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Demonstrators in Tunisia

TUNISIAN PRESIDENT WARNS OF GROWING STRENGTH OF SALAFI-JIHADI MOVEMENT

Like Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Tunisia's Islamist-dominated government is facing often violent demands for the immediate imposition of an Islamic state from radical Salafist groups, leading Tunisia's secularist president to warn of the threat posed by Salafi-Jihadists to that nation's democratic evolution.

Moncef Marzouki became the interim president of Tunisia after his election by the new Constituent Assembly in December, 2011. Marzouki was a long time dissident during the regime of Zine al-Abdin bin Ali, suffering imprisonment and an extended exile in France. Marzouki's Congress for the Republic political party was one of two secularist parties that joined the larger Islamist Ennadha Party to form a new post-revolutionary coalition government. While Ennadha member Hamadi Jebali assumed the greatest power as Prime Minister, the president remains in charge of defense issues and foreign policy, though he must consult with the prime minister on both portfolios (Reuters, December 13, 2011).

According to the Tunisian president, those Arab Islamists who accepted the democratic process following the Arab Spring revolutions are finding themselves increasingly at odds with more extreme Islamist factions that regard acceptance of democracy as treason, as well as with the broader population that has looked to moderate Islamists for rapid reforms and improvements in their living conditions:

Now the Islamists are finding out that they have fallen into the trap of democracy because they have heavy responsibilities in the economy and regarding living conditions. The people now want solutions to the problems of water, food, security etc. The people will judge them [the Islamists] on the basis of performance. I can say with full frankness now that if Ennadha went to the elections today it

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would perhaps be surprised by a violent reaction from the people because they did not do what was expected of them (*al-Hayat*, November 4).

Marzouki has previously suggested that the center of jihad was shifting from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region to the Arab Maghreb (North Africa, west of Egypt) after finding a foothold in northern Mali. Fear of becoming embroiled in the international “war on terrorism” has produced a policy of dialogue with religious extremists, “but these policies have not produced a result until now and, on the contrary, we have seen what happened” (*al-Hayat*, October 4).

Since the revolution, Tunisia’s new Islamist government has been challenged by mass protests and a series of attacks by radical Salafists, including the September 14 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis led by veteran jihadist Abu Iyad al-Tunisi. Four of the attackers were killed by security forces. In late October, Salafist militants attacked two National Guard posts in the Tunis suburb of Manouba, after a Salafist was charged with assaulting the head of the local public security brigade. Shortly afterwards Khalid Karaoui, *imam* of the Ennour Mosque in Manouba, died of wounds incurred in the attack (*al-Jazeera*, October 31; AFP, November 1). There have even been direct clashes in the streets between Salafists and supporters of Ennadha with sometimes fatal results (AFP, November 5). Ennadha is also facing pressure from its youth wing, which is demanding quicker reforms and the prosecution of former regime members accused of corruption and torture.

Many of the leaders of these strikes are veterans of the Salafi-Jihadist Groupe Combattant Tunisien (GCT), founded in 2000 by Abu Iyad al-Tunisi (a.k.a. Sayfallah bin Hussein) and Tarik bin Habib Maaroufi, who returned to Tunisia last spring after serving time in Belgium on terrorism-related charges (Tunisia Live, April 1; for Abu Iyad, see Militant Leadership Monitor, May 1). Maaroufi is best known for his role in planning the assassination of Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Mahsoud in Afghanistan in 2001.

Fifty-eight of those arrested in the clashes at the U.S. embassy went on a hunger strike in prison in protest of the conditions under which they are held and to bring attention to what the hunger-strikers describe as government persecution of the Salafist movement. Two prisoners have already died, including Muhammad Bakhti, a colleague of Abu Iyad and a senior Tunisian Salafi-Jihadist who was sentenced to 12 years in jail after clashes between the army and Salafists near Tunis in 2007. Bakhti was released in the amnesty that followed the revolution (AFP, November 17).

The bloody demonstration at the U.S. embassy was led by Abu Iyad al-Tunisi (a.k.a. Sayfallah bin Hussein). A one-time follower of radical Jordanian cleric Abu Qatada, Abu Iyad was a founder of the GCT and is the current leader of the Salafi-Jihadist group, Ansar al-Shari’a in Tunisia (AST) (*Business News* [Tunis], September 17). Abu Iyad left Tunisia in 1991 under pressure from the Ben Ali regime. He attempted to obtain political asylum but his anti-British sermons did little to endear him to his hosts, who eventually sent him packing. Abu Iyad then joined the battle against American forces in Afghanistan before his arrest in Turkey in 2003 and subsequent extradition to Tunisia, where he was sentenced under the anti-terrorism act to 58 years in prison, where he remained until his release under the post-revolution amnesty in 2011 (*Business News* [Tunis], November 17). Abu Iyad has since stated his belief that it is the U.S. embassy that rules the country “and pulls the strings of the party in power” (*Business News* [Tunis], September 17).

Police efforts to detain Abu Iyad after the incident appear to have been half-hearted, missing him at home, at a funeral he attended the next day, and most revealingly during an appearance at a Tunis mosque that had been widely announced on social networking sites earlier that day (*Business News* [Tunis], September 17).

Ennadha has been criticized by the opposition for not taking a firmer line with Tunisia’s Salafists, but party leader Rached Ghannouchi is wary of alienating the community, possibly pushing it towards even greater violence: “We need to avoid the rhetoric of the enemy within. We have the experience of Ben Ali, who detained tens of thousands of Ennahda members and demonized the party. Then the regime fell, and now Ennahda is in power. If we want to demonize the Salafists, they are the ones that will be in power in 10-15 years’ time. This is why we talk to them as citizens, not as enemies” (*Le Monde*, October 18).

In remarks that mirror the difficulties Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood is having with the Egyptian Salafist community, Gannouchi has elsewhere warned that the Salafis’ demonstrations and violence result in the depiction of Tunisia as a “center for terrorism and extremism” and a “Salafi State, even though they are a minority within a minority. I do not think they follow Ennadha. Actually they might become the biggest enemies of Ennadha” (*al-Hayat*, October 4).

In the post-revolutionary period, not only has the disparate coalition of secularists, leftists and Islamists that deposed the Ben Ali regime returned to its component (and rival) parts, but almost each political party represented in the new parliament, including Ennadha, has suffered splits

and defections, hampering Tunisia's political transition and weakening its response to internal threats (al-Jazeera, October 23). In a response to these growing tensions, a state of emergency has been imposed on a month-by-month basis since July, but on October 31, President Marzouki imposed a three-month extension of the state of emergency, reflecting a deteriorating security situation (Tunis Afrique Presse, October 31).

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY COOLS TO INTERVENTION AS ISLAMISTS DEFEAT TUAREG IN NORTHERN MALI

With ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) now in agreement over the formation of a force of 3,300 African peacekeepers drawn from both ECOWAS and non-ECOWAS nations, many nations whose support would be required for the success of such an option have recently cooled to this plan, while others, such as Algeria, continue to maintain a reserved position. An apparent victory by one of the Islamist factions occupying northern Mali over a well-armed Tuareg rebel militia that has offered to join counterterrorist operations has not inspired confidence in the ultimate success of the under-size AU force. [1]

Though January 2013 had long been suggested as the starting date of an international military intervention, UN Special Envoy for the Sahel Region, former Italian premier Romano Prodi, said during a visit to Rabat that it would be September, 2013 before an intervention could begin (AFP, November 20). With the intervention receding into the distant future, many refugees from the fighting in northern Mali are returning to their homes, unhappy with Islamist rule but unwilling to wait nearly a year or more for assistance in driving the Islamists out of the region.

Nigeria's decision to pledge only 600 troops to the projected force of 3300 would seem to imperil a project that was designed to be built around a larger Nigerian core (*Daily Trust*, [Lagos], November 22). Chad, a non-ECOWAS country, has apparently agreed to join the intervention force, but the composition of the rest of the force has yet to be revealed (*L'Indépendant* [Bamako], November 12). The EU has dampened earlier expectations that European troops might supplement African forces in the mission. According to EU Counterterrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove: "The European Council held on 18 and 19 October came out in favor of a military mission to train the Malian Army. There is no question of European intervention as such. It is up to Mali to win the north back" (*Le Monde*, November

12).

Algerian Foreign Minister Mourad Medelci reminded concerned parties that: "Algeria is not convinced that an exclusively military solution would bring peace and unity to Mali. Our wish is to convince our partners that the military path must be oriented toward the fight against terrorism. It must be accompanied by a political process in the form of a dialogue between the Malian protagonists" (*Jeune Afrique*, November 14). In neighboring Mauritania, national assembly president Messaoud Ould Boulkheir warned of the fallout from an intervention: "[Mali] is like a volcano about to erupt... If this volcano awakens, it will dump incandescent ashes over its neighbors" (AFP, November 12). A November 14 communiqué from the Tunisian president's office warned against an "uncalculated military intervention in Mali" that could turn the Maghreb into a "hotbed of tension" and threaten the security of the Maghreb states (Tunisian Press Agency, November 15).

Libya delivered its opinion on a military intervention in Mali via Mahfouth Rahim, director in charge of African affairs at the Libyan Foreign Ministry: "We Libyans believe that we should not focus on military solutions at the moment to avert escalation which might lead us to what happened in Afghanistan... The military solution would exacerbate the crisis as the Tuareg rebels and other Islamist groups would be forced to seek refuge in other countries such as Libya" (PANA Online [Dakar], November 14).

Former Malian Prime Minister Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (1994-2000, parliamentary speaker, 2002-2007) is among those who have urged caution, noting that the Malian army needs time to rebuild to counter tactics likely to be used by the Islamist militants: "The population will be used as a human shield. Hence the need for extreme care in planning and skill in implementing an intervention. Military logistics and intelligence will be crucial with a view to knowing exactly whom we are dealing with, before saying: "Let's go in, let's go in!" (*Le Monde*, November 4).

In the north, meanwhile, the defeat of the secular Tuareg rebel Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) by Islamist forces demonstrated the latter's military strength and the readiness of the Islamist groups to cooperate in the field. During what has been described as a MNLA attempt to retake Gao, fighting broke out with forces belonging to the Islamist Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) near Asongo on November 16. Asongo is 120 miles west of Menaka, where the MNLA was attempting to create a base for counterterrorist operations (*Jeune Afrique*, November 18; AFP, November 20). Locals suggested that

many of those resisting the MUJWA attack in Asongo were not MNLA members, including local Tuareg political leader, Alwabegat ag Slakatou and six of his men who were reported among the dead (AFP, November 20).

AQIM was reported to have sent some 300 reinforcements to Gao from Timbuktu, roughly 185 miles to the west (AFP, November 17; *Jeune Afrique*, November 18). The reinforcements were said to belong to AQIM's Katibat al-Mulathamini (Veiled Brigade) and the Katibat Osama bin Laden, led by Abu Walid Sahrawi.

Though MNLA spokesmen described only light casualties in the clash and described the action as “an initial success,” reports from the area and Malian security sources described dozens killed in “a real bloodbath” (*Tout sur l'Algérie*, November 17; AFP, November 20). Both sides presented casualty figures that were likely inflated, with the MNLA claiming 65 AQIM and MUJWA fighters killed, while MUJWA announced the death of over 100 members of the MNLA (AFP, November 20). The MNLA's chief-of-staff, Machkanani ag Balla, suffered a serious wound while leading his men in the fight. MUJWA spokesman Walid Abu Sahrawi said the movement was dedicated to destroying the MNLA: “In Azawad, we are going to pursue the MNLA wherever they may still be found. We control the situation” (*Jeune Afrique*, November 18). Northern Mali's three northern provinces are now conveniently divided between the three Islamist movements – Gao in MUJWA, Timbuktu in AQIM and Ansar al-Din in Kidal. The MNLA was expelled from Gao in June and now operates in rural areas only.

According to MNLA spokesman Hama ag Sid Ahmed, MUJWA forces setting up new bases on the outskirts of Gao have been joined by AQIM commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar (who appears to be at odds lately with the rest of the AQIM leadership – see Terrorism Monitor Brief, November 15) and various Pakistanis, Egyptians and Moroccans (*Tout sur l'Algérie*, November 16).

A spokesman for the Islamist Tuareg group Ansar al-Din claimed that movement leader Iyad ag Ghali had tried to prevent the fighting between MUJWA and the MNLA and remained on the sidelines when the conflict began. In Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso President Blaise Compaoré is now holding joint talks with Ansar al-Din and the MNLA, rather than meet the two rebel Tuareg groups separately, as had been the case so far (AFP, November 16). According to an Ansar al-Din spokesman, if talks go the right way, “one can foresee ways and means in which one can get rid of terrorism, drug-trafficking and foreign groups” (AFP, November 14; PANA Online [Dakar], November 18).

Note:

1. The intervention force briefly took the name “Mission de la CEDEAO [Communauté Economique des États de l'Afrique de l'Ouest] au Mali” (MICENA - ECOWAS Mission in Mali).before expanding its base by adopting the new name “Mission Internationale de Soutien au Mali” (MISMA - International Support Mission to Mali).

Jihad in Syria: A Profile of Jabhat al-Nusra

Murad Batal al-Shishani

The jihadists that began to emerge in Syria several months after peaceful protests against the Bashar al-Assad regime began in March 2011 can be broadly categorized into two groups: al-Qaeda-style groups and local jihadist groups. The latter type is represented by locally-formed jihadist groups, the largest of which is Ahrar al-Sham. The local type adopts the basic components of jihadist rhetoric but insists that their major goal is the toppling of the Bashar al-Assad regime.

The al-Qaeda-style trend is represented by several jihadist groups, such as the Lebanon-based Fatah al-Islam group that clashed with Lebanese authorities in 2007, and the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, which have claimed responsibility for several attacks against Israel from south Lebanon. However, the largest group in this category is Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham (Front for the Support of the Syrian People, commonly known as “al-Nusra”).

Al-Nusra announced its formation in late January, 2012 and their statements have found their way into major jihadist web forums ever since. The leader of the group, using the *nom de guerre* of Abu Muhammad al-Golani, stated in the audio message in which he proclaimed the formation of the group, that he and his colleagues came to Syria “a few months after the revolution, from one of the jihadi battlefields to help the people of Levant against the [Assad] regime.” Citing the refusal of Western countries to help topple Assad's rule, al-Golani declared a jihad against the Syrian regime (muslm.net, January 24).

On June 20, Ansar al-Mujahdeen web forum released a

booklet explaining their ideology entitled *Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham: Who are they? What are their Aims?* The booklet introduces the group as:

A blessed front that has the best mujahideen from various parts of the earth in a sole group on the land of Levant, [aiming] to clean the abomination of Bashar and his gang and to establish the rule of *Allah* in the Levant and not just implementing a phony change of people and names, as happened in Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia and Libya! But the front aims by its jihad to change the whole governance system and bring justice, freedom and equality in the country, as it is ordered by Allah, not as promoted by the West! (As-Ansar.com, June 20).

Clearly the Nusra front adopts the jihadist ideology and since it emerged in Syria it has taken an active part in attacks against Syrian government troops. Its attacks, according to the group's frequent statements on jihadist web forums, have increased dramatically since March 2011. According to a Syrian activist working in an area where furious fighting is ongoing, this is due to an increasing acceptance among locals of the Nusra Front, "which shows high military capabilities and strong organizational skills." [1] In the same context, the Ansar al-Mujahideen booklet states that locals gave help and assistance to al-Nusra members "after they saw the sincerity of al-Nusra's commanders and soldiers in defending their lives and their towns, and in revenge for the blood of their children and the dignity of their women. That is at a time when they were abandoned by the hypocritical governments of the West, and the cowards and traitorous Arab rulers!" (As-Ansar.com, June 20). Al-Nusra seems very keen to avoid clashes with locals and to avoid disagreements with other groups in Syria while expanding their zone of operations to Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Darra and Dier al-Zour.

Al-Nusra coordinates with other factions of the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA), however, the tactics used by jihadists in Syria are similar to those used by jihadists in Iraq after the American invasion in 2003. The group carries out ambushes, kidnappings, assassinations, IED attacks and suicide bombings. Implementing such tactics made al-Nusra attractive to young people who want to join the fight against regime troops. According to the Syrian activist cited earlier, "al-Nusra front is more capable in using non-conventional tactics than the FSA," most of whose members are deserters from the regular army and lack training in such tactics. [2]

Al-Nusra Front publishes its statements through its media company, al-Manara al-Baida (White Beacon). The group focuses in its media releases on its attacks and avoids debates

with other groups. However, it is gradually gaining legitimacy among jihadist scholars.

Al-Nusra has been criticized by Salafi-Jihadist ideologue Abd al-Mun'im Mustafa Halima (a.k.a. Abu Basir al-Tartusi) as well as by Salafi cleric Adnan al-Arour, a strong supporter of the FSA and the revolution against the Syrian regime. Though Tartusi was more explicit in his remarks, al-Arour criticized the role played by foreign fighters in the movement, rejected suicide bombings as a tactic and denounced the *takfiri* orientation of the group. [3]

This criticism has not stopped al-Nusra from receiving the endorsement of a number of leading jihadist clerics. Jordanian Salafi-Jihadist Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi has urged Muslim youth to join al-Nusra front to fight against "the Sharon of the Levant" [i.e. Bashar al-Assad] (As-Ansar.com, November 8; for al-Tahawi, see *Militant Leadership Monitor*, May 31, 2011). Abu al-Mundhir al-Shanqiti, a prominent Mauritanian jihadist scholar, wrote an article endorsing the group and later issued a fatwa urging anyone who wants to go to the jihadi battlefield in Syria to join Jabhat al-Nusra (Minbar al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad, March 9; June 3). Jihadist internet ideologue Abu Sa'ad al-Amili has also expressed his opinion that the righteous banner of jihad in Syria belongs to al-Nusra (Aljahad.com, March 6).

There are three factors playing major roles in increasing the influence of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria:

- The effect on the Syrian people of the regime's atrocities
- The movement's military capabilities and avoidance of clashes with locals
- Endorsements by jihadist clerics that raise the credentials of the group in the Salafi-Jihadist community.

These factors will play a major role in attracting foreign fighters who are aiming to join jihad in Syria. All these factors indicate that the role of Jabhat al-Nusra will increase in Syria, but at the same time future relations with other armed groups and local communities inside Syria could be different if the Assad regime was toppled. In this situation, al-Nusra's continued presence in Syria could be open to question if there is no longer any place in Syria's political evolution for a jihadist ideology.

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Middle East.

Notes

1. Interview via Skype with a Syrian activist who preferred to remain anonymous, November 1, 2012.
2. Ibid, November 17, 2012.
3. For Tartusi's remarks, see muslm.net, January 27, 2012. For al-Arour's comments, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbIX0IIYwsU> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvLmoT9IETU>.

China Claims Uyghur Militants Are Seeking a Syrian Battlefield

Raffaello Pantucci

Chinese security officials informed reporters in late October that members of the East Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIM, a name used frequently by Chinese officials to refer to the Turkistan Islamic Party - TIP) and the East Turkistan Educational and Solidarity Association (ETESA) had slipped into Syria to join anti-government forces operating there (Global Times [Beijing], October 29). The report came at the end of a month in which the TIP released a number of videos and magazines on jihadist web forums showing their forces training at camps, calling for more support and generally highlighting the group's ongoing struggle. However, neither the videos nor reports from Syria were supported by any visible action or evidence to support the claims. Questions also continue to be raised about the group's ability to launch effective attacks in China, Syria or elsewhere.

According to the newspaper, which is owned by the Communist Party of China, the ETIM or ETESA members slipped across the border from Turkey into Syria from May onwards. Officials talking anonymously to the Global Times indicated that people had been recruited amongst those who had fled from the western Chinese province of Xinjiang, had been trained and then re-directed by "al-Qaeda" to the frontlines in Syria. The actual number of recruits was believed to be relatively small. The story was given an official imprimatur the next day when it was mentioned during the regular press briefing at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where emphasis was placed on the close connection between ETIM and "international terrorist organizations [that] not only seriously harm China's national security, but also pose a threat to the peace and stability of other countries." [1] The remarks highlighted the alleged connection between militants belonging to China's Turkic and Muslim minority and the international terrorist threat of al-Qaeda as it is

currently expressing itself in Syria; towards the end of the Global Times report, mention was made of the recent video in which al-Qaeda leader Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri called for fighters to go to Syria.

What was striking about the report was the specific mention of the East Turkistan Educational and Solidarity Association (ETESA). This is the first time Chinese officials have spoken openly about the group, suggesting it is a terrorist organization along the lines of TIP/ETIM. Based in Istanbul, the group's site proclaims that its intention is "to educate and bring up Turkistani Muslims....meeting their Islamic, social, cultural, spiritual and earthly needs" as well as to "fundamentally end the ignorance in Eastern Turkistan." [2] The group strenuously denied the claims by the Chinese government, publishing a statement on their site in English and Turkish that rubbished the Chinese claims and accused the Chinese government of casting blame on them in an attempt to distract from Beijing's support for the Assad regime. [3] The Turkish government also rejected claims that ETIM forces were operating outside Turkish territory and declared that it was "comprehensively" cooperating with the Chinese in handling terrorism threats (Global Times, October 29). Certainly, the broader Sino-Turkish relationship has been going relatively well of late with a successful visit by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Urumqi (provincial capital of Xinjiang) and Beijing in April (Hurriyet, April 9). This was followed in September by a meeting between Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan and former Chinese leader Wen Jiabao in Urumqi on the fringes of the 2nd China-Eurasia Expo (Xinhua, September 2). China has actively encouraged Turkish investment in Xinjiang – the province dissident Uyghurs refer to as East Turkistan – including the establishment of a joint trade park just outside Urumqi. It would therefore seem counter-productive for Turkey to be actively supporting violent groups like the TIP.

What seems more likely is that the ETESA is falling under the same Chinese brush as the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), a U.S.-based dissident group that China has in the past accused of being behind trouble in Xinjiang, including the July 2009 riots in Urumqi that claimed some 200 lives (Xinhua, July 7, 2009). Both the WUC and ETESA use bases abroad to further political efforts to "liberate" Xinjiang. So far there have been no independent links made between ETESA or the WUC and the violent terrorist groups TIP or ETIM.

Far clearer than Beijing's Syrian-related claims is the continuing presence of fighters claiming affiliation to TIP in the lawless tribal regions of northwest Pakistan along the border with Afghanistan. From this base, the group released from the middle of October onwards a series of videos displaying the group's ongoing exploits and providing advice for other militant groups. For example, in a video released on October 17 they offered advice to their "Muslim brothers in East Turkistan," and in an October 21 video they offered

advice “for our Muslim brothers in Turkey.” [4]

What is notable is that while these videos demonstrate the group’s ongoing intent and existence, they do not seem to advance the cause in a practical way. While there continue to be sporadic incidents of violence in Xinjiang, the link to the TIP is increasingly underplayed officially and the group itself has not claimed any recent operations. An example of Beijing’s new approach is found in a report published on the fringes of early November’s 18th Party Congress that quoted both Xinjiang Communist Party chief Zhang Chunxian and chairman Nur Bekri that touched upon a number of incidents that have taken place in the province that have elsewhere been linked to the TIP/ETIM, but were cited in the report without reference to either group (China Daily, November 10). There was also no reporting in the mainland Chinese press of an alleged October 23 incident in the Xinjiang city of Korla in which a group of Uyghurs reportedly attacked police or a separate incident in Yecheng County in which a Uyghur man was claimed to have driven his motorcycle into a border post (Radio Free Asia, October 23; October 12). No independent confirmation of what took place is available in either case and neither Chinese officials nor TIP/ETIM chose to acknowledge them. Given the low level of the attacks, however, it seems unlikely that these incidents were directed by the TIP.

It seems clear that the TIP/ETIM continues to exist, that it is a concern to Chinese security officials, and that Xinjiang continues to be an ethnically troubled province that provides a motivating narrative for the group. At the same time, however, the ongoing lack of public evidence of TIP/ETIM attacks in China raises questions about what exactly they are doing. The movement does appear to be active in Waziristan, where their videos are presumably shot and where their cadres are periodically reported to have been killed in drone strikes. So far the movement has not released a video specifically praising the Syrian insurgency or encouraging their units to go there, though given their affiliation with the global jihadist movement, it would not be entirely surprising if some members had elected to join the Syrian jihad. However, in terms of advancing their core agenda of attacking China, the latest round of videos and activity does not seem to provide much evidence that the movement is moving in this direction in any effective way.

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Notes:

1. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei’s Regular Press Conference on October 29, 2012,” October 30, 2012,

<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t983693.htm>.

2. ETESA, “Brief Introduction to the Eastern Turkistan Education and Solidarity Association and Its Mission,” 2012, <http://maarip.org/en/?p=131#more-131>.

3. ETESA, “Statement of ETESA on Fake Chinese Blames,” November 1, 2012, <http://maarip.org/en/?p=192>.

4. Hizb al-Islami al-Turkistani, “Advice to Our Muslim Brothers in Eastern Turkistan,” *Sawt al-Islam*, October 17, 2012

<https://alfidaa.info/vb/showthread.php?t=49344>; Hizb al-Islami al-Turkistani, “Advice to Our Muslim Brothers in Turkey,” *Sawt al-Islam*, October 21, 2012, <http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=181814>

The Return of War to Africa’s Great Lakes Region: Can the Revolutionary Army of the Congo Be Contained?

Andrew McGregor

The seizure last week by mutinous Congolese soldiers of the city of Goma in the midst of the mineral rich Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has brought the deaths of hundreds of people and displaced hundreds of thousands of others. The ineffective response of the DRC military and the UN troops intended to support it has nourished fears that the mutineers might continue their march through the Congo, plunging the war-wracked state into yet another round of uncontrollable violence.

Now calling itself the Revolutionary Army of the Congo (RAC), the group of mutineers formerly known as M23 had pledged to march on the DRC capital of Kinshasha if DRC president Joseph Kabila failed to agree to discuss their demands, which include calls for national talks to be hosted by President Kabila, the release of political prisoners (including leading opposition politician Etienne Tshisekedi), the dissolution of the national electoral commission (believed by the RAC to have arranged Kabila’s re-election in 2011) and the investigation of military corruption (*New Vision* [Kampala], November 27).

The RAC/M23 movement has its origins in the largely Tutsi *Congrès national pour la défense du peuple* (CNDP), an ethnic-defense militia based in the DRC province of Nord-Kivu. [1] The movement was believed to have been sponsored

by Rwanda as a proxy force for use against the Kivu-based Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR), a Hutu militia determined to finish the genocide of Tutsis and moderate Hutus that ravaged Rwanda in 1994. The FDLR appears to have stepped up cross-border operations into Rwanda in recent days and has renewed clashes with RAC/M23 (AP, November 27). The ICC issued a warrant in July for the arrest of FDLR commander Sylvestre Mudacumura, a Rwandan Hutu facing nine counts of war crimes.

General Bosco “The Terminator” Ntaganda, a Rwandan Tutsi wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes committed while both a rebel and an officer in the DRC national army, took control of the CNDP in 2009. [2] The peace agreement that followed in that same year resulted in the integration of most of the CNDP into the DRC army, known as the Forces armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC). Colonel Ntaganda led a mutiny of up to 600 soldiers in Nord-Kivu in March after orders came for the ex-CNDP troops to be redeployed from Kivu, where ex-members of the CNDP had made a comfortable living by exploiting and taxing the numerous mining operations in the area. The Mouvement du 23 Mars (M23) was named for the March 23, 2009 peace agreement that movement leaders claim Kinshasha failed to honor (*East African* [Nairobi], July 16).

Colonel Ntaganda, who has always denied being the M23 commander despite abundant evidence to the contrary, has kept a low profile since April, allowing the movement’s leadership to pass into the hands of its official commander, Colonel Sultani Makenga. Makenga (now a RAC brigadier) is a former CNDP commander who is believed to have played a major role in massacres carried out in the region in 2007 and 2008. Colonel Makenga denies Ntaganda is being harbored by the RAC (*East African* [Nairobi], October 22). At the time of his desertion from FARDC in May, Colonel Makenga was the second-in-command of DRC operations against the Hutu FDLR. Makenga was designated for asset seizure by the U.S. Treasury Department on November 13 in relation to his alleged use of child soldiers and being a recipient of arms and material related to military activities in the DRC.

Under a deal forged by Uganda, a RAC spokesman announced on November 29 that the movement would hand over the town of Sake to UN forces on November 30, to be followed by a withdrawal from Goma to a point 12 miles north of the city, though 100 RAC fighters would be allowed to remain at the Goma airport (AFP, November 29). In return, Kinshasha has agreed to negotiate with the rebels and hear their grievances, once they have retreated to 20 kilometers (12 miles) north of the city.

The Assault on Goma

A three-month truce was shattered on November 15 as RAC and Congolese forces clashed at daybreak, both sides claiming later to have acted in self-defense. Tanks belonging to the UN’s Mission de l’Organisation des Nations Unies en République Démocratique du Congo (MONUSCO) rolled into defensive positions outside Goma, ready to support the defense of the city of one million people close to the Rwandan border. On November 18, UN attack helicopters, provided by the Ukraine and operated by Ukrainian pilots ran ten strike missions against the rebels outside Goma (AFP, November 18). The night before the assault on Goma, Rwandan General Joseph Nzabamwita reported that the DRC army had bombarded the Rwandan border region with T-55 tank shells, mortars and anti-aircraft missiles. A FARDC spokesman said an investigation was under way but countered that Rwanda had also fired mortars across the border (AFP, November 19).

RAC forces continued to advance and took the city in the morning of November 20 after a few hours of light resistance from FARDC and UN forces based in Goma. With the RAC on the outskirts of Goma, DRC forces engaged in some tough talk, with the local Republican Guard commander promising to “die with the population” rather than leave them to the hands of the rebels (Agence Congolaise de Presse, November 19). Residents of Goma reported that the Republican Guard (which reports to the president directly rather than to FARDC command) did offer some resistance to the insurgents while FARDC troops busied themselves with looting before abandoning the city (AFP, November 19). A FARDC spokesman claimed later that DRC armor came under fire from Rwandan artillery every time they tried to shell RAC positions, but a Rwandan spokesman replied: “Every time [FARDC] gets beaten on the ground, they use the RDF [Rwandan Defense Force] as an excuse” (AFP, November 17). Many of the Congolese troops shed their uniforms before fleeing into the bush. The precipitate departure of Congolese forces from Goma appears to have provided the RAC with an arms windfall of as much as 1,000 tons of arms and ammunition, including heavy artillery (AP, November 27).

After the attack, the DRC government reported that the rebels had been reinforced by 4,000 Rwandan troops and had been provided with night-vision goggles that gave them an advantage in the fighting (Agence Congolaise de Presse, November 19; November 20). The DRC had earlier claimed to have found bodies wearing Rwandan Army uniforms after clashes with the RAC on November 15, but a Rwandan army spokesman retorted: “This an old propaganda gimmick; it’s

easy to try to draw Rwanda into this mess” (AFP, November 15; November 18, *Jeune Afrique*, November 17).

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius expressed his disappointment with the performance of the UN’s 1,500 man peacekeeping force in Goma: “MONUSCO’s mandate should be revised. MONUSCO was not in a situation where it could prevent what happened when faced with a few hundred men” (AFP, November 20). The UN has stated its Goma contingent, part of a force of 6,700 UN troops in Nord-Kivu, would remain in Goma, though their role in the current situation remains undefined.

UN peacekeeping chief Herve Ladsous defended the MONUSCO contingent in Goma, pointing out that their mandate called for support of FARDC troops, but given the fact that government forces fled from Goma shortly after fighting began this was “hardly achievable... and clearly it is not the role – not the mandate of MONUSCO – to directly hit the armed groups...” (Xinhua, November 21).

MONUSCO’s ineffective defense of Goma sparked large demonstrations in several cities, including Kisangani, where UN vehicles were set on fire and stones thrown at UN offices. Protesters also targeted the government and the RAC for their roles in the continuing violence (Agence Congolaise de Presse, November 21; November 22).

After a “strategic withdrawal” from the Goma area, FARDC troops are now based around the town of Minova, 36 miles from Goma. On November 22, FARDC launched an offensive to retake the town of Sake, west of Goma. The Goma Airport remains under the control of UN forces.

Regional Involvement in the Crisis - Rwanda

A UN report on foreign military involvement in the Kivu region was leaked earlier this month, creating a diplomatic crisis in the Great Lakes region. Much of the report appeared to confirm the DRC’s claims that neighboring Rwanda and Uganda were providing arms, intelligence and logistical support to RAC/M23. The DRC is now demanding that Rwanda and Uganda be targeted by U.S. and UN sanctions for its support of RAC (AFP, November 18). Some of the fallout was internal, however; General Gabriel Amisi, the chief of DRC land forces, was dismissed by President Kabila on November 22 after having been accused in the report of trafficking arms to various militant groups, including suspected RAC allies in the local Mai-Mai and anti-Hutu Raia Mutomboki groups (JournaldeKin.com [Kinshasha], November 23; AFP, November 22).

Based partly on MONUSCO radio intercepts, Rwanda was identified in the report as playing a major role in creating and backing RAC/M23, with Minister of Defense General James Kabarebe accused of directing the movement’s activities with the assistance of Army chief-of-staff Lieutenant General Charles Kayonga and Lieutenant General Jacques Nziza. Rwandan troops fought in the Congo during the rebellion against President Mobutu Sese Seko in 1996-1998 and again from 1998 to 2003. Rwandan troops returned to the DRC with permission in 2009 to pursue the Hutu FDLR militia.

Rwanda’s activities in the border region have led to the cancelling of an important training agreement with the Belgian military; according to Belgian foreign minister Didier Reynders: “We will not train soldiers who could contribute to the destabilization [of the Congo]” (Radio Télévision Belge Francophone, November 11). The DRC, seeing an opportunity, dispatched Prime Minister Augustin Matata Ponyo to Brussels to urge greater military assistance and training from the Belgians.

Regional Involvement in the Crisis - Uganda

Uganda, which President Kabila describes as “the bad boy” of the region, was also identified as a major backer of RAC/M23, much to the outrage of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni (Sunday Monitor [Kampala], October 29). Ugandan police chief Lieutenant General Kale Kayihura and the President’s brother, General Salim Saleh, were singled out in the UN report for providing military assistance and troops to RAC/M23 (*Daily Monitor* [Kampala], November 5).

Uganda has intervened in the DRC before, particularly in 1996-1998, when Ugandan troops backed Laurent Kabila’s efforts to depose President Mobutu Sese Seko and again in 1998-2003 during a vast civil war that dragged in many other African countries. Ugandan generals, some related to President Museveni, made enormous profits by pillaging the eastern Congo’s mineral industry.

Ugandan premier Amama Mbabazi described the leaked report as the work of “UN amateurs” and asked:

Why should we continue involving Uganda where the only reward we get is malignment? Why should the children of Ugandans die and we get malignment as a reward? Why should we invite retaliation by [Somalia’s] al-Shabaab by standing with the people of Somalia, only to get malignment by the UN system? (Daily Monitor [Kampala], November 2).

After the release of the UN report, Uganda announced it was

considering three options before taking action:

- Withdrawing from regional peacekeeping operations in Somalia (where they form the core of the African Union Mission in Somalia – AMISOM) and the Central African Republic
- Continuing with these operations despite the UN report
- Demanding a withdrawal of the allegations contained in the UN report before allowing Ugandan peacekeeping operations to continue (*Daily Monitor* [Uganda], November 26).

After Uganda made its threat to abandon UN-backed peacekeeping operations in Somalia, UN officials quickly began to back away from the report, saying that the views expressed therein “did not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations” (*Africa Review* [Nairobi], November 5).

During an interview with a local newspaper, Ugandan defense minister Dr. Crispus Kiyonga admitted that Ugandan authorities had conducted secret meetings with RAC/M23 to urge them to stop fighting and suggested that these meetings might have been misinterpreted as support for the group (*Daily Monitor* [Kampala], November 12).

Pursuit of the largely moribund Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebel group is often cited by the government as the reason for its cross-border military operations in the eastern DRC. Museveni claims that a recent series of assassinations of prominent Muslim clerics in Uganda is the work of ADF operatives based in the DRC (*Observer* [Kampala], September 17; for the ADF, see *Terrorism Monitor*, December 20, 2007). In an interview with Ugandan journalists, Kabila said joint DRC-Ugandan operations against elements of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) based in the Congo had been successful and that further joint operations against Ugandan rebels of the ADF based in the Kivu region would have followed if they hadn’t been pre-empted by the new outbreak of violence in the region (*Sunday Monitor* [Kampala], October 29).

As leader of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), President Museveni is officially leading regional efforts to quell the fighting in Kivu and appears to have some influence over RAC/M23. [3] Despite the claims that Uganda is arming and facilitating the RAC/M23 rebellion, Uganda says it still has the “moral authority” to continue as a mediator in the conflict (*IRIN* [Nairobi], November 23). The ICGLR has proposed forming a “neutral” international force of 4,000 troops under AU and

UN supervision to eliminate armed groups in the eastern DRC, but it will be difficult to find solid commitments of trained and capable troops for this force. The neutral force is intended to include 4,000 troops from Angola, Tanzania, Kenya and the DRC, although only Tanzania has committed a small force of 500 men in the three months that have passed since the creation of the force was announced, and funding remains unconfirmed. It was intended to deploy the force by December, but this now appears unlikely (*Daily Monitor* [Kampala], November 1). DRC Prime Minister Ponyo has stated his preference for a “reinvigorated” MONUSCO as a “credible and realistic alternative” to the proposed “neutral international force” (*Agence Congolaise de Presse*, October 26). President Museveni, who favors the new force, has said that what is required is a “new hybrid of troops who are ideologically committed and loyal” (*Observer* [Kampala], September 17).

Conclusion

The struggle for the wealth of Kivu Province continues without regard for the residents of the region, who are buffeted one way or another by offensives and counteroffensives. For now, however, it appears that RAC has stepped back from its announced intention of taking the war to Kinshasha, which was always more of a threat than a potential reality due to the great distances, difficult terrain and hostile groups that would be encountered on any march to the national capital. If the RAC actually withdraws from Goma in the coming days (which is by no means guaranteed), it has still emerged from the latest round of fighting with greater wealth, more arms and a degree of respect for their military capabilities when matched with FARDC. The question is whether RAC can translate their new situation into an agreement by a largely unwilling DRC government to consider or even discuss their demands. For the moment, FARDC, even with the support of UN forces, is almost certainly incapable of driving RAC from its lucrative bases in the mining regions of Nord-Kivu and Sud-Kivu. The region’s notorious volatility and reputation as a haven for every type of bandit and would-be revolutionary does not hold much promise that a truce with one group will prevent other groups from continuing to rampage across the eastern Congo. In the end, Rwanda, Uganda and the DRC all value their proxy militias too much to be expected to take decisive steps to bring peace to a region bearing impressive mineral wealth for those willing to bend international protocols to exploit it.

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Notes:

1. For background on the M23, see Andrew McGregor, “M23: A New Player in the Proxy Wars of the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” *Terrorism Monitor*, July 26, 2012.
2. For Ntaganda, see Andrew McGregor, “War Crimes, Gold Mines and Mutiny in the North-East Congo: A Profile of General Bosco Ntaganda,” *Militant Leadership Monitor*, August 31, 2012.