came to the conclusion that the repeated refusals of the security forces to engage or pursue the raiders even under favorable conditions and the transfer out of the region of veteran police officers familiar with the terrain meant the militants were serving a political purpose, likely by disrupting coast society during voter registration. GSU methods focused on rounding up unarmed members of the Digo and subjecting them to arbitrary arrest, beatings, torture and rape. [3] The MRC has repeatedly denounced the Kaya Bomba Raiders, characterizing their "revolt" as an episode of state-organized political violence at odds with the objectives and methods of the MRC.

The Rise of the Mombasa Republican Council

Since its formation, the MRC has pursued its quest for independence in the courts, citing the questionable status of the Coast region at the time of independence. The movement employs two main slogans; *Pwani Si Kenya* ("The Coast is not part of Kenya") and *Nchi Mpya Maisha Mpya* ("New country, new life"), and is jointly governed by a Leadership Council composed of the movement's executives and the more secretive Council of Elders. All MRC recruits go through an initiation known as "oathing." This ceremony is an important exercise in the creation of secret societies on the Kenyan Coast. From various descriptions, the oathing usually consists of a ritual applied to recruits in a spiritually important place (such as a forest) involving ritual bloodletting and the taking of an oath to maintain secrecy and follow orders explicitly. In return, the new member receives supernatural protection from enemy weapons and the ability to render himself invisible from his enemies. [4]

Belief in supernatural forces has always been strong in the Coast region, but there are a growing number of young, educated "Coasterians" who reject what they describe as

the deceptions practiced by local sorcerers and practitioners of witchcraft. Oathing itself is clearly based on pre-Islamic beliefs and folk traditions beyond the pale for most members of Salafist groups such as al-Shabaab or their allied organizations in Nairobi and Mombasa.

When the Kenyan government banned the MRC in October, 2010, the movement did not take up arms but instead took the government to court, achieving a surprising repeal of the ban from the Mombasa High Court on July 25 of this year. This success, however, only raised suspicions in some Kenyan quarters of the movement's source of financing in light of the generally impoverished condition of its leadership (*Nairobi Star*, October 20). On October 9, security officials announced they had opened an investigation of several MPs and a number of businessmen related to support and funding of the MRC (*The Standard* [Nairobi], October 10; Capital FM, October 13). A prominent Muslim leader and member of parliament, Shaykh Muhammad Dor, was arrested on October 17 on charges of inciting violence after endorsing the MRC and promising to fund it "if asked" because it was "not an outlawed group" (Capital FM [Nairobi], October 19; AFP, October 18).

Violence Begins to Spread in the Coast Region

Grenade attacks in the Coast Province began in late March with an attack on a restaurant in Mombasa and another in the town of Mtwapa (AFP, March 31). An oathing ceremony at Kaloleni in the Kilifi District turned deadly on September 27 when a village elder was killed by people alleged to be involved in an oathing in the nearby forest. Local residents had watched the strangers arriving in the area and feared they were preparing an attack on Kaloleni. Villagers pursued the roughly 200 men and killed eleven of them, including seven by stoning. Four more men alleged to have been MRC members escaping the initial massacre were lynched after they tried to hijack a car in Samburu (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], September 29). Eight men, including an alleged "witchdoctor" responsible for administering the oaths were arrested and charged with various offenses (*Standard* [Nairobi], September 28; October 2).

After the lynchings, local police displayed items used in the oathing ceremonies, including flags, sheep heads, fresh sheep skins, black and red cloth, machetes, knives and various "concoctions" (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], September 29). However, one security source told journalists that "This was not the MRC. It is an entirely new group and it looks like we have a bigger security problem" (PANA Online, September 29). MP Najib Balala, the leader of the Republican Congress Party of Kenya, said that the MRC has legitimate

grievances and was only fighting for justice: "We know what the MRC is. We have not seen terrorism in its face" (*Nairobi Star*, October 2).

Kenyan authorities blamed the MRC for a vicious machete attack on Fisheries Minister Amason Kingi at a campaign rally just north of Mombasa on October 4. Kingi survived the attack due to the efforts of his bodyguard, who was hacked to death before those attending the rally beat the three attackers to death (PANA Online, October 22). The Minister is considered the point man in the Coast region for Prime Minister Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), who is running for president in the coming elections (PANA Online, October 5). Odinga commented on the violence in the Coast region: "It looks to me like there are people who want to disrupt the elections and the registration of voters especially in the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) zones so that people cannot register and eventually vote" (PANA Online, October 9). According to Coast Provincial Police commander Aggrey Adoli, the attackers were MRC members who had just arrived from a forest where they had taken the oath. Adoli went on to advise local politicians to examine the MRC's beliefs closely before offering their support to the movement (*The People* [Nairobi], October 8). However, MRC spokesman Rashid Mraja said that these and other youth found taking the oath in Coast region forests by security forces had been paid by local businessmen and politicians to join a violent militia ("the Muyeye movement") designed to discredit the MRC's calls for secession and ultimately lead to fighting between the two groups (*The People* [Nairobi], October 8).

GSU detachments are currently engaged in a disarmament campaign in the Tana River district and the pursuit of some 2,000 youth alleged to have taken the MRC oath in September (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], October 22). A group of Tana residents have threatened to sue the GSU for alleged atrocities carried out during the campaign (KBC-TV, September 26). The district is host to long-standing tensions between Pokomo agriculturalists and Orma pastoralsists over access to water. These tensions exploded on August 22, when the Pokomo attacked an Orma camp, killing 62 men, women and children with machetes, spears and handguns (al-Jazeera, August 22). Further violence followed in a pair of retaliatory attacks on other villages in the district, killing another 50 people, including nine police officers (K24TV, September 7; *Daily Nation* [Nairobi], October 1). Despite the dispute over water rights, it appears to have been political considerations that set off the violence, with the Pokomo hoping to disrupt voter registration amongst the Orma in Tana River District, where all three MPs currently hail from the Pokomo tribe. A local MP, Dhadho Godhana, was

dropped from cabinet and charged with inciting violence in the Tana River delta amidst claims from villagers that their attackers included many people they did not recognize and who appeared to be organizing the massacres (AFP, September 14). Muslim clerics in the region have told the tribes they are being used for political purposes and have urged them to form a peace council to prevent further violence (*Nairobi Star*, October 2).

Kenyan police reported that a group of suspected MRC members raided their camp in Likoni with “crude weapons” in the early hours of October 20. Three days earlier, a GSU officer was killed in a grenade attack (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], October 17, October 20).

Sweeping Up the MRC Leadership

The MRC’s existence as a legal entity was short-lived, as the Mombasa Chief Magistrate accepted an application by the state and once again outlawed the MRC, ordering police to arrest all its leaders and present them in court to face fresh indictments (PANA Online, October 22). By coming back under an official ban, MRC activists will now be subject to the sweeping new powers given to security forces by the Prevention of Terrorism bill currently on its way to a third and final reading in the Kenyan parliament (KBC-TV, September 27; *Standard* [Nairobi], September 27).

On October 14, police raided the home of MRC leader Omar Hamisi Mwamnuadzi in Kombani, south of Mombasa. Mwamnuadzi had gone into hiding after security forces began a crackdown on various groups on October 8. Police reported that they were met at the road leading to the MRC leader’s home by two bodyguards who threw a petrol bomb at a police vehicle. The bomb failed to explode and the two men were killed by police who then arrested 38 people, including Mwamnuadzi and his wife. The entire arsenal seized consisted of only four petrol bombs, one AK-47 rifle and 15 rounds of ammunition (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], October 15).

After his arrest, Mwamnuadzi was charged with possession of the firearm and 15 rounds of ammunition. Both the MRC leader and his wife, Maimuna Hamisis Mwavymbo, were additionally charged with practicing witchcraft and possessing articles used in witchcraft (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], October 22). Police pointed to the MRC after a local administration official accused of giving out Mwamnuadzi’s location was the victim of a violent murder shortly after the MRC leader’s arrest (PANA Online, October 16).

At his release, Mwamnuadzi appeared to have been the victim

of a severe beating, which he claimed was administered during his arrest, his death having been prevented only through the intercession of his bodyguards. The MRC leader lost four teeth while being detained and was unable to raise the \$36,000 bond for his release and that of his wife (*Nairobi Star*, October 20).

Kenyan president Mwai Kibaki used a national “Heroes Day” broadcast on October 20 to warn the MRC that the government “will take firm and decisive action in dealing with those who have issued threats of secession or those who threaten our security. Kenya is one unitary state. The constitution is clear and so is our history. Let us learn from that history and not seek to distort it...” (KBC TV, October 20).

Other MRC leaders have been systematically rounded up or surrendered to security forces in recent days:

- Spokesman Muhammad Rashid Mraja was arrested on October 8 for calling for the secession of the Coast region and failed to make bail (KBC Online, October 8);
- Secretary General Randu Nzwai Ruwa was charged with incitement to violence on October 10 and released on \$24,000 bail. (KBC, October 10);
- Treasurer Omar Suleiman Babu (a.k.a. Bam Bam) surrendered to police on October 23; and
- Council of Elders’ chairman Hassan Mbwana Mwanguzwa was arrested in early October.

Islamist Connections?

In late September, Somalia’s al-Shabaab Islamists announced the creation of a Kenyan branch of the movement to be led by Shaykh Ahmed Iman Ali, the founder of the Shabaab-allied Muslim Youth Center (MYC, a.k.a. Pumwani Muslim Youth – PMY). Shaykh Ahmed quickly indicated the group would pursue revenge for al-Shabaab’s loss of the port of Kismayo to the Kenyan military by calling for “all means possible” to be used to kill the “infidels” in Mombasa, Nairobi “and across East Africa.” [5] In this environment, it is likely that Kenyan authorities will conflate political resistance (violent or non-violent) by the Coast Muslims of the MRC with the more serious pro-Shabaab Salafist threat. During an October 11 cabinet meeting, Kenyan ministers downplayed the possibility the recent violence on the Coast was motivated by local dissatisfaction with the government, suggesting instead that it was the work of al-Shabaab infiltrators and absentee landlords who had been adversely affected by changes to the land laws (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], October 12).

Despite the attempt to paint the MRC as a religious-based movement, some Mombasa businessmen have more concrete

reasons for disliking Kenya's intervention in Somalia, as many made sizable profits by dealing contraband across the mutual border (Business Daily [Nairobi], October 8). It should also be noted that the MRC is not an exclusively Muslim organization. Pentecostal churches and pastors are reported to play a large part in MRC organizing activities. A pastor was among those MRC suspects arrested in a recent GRU operation in Tana River District (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], October 22).

Conclusion

There is suspicion that Nairobi's sudden offensive against MRC leaders is designed to disrupt election preparations in the Coast region, where Raila Odinga's ODM took most of the vote in the 2007 elections, in which 1,200 people were killed and 600,000 displaced in post-election violence across Kenya after Odinga accused President Mwai Kibaki of rigging the vote. Outlawing the MRC brings the risk of greater political violence as the membership is forced to go underground. In current conditions, it appears unlikely that the MRC will be allowed to continue their recourse to the courts to address the group's core issues.

Nevertheless, the MRC's actual commitment to secession appears rather weak; the coast, after all, was never an independent state, coming at various times in various places under the rule or protection of the Portuguese, the Omani Arabs, the Germans, the British and finally the rule of Nairobi. Coastal independence is a goal not shared by the Salafists, who are pursuing an East African Islamic Caliphate that would include Somalia, the coasts of Kenya and Tanzania and other predominantly Muslim parts of the region.

The loose organization of the MRC and its informal membership system creates several problems for the movement, including the risk of infiltration by security forces, political manipulators or militants who do not share the MRC's the movement's goals and non-violent strategies. The MRC Youth Wing especially is agitating for stronger responses to state repression of the movement, but the repeated lynching of those believed to be planning violence in the region reveals a popular distaste for any repetition of Kaya-Bomba-type attacks and the often indiscriminate repression that followed. Despite this, movement leaders admit they are having difficulty in keeping the youth wing in check.

MRC statements do not display any mention of or support for jihadi/Islamist agendas and the religion practiced by most Muslim MRC members incorporates traditional Islamic and folk beliefs rather than the austere Salafism that

characterizes most of the Islamist movement. However, continuing speculation from government administrators that the MRC is allied with al-Shabaab and the challenge posed by the MRC's call for a boycott of the forthcoming March 2013 general elections is likely to keep the MRC on the list of banned organizations. With the incarceration of most of the movement's leadership, the MRC youth wing will remain susceptible to both political manipulation and even enticements from foreign jihadists able to promise a more forceful response to the government crackdown in the Coast region.

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Notes:

1. James R. Brennan, "Lowering the Sultan's Flag: Sovereignty and Decolonization in Coastal Kenya," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50(4), 2008, pp. 831-861.
2. See Paul Goldsmith, "The Mombasa Republican Council Conflict Assessment: Threats and Opportunities for Engagement," Kenya Community Support Center, November 2011, http://www.kecosce.org/downloads/MRC_Conflict_Assessment_Threats_and_Opportunities_for_Engagement.pdf, and "Playing with Fire: Weapons Proliferation, Political Violence and Human Rights in Kenya," Human Rights Watch, New York, 2002.
3. *Ibid*, p.13.
4. "Playing with Fire: Weapons Proliferation, Political Violence and Human Rights in Kenya," Human Rights Watch, New York, 2002, pp. 30-32.
5. Al-Kataib, October 19, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdY8IDaBGTU>